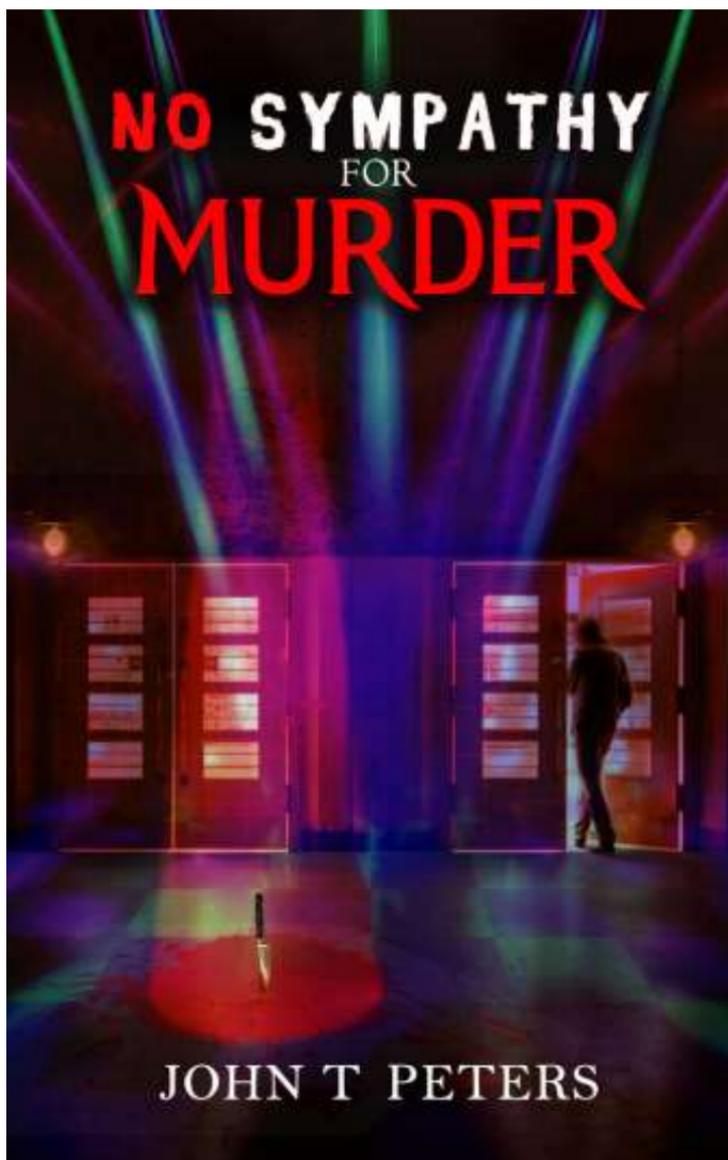


No Sympathy for Murder



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John T. Peters

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CHAPTER ONE



Stephen's eyes shot open, but he couldn't see anything. His body felt numb, and a searing pain pulsed through his skull like someone had hammered nails into it. He tried to scream, but they had gagged his mouth with duct tape. Only then did Stephen notice the cold metal of handcuffs biting into his wrists and the hard floor pressing against his back.

His mind raced with fear and confusion as he struggled for breath - how did he get here? Who could have done this? He wriggled his fingers in an attempt to slip out of the cuffs, but they wouldn't budge. With mounting terror, he realized that he was trapped.

The workbench loomed over him like a monolithic statue of despair. It was clear that whoever did this had planned it with meticulous care and attention to detail. Stephen knew he would need help to escape, but what kind of person would do this to him?

Stephen felt his whole body scream with fiery pain as he slowly regained consciousness. His attacker had been skilled, delivering a series of jabs and kicks that pounded his aching body until Stephen lay unmoving on the floor. He strained to remember what happened before they knocked him out—a smartly

dressed man at the front door, looking confused at the Alexa screen...then nothing. The last thing Stephen saw was a glint of metal coming towards him in the dusk light.

Stephen did not know how long the intruder had him handcuffed to the workbench. All he knew was that he woke up dying of thirst.

He heard some noises from upstairs. Stephen thought it was his cleaner, Wendy, who worked on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Stephen frantically tried to reach a wooden stick with his feet to tap on the ceiling, but the pole was far too short for his purpose whilst lying down. He noticed that the extractor fan switch was above his head. He could switch on the fan if he could raise his legs in the air.

With much effort and pain, he eventually switched on the extractor fan and passed out from exhaustion.

Unknown to Stephen, Wendy arrived, finding the house a total mess, and phoned the police. The police arrived and searched the house for clues. One of the policemen heard the extractor fan and asked Wendy what the noise was. Wendy did not know but informed the police that it sounded like it was coming from the basement. The policeman replied, 'We better have a look then.'

Wendy responded, ‘Mr Ward does not like anyone going down there.’

The policeman ignored her and tried the door leading to the stairs going down into the basement. Finding the door unlocked, he went downstairs into the workshop, where he saw Stephen. The police immediately called an ambulance.

The next thing Stephen knew, he was in the hospital, attached to a drip. The doctor said that he could not find anything broken. The attackers had bruised every part of his body, but that would recover with time. Stephen was seriously dehydrated but should be fine to go home the following day. He added, ‘The guys who did this to you knew what they were doing.’

That night, Stephen lay in bed trying to understand why the intruders attacked him. It did not sound like a typical burglary. He had nothing of real value.

Stephen Ward is a web application developer working from home, self-employed.

He specialises in developing online shopping websites. Stephen had completed three A levels at Harrow Secondary School as a boarder. His family was always in the civil service and expected him to follow in their footsteps.

Unfortunately, Stephen's father passed away during his final year at Harrow. As a result, it re-awoke the love he had for website development.

Having received a large inheritance, Stephen decided to skip university and work with a web development agency to gain practical experience. He worked for Red Dot Designs for three years while studying computer programming and web applications through the Open University in his spare time.

After completing his degree, Stephen left Red Dot Designs and created his own Ward Designs business. From the word go, it was successful, and clients flooded in.

He struggles to keep up with the demand for this lucrative business, designing websites and renting web hosting space to his clients.

Even though he was swamped with work all day, he realised he needed to take a daily break from computer work. Stephen decided to learn silversmithing as a hobby, creating silver charms and jewellery.

His house in Lawrence Street, Chelsea, is only a short walk to the Albert Bridge over the River Thames. Stephen inherited it from his late father; consisting of three floors and a basement. On the

ground floor, Stephen runs the business. He uses the first floor as a private living area and the floor above for sleeping purposes.

Although he outsources most repetitive work and simple websites, Stephen needed a full-time person to run the administration and control all the outsourced work. So far, he has not yet taken the step of employing someone. Stephen hoped his new hobby would force him to find the right person to fill that position.

Stephen decided to convert the basement of his house into a workshop to do his silversmithing in peace.

The basement was small, so he had to install extractor fans to remove the toxic fumes from soldering and melting silver.

He built a workbench with machinery such as a lathe, grinder, and kiln on one side and a soldering station on the other. He left the front bench empty to work on and installed pegboards above the bench to hang his tools.

The following day, he was discharged from the hospital and returned home. The first thing Stephen did was phone Clive Webb, one of the applicants who had applied for the position of assistant web developer.

Previously, Stephen had interviewed him and found him suitable. He also lived nearby. Stephen should have offered him the position but was unsure about having a full-time employee. Now he was desperate and asked if he could start straight away. To Stephen's delight, he accepted and promised to commence the following day.

Stephen decided now that he was going to employ people. He would change his business to a limited company since he did not think the staff would like to work for a self-employed person. Stephen phoned his accountant, who said he would set up the company immediately, Ward Designs Limited. Stephen thought it sounded grand. The accountant reminded Stephen to open a bank account for the company as soon as the registration documents arrived.

Wendy or the police had not cleared up the mess left by the intruders, which was just as well—they would file everything out of place.

Stephen started with the massive undertaking of tidying his files. The going was slow with his sore body, and he was about to rest when the front door burst open, and Sandy, who had long blonde hair with her sleek body, flew in like the whirlwind she was. Unknown to Stephen, Sandy was a light user of cocaine, and her whirlwind livewire appearance was drug-induced.

‘Where have you been? You have not answered your phone for days. I have been worried sick.’

Sandy was Stephen’s girlfriend... or at least Stephen thought she was his girlfriend. Sandy led a busy life, working as a model doing photo shoots all over London. Stephen suspected she had many boyfriends. You never know if Sandy is coming or going. However, she is good in bed and incredibly passionate.

Grinning, Stephen replied, ‘My darling, I don’t even know where my phone is. I was attacked and spent the night in hospital. Please help me sort out this mess the attackers left, or better still, make some tea.’

Search as he may, he could not find anything missing.

Vandals don’t go to so much trouble beating people up for nothing. They must have been looking for something... but what?

Tiring from picking up worthless pieces of paper, he looked through the computer to see if they had destroyed anything on the hard drive. That’s when he spotted it. They had removed his list of clients and copies of all the websites he had created.

Sandy entered with two cups of tea. ‘I found what they stole. But I can’t understand why. If they wanted

a list of my clients or a copy of all the websites, they only had to copy it onto a USB key. I would never have noticed. There was no need to delete all the files.'

Sandy responded, 'Obviously, they did not want the files. They also did not want you to have the files or some of the information on them.'

Frowning, Stephen replied, 'Indeed, the people who broke in must realise that we make backups of all these files. I have software that copies all my files daily and stores them online. I don't understand what is going on here.'

Sandy led Stephen to a sofa in the reception area. 'Stephen, you look shattered. Leave your searching for a bit and relax while drinking your tea.'

Relaxing on the sofa, Sandy stroked his forehead. 'You poor darling, did they hurt you a lot?'

Stephen answered, 'I have decided to employ someone to help. Clive Webb is starting tomorrow. I don't think it is safe to work here alone, and besides, I have too much work.'

Sitting beside Stephen on the sofa, Sandy pulled him towards her, cuddling him. 'I am pleased. Leave all the manual work for him to do. You relax for the rest of the day. I will look after you.'

‘I also decided to add to the business sign outside the front door: *Visits by appointment only.*’

Stephen jumped up, frightening Sandy. ‘I think I know what the intruders were after. All my client’s e-mail addresses and login details to their website databases. The website automatically stores customers’ bank details on these databases. I better send them an e-mail warning them what has happened and ask them to change their passwords. Clive can rename all the databases tomorrow and change the password accordingly.

Sandy inquired, ‘Can’t I do that now for you?’

‘It is far too technical. It will be a good test for Clive. He claimed he knew all about databases, so that it would be an excellent experience for him.

Stephen restored his computer with the backup files and sent the same e-mail to all his contacts, telling them what had happened and advising them to change their passwords.

Sandy asked, ‘How many contacts do you have? It can’t be many if you finish so soon.’

‘Oh, I have several hundred clients, but I only have to send one e-mail and select all, press send, and the computer will send the same e-mail to all of them.’

Stephen hardly finished his sentence, and there was a loud banging on the front door. He asked Alexa, 'View front door.' He could feel his stomach-churning. Two gentlemen were standing there. Stephen decided he was not falling for it again. He must correct the sign outside.

However, he asked via Alexa, 'Can I help you?'

The one caller responded. 'We are the police,' and held up his warrant card.

Stephen replied, 'I hope you realise the security camera has taken your images and warrant card. What do you want?'

He replied, 'May we come in? We are here in connection with the assault and robbery you had.'

Stephen pressed the release of the door and announced, 'Come in. The door is open.' Standing well clear. Nobody was going to catch him unaware again.

The two plain-clothed policemen entered, still holding up their warrant cards. 'Sorry, we should have phoned first, but we were in the area. We noted that the police sergeant who attended the incident failed to record all the details.'

The older policeman introduced himself as Chief Inspector Wilson and his associate as Detective Sergeant Barker.

Chief Inspector Wilson, an elderly, thick-set man with a moustache and kindly eyes, spoke, 'We realised that you were assaulted and tied up to your workbench, but we need to know what the intruders have taken.'

Stephen responded, 'First, let me introduce you to my friend, Sandy Berry. That's what worries me... I can't find anything missing. The intruders seemed to beat me up and delete all the copies of the websites I had created and my client database. I have already restored the information as I have an automatic backup system. I cannot understand why unless they hate me and this attack was personal.'

Stephen continued, 'The only other reason could be credit card fraud. I have already e-mailed all my clients, telling them what happened and asking them to change their passwords. Tomorrow, we will change all the database names. All criminals would know this is the standard procedure, and the theft would not be fruitful. The credit card information on the database is encrypted and will take time to decipher. By that time, I will have changed the database names.'

Chief Inspector Wilson responded, 'Perhaps they did not realise you would take such fast, evasive action. I, for one, did not realise that you could.'

'Maybe the attack on you was for an entirely different reason. You must be making much money to afford this house and the lovely red Ferrari outside. Is that yours?'

Stephen felt a bit defensive as he was the reason for the attack. 'Although my business is financially prosperous, I inherited the house from my late father. Even without paying rent or a mortgage, paying the yearly rates is still a struggle. The car is mine. It is my only extravagance, paid for out of my inheritance.'

Sandy interrupted, 'I wish Stephen never bought that car. The design is not fit for ladies. If you wear a skirt or a dress, it isn't charming to get in or out. Especially with people looking at the car all the time.'

Stephen laughed. 'Sandy, as a model, the whole of London has seen your knickers. You show them off on billboards all over London daily, and you look lovely.'

Sandy was now a bit embarrassed. 'That is entirely different. That is my work. To me, it is not real. The car incidents are real.'

Chief Inspector noted Sandy's erratic behaviour and responded, smiling, 'I thought I recognised your face from somewhere. I can understand how such a car could be a problem. They are extremely close to the ground. Getting back to the intruder, I can't see any other reason he would attack you. Unless it is someone with something to hide that never wanted to be on your list in the first place.'

'If that is the case, they will know I have restored my database. I e-mailed everyone to let them know what happened,' Stephen explained. 'That means they will come again. I better make a copy of all my files. They may decide to physically destroy the computers.'

Chief Inspector Wilson asked if he could have a copy of all the erased files. Stephen agreed to the proviso that he keep all the information confidential. He then went to his computer and copied the requested files onto a disc for the inspector.

Again, Stephen asked for assurance to treat the files with the strictest confidence. 'I do not want to lose my customers because they feel I have not treated their information as confidential.'

After the police left, he made a copy of his computer's hard drive and locked it in the safe in his bedroom.

Sandy and Stephen continued to tidy up the office area until it looked presentable. She asked him to stay at her flat for the night, saying that he should not be alone and that his house was scary. ‘What if they come back? You are still so weak. You need time to recover.’

Stephen ensured he had bolted all the house doors and helped Sandy into the Ferrari, catching a glimpse of her knickers. ‘My goodness, it is a lovely car with many bonuses. I see you are wearing light blue knickers today. My favourites.’

With a huff, she pulled the door shut in his face. Laughing, Stephen climbed into the driver’s side. The car’s low profile made him feel the aches and pains of his injuries.

Sandy, now grinning, said, ‘By the expression on your face, I can see that some of the car’s bonuses are not that pleasant.’

Sandy’s flat—a bedsit in West Hampstead—was tiny but comfy. They ordered a pizza takeaway for their evening meal. After dinner, Stephen had a long, luxurious soak in Sandy’s bath to ease his pain.

In bed that night, they made gentle love, with Sandy doing most of the work. Afterwards, he was out for the count until his mobile woke him early in the morning.

It was Chief Inspector Wilson. ‘You better come home immediately... there has been another incident.’

Stephen questioned the inspector, who said he should come home and disconnected the call.

Awake and grumpy, Sandy asked, ‘What do they want this early?’ Stephen explained to her that it was the police and they wanted him to come home. ‘There has been another incident.’

‘Oh no,’ Sandy cried. ‘I have a photo shoot this morning, so I can’t accompany you. Are you sure you will be all right on your own?’

‘Certainly, my darling. I am not injured, and Clive will be there, poor fellow. His first day of work.’

Stephen raced to Chelsea with a pounding heart, fear and anxiety clawing at his throat. He could not fathom what he would find when he arrived, but at least he was not in the house. As he approached, dread bubbled up inside him. A police car had taken his spot, leaving him to fit into his neighbour's area like an ill-fitting puzzle piece. He nervously shut off the engine, desperation knotting within him.

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