



THE LONDON MURDER MYSTERIES

**DEATH OF A
CHIMNEY
SWEEP**



CORA HARRISON



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CHAPTER 1

WHY DID HE DIE?



Alfie knew who it was the moment he saw the body. It lay there on the river steps, just by Hungerford Bridge. Soot-blackened clothes, soot-blackened hair, soot-blackened skin, dead eyes staring at nothing. If it hadn't been for a sudden beam of light from a fishing boat, he would never have noticed it lying against the darkness of the rain-washed stone. But he did see it, and then he could not walk away.

Early that morning, Alfie had been coming down St Martin's Lane when he saw the figure of Joe, the young chimney sweep, silhouetted against the dawn sky, scrambling hastily across the rooftops.

Joe had been in a state when he reached the ground. His words were almost incomprehensible. Something about a bend . . . something about going the wrong way – or was it going into the wrong room? . . . something about being scared . . .

Alfie had tried to persuade him to run away, but Joe did not want to take that drastic step. Runaway apprentices were put in prison.

So the boy had gone back to the chimneys, back to Grimston the master chimney sweep. And now he was dead.

But how did he die?

Alfie looked all around. The light was fading on this winter afternoon and the fog was coming down thickly again. The river and the shoreline below were already dark as night.

The oil lamps from Hungerford market were a golden haze in the distance, and a few pitch torches on the roadway flared in small pockets of light, but there was no sign of anyone nearby.

Had the terrified boy just lain down and died?

Or had Joe been murdered?

CHAPTER 2

DANGER



‘What’s the matter?’ Sammy, Alfie’s blind brother, had stayed silent up to now. Sammy always knew when something was wrong; when fear, anger – even terror – overwhelmed his older brother.

‘A dead body. Joe the sweeping boy,’ said Alfie briefly.

‘Dead!’ echoed Sammy. ‘What happened?’

‘Don’t know.’ And then, after a minute, almost to himself, Alfie said, ‘Why here? Why by Hungerford Bridge? Grimston has all his boys up in that stable at the back of Westminster Abbey. Why should Joe come down here?’

‘Bit early to have stopped work, too,’ observed Sammy. ‘The four o’clock bell at St Martin’s church has only just gone.’

Alfie bent down over the body, trying hard to see it properly, but it was only a shadowy outline. At that moment, an anchored ship swung with the turning tide and its lamps lit up the scene. The light splashed over the body, showing the blackened young face – no sign of a wound, but a tongue protruded.

Alfie drew in a deep breath. ‘He was murdered, Sammy,’ he whispered in his brother’s ear. ‘Someone strangled him!’

‘Alfie,’ said Sammy in a low voice, ‘that gig that passed in front of us a minute ago, just as we was coming out of the alleyway – I’d say that they was the ones that dumped the body. I heard a thud and then they pulled the horse’s head around and went back towards the market.’

Alfie knelt down and touched the body. It was still warm. He lifted the arm; it was limp.

Alfie knew death well. After every night of frost or fog or even rain, there would be bodies on the London streets – some under the carts at Hungerford market, some in shop doorways, some under the archways of Waterloo Bridge. Joe would be just

another body to be carted away when morning came.

‘Alfie,’ said Sammy, his voice full of alarm, ‘that gig is coming back . . .’

Thoughts darted through Alfie’s mind like lightning. They were in danger if it was the same man, the man who threw the dead body out of the gig. The sudden light on the river bank would have made him look back and he would have seen the two boys by the body. He might think he’d been spotted by Sammy and Alfie – in that case, he’d want to get rid of them. One dead boy, three dead boys; one murder, three murders – what was the difference in the mind of a killer?

It was no good running. Hungerford market, crowded with stalls and people, was a good hundred yards away; a horse with only a light, open-topped carriage attached could outrun any boy.

A second later, Alfie was in the evil-smelling water of the Thames. He held Sammy in a tight grip around the blind boy’s chest, pulling him along, making for a place to hide. The outline of the boat was now just a dark shadow against the brick pillar of the bridge. There was no one on it. If they could get there without being seen, it would be a safe hiding place for them.

The water was getting deeper – up to their waists now. Alfie prayed that it would go no higher. He tried to move as silently as possible, pushing his legs forward in long smooth strides, and Sammy copied him.

‘Hi! Is there someone there?’ The shout made him jump. The oil lantern had been lifted off the gig and its beam swung along the shoreline. Alfie stopped for a moment and then moved cautiously forward for a few more yards. In front of them were the steps leading up to the bridge and the boat was moored beside them. He reached out and touched the solid brick of the pier. Cautiously, Alfie turned Sammy around until the boy had his back to the steps and pressed on his shoulders. His breath grew short and his heart thudded as he tried to make Sammy understand what he wanted him to do. He did not dare whisper and had to guide the blind boy by touch. Every moment he expected the light of the lantern to reveal them to the man hunting them. Finally his groping hand found wood and he gripped the side of the boat tightly.

‘Stay still,’ he whispered in Sammy’s ear.

Once he was over the edge of the boat and his feet were firmly on the deck, he helped Sammy in. By

touch he found a tarpaulin and pushed Sammy under it. He was just about to tuck his own head under it when the lamp's beam swung in a wide arc and lit up the fishing boat.

Had they been seen?

CHAPTER 3

HIDING PLACE



For a moment the light stayed focused on the boat, lighting up the canvas covering them, but then it moved on and Alfie drew in a sigh of relief. The stench of fish was almost overpowering, but the solid roof of tarpaulin over their heads gave a sense of security. Alfie strained his ears but could hear no sound. No one shouted; no footsteps approached from the bridge. Perhaps they had not been seen. Perhaps his luck had held. Sammy moved cautiously and Alfie stiffened, but then heard a muted chuckle.

‘There’s an eel here, a dead eel, just under my hand,’ whispered Sammy and Alfie smiled into the

darkness. Although Sammy was only eleven, he was amazingly brave. He had been blind since he was a small child – blind from the spotted fever, but it was years since Alfie heard him complain. The boys' grandfather had always impressed on Sammy that he was cleverer and more talented than anyone else around and perhaps that had given him a belief in himself, a serene courage and a keen sense of humour.

'Supper,' Alfie whispered back, but could not stop himself from adding, 'if we get out of here alive.'

However, as the minutes passed, his confidence grew. Surely, if the man came onto the bridge and shone his lantern in their direction, then they'd see its glow. But no light came. Everything was as black as midnight and the splash of the water against the bridge was the only sound to be heard.

The only sound to be heard by Alfie, at least.

Sammy sat up suddenly, his head lifting up the tarpaulin.

Alfie waited, holding his breath, not daring even to whisper.

'It's going away,' said Sammy after a minute. 'The gig is moving. I hear the horse. Listen, you can hear, one wheel is a little loose. Hear it rumble.'

Alfie listened. He could hear nothing, but he

trusted Sammy. He was not a boy to speak without being sure.

‘Gone now,’ said Sammy, but he still spoke in a low voice. ‘It’s turned up towards Charing Cross.’

Alfie sat up and moved his legs. He was soaked through and freezing. Now that the tension was over, his teeth began to chatter.

‘Let’s get out of here before we freeze to death,’ he said, but Sammy’s hand fumbled to cover Alfie’s mouth.

‘Shh,’ he said and then added in Alfie’s ear, ‘Someone on the bridge.’

Alfie could hear this now. A loud, confident tread, someone wearing heavy hobnailed boots. Could it be the boatman?

Come back for his eel, he thought. Despite his terror, he found himself desperately trying to suppress a giggle.

The footsteps stopped on the bridge just above the boat. Their owner seemed to pause there, not coming down the steps towards the boat. And then there was a strong smell, a smell of tar, pungent enough to overcome the stench of dead fish. Alfie sighed with relief. Ten huge pitch torches were stuck into holders along both sides of the bridge. The one above their heads

had just been lit. It would make getting out of the boat easier, but it also meant that they would be seen more easily. They would have to be very careful.

Alfie waited for what seemed like an eternity and then he peered out from under the tarpaulin. The bridge was lit up now and several big boats on the Thames had lanterns hanging from their masts. The lights were bright at Hungerford market and he knew that once he and Sammy got there, it would be easy to mingle with the crowds. The man in the gig could not have seen much of them down there by the water's edge – just a glimpse of two boys, one bending over the body thrown on the ground.

However, there was no one on the bridge and that's where they would have to be careful. Their two figures would be very noticeable. He thought about wading through the water again, but could not face it. Already he was shaking with the cold and he could hear Sammy's teeth chatter.

Getting Sammy out of the boat was agonisingly slow. Usually Alfie directed his brother with words, but now he dared not speak, and kept casting hunted glances over each shoulder as he steadied Sammy, lifting one bare foot after the other and making sure that the boy was safely on the stone steps before

leading upwards. Through it all, Sammy kept a tight hold on the eel and this added to the difficulties.

Once they were up the steps and on the bridge, Alfie began to breathe more easily. The pitch torches flamed, but they cast black shadows and it was easy to creep from shadow to shadow until they reached the end of the bridge and were in the open space in front of the rotting old houses by the waterside. Alfie dragged Sammy quickly past these. Many of the men standing around specialized in fishing out dead bodies from the river – emptying the pockets of the corpses before handing them over to the police for a small reward. It was rumoured that a few of them were not above killing someone, dumping the body in the river, then fishing it out a few hours later – just so that the reward could be claimed!

No rewards for finding a corpse on the street, thought Alfie as they climbed the short steep hill to Charing Cross. The river, however, was a different matter. A few dead bodies there and cholera would begin to spread through the city of London. It was worthwhile to pay the riverside characters to trawl through the filthy water to remove drowned men and women before they began to decay.

‘I’m freezing,’ he said to Sammy as they passed

through Hungerford market.

‘Think of the eel!’ said Sammy through chattering teeth. ‘Think of this big, fat, juicy eel roasting above a lovely hot fire.’ He chuckled and swung the creature at his side.

Alfie laughed. ‘We’ll heat some beer and toast some bread and put chunks of fried eel on top of it,’ he said to Sammy and a woman in a nearby stall gave him a sympathetic grin, her eyes on the eel swinging from Sammy’s hand. They were all poor too; they knew the pleasure of an unexpected meal.

It felt good to be in the middle of a crowd and it felt good to be able to talk aloud. It would have been much quicker to get to Bow Street by going along the river, but Alfie shuddered with fear as well as with cold when he thought of the man in the gig driving his horse up and down, looking for him and his brother.

He tried not to think of anything other than the toasted eel, but one thought would keep coming into his head. What was he going to do about the murdered body of Joe the chimney sweep?