

# Murder of a Dead Man

Katherine John

Published by Accent Press

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# MURDER OF A DEAD MAN

Katherine John

## PROLOGUE

A chill hush pervaded the basement of the General Hospital. Someone standing close to the lift shaft or to the staircase leading down into the entrails of the building might hear the distant hum of the boiler that fed scalding water into the heating system. The boiler worked well; too well. The temperature on the wards rarely dropped to a tolerable level.

The muffled clanking of a trolley being wheeled into an elevator, followed by the remote clatter of equipment, reverberated through the stairwells, but the sounds only served to remind that the bustle of hospital life had no place down here. Even the corridors that led out from the brilliantly lit, white-tiled hall that covered three quarters of the floor area were deserted, stretching emptily into blind, secretive corners.

When night fell, even seasoned staff accustomed to death's presence on the wards avoided the passages that led down to the steel double doors below ground level. Behind them were stowed the General's failures. The patients who'd succumbed despite the care, skill, and technological advances.

A young man with the unhealthy pallor of someone rarely exposed to the sun bent over a trolley. His hair fell forward, covering his face, his spectacles slipped, and his hands trembled as he concentrated on the task in hand. And while he worked, the powerful lamp set low overhead burned, stinging his eyes and searing his neck.

He paused and glanced nervously over his shoulder. Shaking his head at his foolishness, he flexed his rubber clad fingers before resuming his kneading of the stomach of the cadaver he was laying out. He had watched the procedure often, knowing his turn would come, but never thinking that it would come so soon. That Jim would call in sick tonight.

They usually spent the greater part of their night shift in the porters' station, drinking tea and scanning old copies of *Playboy*. But not tonight. It was only half past two but there had been three deaths already and two calls from the wards warning of more to come.

Clenching his fists, he pressed down hard. Air wafted from the corpse's open mouth. It lingered in the chill, bright air, a final sigh that made the attendant's blood run cold. He pushed down again trying not to look at the face or think of the man this had been. The tags attached to the wrist and ankles detailed a name and number, but he remembered only the age. Twenty-seven – born the same month and year as him. Even the casualty sister had been affected by the tragedy of such an early death.

Why hadn't he given a thought to his future when he had opted to read philosophy? If he'd studied accountancy or law he would be equipped for a profession. He wouldn't be here, in this ceramic and steel house of the dead. A repository where corpses were stowed, until the ceremonies were over and they could be forgotten.

He flinched when the telephone shrilled. Peeling off one rubber glove he left the corpse and picked up the receiver.

'Mortuary!'

'Ward Eleven. We need you immediately.'

'Can't you get a porter, I'm laying out.'

'No porters available.'

'A nurse.'

'We're short staffed. Down to two on the ward.'

'I'm working single handed.'

'We all have our problems. It's an old lady in a four-bedded ward. People are awake. It's upsetting them.'

'I'll be there.'

He replaced the receiver and returned to the corpse he was laying out. The body was flat, legs straight, arms parallel to the body. The eyes were closed, but not the mouth. He taped the jaw, and as he did so, looked at the face for the first time. The features were regular, even. The kind his girlfriend admired when she wanted to tease. The

man had been tall, over six feet, with thick, dark hair. What wouldn't he have given to have had hair like that? His had always been thin, and was now receding. He pulled off the second glove, tossed it into a bin and picked up a fresh pair from the box. There wasn't anything so pressing that couldn't wait the quarter of an hour it would take him to go to Ward Eleven.

The sheet he picked up rustled as he draped it over the corpse. It was silly of him to bother but he didn't want to be faced with the uncovered body on his return. Dark hair, pale skin; so lifelike and so dead.

He pulled an empty trolley from a rank lined against the wall and wheeled it into the corridor. Regulations demanded that the mortuary be manned at all times, or else locked. He'd read his contract and signed it but it hadn't taken him long to discover working practices were very different from rule book ordinances. He had not forgotten the terms of his contract, simply learned to ignore them, as did the other attendants and porters. There was often no option since the place was understaffed. Besides, it would be a bind to have to dig his keys out of his pocket and lock the door when he would only have to repeat the procedure on his return.

The nurse had said there were other patients awake, so he'd chosen one of the new American-style carts. The body was deposited in a box-like hollow and a lid dropped down to cover it. Then a sheet was placed over the box. Simple, but effective. A flat sheet didn't draw the curious stares a shrouded corpse attracted, but the box carts never fooled a patient who'd witnessed the disappearing act.

He recalled the nurse saying, "It's upsetting them." Upsetting who? The staff? The patients? Visitors? – Of course visitors. Ward Eleven always had relatives staying over. Sitting by the beds, pacing the corridors, waiting for the end to come. And it nearly always came during the hours of darkness. Or did it just seem that way?

He reached the lift, parked the trolley and pushed the button for the eighth floor. He didn't have to wait long. The elevator ran smoothly to the seventh floor then shuddered violently, finally jerking to a halt on the eighth.

'You took your time.'

'I came as quickly as I could. I'm the only attendant on duty tonight.'

'This way.' The staff nurse marched ahead of him. He'd been right about the relatives. A woman stalked them, an anxious frown creasing her face.

'Staff...'

'I'll be with you in a moment. Here.' She pushed open the door to a small ward. The curtains were drawn around the bed nearest the door. He wheeled his trolley through the gap bumping into a student nurse who was dismantling a drip. She looked up, her eyes heavy from lack of sleep. He opened the box on the trolley.

'She was a dear,' the student whispered. 'Never complained.'

As she helped him lift the emaciated, slack-jawed figure from the bed on to the trolley he made a decision. Tomorrow – he wouldn't go to bed right away, he'd shower, change, take a walk to the Job Centre and look at the boards. If there was nothing there, he'd buy a paper and go through the situations vacant column. There had to be something better than this.

'Thanks. I'll take it from here.' He reassembled the box, and straightened the sheet ensuring the folds hung down, obscuring most of the trolley. The staff nurse nodded to him as he returned to the lift. The woman he'd seen earlier turned her back as he passed. He saw the look on her face and wondered if the extra the hospital had paid for the wagons had been worth it.

The lift was still on the eighth floor. There wasn't much call for movement between wards in the early hours. He pressed the button, opened the doors and wheeled in his load. The juddering was repeated as he descended into the basement. The door opened on to the deserted corridor.

He pushed the trolley towards the mortuary. Halting in front of the door, he looked around. He had no reason to do so. There had been no sound, nothing to alert him to the presence of anything untoward. Only a feeling of unease.

He took a deep breath. He was a grown man, a philosophy graduate. There was nothing to fear down here. As Jim had put it. "Our clients may not be happy with their lot, but you'll never know any different. You won't get a peep out of them."

He pushed the front end of the trolley through the doors. Then he froze.

The young man's corpse was sitting bolt upright on its trolley, facing him, the sheet draped in folds around the waist.

Jim had warned him that it could happen if all the air wasn't expressed from the stomach. But he was too horror-struck to wonder about the reason.

The torso facing him was white and finely muscled, with a mat of dark hair on the chest. But the porcelain gleam of the chest was in glaring contrast to the bloody, purple-blue pulp where the face had been. Only the eyes remained. The irises dark, the whites bleached, staring out above scraped cheek bones. Below, teeth grinned in a lipless aperture.

He continued to gaze, mesmerised, registering stumps where the ears should have been, black holes between the eyes where the nose and nostrils had been torn away. The ragged hairline above the naked cranium. One word echoed through his mind as the scream finally tore from inside his throat. Flayed!

The face had been skinned as neatly and completely as his father had skinned the rabbits he'd shot on their farm back home. But why would anyone want to skin a dead man?

## CHAPTER ONE

‘Two, four, six, eight, who do we want to date – turn – jump – hop – scotch –’ The young girl balanced on one leg before swooping down and retrieving a flat piece of marble from one of the squares painted on the surface of the playground. Placing it next to her foot she hopped, sending it skidding further down the geometric pattern of white on black tarmac.

‘It’s my turn after Hannah.’ A plump child elbowed her way aggressively to the front of the queue of girls.

‘No it’s not!’ The girl who had possession of the hop-scotch hovered, one foot in mid-air. ‘It’s Kelly’s.’

‘So there, Miss Bossy Boots.’ The girl who’d been elbowed aside reclaimed her place.

The children’s voices, eager, high pitched, carried across the school yard, out through the railings to an alleyway where a painfully thin man lurked, watching their game. His face was grimy with ingrained dirt, his chin black with stubble, his shoulder-length hair matted. A rusty black overcoat flapped at his knees, revealing ragged trousers stiff with grease. The only splash of colour was in his shoes, bright red baseball boots with luminous blue laces.

He shrugged his shoulders, easing the weight of the knapsack he was carrying. His eyes, keen, feverish, watched every move the young girl on the hop-scotch made. She was an attractive child. Tall for a junior school pupil, slender, with none of the puppy fat that characterised her playmates. Her silver-blond hair was brushed away from her face and plaited into a ripple that extended to her waist. Her eyes were blue, a deep cornflower blue that shone like painted enamel in the drab surroundings of the school yard. She was easily the prettiest girl in the group. A swan in a sea of ugly ducklings. The grace and beauty of the woman yet to emerge could already be seen in her willowy figure.

‘Miss! A dirty old man is watching us.’

The voice was shrill, the speaker a small boy who sat apart from the others at the foot of the railings. A middle-aged woman wearing a grey woollen dress and a lumpy, home-knitted blue jacket dashed towards the gate from the other side of the yard. Games were abandoned as all the children within earshot turned and looked into the alley. The man ran off.

‘That’s my Daddy!’ Abandoning the precious stone that entitled her to first turn of every game, Hannah tossed her plait over her shoulder and darted out of the playground before the middle-aged woman could reach, let alone stop, her. She bolted across the narrow road without giving a thought to traffic. The squeal of brakes was followed by the muffled curses of a driver.

‘Daddy!’ Hannah screamed, but the man kept moving. ‘Please stop.’

He looked back. Tears had cleared grey-white gulleys down his cheeks.

‘Daddy! You’re not my daddy...’

The man broke into a run again, leaving the child sobbing on the pavement.

‘Come on, Hannah, there’s a good girl.’ The middle-aged woman reached her.

‘No!’ Hannah refused to take the woman’s hand. ‘I don’t want you. I want my daddy!’

‘Whoever it was is gone now. Come back into school.’

‘He looked like my daddy until he turned around. I thought he was –’

‘You can sit in Mrs Jones’s room. We’ll send for your aunt. You can go home early. Would you like that, Hannah?’ The woman led the child back through the school gates.

Another member of staff tapped the teacher’s arm and mouthed, ‘Police?’

The teacher shook her head. ‘Ring the bell and get the children inside. Then telephone Hannah’s aunt. If the headmaster and Miss Davies think it’s warranted, they’ll contact the police.’

‘Happy birthday, dear Trevor,’ Peter Collins sang to his colleague Trevor Joseph as Lyn Sullivan walked through the door of the darkened living room of Trevor’s house carrying a chocolate and cream gateau ablaze with candles.

‘He’s not your “dear Trevor”, Peter, he’s mine,’ Lyn set the cake on the table in front of the crowd gathered around Trevor.

‘So he must be,’ Peter agreed. ‘No one’s given me a cake or a party since I was five years old.’

‘Difficult to organise when you spend every off-duty minute in that disgusting White Hart,’ Sergeant Anna Bradley, Peter’s colleague and companion for the evening observed.

‘How do you know it’s disgusting? You’ve never set foot in the place.’

‘I don’t need to step inside. You only have to look at the outside.’

‘Time to blow out the candles, Trevor.’ The smile on Lyn’s face was strained. After six months of living with Sergeant Trevor Joseph of the Serious Crimes Squad, the kindest thing she could think of saying to her friends and family, was that police officers were “different”. And they were. In the hours they kept, their habits, their lifestyle, their sense of humour – especially their sense of humour – and whatever went for the force in general, went doubly so for Sergeant Peter Collins of the Drug Squad.

Trevor's closest friend could be difficult at the best of times, and it had been a while since she and Trevor had enjoyed the best of times. Four months to be precise, since a relationship, begun with so much promise, had deteriorated into grinding days of separate work schedules interspersed with solitary leisure times of missed opportunities. No matter which nursing shift she opted for, she invariably returned to an empty house. Whether she worked days, mornings, afternoons or nights, Trevor's hours on the Serious Crimes Squad rarely coincided with her own.

It had taken a mammoth amount of juggling at the psychiatric hospital where she worked as a staff nurse, endless liaison over the telephone with Trevor's immediate boss, Inspector Dan Evans and his colleague Sergeant Anna Bradley, plus numerous semi-serious threats to Trevor before she'd felt confident enough to arrange this party. Even now she was waiting for the telephone to ring and summon half her guests away. So much so, she'd been unable to eat more than a mouthful of the buffet of cold salmon, cold sliced meats and salads she'd spent the last three days preparing.

She consoled herself with the thought that, once the candles were blown out, the drinking would begin in earnest. With luck Trevor would soon be too plastered to go out, even if he was called. The first evening he'd spent at home for over six weeks, and she'd been stupid enough to invite thirty other people.

'Blow out the candles, Trevor. You're wasting drinking time,' Peter grumbled.

Trevor took a deep breath and blew over the cake.

'I don't appreciate cream being blasted on to my best bib and tucker, mate, even by a birthday boy.' Andrew Murphy, who'd been a constable all his working life, flicked a fleck that had landed on his tweed jacket back in the direction of the cake.

'After some of the places that jacket's been, a blob of cream isn't going to make any difference, Andy. It might even disguise the blood and tooth marks.' Anna handed her plate to Lyn. 'Large piece please, with a double helping of cream.'

'How do you put up with her on your squad?' Peter asked Trevor who was cutting the cake into thick, uneven slices.

'A better question might be, how does Anna put up with Dan and Trevor?' Lyn eased the slices on to plates and handed them around.

'Three more promotions and I'll be able to push any sergeant in this town into clerical duties,' Anna smiled through a mouthful of chocolate and cream.

'Five more promotions and I'll be able to order all policewomen back to paperwork, housework, and bed work.' Peter touched his glass to Trevor's. 'Here's to an all male force.'

Anna looked Peter in the eye. 'Just wait until I'm your super, Sergeant.'

'I doubt there's a man on the force who has the faintest notion what sexual equality means,' Lyn gave Peter a withering look.

'I give all my women every opportunity to take their turn on top, as you'll soon find out, Anna.' Peter wrapped his arm around her waist.

'I take it your past conquests used the vantage point to watch for something better coming in through the door.' Anna took his hand from her waist and dropped it.

Bored with Peter's banter, Lyn took the empty cake plate into the kitchen. Every inch of work surface was littered with abandoned plates, screwed up paper napkins, half-chewed chicken wings, dirty glasses and knives and forks. She opened the bin and the dishwasher. After scraping the plates, she began to stack the crockery and cutlery into the machine. When it was full she switched it on and debated whether to wait until the load had finished, or wash the overflow by hand.

'I apologise for my tactless colleagues.' Trevor crept up behind her and kissed her neck. 'You should have invited your brother and the nurses from the hospital.'

'This house isn't big enough for my friends as well as yours.'

'Then you should have just invited yours.'

'For your birthday?'

He turned her around. Her eyes were on a level with his. She was six foot, barely an inch below his own height. He kissed her on the mouth, thoroughly and slowly. Her irritation with Peter Collins, and the evening in general, dissipated as she recalled exactly why she'd moved in with Trevor eight months ago.

'Thank you.'

'For what?' she asked.

'My birthday party. And for being here, with me. But would you mind very much if I organised something for just the two of us on your birthday?'

'If I could have been sure you would have made the effort to be here, I would have done just that this evening.'

'Are you on duty this weekend?'

'Of course. Don't tell me you're not?'

'I was hoping we could go down to Cornwall.'

‘To your mother’s farm?’ Her dark eyes sparkled at the prospect. She’d never met his family. He’d told her about his mother, brother, sister-in-law, nieces and nephews and she’d spoken to them on the telephone, but all of Trevor’s protestations to the contrary had failed to reassure her that they approved of her living in his house.

‘I want to show you off.’

‘They might not like me.’

‘They’ll love you.’ He kissed her again. ‘And we’ll be able to visit all the secret dens I built when I was a boy.’

‘For an offer like that I’ll swap my shifts.’

He pulled her closer, until their bodies meshed. ‘We could go upstairs.’

‘Someone might notice.’

The kitchen door burst open, slamming painfully into Lyn’s spine. Peter pushed past.

‘We’re dying of thirst out there, mate, while you’re having it off with Florence Nightingale in here. Some bloody host you make.’

The drizzle-filled, saffron glow of the street lamps highlighted the filth that clung to the rusty black overcoat despite its sodden state. The trousers were more ragged than when Hannah and her teachers had seen them earlier. Oblivious to his state, the derelict clutched his bottle, staggered and fell to his knees as he entered the seaward end of Jubilee Street.

Coarse laughter echoed around the four storey terrace of superficially elegant houses. Daylight would have revealed rotting wood and peeling paint on the graceful eighteenth century facades; roofs dipping alarmingly in their centres, and more windows shored with wood than glass. But the drunk was in no state to look at his surroundings. He was only aware that he was in the vicinity of what he called “home”. The grand town houses built on the wealth of merchant shipping, were in the final throes of decay. The few still habitable had been leased by the council to the churches and voluntary organisations who struggled to house the town’s homeless.

The drunk’s bottle rolled from his grasp. A man walked up behind him and retrieved it. The drunk looked up.

‘Got change to spare, mate?’

‘Have this one on me.’ The stranger handed him a fresh bottle.

The drunk unscrewed the top and drank deeply. ‘Good stuff,’ was the only intelligible sound he uttered as the unaccustomed warmth of whisky flowed down his throat. ‘You’re a good mate. One of the best – bloody good –’

‘Let’s get you behind this hoarding and out of the worst of the rain.’

‘Too bloody soft, that’s your trouble. Haven’t been on the road long enough. It’s sheltered enough out here.’ The tone had become contentious. The man who offered the bottle grew wary. He knew what men who lived on the streets were capable of.

‘For you perhaps,’ he said quietly. ‘But you’ve half a bottle inside you.’

‘You complaining I’ve taken too much of your booze?’ The drunk tried and failed to focus as he handed the bottle back. He attempted to sit up, lost momentum and fell backwards, sprawling on the fouled pavement.

‘I gave it to you because I want you to have it,’ his companion explained. ‘But we’re in the open. You know what the others are like. One whiff of that bottle and it’ll be gone.’

‘I’ll look after it.’ The voice slowed as the fuddled mind digested the gravity of the threat.

‘Up you get.’ A hand gripped the back of the dirty coat. The sharp sound of tearing cloth echoed around the street but the drunk managed to remain on his feet – just – and only with help. Tottering close to the man who had given him the bottle, he reeked of the fetid, sour filth he’d lived and slept in all winter.

‘One more step.’

The drunk fell headlong behind a hoarding advertising a lager that would, if the picture could be believed, attract young, voluptuous females. Rolling over he held up his arms.

‘More!’ he begged.

The whisky bottle again changed hands.

‘Good stuff –’ the bottle fell from his fingers. His companion watched it roll over the rough ground until it clattered to rest against a lump of concrete. The contents gurgled into a puddle, mixing with the rainwater.

The man looked up and down Jubilee Street. It was deserted, just as he’d hoped it would be. The hostels for the homeless closed their doors early. They had to because the demand for beds greatly exceeded the supply. Anyone who’d lived on the streets for any length of time knew there was nothing for them in Jubilee Street at this hour. Queues started forming at five o’clock. The Salvation Army and lay charity hostels were invariably full before six, the Catholic one, which was fighting a losing battle against lice and fleas, a little later. At eight the police came down and moved the stragglers on. But despite the intermittent police presence, few wandered among its precincts after dark. And tonight was no exception.

The pavements shone dull, grey satin except where potholes had been filled with gleaming black puddles. Rain continued to fall, soft and silent. No footstep, no whine of a car engine disturbed the silence. Lights burned in the ground floor windows of the hostels, but no sound came from them.

The man stared dispassionately at the drunk lying at his feet. Eyes closed, legs spread wide apart, a snore ripped noisily from his throat. He was dead to the world. A smile creased his companion's face as he thought of the old adage.

He slung the bag he was carrying on to the ground. Opening it, he removed a plastic bottle of clear liquid, a tin gallon can and a hunting knife with a six inch hooked blade. Time to set to work.

Father Sam Mayberry, who'd been working late on the Catholic hostel's account books, heard the scream. A piercing, bestial cry of pure agony. It took him precious minutes to unbar the front door. The first thing he saw were the flames soaring behind the hoarding. As he ran closer, crying out for someone to call the fire-brigade, he saw the dark shape in the centre. It ceased screaming moments after he reached it.

When the telephone rang, it came almost as a relief. Lyn picked it up. She looked across the room to where Trevor was talking to Anna and Peter. He must have had a few, not to have even heard it.

'Lyn, is Trevor there?'

She recognised the lilting tones of Trevor's superior's Welsh accent.

'I'll get him for you, Dan.'

'I'm sorry, but –'

'It's all right,' she interrupted the inspector. The first thing she'd learned as the live-in girlfriend of a police officer was that "but" meant cancelled plans. As one disgruntled wife had complained to her at the police ball, even funerals, marriages and births – especially births – came second to police emergencies.

'I'm sorry, Lyn.' Trevor slid his arms into the sleeves of his quilted anorak. Anna was already outside in the car the inspector had sent to pick them up.

'Stop apologising. I expected it.' Lyn stood back as the door to the living room opened.

'But you've gone to all this trouble...'

'Don't worry, mate. We'll enjoy ourselves without you.' Peter stood in the doorway a drink in one hand, a cigar in the other.

'I've no doubt you will.'

Peter picked up the sarcasm in Trevor's voice but ignored it. He drew on his cigar as he retreated back into the noisy room, leaving a trail of acrid smoke in his wake.

'I'll be back as soon as I can.' Trevor reached out intending to embrace Lyn, but she stepped into the kitchen away from him.

'I won't wait up.' There was an edge to her voice he didn't have time to soften.

'See you.' He opened the front door and strode down the garden path. The car was parked, blue light flashing at the bottom of the narrow driveway.

'You took your bloody time,' Anna said. 'What's the problem? Needed one more double brandy to convince yourself that it really is your birthday?'

Twenty minutes later, it wasn't only Trevor who was wishing he'd had one more stiff drink. Dan Evans was waiting for them in the middle of Jubilee Street, police cars and fire engines parked either side of him. Behind him the forensic team was busy winding "scene of crime" tape around poles, cordoning off an area of waste ground and pavement the size of a football pitch. In the centre, behind a scorched hoarding, were the smouldering remains of a fire that had blanketed the street with the stench of burning flesh.

'No more bloody water or foam. Please!' Patrick O'Kelly, the pathologist from the General Hospital who was police pathologist on call, shouted to the firemen as he hoisted his leg over the tape.

'Sorry about your party, Trevor.' Dan stuffed a peppermint into his mouth as Trevor and Anna climbed out of the car.

'So am I,' Anna retorted.

'You were enjoying it?' Dan asked.

'Glad someone was,' Trevor said.

'What we got?' Anna shied away from the maudlin note in Trevor's voice. There was nothing worse than a copper whose personal relationship was foundering. She recognised the symptoms because it was a familiar scenario. Police work didn't make for happy marriages or long-term relationships. Her last one had disintegrated when her boyfriend had been interrupted once too often during the crucial stages of passion by the telephone at her bedside.

'We've a body, or what's left of one.' Dan indicated the smoking ashes that Patrick was peering at, as he pulled on his rubber gloves, boots and sterile white paper overall.

'Doesn't look like there's much left,' Trevor commented.

'Murder?' Anna asked.

'That's what Patrick is here to find out.' Dan led the way towards the tape barrier.



'Bring the tent up here before these ashes blow all over the docks,' Patrick shouted to his assistant who was heaving a heavy wooden box from the pathologist's car. 'Any witnesses?' he asked Dan, without looking up from the blackened mess.

'Sam Mayberry.'

'Father Sam Mayberry?' Trevor checked.

'He said he knew you.' Dan offered his peppermints to Anna and Trevor. 'He heard a cry. It took him a few minutes to unlock his door. By the time he crossed the street all he could see was a burning mass with a screaming blob in the middle – his words, not mine.'

'He saw no one else? Didn't hear anyone running away?' Trevor asked.

'No.' Dan looked towards the church hostel. Sam Mayberry, short, round and diminutive, was standing in the doorway talking to Captain Arkwright who ran the Salvation Army shelter. 'But I only spoke to him briefly. He might have something to add.'

'Is there anything to indicate this could be murder?' Trevor had worked with Patrick many times. During the initial stages of an investigation every word had to be dragged out of the man. The pathologist avoided making statements until he was one hundred percent certain of his facts; a trait that usually meant a slow start to investigations into "suspicious deaths".

'I can tell you that if he or she was alive when the fire started, he or she didn't last long.' Patrick rose to his feet and straightened his back. 'And petrol was used.'

'How do you know?' Dan asked.

'The smell.' Patrick waved the forensic photographer forward. 'Once the site's been tented and photographed I'll take a closer look. When the body's ready for moving I might be able to tell you more.'

Anna groaned; her hopes of returning to the party dashed. 'It's going to be a long night.'

'And that's before you begin questioning the hostel inmates,' Dan said.

Trevor didn't say a word. He had been posted to the Serious Crimes Squad for eight months, four months longer than Anna, and he knew exactly how long a "long night" could be.

'You didn't hear, or see anything before the scream, Sam?' Trevor asked.

'As I told Inspector Evans,' Father Sam Mayberry, who rarely used his title outside of church meetings, and never in the hostel, continued. 'I was sitting in the office, trying to work out the accounts –'

'The time?' There was a nagging pain between Trevor's eyes. The dry, metallic taste of hangover tainted his mouth. His stomach heaved at the smell that hung in the atmosphere despite another shower of rain. He wanted to be home and in bed with Lyn. But he licked his pencil and held it over his notebook.

'A quarter past twelve. I looked at the clock in the hall. The door to the office was open.' Sam's gnome-like features crumpled with the effort of remembering. 'There was a scream –'

'And before then?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary. Rain pattering...'

'It was raining?'

'Light but steady, like now. I got wet when I ran outside.'

The revelation warranted another scribble in the book.

'I wasn't even sure if the scream was human. I jumped up and ran to the door.'

'What exactly did you see?'

'As I told the inspector. A dark figure in the centre of a fireball. It looked like a cartoon shape of a man.'

'Standing or sitting?'

Sam Mayberry frowned. 'Possibly kneeling.'

'Why kneeling?' Anna asked.

'Because the figure was too close to the ground to be standing upright and its arms were waving in the air, as if clawing at its face.'

'At its face?' Trevor looked up from his notebook.

'It might have been the face or the back of the head. I can't say which. The fire was so bright he was just a dark silhouette.'

'And you noticed no one else in the street?'

'I didn't look,' Sam answered in his soft Irish brogue. 'I shouted for help. Afterwards I gave the poor soul the last rites.'

'Thanks, Sam.' Trevor stowed his notebook and pencil in the top pocket of his shirt. He'd carried them there even during his birthday party. Habit? Lyn would have said conditioning. 'We'll need a formal statement, but it can wait until morning. Looks like we're going to be here all night. In the meantime if you remember anything else –'

'I'll call the station and ask to speak to you, or Inspector Evans or Peter.'

'I don't work with Peter any more, Sam. He's still on the Drug Squad.'

'Then you've been promoted?'

‘A sideways shift.’

‘Was the victim still screaming while you gave the last rites?’ Anna moved closer. The light from the street lamp fell on to her face. Harsh, unflattering, it threw her strong features into relief, emphasising the determined set of her jaw, the line of her Roman nose and her eyes, hooded, deep set, in her raw-boned skull.

‘Thankfully no, because by then quite a crowd had gathered. Captain Arkwright had come out and Tom Morris and half of their hostel inmates behind them. Everyone wanted to see what the commotion was about.’

‘Did you notice anyone there who shouldn’t have been?’ Unlike Trevor, Anna had no notebook to hand. Without asking, she reached into her colleague’s pocket and removed both book and pencil.

‘That depends on what you mean by “shouldn’t have been”.’

‘The population of Jubilee Street is, to say the least, fluid,’ Trevor explained.

‘The inmates vary from night to night. Especially in my hostel. We all have our regulars. Captain Arkwright caters for the ladies, Tom Morris the younger folk, I tend to get the old hands, but we all get casuals who stay only one night. Some are looking for work and when they don’t find it they move on, some, the lucky ones, have places to go to. A few disappear from Jubilee Street and are never seen again. I like to think that for them, especially the youngsters, one taste of the streets was enough to make them swallow their pride and return home.’

‘But there were people in the crowd you didn’t recognise?’ Anna persisted.

‘Of course, but none from my own hostel. I’ve only taken in regulars tonight. But I can’t speak for Tom Morris, or Captain Arkwright. They’re good people, and like me, they’re fighting a losing battle against the authorities to keep their shelters open.’

‘I read something about that,’ Anna said. ‘Isn’t the council trying to shut the hostels so they can redevelop this area?’

Sam nodded. ‘The church leases my building from the council, same as the Salvation Army. We pay a peppercorn rent, but they can close us down any time they chose. And as Tom is seconded directly from Social Services, which is run by the council, he’s even more vulnerable than us.’

‘Leaving the homeless with the doorways and the underpasses in the centre of town.’

‘No disrespect intended, Sergeant Bradley, but seeing as how your colleagues move them on from there, and the pier was pulled down a while back, it will leave them with nowhere,’ Sam shook his head. ‘They’ll end up dying from hypothermia. One hard winter will be all that’s needed to kill most of them.’

‘Perhaps that’s what the council wants.’ Anna returned Trevor’s notebook to him.

‘I refuse to believe that any man truly wishes another ill.’

‘The council’s not a man, Sam. It’s a hard, inhuman, faceless institution. I thought you’d have learnt that by now.’ Trevor pushed his notebook back into his pocket.

‘Patrick’s ready to move the body. We’ll give the boys a hand to push this crowd back, then start interviewing the hostel inmates.’ Dan’s massive six-foot-four frame loomed towards them.

‘Has Patrick found anything yet?’ Trevor asked, once they were out of Sam’s earshot.

‘The victim was human. Either doused with petrol, or had doused itself, prior to igniting. The only recognisable bits are a boot with a foot inside, and a charred skull.’

They returned to where Patrick had prepared the remains for removal. A body shell and bag were laid out in front of the tent that had been pitched to protect the ashes from the wind. Patrick moved his gloved hand delicately among the warm embers, lifting each charred discovery carefully as though it was a precious object. He stared at one piece for a few moments then waved it in the air. ‘Cheekbone.’

Trevor stared at the flattish dark bone. Threads of wormy flesh clung to its contours.

‘It was resting against this.’ Patrick pointed to a piece of dressed stone he’d swathed in plastic. ‘The weight of the body must have pressed down on it, cutting off the oxygen. As you see it’s barely singed.’ He squinted at the piece of bone again, then took a pencil torch from his top pocket and shone it directly on to his find. ‘There’s something here that looks like knife marks slicing diagonally into the bone.’

‘Are you saying what I think you’re saying?’ Dan queried.

‘It could be that this portion of the face was cut off before the fire was set.’ He took a plastic bag from his case and slipped the section of bone into it, holding it against the light. ‘Whoever it was did a good job. Look at that stump on the side. It’s clean cut, not burnt. The ear was taken off before the fire reached it.’