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Code Runner

By Rosie Claverton

Book Two of the Amy Lane Mysteries

Ex-con Jason Carr has faced down the toughest thugs in Cardiff, but being assistant to a brilliant, eccentric hacker who hasn't been outdoors in ten years has its own challenges. Still, he and Amy Lane can solve cases even the cops can't crack. And when a corpse washes up on a beach, Jason can't resist chasing the clues—or defying Amy by infiltrating the very gangs he once escaped.

Amy is distraught when Jason's pursuit gets him framed for murder. He's thrown back in prison where he's vulnerable to people who want him dead. He needs Amy to prove his innocence. Fast.

But Amy hasn't been honest with him—her panic attacks aren't getting better. And now, with everything that makes her feel safe ripped away, she must stand alone, using her technological skills to expose a baffling conspiracy and a new kind of online crime. Can she clear Jason's name before danger closes in?

89,000 words

Chapter 1: Overheard in Cardiff

DS Rich Porter was sick to death of Cardiff.

What was supposed to be a capital city was a soggy little nothing town—no prospects of promotion, no chance to shine. He wished he'd realised that before he'd accepted the transfer, but the Met had been all abuzz with their work on a serial killer case and he'd been enthralled by the manhunt, the digital forensics, the cutting-edge police work.

But what he'd found was a bunch of past-it detectives who had blundered through the investigation and only found the bloke because of some nerdy girl with a computer and her criminal sidekick. It was a sham from start to finish and now he had their useless unit attached to his CV.

At least the lads back home in Camden had taken pity on him and organised a piss-up to make the most of the May Day weekend. He needed to be back among the living in London.

Making his way down St. Mary's Street in Cardiff's piss-poor excuse for a city centre, Rich checked his watch, rubbing at the rain that splattered it. Twenty minutes—he could stroll it. He passed McDonald's and the chavs propping up the windows, disaffected youth in fake designer gear and gold-looking chains. He clocked three of them who he'd seen on the unsolved boards in the office. Petty theft, possession of a negligible amount of cocaine, school arson. What a gallon of twats.

Speaking of twats... Rich became aware of a skinhead coming up behind him on the street, and automatically pulled his jacket closer. He subtly checked him out in the reflection of the shop window: a tall, broad twenty-something with a light coating of stubble on his cheeks. He wore a nice leather jacket—looked vintage, but you could buy that crap from the indoor market for a pittance. Cheap Chinese crap that kids thought made them look cool.

This boy didn't look like the usual breed of neo-Nazi scum, but DI Hesketh had been wittering on about an increased presence of English Defence League—or was that Welsh Defence League?—hooligans on their streets. They were supposed to be on the lookout for racially motivated crimes, but Rich had never been keen to

police what was going on in someone's head. And if the Welsh bastards wanted to keep Wales for themselves, they were welcome to it.

Yet this kid made him antsy precisely because he didn't fit the bill. He had his shoulders hunched down and was walking at a pace that his long legs could easily have exceeded. Why was he walking so damn slowly?

Rich suddenly felt a deep sense of unease, the hairs on the back of his neck rising up. Had he done something to piss off the boys down in grubby Splott? Had they sent a friend to take care of him? He regretted leaving his badge at home.

It wasn't yet nine o'clock but the streets were dark and quiet, falling into the lull between the day's shoppers heading home and the nightlife coming out to play. There were barely twenty people the entire length of the street and no one close to them. The skinhead could easily come up behind him, slide a knife between his ribs, and that would be him done. Nobody would even know until Rich spilled his lifeblood on the ground, spreading pink in the rainwater gutters of the street.

Rich picked up his pace, crossing the street and resisting the urge to look behind him. He had to get to the station—it would be busy there, crammed with witnesses. There was safety in numbers.

As he rounded the corner for the station, Rich caught sight of him again. The guy was following him! Rich all but ran through the rain, his jacket flapping about him as his feet pounded the pavement. He had to get to the platform.

Rich ran into the station concourse, his breath catching in his throat. Shit, the barriers were down. Trying to get control of himself, he joined the queue for the ticket machine, keeping his eyes fixed on the door. But the skinhead didn't appear and, by the time he got to the machine, his hands had stopped trembling.

He was getting paranoid in this claustrophobic town. It wasn't like London, where you could lose yourself in the flotsam and jetsam. Here, people knew a man. They knew where to find him.

Rich passed through the barriers with his head down, going straight to the platform and huddling in a spot away from the numerous leaks in the roof. He was done with this godforsaken place. He would put in for the first transfer that came up, and fuck how it would look.

He took a deep breath and let it out. On the other hand, he was making something out of nothing here, wasn't he? The guy wasn't actually after him. Rich was just jumpy and it didn't mean anything. When he got back from his weekend away, he could look at the whole situation and where his options were. Maybe Cardiff still had some potential.

And then, in slow-motion horror, the skinhead came up the platform steps and stood ten feet away from him. Rich tried to swallow past the lump in his throat, wanted desperately to avoid choking on his own saliva, and dying of fear like some fainting Victorian wench in a Hammer Horror.

But the man caught his gaze, looking at him a little strangely, and looked away.

Rich closed his eyes in relief. He was just getting a train. He was plodding through the rain to catch a train like every other body with sense, getting away for the long weekend. And Rich had just made a tit of himself in the centre of Cardiff. He hoped there weren't any perps who'd recognised him. Or, worse still, his fellow officers.

The London train trundled in, stopping with a piercing screech of brakes. Rich gratefully got on it and tried to find a seat, peeling off his damp jacket and jumper to let them dry on the overhead luggage rack.

He tried not to flinch as the skinhead pushed past him and took the next seat down, removing his leather jacket to reveal a variety of old-school tattoos. The guy was built and Rich slipped into his seat, trying to avoid his attention. The bloke might not be following him but the last thing Rich needed was to start the weekend with a broken nose.

Rich relaxed into his seat, pulling himself together and trying to forget his silly dash across the bus station to escape his imaginary stalker. He wiped his phone carefully on his jumper before having a check of Facebook and Twitter. Nothing doing. He refreshed the apps, but new messages refused to load. He switched the phone on and off, and still nada. The signal bar wasn't showing any data connection at all and this stretch of the line could usually be relied on for a bit of reception.

Since he had nothing better to do, he decided to call his mother. But the bloody phone still wasn't playing ball. "Calls to this number are not available from this handset. Please wait while we connect you to customer services."

"Fuckers." Rich went to check his balance on his banking app, only to remember that he didn't have any signal. He swore again.

An old lady across the aisle looked at him disapprovingly and he ducked his head to give the illusion of privacy and waited for customer services to pick up.

"Hi, you're through to Natalie—how can I help you today?"

The perky Glaswegian woman just made him more irritable. He put on his best interrogation voice. "You disconnected my phone. Why?"

"Let me just check your details. Can I have your full name and security phrase please?"

Rich racked his brains for whatever password he'd thought was a good idea at the time. "Richard Anthony Porter, and umm...it's probably Lampard."

"Could you spell that for me, sir?"

Rich wanted to rant that none of it was difficult and did the silly little bint really not know the most famous member of the England squad? "My name or the answer?"

“The answer please, Mr. Porter.”

“Lampard. L-A-M-P-A-R-D. The footballer, yeah?”

“Thank you. Let’s see...” She clacked some keys in the background. “It appears your direct debit failed to go through. You need an alternate payment method.”

Rich stood up and rummaged around in his jacket for his wallet. He flicked through his cards, before choosing the MasterCard.

“Yeah, I got a credit card here—”

“Sorry, sir. We only accept a new direct debit or standing order.”

The bitch was infuriating. The train pulled into Newport and Rich massaged his forehead. He had to get this sorted quick before he lost signal in the Severn Tunnel on the way into Bristol. He rooted around in his wallet for the scrap of paper with the details of the other account on it. Once he’d got his bank sorted, he’d change it back, nice and easy.

“How do you want it?” Rich smoothed the bit of paper out on his jeans, squinting at the last digit of the sort code where the ink had run. Was that a four or a seven?

“Sort code first. That’s the six-digit—”

“I know, I know.” Rich decided it was a four and read it out, slowly and carefully. The blonde bimbo—he’d decided she was blonde—asked for the thing again, so he read it out again, as if he was trying to teach the learning disabled.

He went through the same arduous process with the account number, repeating the last two digits four times before the message got through to the Scottish lass of questionable intellect. All the time, the bloody tunnel was getting ever closer—he just needed his phone back. How hard could it be?

“Right, that’s all done for you. You should be reconnected within twenty-four hours. Anything else I can help you with today?”

If you didn’t laugh, you would cry. Rich curled his hand into a fist but resisted the urge to slam it into the seat in front and disturb the skinhead.

“No. Thanks.”

He hung up and sank into his seat, clutching his useless brick of a phone and wishing he was one of those intellectuals who read novels.

The skinhead, for his part, was enjoying his all-expenses-paid trip down the rail line. He’d meant to bill his employer for a cup of tea but he didn’t make it as far as the dining car before Bristol Temple Meads.

At his destination, he tugged on his jacket, careful to look anywhere except at the man sitting behind him, and was the first one to the doors. He yanked down

the window and swung open the door, shouldering past the crowd clamouring to get on the train and out of Bristol.

Pushing through the crowds, he took the stairs and crossed to the next platform over. He had a couple of minutes to wait, so he fished his Bluetooth headset out of his pocket and slipped it over his ear to call the boss.

And got on the train back to Cardiff Central.

“Amy? Yeah, we’ve got him.”

Chapter 2: Cash in Hand

When Jason arrived home, Amy was laughing hysterically to herself while reviewing the CCTV footage of Rich Porter's flight to Central Station. His hilarious flapping run played on all three monitors belonging to her home-made supercomputer AEON and she captured a set of stills for posterity. She ran it through once more for her assistant's amusement.

"You are a cruel woman. Remind me to stay on your good side."

Amy held out a hand for his intel. "You might not be on my good side at all, minion. Did you bring me a souvenir?"

Jason handed over his notebook—soft brown leather, almost identical to one owned by her police contact, DI Bryn Hesketh. "I was in Bristol for four minutes. What could I possibly have got you?"

"Cup of tea would be nice." Amy input the sort code and account number of their target into her interface, downloading the recent transaction history in an instant. She had been refining her account interrogation—the banks were getting smarter and she had no intention of falling behind.

Jason was crashing around the kitchen like a bear with a sore head, muttering to himself about damp denim. Amy would have to encourage him into the shower before he caught a cold. For a man brought up in Cardiff, he was strangely averse to the rain, though she was sure he'd spent years running down the sodden streets with his boys, before it had all come crashing down around him.

He returned with two mugs of tea as she perused Rich's recent transactions. Or, more accurately, the regular and substantial cash deposits. It wasn't the concrete evidence trail she would've liked but if they could link a couple of the deposits to a matching sum coming out of Madhouse Mickey's account...

Jason hovered over her shoulder, his usual spot while he watched her tease truths from her computer. "You got what Bryn needed?"

"I've got it." She had enough, she was certain, and she deposited the files directly onto Bryn's computer. There was nothing worse to Bryn Hesketh's mind than a bent copper and he would use those files to raise suspicion in all the right places. Amy might be able to light the fire under the bastard, but it would take proper police procedure for him to burn for his crimes.

“I thought I’d head over to Mam’s to pack up some things for tomorrow. You don’t mind, do you?” Jason was already moving away, heading for the elevator that led to his bedroom.

“Of course not.” The words were automatic, ashes in her mouth, but she tried to put on a brave face.

He was going down to the caravan in Tenby with his mum and sister for the long weekend and Amy was not sulking. Jason had his family and it was only natural that he should want to spend time with them. Of course, Gwen had invited her to join them, with a motherly affection alien to Amy. She had managed to politely decline before excusing herself to have her panic attack in private.

The thought of the beach and the open ocean, the fields at her back...and all those people... It had taken two little blue tablets and an hour of deep breathing before she was able to emerge, by which time Gwen and Cerys had left and Jason had fallen into an after-dinner dose. Even now, she struggled to think about the caravan site in Pembrokeshire without breaking into a cold sweat.

It was only three days. She’d been without her assistant for longer—Christmas, Easter, that time he’d got drunk and woken up in Portsmouth. His mate Dylan had paid for that prank dearly when Amy had arranged a surprise tax inspection of his garage in the dodgier part of Canton.

It had been too easy to get used to having Jason around. Now it was hard to recall the years she had spent alone, sharing her space with AEON and no one else. Even before Lizzie left for Australia, her sister had her own life outside their apartment—school, a job, friends. Jason had insinuated himself into every corner of Amy’s world and when he retreated to pursue his own interests, apart from her, Amy felt the loss keenly. The loss of him, and the sad reality that she could never follow where he went.

It was almost midnight when Jason finally left the house and headed over to his mam’s in Butetown. He was glad to be back behind the wheel of his battered Nissan Micra, even though its rust spots were growing after spending winter parked on the street outside Amy’s.

Whatever Jason had expected when he’d accepted Amy’s job offer to become her live-in assistant, this wasn’t it. She kept odd hours and expected Jason to do the same. She could spend entire days fuelled only by coffee and toast. Sometimes her black moods couldn’t even be shifted by Jason, cowering under the covers for twenty-four hours before finally emerging as something approaching human.

And then, sometimes, she would order pizza and introduce him to some obscure sci-fi show she knew everything about, rambling on with all the animation

she usually reserved for the pursuit of a mystery. When her bright green eyes reflected the dancing light of the television, Jason was lost in them and he could spend hours listening to her enthuse about starships and wormholes and bleak dystopias.

Other days, he just had to get away. He had hammered out a schedule where he had one day per week that was all his own, and while it was subject to last-minute cancellations, he was able to snatch time to fix motors with his friend Dylan at the garage or eat his mam's roast dinners.

And there was Keira, his lover maybe, but definitely not his girlfriend. Between Amy's brutal schedule and Keira's bar shifts, they were lucky to catch each other twice a week—but then it was about the loss of clothes, the meeting of skin, and a cigarette shared in the afterglow. Still, she'd noticed that they always ended up at hers, and Jason could see it was going to be a problem. If not with Keira, then maybe with a future girlfriend. How could he entertain a woman in Amy's basement, or in the single bedroom at his mam's house?

That was assuming he ever plucked up the courage to tell the women in his life about Keira. His mother would probably take it in her stride, his sister would shrug it off, but Amy...

As Jason emerged from the city centre and turned onto Bute Street, he saw a familiar blonde huddled against the wind, drowning in her pale blue hoodie. He pulled up to the curb and crawled alongside her for a couple of metres before she finally looked up—and smacked the window.

"I thought you were some creep!" Cerys said, yanking open the door and getting into the passenger seat.

Jason laughed and drove towards their mam's house. "You're late out."

"What, you playing Mam now?" Cerys shot back, sinking into the seat like a sulky child. Sometimes it was hard to remember she was nineteen, but she'd recently lost the ridiculous fringe that had covered her eyes and her piercings had morphed from large bright spikes to subtle silver bars and studs. It was almost like she was a grown-up.

Jason glanced at the rear-view window. A dark car was following them, a few metres away. It looked like a new-ish BMW, far too fancy for a neighbourhood like this. Lost tourist?

"You pissed anyone off lately?" Jason said, taking a sudden hard right.

Cerys yelped and clung to the seat. "No! What the fuck?"

Jason glanced back—nothing. "Just testing your reflexes."

Lights flared in the mirror and Cerys twisted in her seat. "Is that guy following us?"

The car was back, creeping along behind them at exactly five metres' distance.

“Why would anyone follow us?” Since becoming Amy’s assistant, he’d managed to keep his nose clean—for the most part—and the folk who had a problem with him were more likely to punch him in the street than tail him in a car.

Jason turned again, stuck on the slow circuit to his mother’s house. If the car wasn’t lost and didn’t belong to one of his former associates, who was following them in the dark?

Had Rich Porter somehow found out about Jason’s snooping? Had Bryn already delivered the smackdown—and now he was out for revenge? Jason’s heart rate jumped, aware that his little sister was sitting in his car and vulnerable.

He slammed his foot on the accelerator, speeding away down the street.

The blare of a siren and pulsing blue light followed him. *Well, shit.*

Jason pulled over, as Cerys rounded on him. “What did you do?”

“Me?! What did *you* do?”

“I’m not the one with the record!”

The car pulled up behind him and the driver got out. Jason took a deep breath, practising his calm voice in his head. Sniping at coppers didn’t get you anywhere but a jail cell, especially when you’d already done time—and his face was known to every detective and beat bobby in South Wales.

He reluctantly wound down the window and looked up at the officer brandishing his torch.

“Gotcha.”

“Owain!” Cerys exclaimed at DS Owain Jenkins, junior detective and Bryn Hesketh’s partner in fighting crime.

Jason scowled at him. “What the hell are you doing here? Except scaring the shit out of us.”

Owain swept his floppy fringe out of his eyes, amused at his little joke, and leaned up against Jason’s car. “Visiting my cousin.” Jason clearly wasn’t very good at hiding his surprise, because Owain’s blue eyes filled with mirth. “Didn’t realise I had a Bute boy for a cousin, did you?”

It shouldn’t be a shock, not really, that Owain’s family came from the rough streets of the former Docklands. When it came down to it, most Welsh boys had grandfathers who were miners and fathers who worked in the trades. Owain might have embraced his life as a police officer, but he remembered where he came from.

“Well, I don’t see your cousin here, now,” Cerys sniped.

Jason glanced over at his sister, who was staring straight ahead with her arms folded. “Play nice, Cerys.”

“No, she’s fine,” Owain said quickly, the cocky swagger falling away. “I’d better be getting on then.”

“You want to come round for a brew?” Jason asked. “Mam’ll still be up.”

“Er, no, no ta.” Owain backed away, waving awkwardly. “Enjoy your trip to Tenby.”

It was only when Owain was safely back in his car and speeding away that Jason realised he’d never mentioned the caravan in Tenby. Though it was likely Amy had spread her dissatisfaction far and wide—she hated him being out of sight and out of range of Cardiff’s CCTV network.

“Can we get home sometime this week?” Cerys snapped.

“What’s gotten into you? He never meant any harm.”

“Just drive.”

Jason rolled his eyes and pulled out. He was swapping one stroppy woman for another. It was going to be a fun weekend.

Chapter 3: A Dark and Stormy Night

The wine-dark sea battered the sides of the little rowboat and Eduardo regretted not waiting another day.

But his contact had insisted that the drop had to be made on time and it was with a heavy heart that he'd told his men—his friends—that they were braving the ocean tonight. To their credit, they did not complain, though some dark eyes held silent accusation. To lose even one man overboard would be a tragedy, but if the boards should separate... It did not bear thinking about.

The packages were wrapped securely in tarpaulin and strapped down between the oarsmen. The men were barely distinguishable from each other in the foul-weather gear and Eduardo could hardly see them through the salt spray. He sat at the stern, his compass attached to his wrist, guiding them into shore.

"*Estribor!*" he yelled above the roar of the ocean, and the oarsmen heaved the little boat around, fighting the waves that would drag them unto the rocks and dash them to pieces. Eduardo was helpless, a voice in the storm without his own oar to pull, praying to a god he didn't believe in to take them safely to shore.

Lightning split the sky above them, clouds from horizon to horizon, and Eduardo caught sight of a small huddle of figures on the deserted beach. It was only a few hundred yards to safety, but it could've been a million miles. His men were already tired from the pull from their ship, safely anchored a mile out, avoiding the Coastguard patrols. He had no idea how they would get back—but first he had to make land. One horror at a time.

A sudden swell caught their boat and lifted them clear of the surface, hurtling through the air towards an outcropping of rock. The prow bounced off the nearest, and the oarsman on the opposite side screamed, his body thrown clear of the boat.

One grasping hand flashed to the surface, and then he was gone. Eduardo's instinct was to leap, to reach desperately for him, but he had to think about the men in the boat. A boat on the verge of foundering, all souls lost. So he did not scream or shout or cry to the heavens, even though everything in him wanted to express his grief. Instead, he stood and ran along the benches, quick and light, before crashing down into the berth his comrade had recently departed. He seized the oar from its lock and now he screamed, competing with the thunder, "*Remen! Más rápido!*"

The effort tore at his shoulders, his arms, but it was fear that drove him now. If they could not make land, they would die in this storm. Their bodies would decorate the shore, and their legacy would float up out of the tarpaulin to damn them all.

He glanced behind him, trying to make out where the cliffs ended and clear water began, when he caught the glimmer of a dark lantern cautiously spilling its light to guide them. *Ave Maria, gratia plena...*

The minutes passed in a blur, sweat and spray mingling on his cheeks, the ache and chill deep in his bones, but slowly, painfully, they gained the shore. Like an automaton, Eduardo lurched from the boat, boots sinking into the sand as they hauled the boat up the beach.

His contact was waiting for him, his obvious muscle man at his side, and a third man Eduardo did not know. Michael Doyle's weaselly face was lit by a cheap cigarette, somehow still burning despite the wind, but the other men were shadows. Eduardo had no energy left for fear. He wanted to sink to the shingle and shale and kiss the ground God had granted him, but this was business and his obeisance could wait.

"You're late."

Fire flared in him, stronger than his weariness and his good sense, and Eduardo launched himself at the rat of the man. His friends restrained him, wiser heads than his, as Mickey's cigarette fell into the wet sand and was extinguished.

"Do you know what your demands have cost us?" Eduardo screamed at him, his throat raw. "One of my men—my cousin—lost his life for your delivery. But no! You would not listen!"

Mickey's mouth twisted. "That is...unfortunate."

The third man stirred, looming out of the shadows. "Where is the body?" His voice was emotionless, as if he was asking about the weather, as all these British did. He was local to these shores, though, unlike Mickey and his Irish enforcer.

"Lost!" Eduardo gestured at the sea that had claimed him, white with rage like the high foam on the water. "We cannot even take him to his mother to bury him!"

Mickey looked to the third man. In the thin moonlight, Eduardo could see him shake his head.

"The delivery." Mickey gestured imperiously at the rowboat, tossing his head like an unbroken horse.

The remainder of Eduardo's crew heaved the waxed crates out of the boat and laid them at the feet of this man who fancied himself a European emperor. Eduardo longed for his knife, to gut the Irish *cabronazo* like a fish and decorate the sand with his entrails, watching the crabs gnaw at them. But he would not do this, not until the money was in his hand. His cousin, his blood brother, would not die

for nothing. If Eduardo could not bring the rat's head to his widow, he would at least be able to give her his share of the profits.

When the crates were all in position, Eduardo looked at the case held in the enforcer's hand. "The payment? In American dollars, as we agreed?"

"As we agreed."

The hard man stepped forward and set the case down on the sand. Eduardo knelt and opened it, rifling through one stack to ensure it went right down to the bottom. The rat had not cheated him, at least.

"I regret that our business arrangement is at an end."

A meaty hand seized his throat, lifting him clear from the sand and choking the life from him. *The enforcer.*

"Stay back! Stay the fuck back!" The mad Irish one was shouting now, a pistol in his hand. "Will you get on with it?"

Eduardo was propelled backwards, knuckles white as he continued to grip at the case handle. He saw bundles of dollars spilling out on the sand, tumbling along the beach, out of his reach.

The enforcer threw him down and Eduardo's head struck something hard, metallic fluid filling his mouth as he bit his tongue.

A cacophony of voices filled his ears, lamentations in Spanish and Latin, before his face was plunged beneath the water.

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