Lovereading.co.uk

The Soul Collector

Paul Johnston

Published by MIRA Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

Prologue

The black cat rubbed its flank against Mary Malone's fleshy arm. They were on the window seat on the third floor of the house in Ifield Road, Fulham, West London.

'Yes, Noir,' the writer said, looking down at the tombstones in Brompton Cemetery. 'It's a nasty night. But you don't have to go out.'

The cat gave her a supercilious glance, then jumped down and headed for the stairs.

'Stubborn creature!' Mary turned back to the view from the high window. It had been a cold February with frost crimping the grass. In the last few days, the temperature had risen slightly and the evenings had been misty. It seemed to the writer that the patches of visible air above the graves were like exhalations of the restless sleepers in the frigid earth. Then again, she'd always had a vivid imagination.

Mary went back to her desk. She had written half of her latest Doctor Kasabus mystery. The series was set in eighteenth-century Paris and her hero was a freethinking medical man who had a secret life as an investigator specialising in cases of a religious nature—priests who sanctioned murder, heiresses locked up in nunneries,

bishops who abused boys. Rather to her surprise, she had gained a large readership on both sides of the Atlantic. Not that she ever met her fans. At five feet one, fifteen stone and with a face best suited to radio, she kept herself to herself. The memory of school—saliva-spattered girls' faces eagerly poking fun at the class 'hippo'—still made her weep on bad days.

Mary Malone (real name, Shirley Higginbottom) leaned back in her specially constructed office chair and looked at the lines of script. She could feel one of her periodic bouts of melancholy coming on. What did she have to show for twenty years of slavery at the typewriter and computer? Twenty-five books, good sales, some decent reviews, every day a host of e-mails from her fans—most complimentary, but some from people who didn't hide their desperation to know what she looked like. She had never allowed an author photo to be published and she never appeared at bookshop readings or crime-writing conventions. Her face and body were hers alone.

'Piss and shit!' she said, trying to repel bitterness. So she couldn't have what every other person had—a man, children, a normal family life, friends who made much of her at parties. Instead she spent her evenings looking at the websites of beautiful, blonde, female and handsome, young, male crime novelists. Her books did better than most of theirs, but she was in self-imposed exile, a fifty-one-year-old hermit, a repulsive gargoyle.

Mary heaved herself to her feet and went down to her sitting room on the ground floor. Negotiating the stairs was her only exercise, not that it seemed to make any difference to her weight.

'That's enough self-pity,' she said, pouring herself a

gin and tonic that was heavy on the former. She headed for the sofa, picking up a copy of the latest *Clues* on her way.

The sudden, ear-splitting yowl from the back of the house made her drop both glass and magazine.

'Damn!' Mary took a few deep breaths, and then lumbered to the door with the cat-flap that led to her garden. 'Noir!' she called. 'What are you doing? Come in this minute, Noir!' She turned on the light.

And felt her stomach somersault.

Her beloved Noir's head had come through the flap onto the carpet, but it was detached from the body.

Mary Malone let out a long moan. 'No,' she gasped. 'No…' Despite her revulsion, she kept moving towards the cat's bloody head. She was a few steps from the door when she realised that the handle was depressed. She stared into the darkness beyond the glass, her heart thundering. She didn't think of turning and running—she knew she couldn't move fast enough. She made out only a vague shape.

Then the door was pushed open violently and a figure dressed from head to toe in black entered. In the right hand was a knife streaked with blood and in the left was Noir's body. It was tossed towards her.

Mary couldn't speak, couldn't make any sound at all.

The figure came up to her, holding the blade horizontal to her throat. Then a face appeared beneath a hood, but it wasn't human. The mask was white, the eye-holes ringed with red. There was a goatee beard on the chin and the lips were turned up in a mocking smile. Worst of all, the surface was covered in discoloured warts and lumps. Medieval depictions of people suffering from the Black Death flashed through Mary Malone's mind.

At last, she found her voice. ‘What is this?’ she gasped. ‘Who are you?’

The intruder nodded slowly. ‘I think you know, Mary.’ The voice was steady. There was a pause. ‘You’re face to face with the devil.’

There was a loud thud as the fainting novelist hit the floor.

DID YOU PURCHASE THIS BOOK WITHOUT A COVER?

If you did, you should be aware it is **stolen property** as it was reported *unsold and destroyed* by a retailer. Neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this book.

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

All Rights Reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. This edition is published by arrangement with Harlequin Enterprises II BV/S.à.r.l. The text of this publication or any part thereof may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, storage in an information retrieval system, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the prior consent of the publisher in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

MIRA is a registered trademark of Harlequin Enterprises Limited, used under licence.

First published in Great Britain 2008 by Harlequin Mills & Boon Limited, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1SR

THE SOUL COLLECTOR © Paul Johnston 2008

ISBN: 978 0 7783 0236 0

58-0908

Printed and bound in Spain by Litografia Rosés S.A., Barcelona