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**Opening Extract from...**

**The Mammoth Book of**

# **Best British Crime 11**

Edited by Maxim Jakubowski

Published by Robinson

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THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF

# Best British Crime 11

Edited by Maxim Jakubowski



ROBINSON

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# INTRODUCTION

Maxim Jakubowski

We are now well into the second decade of this anthology series in which, over the past years, I have endeavoured to unearth and discover the best criminal short stories of the year from the pens of British and Irish authors (including expatriates living as far afield as Australia and a handful of Yanks who have been resident in the UK for a long time). Few anthology series in the mystery field last this long and I must express my sincere thanks to our publishers past and present for continuing to support the project. Without David Shelley, Susie Dunlop, Peter Duncan and, holding the fort right now, Duncan Proudfoot, these books would not have seen the light of day and many crime writers would not have won a variety of awards by being published in *The Mammoth Book of Best British Crime*.

And still, year after year, our writers manage to come up with yet more ingenious crimes and solutions to crimes, together with a veritable landscape of atmosphere, emotions and sometimes chilling insights into the murky world that separates good and evil. But first and foremost, they continue to tell wonderful, gripping stories that have the ability to shock, delight and make you think twice, if not three times.

The mystery short story is a fertile field where all things go as long as the writer captures our imagination, and our contributors over eleven volumes have never failed to do so in splendid ways. And long may they continue!

Many regulars are with us again – both big stars from the bestseller lists and lesser known but no less worthy

authors – but it’s always a particular pleasure of mine to come across either new names or to be able to include writers who had not joined our little club before. So, a heartfelt welcome – in no particular order – to Will Carver, Christopher J. Simmons, Susan Everett, Tim Willocks (whose presence in the series was well overdue), Dreda Say Mitchell, Kate Rhodes, Rhys Hughes (from the shores of fantastic fiction with a rare step into mysterious pastures), Howard Linskey, Peter Guttridge (a fellow judge of mine for the Crime Writers’ Association John Creasey Dagger and witty author in his own right, included here with a short tale which won the 2013 Graham Greene Festival story award), and two leading popular children’s books authors shifting into a criminal mode, Mary Hoffman and Ros Asquith.

Sadly, Robert Barnard, a frequent contributor to the series, died just as I was making this year’s final selection, and we salute his memory. He will be sorely missed. Nick Robinson, who started the publishing house that is now Constable & Robinson, also passed away recently. He was both a friend and a wonderfully supportive publisher for me over almost three decades, not just for this series but for many other books too. This volume is dedicated to the two of them.

So enjoy our tales of devious deeds, puzzles and twists in the tail that prove, once again, that crime indeed does pay!

# The Hollywood I Remember

Lee Child

The Hollywood I remember was a cold, hard, desperate place. The sun shone and people got ahead. Who those people were, I have no idea. Real names had been abandoned long ago. Awkward syllables from the shtetls and guttural sounds from the bogs and every name that ended in a vowel had been traded for shiny replacements that could have come from an automobile catalogue. I knew a guy who called himself LaSalle, like the Buick. I knew a Fairlane, like the Ford. I even knew a Coupe de Ville. In fact I knew two Coupe de Villes, but I think the second guy had his tongue in his cheek. In any case, you were always conscious that the guy you were talking to was a cipher. You had no idea what he had been and what he had done before.

Everyone was new and reinvented.

That worked both ways, of course.

It was a place where a week's work could get you what anyone else in the country made in a year. That was true all over town, under the lights or behind them, legitimate or not. But some got more than others. You were either a master or a servant. Like a distorted hourglass: up above, a small glass bubble with a few grains of sand; down below, a big glass bubble with lots of sand. The bottleneck between was tight. The folks on the top could buy anything they wanted, and the folks on the bottom would do whatever it took, no questions asked. Everyone was for sale. Everyone had a price. The city government, the cops, regular folks, all of them. It was a cold, hard, desperate place.

Everyone knew nothing would last. Smart guys put their early paychecks into solid things, which is what I did. My first night's work became the down payment on the house I've now owned for more than forty years. The rest of the money came with a mortgage from a week-old bank. And mortgages needed to be paid, so I had to keep on working. But work was not hard to find for a man with my skills and for a man happy to do the kind of things I was asked to do. Which involved girls, exclusively. Hollywood hookers were the best in the world, and there were plenty of them. Actresses trapped on the wrong side of the bottleneck still had to eat, and the buses and trains brought more every day. Competition was fierce.

They were amazingly beautiful. Usually they were better-looking than the actual movie stars. They had to be. Sleeping with an actual movie star was about the only thing money couldn't buy, so look-alikes and substitutes did good business. They were the biggest game in town. They lasted a year or two. If they couldn't take it, they were allowed to quit early. There was no coercion. There didn't need to be. Those buses and trains kept on rolling in.

But there were rules.

Blackmail was forbidden, obviously. So was loose talk. The cops and the gossip columnists could be bought off, but why spend money unnecessarily? Better to silence the source. Better to make an example and buy a month or two of peace and quiet. Which is where I came in. My first was a superhuman beauty from Idaho. She was dumb enough to believe a promise some guy made. She was dumb enough to make trouble when it wasn't kept. We debated disfigurement for her. Cut off her lips and her ears, maybe her nose, maybe pull every other tooth. We figured that would send a message. But then we figured no LA cop would stand for that, no matter what we paid, so I offered her pure and simple, and that's how I got the down payment for my house. It was quite an experience. She was tall, and she was literally stunning. I got short of breath and weak at the knees. The back part of my brain told me I should be dragging her to my cave, not slitting her throat. But I got through it.

The next seven paid off my mortgage, and the two after that bought me a Cadillac. It was the eleventh that brought me trouble. Just one of those unlucky things. She was a fighter, and she had blood pressure issues, apparently. I had to stab her in the chest to quiet her down, and the blade hit bone and nicked something bad, and a geyser of blood came out and splattered all over my suit coat. Like a garden hose. A great gout of it, like a drowned man coughing up seawater on the sand, convulsive. Afterward I wrapped the knife in the stained coat and carried it home wearing only shirtsleeves, which must have attracted attention from someone.

Because as a result, I had cops on me from dawn the next morning. But I played it cool. I did nothing for a day, and then I made a big show of helping my new neighbour finish the inside of his new garage. Which was a provocation, in a way, because my new neighbour was a dope peddler who drove up and down to Mexico regular as clockwork. The cops were watching him too. But they suffered an embarrassment when we moved his car to the kerb so we could work on the garage unencumbered. The car was stolen right from under their noses. That delayed the serious questions for a couple of days.

Then some new hotshot LAPD detective figured that I had carried the knife and the bloody coat to my neighbour's garage in my tool bag and that I had then buried it in the floor. But the guy failed to get a warrant, because judges like money and hookers too, and so the whole thing festered for a month and then went quiet, until a new hotshot came on the scene. This new guy figured I was too lazy to dig dirt. He figured I had nailed the coat into the walls. He wanted a warrant fast, because he figured the rats would be eating the coat. It was that kind of a neighbourhood. But he didn't get a warrant either, neither fast nor slow, and the case went cold, and it stayed cold for forty years.

During which time two things happened. The LAPD built up a cold-case unit, and some cop came along who seemed to be that eleventh hooker's son. Which was an unfortunate confluence of events for me. The alleged son was a dour

terrier of a guy with plenty of ability, and he worked that dusty old file like crazy. He was on the fence, fifty-fifty as to whether the floor or the wall was the final resting place for my coat, and my coat was the holy grail for this guy, because laboratory techniques had advanced by then. He figured he could compare his own DNA to whatever could be recovered from the coat. My dope-peddling neighbour had been shot to death years before, and his house had changed hands many times. None of the new owners had ever permitted a search because they knew what was good for them, but then the sub-primes all went belly-up and the place was foreclosed, and the hotshot son figured he could bypass the whole warrant process by simply requesting permission from whatever bank now held the paper, but the bank itself was bust and no one knew who controlled its assets, so I got another reprieve, except right about then I got diagnosed with tumours in my lungs.

I had no insurance, obviously, working in that particular industry, so my house was sold to finance my stay in the hospital, which continues to this day, and from my bed I heard that the buyer of my house had also gotten hold of my neighbour's place and was planning to raze them both and then build a mansion. Which got the hotshot son all excited, naturally, because finally the wrecking ball would do the work of the warrants no one had been able to get. The guy visited me often. Every time he would ask me, how was I feeling? Then he would ask me, wall or floor? Which showed his limitations, to be honest. Obviously the coat and the knife had exited the scene in the dope dealer's stolen car. I had put them in the secret compartment in the fender and left the key in the ignition when I parked the car on the kerb. They were long gone. I was fireproof.

Which brought me no satisfaction at all, because of the terrible pain I was in. I had heard of guys in my situation floating comfortably on IV drips full of morphine and Valium and ketamine, but I wasn't getting that stuff. I asked for it, obviously, but the damn doctor bobbed and weaved and said it wasn't appropriate in my case. And then the hotshot son



would come in and ask how I was feeling, with a little grin on his face, and I'm ashamed to say it took me some time to catch on. Everyone was for sale. Everyone had a price. The city government, the cops, regular folks, all of them. Including doctors. I have no idea what the son was giving the guy, favours or money or both, but I know what the guy wasn't giving me in return. The Hollywood I remember was a cold, hard, desperate place, and it still is.