



THE LONDON MURDER MYSTERIES

— *The* — 
DEADLY
FIRE

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CHAPTER 1

THE BETRAYAL



Alfie gulped nervously and looked around. Night was falling and the fog was thicker and more yellow than ever. One by one, the costermongers were blowing out the torches in their stalls. The unsold fruit and vegetables had been packed into carts and wheeled away. Soon the entire square would be emptied of people. Those who were still there turned their gaze away uneasily from the sight of a twelve-year-old boy in the vicious grip of the most feared and hated person in the whole of Covent Garden market.

Mary Robinson, known as the Queen of the Costermongers, was the tallest, widest, strongest

woman that Alfie had ever known. She always dressed in a man's overcoat and a man's hat, and under her calf-length gown she wore a pair of men's trousers. Her voice was like a man's also, deep and hoarse, and she had the strength of the strongest dock labourer. Now she took hold of Alfie and shook him, knocking his head against the wooden struts of a nearby stall until he began to see stars in the fog surrounding him.

'I've got you now,' she hissed, holding his throat with one large rough hand while rummaging in his pocket with the other. 'So it's you that's been spreading this poison among the stallholders, you pestilent little beast. Don't think that I don't know where you live, neither!' She had taken the leaflets from his pocket, screwed them viciously into the shape of a corkscrew and thrust it at him like an accusing finger. Alfie knew what was printed on them.

*DO NOT ALLOW MARY ROBINSON
TO CHEAT YOU.
SHE LENDS YOU EIGHT HALF-CROWNS
ON MONDAY.
SHE TAKES BACK NINE HALF-CROWNS
ON SATURDAY.*

*MARY ROBINSON MAKES
A FORTUNE EVERY YEAR
WHILE YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN
STARVE.*

'I'll kill you,' she spat. 'I mean it. No one will miss a slum kid like you. It's going to be a frosty night tonight – your body won't be the only one to be swept up by the street cleaners in the morning and no questions asked. Come on, answer my question. Who got those leaflets printed? Don't tell me any lies, neither. I've my fingers on your throat and you wouldn't be the first that I have choked the life out of.'

She was in earnest, this Mary Robinson. Alfie knew that. He cast a quick, desperate glance around to see if his cousins Tom and Jack were near, but no one was around except his blind brother, Sammy. Sammy sang for the stallholders and their customers, and charitable people put a few coppers into the bowl at his feet. Now, however, there was no one left to sing for, and Sammy waited patiently for Alfie to lead him home.

The woman saw his glance and Alfie heard her chuckle. 'And he's your little brother, isn't he?'

Perhaps I'll choke the life out of him first. Let you watch him die! Have you ever heard a man die from strangulation? I have, and I'll tell you that it's not an easy death. A boy would be quicker, but he'll suffer just as much.'

And then she was walking over towards Sammy, dragging Alfie along, her hard fingers still at his throat, the first finger and thumb pressing in so that he could not yell, could not even whisper, could not warn Sammy, could not tell him to run. Desperately, he reached up and clawed at her hand.

'I'll tell you,' he managed to say, his breath wheezing like that of an old man.

'That's better. Seeing a bit of sense, are you?' Her grip eased a little, just a very little, just enough so that he could gasp out the name.

'Mr Elmore!'

'Who's Mr Elmore?' Once again the grip tightened warningly before release.

'He's the teacher. The teacher at the Ragged School, at St Giles.'

'I know him. The son of the goldsmith in Ludgate Hill, son of a rich man. So that's who is trying to rob a poor woman like me! Well, Mr Elmore won't see you again, and he won't see that blind brother of

yours neither. He'll just be a burden on the parish when you're dead, so I'll get rid of him as well as you.'

And then Alfie knew that it was all over. He had betrayed Mr Elmore for no reason. He was still going to die and so was Sammy. He had broken his promise to his dead mother to look after his blind brother. That was his last thought as the life was slowly squeezed out of him and a deadly faintness came over him.

CHAPTER 2

SHOOT THAT DOG!



And then there was a whistle. A sharp, high whistle and then a note: just one note. A note pitched almost impossibly high. A boy's voice. Sammy's. His whistle, too. Sammy could not see, but his hearing was pin-sharp. He knew that Alfie was in danger and he had called for help.

Then a bark. A deep bark. A scrabble of paws on the cobbled surface of Covent Garden. A shout of warning from one of the costermongers. Another bark, a whole series of barks and then, from deep down in the chest of a large dog, an angry growl.

The grip on Alfie's neck slackened. He opened his

eyes. Mary Robinson was no longer holding him. She wasn't even looking at him. She was staring fearfully ahead.

'Help!' she screamed. One of her helpers approached with a torch and then another. The pitch on the torches flamed up and lit the scene.

It was Mutsy! Faithful Mutsy. Mutsy, who had followed Alfie home one day from Smithfield market to make his home with the four orphan boys and to love and protect them. He was a very large, very hairy dog with enormous paws and a heavy fringe of hair hanging down, a dog who made most people smile, but there was nothing comic about him now. Every fibre of his body bristled with menace.

Step by step, he advanced on Mary Robinson. Each hair of his coat seemed to be standing on end, making his body appear almost twice as big as normal. His brown eyes, usually so soft and loving, were now hard, and fixed on Mary Robinson's face. His lips were stripped back from his teeth.

Pace by pace, his huge paws moved threateningly across the ground.

'Help!' screamed Mary Robinson again. 'Police! Help!' Her loud harsh voice rang through the square. She let go of Alfie. Quickly, she snatched a torch from

one of the men and threatened Mutsy with it. The big dog did not flinch, though. Still he growled, standing so close to his owner that Alfie could feel heat from Mutsy's body against his bare leg.

'Police! Help!' screamed Mary Robinson once more and this time there was an answering shrill sound of the police whistle. A few of the people standing around disappeared, but most stayed.

Alfie put a hand on Mutsy's back and looked over at Sammy. Was there any way that he could get himself and his brother away from this place? He took a hesitant step backwards, but Mary Robinson flourished the torch again, and Mutsy growled and snapped at her.

'Kill that dog! Shoot him! He's mad. He has rabies! He tried to attack me. Everyone saw him. Listen to him growl,' she screamed at the breathless policeman who had just arrived, still blowing on the small whistle attached to his uniform.

'I haven't got a gun, ma'am,' said the policeman diffidently. He probably knew Mary Robinson. He sounded scared of the woman.

'Well, hit him with your truncheon, then. What do we have policemen for if they can't defend us against a mad dog?' Mary Robinson looked around at the crowd, inviting them to agree with her.

The policeman took one tentative step towards Mutsy, swinging his truncheon in a half-hearted way. Mutsy glanced at him, then settled his gaze back on Mary Robinson and gave another ferocious growl.

The policeman blew his whistle again. 'I'll have to get the dog catcher, ma'am. He's got a net and he can kill the dog when he's safely trapped in the net.'

'He's not mad. He was trying to defend me and my blind brother,' croaked Alfie, his throat so sore that he could hardly speak. He kept his hand on Mutsy's collar and moved cautiously over to join Sammy. Now the three of them were together and his courage came back to him. 'That woman tried to strangle me,' he said, bravely pointing at Mary Robinson.

'You little . . .' Mary Robinson took two steps towards him, and then backed away hastily as Mutsy showed his teeth and growled again.

'Here's another peeler,' shouted one of the costermongers as a second policeman came panting up through the crowd.

'We want a dog catcher,' bawled the first policeman. 'There's a mad dog here.'

'The dog's not mad,' repeated Alfie. His voice was beginning to come back, though his throat was still very sore. To his relief, he could see a familiar face

above the navy-blue uniform and the number on his collar. 'You know me, PC 29. Inspector Denham knows me – Alfie Sykes from Bow Street.'

The second policeman hesitated. A glance passed between him and his colleague and then he nodded. He spoke in a low voice, but Alfie could hear the words 'Runs errands for Inspector Denham'.

Cautiously, he drew in a deep breath. 'Is it all right if I take my brother home out of this freezing fog, sir?' He did not look at Mary Robinson, but addressed the first policeman with as much politeness as he could manage to get into his croaking voice.

Once again the two policemen exchanged glances and then the first said, with a jerk of his head, 'Go on; hop it!'

Thankfully, Alfie seized his blind brother's hand and put his other on the rope collar around Mutsy's neck. As he made his way towards the edge of Covent Garden Square, he could see his two cousins waiting for him.

'What happened?' asked Jack.

'Mutsy just took off when I was doing a trick with him,' complained Tom, Jack's younger brother.

Alfie opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again. Someone had tapped him on the back and then

thrust a piece of paper into his hand. Alfie looked at it curiously. It was one of the leaflets that he had been handing out, the leaflet that Mr Elmore of the Ragged School had printed in an effort to stop the costermongers being robbed by Mary Robinson.

The back of the paper should have been blank, but this one had something drawn on it.

It was the picture of a boy – crudely and badly drawn with a piece of charred wood from a torch. But that was not all.

The boy in the picture had a rope around his neck and he dangled from a gallows.

Alfie drew in a long breath and felt his heart thump wildly.

There was no mistaking the meaning of Mary Robinson's message.

CHAPTER 3

THE BODY SNATCHER



‘Stop arguing, Tom. I say you go to school, and you go to school.’

Alfie had had a hard day and his throat still ached from Mary Robinson’s fingers. He spoke angrily: he was tired of Tom. They had this argument every single night. Tom did not enjoy the Ragged School. He was finding it almost impossible to learn his letters and he was still in the lowest class in the school. Alfie bent over the fire in the cellar they called their home, carefully dampening it down with a mixture of coal dust and water. No sense in wasting fuel while they were all out.

‘I could stay at home with Sammy if you’re worried

about that Mary Robinson,’ grumbled Tom for the tenth time as the four of them made their way down Monmouth Street. ‘Me and Mutsy – we wouldn’t let nobody in. You could trust us. You’ll only get into trouble bringing a blind boy and a dog to school.’

‘Shut up,’ said Alfie. Mary Robinson’s remark about knowing where he lived lingered in his mind. He knew there was some truth in what Tom said. He didn’t think that Mr Elmore would mind him bringing Sammy. Sammy was quick and sharp and even if he couldn’t see, he could join in the chanting of the alphabet with everyone in the first class. No, it wasn’t Sammy he was worried about – it was Mutsy. Even a man as kind as Mr Elmore might refuse to have a dog in his school.

On the other hand, Alfie did not want to walk through the dark, fog-filled streets without Mutsy’s protection. He wasn’t just scared of Mary Robinson and her gang of toughs – it was said in the market that some of those fellows would knife a man as quickly as they would cut a cabbage stalk – but she was not the only menace that stalked the gas-lit streets of this part of London.

Alfie caught his breath in a gasp of fear as he saw a burly figure approaching them from the direction of

the Drury Lane burying ground.

Joseph Bishop was feared and loathed by all. Even the poorest of the poor – even people who rented one corner of a room in the crazy, tumbledown houses in the parish of St Giles – would not do what Joseph Bishop did.

He was a grave robber, a body snatcher.

In the darkness of the night, even in the dim twilight of foggy days, Joseph Bishop went into the burying ground of Drury Lane and dug up bodies which he sold to the medical students at St Bart's Hospital for dissection. But, even worse, people said that he also murdered children to sell their bodies. Perhaps it was easier to kill a child than to dig one up from the stinking earth of the over-crowded burying ground.

'Keep well out of his way,' Mr Elmore had warned a week before. He had looked all around the room, making sure that every child in his Ragged School was listening to him, before continuing. 'There was a young boy who used to come here, a boy with a twisted leg. The last that anyone saw of him, he was talking to Joseph Bishop. I have spoken to the police about this, but nothing is done. It seems as if only the murders of the rich and the powerful are investigated by them.'

Alfie had known what Mr Elmore meant. Ever since then he had kept a sharp eye on Sammy. Perhaps the body of a blind boy would be of interest to the medical students.

'Ugh,' muttered Tom now, pinching his nose between his finger and thumb, as Joseph Bishop approached them.

'Shut up,' muttered Alfie. Tom had no sense. His older brother Jack was quiet and easy-going – a loyal member of the gang and a hard worker, but Tom was a trouble-maker, always rebelling against Alfie's rule and challenging every decision.

Joseph Bishop looked at the four boys narrowly as he passed, transferring a sack of something bulky and evil-smelling from one shoulder to the other. He said nothing, though – just looked at them, then at Mutsy, and then passed on. A deep growl rumbled in Mutsy's chest, but it was low and Alfie covered it by exclaiming quickly, 'There's Sarah!'

'Hello, Sarah,' said Tom.

'Why are you looking so glum, Tom?' Sarah asked, and Tom scowled.

'You're late, Sarah,' said Jack hurriedly with an eye on his brother's annoyed face. 'You're usually at the school before the door even opens.'

Sarah was the scullery maid in one of the posh houses in Bloomsbury Street, just to the north of the parish of St Giles. The mistress at her previous house had overheard Sammy singing in the streets and had got her coachman to bring him back to her drawing room to sing there. Sarah had taken Sammy home to the cellar afterwards and had made friends with the other boys. She, Alfie and the rest of the gang had worked together in solving the murder of Mr Montgomery for Inspector Denham. The puzzle could not have been worked out if Sarah had not been able to read and that made Alfie determined that he, Jack and Tom would also learn.

‘Is Sammy coming to school, too?’ Sarah sounded surprised as she stroked Mutsy.

‘I just thought I’d bring Sammy along,’ said Alfie in an off-hand manner. ‘I had a bit of trouble today – with Mary Robinson.’

‘Those leaflets that Mr Elmore got printed!’ Sarah had a quick, clever brain.

‘That’s right. That woman tried to strangle me.’ Alfie stopped under a gas lamp, tilted his chin and showed the black bruises on his throat. ‘She threatened Sammy, too. She said that she knew where we lived so I thought I would bring him with us.’ He didn’t

mention Mutsy; he didn’t like to admit that he felt uneasy about walking through the streets of St Giles without the presence of his faithful dog. In every shadow he seemed to see the huge, burly form of Mary Robinson, dressed in a man’s overcoat and a man’s hat.

‘Coward,’ taunted Tom. ‘You nearly wet yourself, didn’t you, just because a woman gave you a shaking! Can’t think of nothing else but Mary Robinson, Mary Robinson, Mary Robinson! He’s been going on about her for the last hour or so, Sarah. He’s scared stiff, poor little boy!’

‘You shut up or I’ll make you sorry,’ retorted Alfie. He doubled his fists, but then uncurled them reluctantly. He didn’t want to upset Jack. Jack was such a good friend as well as a cousin, never complaining, always ready to do the worst jobs like spending freezing hours up to his knees in the filthy water of the Thames, searching for pieces of coal. Without Jack, their life in the damp cellar in Bow Street would be a lot less comfortable. His brother just had to be put up with.

Without saying a word, Alfie walked on. A flood of bad language was coming from Tom, but Alfie ignored it. Tom wasn’t too bright; he would soon run

out of things to say and then they could forget their quarrel.

‘Come on, Tom,’ said Jack, the peacemaker, after a few minutes. ‘Cheer up.’

‘Well, I’m tired of him bossing me. Who’s he to say that I should waste my evenings going to school?’ Tom moodily kicked a stone from the pavement right under the feet of a passing horse.

‘Give it another try,’ advised Jack. ‘It will come to you all of a sudden, you’ll find.’

‘We’ll probably all be turned out anyway, what with Alfie dragging Sammy and Mutsy along,’ said Tom. Typically, he sounded quite good-humoured, now.

Alfie didn’t turn his head. He had worse things to worry him than Tom. His eyes were fixed on the tall, broad figure emerging abruptly from a darkened doorway and then striding away from them, rounding the corner towards Great Russell Street.

He met Sarah’s eyes and said in a low voice, ‘I think that might have been Mary Robinson.’