



BINARY WITNESS

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By Rosie Claverton

Book one of The Amy Lane Mysteries

Police detectives rely on Amy Lane to track the digital debris of their most elusive criminals—when she’s not in the throes of a panic attack. After two students disappear in Cardiff, Amy uncovers photographic evidence that they’ve been murdered. From the safety of her computer, she looks through the city’s digital eyes to trace the steps of a killer.

Amy’s investigation requires footwork, however, and the agoraphobic genius can’t hack it alone. She turns to her newly hired cleaner, ex-con Jason Carr. Jason is fascinated by both Amy and the work, and can’t refuse even when she sends him into situations that risk returning him to prison.

The killer strikes again and again, and Amy and Jason are the only investigators closing in on him. But Amy’s psyche is cracking under the strain, and Jason’s past is catching up with him. To stop the next murder, they must hold their unconventional partnership together at any cost.

78,000 words

Dedication

For Pam, the epitome of grace under pressure—thank you for showing me that all things are possible and raising your son to be my perfect husband.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my talented editor, Deb Nemeth, for weaving her magic to turn my shabby manuscript into a novel, and for Angela James at Carina Press for taking a chance on me.

Thank you to Professor Burkhard Schafer of the University of Edinburgh for proving invaluable in my research on digital evidence and forensic computing. All the facts are his, and all the mistakes mine.

Thanks to all my friends and housemates who have lived at various locations in this novel, particularly Nicole who shared my wheelie bin anxiety.

Cardiff, I miss you. Consider this a love letter, hopefully the first of many.

Finally, thank you, Huw—words cannot express how much of this novel I owe to you and your indefatigable support. *Diolch yn fawr, cariad.*

Chapter One: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

The soft burble of the television threatened to lull her to sleep, and Kate forced her eyes open. She twirled the end of her messy blond plait around her finger and tried to find the will to get off the sofa. *Have I Got News for You* had just finished, there was nothing on for half an hour, and if she didn't take the rubbish out before her housemate got back, there'd be hell to pay.

Neither of them could be bothered to get up early on a Monday morning after a weekend of shifts at the club, so Friday night was her opportunity to shove the wheelie bin out front. Kate knew they'd get poisonous looks from their lemon-sucking neighbour for leaving it out all weekend, but she was also the woman who'd complained about their barbecue last month. Kate had no qualms about ruffling her feathers.

With Herculean effort, Kate prised herself off the faux leather couch and stumbled towards the back door. Opening it let in a sharp draught of October air, and she drew back her hands into her hoodie sleeves, teeth already chattering. The outside light flickered to life, blinding her after the dim, dingy student living room. She'd add that to her tale of woe for her housemate later.

With one hand, she stuffed the kitchen waste into the overflowing black bin, while the other rummaged among the detritus on the windowsill for the gate key.

She eventually found it among the cocktail umbrellas and, waving her arms to get the outside light on, she twisted the key against ancient rust to wrangle the lock open. She shut the back door, but didn't bother with the lock. It would only be two minutes. What could happen in two minutes?

Pushing the bin like a mam with a pram, Kate manoeuvred the thing through the gate, wincing at something sticky between her palm and the handle. The light clicked off behind her, and she spent a minute or three trying to fit the wheelie bin round a corner too slim for it. Finally, it budged and she shoved it down the narrow alleyway to the street.

She wedged the bin against the windowsill, ignoring the twitching curtains. As long as the foxes didn't get at it, she didn't see the big deal. It was November and the bin was more likely to freeze shut than raise a stench.

Kate looked back down the alley.

With the streetlights behind her, it looked ominous. High walls overshadowed the tiny walkway, with no light at the end to guide her through. The anaemic moonlight played off the ivy curtains, casting shadows that looked like men. Leafy green monsters. Kate scowled. It was stupid to be afraid—she'd only just walked down it. There was nothing there. Was there?

She crept down the alley, the darkness pressing in on her. The ivy monsters formed an honour guard as she passed, ready to end her with a branch bayonet at the slightest misstep. She was certain there were eyes on her, watching her, following her every move. Could she hear footsteps...?

Kate turned, twisting round to stare back at the road.

Nothing. She took a deep breath, pulled herself together and hurried down the rest of the alley.

Reaching her gate, she stopped on the threshold. The outside light was on.

Suddenly, the feeling of being watched returned. She was sure the light had been off when she'd left. How could it be on now? What movement in the shadows had triggered it again? Kate was acutely aware that she'd left the door unlocked. Anyone could be inside her house.

"God, you're ridiculous," she told herself and marched through the gate, slamming it shut behind her and snapping closed the lock. She walked determinedly towards the back door. It must've been a cat, or a mouse. How many times had it come on for no good reason? They should get the landlord to look at it.

Closing the back door behind her, Kate locked it and dropped the key on the windowsill. Then she turned to confront the house. The kitchen was a state, overflowing with dishes but empty of intruders, and she could see all the way through the dining area into the living room. There was nowhere a man could hide.

Kate breathed a guilty sigh of relief and returned to her spot on the sofa, but she didn't feel like TV anymore. She had to haul herself to the library in the morning, and she'd have to take the bus if it was raining. Of course, it was always bloody raining, but she'd moved to Wales—what else could she expect?

She turned off the lights, set the box to record *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (Naomi loved that retro nonsense) and made sure the deadlock was off so Naomi could actually get in after her shift. Having her housemate howl down the door at 3:00 a.m. did nothing for their relationship with the neighbours.

The house slipped into its midnight state, the faint strains of Maroon 5 coming through one wall accompanied by the rhythmic banging of headboard against plaster. Kate yawned, plodding up the stairs and straight into the bathroom.

From the vantage point of the cracked toilet seat, she stared at the shower curtain. Naomi always pulled it across—to let it dry, she said, something about mould—and Kate hated it there. For a start, it was an ugly curtain, all mutant fish and kids' bathtime phrases on deep plastic blue.

And, secondly, it would make a great hiding place.

Shaking her head, Kate went to wash her hands in the sink, letting the water warm her hands and calm her nerves. It was just that bloody cat outside. That was all. She looked at her face in the mirror, picking at her blemishes.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she realised: the shower curtain was drawn back.

Chapter Two: I'd Do Anything

“So, what do you want to be?”

Jason stared at the man incredulously. Ever since Jason had walked in and sat down in front of his desk, the nervous little man had grown more anxious, shrinking into his chair and tapping away at his keyboard as though it held the secrets of the universe. Sure, Jason was a big guy, shaved head, few tats, but he knew how to smile and speak softly. That got you a long way with people.

Still, this “Martin”—as his neat plastic badge proclaimed—seemed to think Jason was about to pound him into the ground, and yet this didn’t stop him asking stupid questions. What was the point of looking like a hard man if it didn’t stop people asking you stupid questions?

“I want to be whatever gets me money.” Jason kept his voice even and calm, but that didn’t stop Martin from shrivelling further into his chair.

“Er...anything specific you like, though? Something... um...outdoors? Or with animals?”

What did he want to do? His fingers itched to work, to craft something with his hands—make something, do something. And stay the fuck out of prison. Since getting out of lock-up, he’d spent every day in his mam’s living room watching daytime TV. There was only so

much he could take of “My sister stole my girlfriend while I was in prison.” (If Cerys had done that, Jason hoped he’d have the sense to keep it off the television.)

“I like cars,” he said finally. His only relief was Dylan’s garage over in Canton and the motors he fixed up. True, most of them weren’t entirely legal, but it was good money. He could lose himself in the pure roar of the engine, the beauty of the whole working in harmony. But it was that legal thing that bothered him now. If he got involved in the business, it would draw attention to Dylan, and he couldn’t do that to his mate. One of the few he had left.

Martin dutifully typed something on his keyboard that was a lot longer than “cars” but there was probably some fancy name for it. Jason had no time for faff.

“Well...we have one vacancy,” Martin said, nervously smacking his lips and peering at his screen. “It’s not exactly cars...”

“I’ll take it,” Jason said immediately. He couldn’t care less what it was, as long as it was work. It had been a heavy blow to his pride just to walk through the doors of the Job Centre. Everything now was just getting on with business.

Martin blinked at him. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

“Put my name down and then tell me where I’ve gotta show.” He wouldn’t give himself any opportunity to turn chicken shit and back away from this now. And then he could go home and tell Mam and Cerys that he had a job now and that was that.

“Report to the Roath Cleaning Company on Monday morning, nine o’clock. They do commercial and domestics and they employ a lot of con...victs.” Martin

looked at Jason with a mixture of terror and pity but Jason ignored him. He was used to that look now, got it from his mam's friends and his sister's boyfriends, the ones who thought he was stupid to have been caught.

So, cleaning. That wouldn't be so bad. He'd grown to like order and cleanliness during his time inside, taking pride in a job well done. He'd just go to work, get it done, and then he'd have cash to go out with his mates on a Friday night, have a couple, and glare at the young boys from the Valleys down Catherine Street as they stuffed their flapping gobs with chips. He could help Dylan on the weekends and he could buy his mam something decent for Christmas. And, most of all, he'd have his pride.

"Yeah," he said. "I can do that."

* * *

"Mam! I'm home!" Jason dumped his holdall on the kitchen floor and flopped down at the kitchen table. He felt tired for the first time in weeks, the pleasant ache of a hard day's work settling into his muscles.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

Jason looked up and scowled. Cerys stood in the doorway, giggling at him from behind her dyed-blond fringe and freakish false eyelashes. Bloody sisters—who'd have 'em?

"That's a lovely shirt that is, Jason," his mam said, breezing her way in and filling the kettle. Cerys's giggles erupted into sitcom laughter, an exaggerated state where the laughter holds their sides and requires the wall to prop them up. His longsuffering mother, the formidable Gwen Carr, wisely held her tongue.

“Mam, it’s pink!” Cerys pointed out between spasms, and Jason directed his scowl at the table instead. It was definitely not pink. He wasn’t wearing a pink anything. Apart from the Cardiff Blues away shirt, but that was different.

“It’s lilac, Cerys. Don’t be rude to your brother. He’s got himself a job, thank God, and this is what he has to wear.” Gwen set down his mug in front of him and handed one off to Cerys, before picking up her own. “Jason’s paying his own way now.”

“He’s cleaning toilets and washing old ladies’ knickers.” Cerys curled one loop of peroxide hair around her finger. “Any mug could do it.”

“Yeah, then why don’t you?” Jason said, aware this conversation was descending into petty sniping.

Cerys sighed dramatically. “Nobody works these days, Jason. It’s a sign of the times. Something about the economy or some shit.”

“Mind your tongue, *bach*.” Gwen leaned up against the kitchen counter, her cracked red hands curling around the mug. “So, how was your day? Did you meet some nice people? From around Roath Park, was it? Those houses are so lovely.”

With a final roll of her eyes, Cerys left the kitchen, humming as she ran up the stairs.

Jason watched her go and waited for the door to slam at the top of the stairs, before smiling up at his mam. “I liked it. Was good to do something.”

Gwen smiled, the lines at the corner of her eyes and mouth deepening. “That’s my boy.” She sat down at the table with him and they sat in companionable silence, nursing their cups of tea.

“Have you seen this terrible thing in the paper?”

Gwen nudged the *South Wales Echo* across the table. “There’s a girl missing—she’s a student, she is. Only nineteen, bless her.”

“She’s probably run off with the boyfriend. That’ll be Cerys next.” He raised his voice so that it carried up the stairs to his sister’s ears. A door slammed loudly and he grinned.

Gwen frowned. “Now, don’t talk about your sister that way. She’s doing the best she can.”

Jason snorted, earning A Look from his mother. “She’s doing what pleases her,” he said, with the newly acquired smugness of the employed. “You should be more firm with her.”

Gwen grew silent, shifting her mug round and round between rough hands. “Well, that was always your father’s business, wasn’t it? I was never one for being firm, *bach*. Drink your tea, now, and I’ll see what I’ve got for dinner.”

She left him at the table while she poked around the freezer.

Would his father would be proud of him, the cleaner in pink? The working man. For the past year, Jason had been glad his dad wasn’t around to see the state he was in. But now he craved that approval and he was never going to get it, would never know for certain what his dad wanted for him. His mam didn’t talk about him often and Cerys was too young to remember. Jason had been ten years old when he’d passed away—bowel cancer. The GP kept telling him he should get tested, sending out letters, but Jason quietly tore them up when his mam wasn’t looking. He didn’t want to know how much he was his father’s son.

Chapter Three: The Mothership

Jason slammed the boot of his Nissan Micra and shouldered his bag. He adjusted his scratchy lilac T-shirt, garishly emblazoned with the company logo, and looked up at the house. It was one of a shabby pair of semi-detached houses, holding each other up like drunken sailors, paint peeling on the outside and gutters overflowing. There were two doors, side by side in the centre. The door on the left was boarded up, the windows shuttered with corrugated iron. The one on the right—12 Canberra Road—had a fancy buzzer box with only one button and a thin screen at the top. The corners of the door were plastered with cobwebs—maybe the remnants of Halloween? He pressed the button, unable to hear the tone through the door, and waited.

Jason glanced down at the request again. The client lived in Australia and was hiring on behalf of her sister. Underneath, there were a list of warnings about the occupant refusing the previous two cleaners entry. This would be strike three. After half a minute and no sound of movement from inside, Jason pressed the buzzer again. Immediately, the box beeped and Jason jerked his hand away. A digital display scrolled a message: *WHO ARE YOU??*

Jason was baffled as to why the door buzzer was writing to him. He leaned a little closer. “Er...I’m Jason

Carr. From the Roath Cleaning Company. I've come to clean your house."

The box beeped again. *I DONT WANT YOU GO AWAY.*

Jason scratched at his chin with his knuckle. "I don't think I can do that, love. I'm paid to be here for the next two hours." Another insistent beep: *DONT CARE GET LOST.*

"Bloody hell—who still says 'get lost'?" he muttered to himself and got down on his knees, pulling out his duster and starting work on those cobwebs. Halloween or not, it was now November and time they went.

The box beeped again. Jason clambered to his feet and squinted at the screen: *I SAID GO AWAY.*

Jason stared down the box. "Look, love, as I said, I'm paid to be here. If I can't clean the inside, I'm gonna at least clean the door."

There was a long silence, before a low buzz came from the box and the door shifted open. Jason pushed it all the way with a satisfied smile and stepped over the threshold.

To find another door.

Slowly closing the front door behind him, Jason inspected this new barrier. Made of riveted reinforced metal, it looked like it could survive a nuclear holocaust. Abruptly, it jerked apart, revealing a small metal space: a lift.

"Well, this is fucking bizarre." Was he about to take a trip to Dexter's Laboratory? He stepped inside and turned to face the door, looking for the buttons. Nothing. The metal was blank on both sides.

The doors jerked shut. Jason wasn't claustrophobic, but standing alone in a little metal box... He rubbed his

sweaty palm on his jeans, struggling to keep breathing. The lift suddenly surged upwards and he steadied himself. *Get it together, Carr.*

The lift stopped. Behind him, the wall slid away. Jason turned, clutching his bag with a white-knuckle grip, and stepped out.

The air was stale, like the old attic at his nan's house. Beneath his feet, the carpet was dusty and covered in what looked like wood chippings. The hallway opened out to the left to reveal the living room, with decent furniture gone bad, dirty and worn.

"Hello?" Jason ventured farther into the flat and tried to get his heart rate down. And then he saw her.

The first impression he had was of metal—three flatscreen monitors, surrounded by computer towers and metal boxes, two keyboards, and wires taped haphazardly to the marked grey walls. Before this shrine to technology, a young woman sat in a high-backed office chair, typing on one of the keyboards. She was slight, drowning in loose casual clothes that had seen better days. Her hair was long, thick with grease and tied in a rough ponytail, and her skin was sallow, as if she hadn't seen the sun or a steak for several weeks. She was also steadfastly ignoring him.

"So...um...where do you want me to start?" Jason said with as much cheer as he could muster. Her fingers never slowed on the keys, typing faster than he could keep up with, adding to the random words strung together with symbols on her computer screen. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

"Do what you like." The voice was barely audible, a cracked whisper that only just reached him over the clacking keys. She sounded rusty, as if she only spoke

twice a week, and he decided he was unlikely to get any further conversation out of her. No wonder her sister was in Australia.

From hovering in the doorway to the living room, he could see the kitchen further back and decided that was as good a place as any to get going. He moved through the living area, stepping over old magazines and newspapers, curled and yellowing. The kitchen was a windowless room, smelling strongly of tomato. Every surface was covered in dirty plates, cups and glasses, with the dishwasher open and bulging. The kitchen bin had overflowed to three bags, one of which was threatening to spill. How could anybody live like this?

It was a bit more than two hours' work, but he was determined to make a dent in the chaos. Jason set the dishwasher going and cleared the counters with good ole suds and water. Next, he gathered up the rubbish and hesitated. He hadn't seen any bins outside.

"Chute in the hall," whispered the woman, without a pause in her typing.

Jason, resigned to only ever talking to the back of her head, approached the two metal boxes in the hall. One was labelled Mail and the other Trash, ink stencilled directly onto the metal. Opening the trash, Jason placed the bags in the chute—who had a rubbish chute in their flat? And where did the rubbish go? Out of sight, out of mind?

Out of curiosity, he opened the mailbox. Inside were half a dozen letters and about two weeks' worth of the *South Wales Echo*. All the front pages carried stories of that missing student, the most interesting thing to happen in Cardiff since the Dark Ages. Jason pulled

them out and carried them through to his client. “Where should I put the mail?”

The woman waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the sofa, continuing to type with the other, and Jason placed the letters on a small end table, removing a couple of mugs. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

The typing halted. The woman tilted her head to the side. “I think the milk’s gone off.” The typing resumed as if there had never been an interruption.

Convinced this woman was a sandwich short of a picnic, Jason returned to the kitchen and checked the fridge for milk. What greeted him was a hideous laboratory of biological warfare. He shut the fridge and struggled not to gag. “How do you eat in here?”

“Microwave. Takeaway,” she said, her voice growing in strength with use. She was English, he realised, or possibly American. The accent was difficult to pinpoint and he spent a few minutes attacking the fridge, wondering if she was Australian.

Satisfied that the fridge wouldn’t be developing sentience any time soon, Jason glanced at the clock. An hour gone already, and he hadn’t even finished the kitchen. She didn’t need a cleaner once a week—she needed someone to work on this place every day for a month. He repeated this aloud in her general direction and again the typing stopped. “You want to come here every day?”

She seemed surprised, but he couldn’t tell how she felt about it. He guessed she probably liked to be on her own with her code, but surely she didn’t want to live like this? His mam was going to have a fit when he told her the state of the place. “I think you need it.”

She tapped one key three times, then paused again. “Okay then. I’ll email them.”

And her hands starting flying away again, *tap-tap-tap*, and it seemed the conversation was over. But Jason was persistent and, if he was going to be here every day, he needed to know a little bit more. “I’m Jason, by the way.”

“Yes, you said.” She was back in her rhythm now, a frenzied beat that reminded him of the bass at a nightclub or the primal roar of the Hakka. Maybe she was one of those reclusive web designers, churning out websites for big corporations. Though, if that were the case, why was she living in a flat like this? She should be in one of those glassy modern things down in the elegant and expensive Cardiff Bay.

“I meant...I don’t know your name. Or anything about you.”

He’d expected the typing to stop again, but it just raced on, incessant as the rain. “Amy Lane. I code. Mostly for fun, sometimes for profit. You should clean.”

Despite the dismissal, Jason smiled. He was finally getting somewhere.