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Opening Extract from...

The Murder Wall

Written by Mari Hannah

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PROLOGUE

His hand on her shoulder made her go rigid. Her scalp tightened as each individual hair stood to attention and goose pimples covered her skin. He forced her down, his eyes slate grey and empty, his voice no more than a chilling whisper . . .

‘Lie still and shut the fuck up.’

Sarah lashed out, her fist freezing in mid-air when he placed the point of a blade at her neck. A sob escaped from her mouth and urine seeped from her body as he fingered the buckle of his belt, using his knee to force her legs apart. She blocked him out with thoughts of her father waiting at home. Sitting in their cosy front room, a fresh pot of tea on the wood-burning stove, two mugs warming beside it – her mother already tucked up safe in bed.

Her attacker’s rage grew as he sensed she’d gone to another place. He punched her full in the face. Warm blood began pooling in her mouth from loose teeth.

Hands.

His hands; rough between her legs.

Hands; groping, hurting, touching where no hands had been before.

A droplet of sweat fell from his chin on to her lip as he forced his way into her.

Sarah felt ashamed. She’d received her First Holy

Communion in this church in front of proud parents. She turned her head away, praying for deliverance. She could just make out an open door . . .

Where was Father Simon?

Why didn't he come?

The man stopped what he was doing and stood up. For a fleeting second, Sarah thought her ordeal was over. It wasn't. He stamped on her chest with the heel of his boot. Rib bones collapsed and breathing became difficult. Sarah felt cold and limp, but surprisingly little pain. She floated outside herself, her body jerking with every blow.

Would her father still be waiting with tea and a hug?

In an act of self-preservation, Sarah curled up into a foetus-like ball and counted the remaining seconds of her short life.

An incident room, frozen in time, littered with the remnants of an impromptu party. Streamers hung untidily from the harsh tube lighting above Detective Chief Inspector Kate Daniels' head, and a blow-up Santa lay slumped, as if drunk, across the statement reader's desk. Someone had left a pair of flashing reindeer antlers on a medical skeleton that sat upright in the Super's chair, its fixed jaw mocking her from across the room. She poked out her tongue and it collapsed in a heap, making her jump.

Feeling a little foolish, Daniels relaxed back in her chair wondering how many lives would be lost in the so-called season of goodwill. Try as she might to push away that sombre thought, it stuck with her, drawing her back to the jumbled pile of bones on the floor – a grim reminder of the task she'd

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been dreading all day. She took in a clock on the wall. Nine thirty. If she left now, she'd still make it to St Camillus to light that candle.

Outside, winter had finally arrived. A snow shower looked set to turn worse as Daniels ran to her car, got in and turned on the radio. A traffic report warned of chaos on the roads – worse inland than at the coast – which wasn't what she wanted to hear. She took a short cut along the river road, heading west, and cut up on to the A69 from the Scotswood Bridge.

But for necessity, she would have driven straight home. The normally busy dual carriageway was almost at a standstill, a steady stream of tail lights stretching for miles along the Tyne Valley with only one lane passable. Drivers up ahead were using too much acceleration for the road conditions, their vehicles fishtailing along in protest. Daniels knew it was madness to continue but ploughed on regardless, grateful for the Toyota's four-wheel drive. The rest of her journey was a blur, the level-headed detective in her drowned out by the dutiful daughter and thoughts of a mother taken long before her time – before either of them was ready to say goodbye.

An hour or so later, she made it to St Camillus, got out and locked the car, taking a moment to admire the village tree – a huge Norwegian Spruce decorated and paid for by the Corbridge Village Trust. Across the marketplace, a couple she knew were leaving the pub, their breath clearly visible in the cold night air. She watched them walk off arm in arm along a terrace of stone and slate cottages, past a row of pretty, festive trees. Their carol singing and laughter echoed in her head long after they were gone . . .

It was like an icebox inside the church. Daniels shut out the blizzard with the heavy oak door, conscious of an impossible journey home. She slid a gloved hand into her coat pocket, removed the candle from its cellophane wrapper and lit it. Taking a deep breath, she set off down the southern aisle, determined not to pray. It was then that she saw the girl's body, lying across the altar like a macabre sacrifice, her huge eyes staring intently at the high, vaulted ceiling.

Daniels took a step backwards. The lit candle fell from her hand and rolled across the stone-flagged floor. Sickened by images of blood and mangled flesh, for the first time in her entire life she felt very afraid. She stood perfectly still, taking stock, waiting for her professional training to kick in. It took every effort to stay focused, but she knew how crucial a witness she would be to a subsequent investigation. *At the point of discovery, subconsciously or otherwise, witnesses take in an abundance of detail . . . temperature, atmosphere, sight and sound.*

The flickering candle sent shadows across the walls. Daniels kept her nerve, resisting a growing temptation to run for her life. Her eyes scanned every dark corner, observing and fixing impressions in her mind. Inclining her head, she listened with her best ear. Nothing. All she heard were words of advice from years back, tips on self-defence she'd hoped never to put into practice.

Then she saw him . . .

Father Simon lay where he had fallen, a pool of blood seeping from his chest, a prayer card and crucifix held tightly in his hand. There was something accusing about the dead priest that made Daniels feel guilty. Being a murder detective

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was her dream job – what else could deliver that adrenalin rush? – but now she saw murder for what it was: cruel, brutal, nauseating, the more so when it was personal.

If only she'd got there sooner.

Eleven Months Later

1

Daniels managed to drag herself from sleep, turn on the light and find the phone. On the other end of the line, Pete Brooks had a bad case of verbal diarrhoea. He was talking faster than she could scribble down notes on a pad.

‘Slow down, Pete . . .’ she said, ‘you’re way ahead of me.’

‘Give over. This is Britain’s party capital, remember? I’ve got a queue of calls a mile long. The whole world wants to talk to me tonight. Except the poor bastard you’re off to see. He’s past caring.’

As Brooks filled her in on what he knew, Daniels put him on speakerphone and leapt out of bed in a room ready for call-out at a moment’s notice: a suit of clean clothes hung from the wardrobe, matching shoes and briefcase beneath, next to a fully charged mobile phone and car keys. Her watch read one twenty-eight. She’d been asleep less than two hours, having spent a long day on her regular duties, then three hours teaching cognitive interviewing to rookie detectives on the CID training course. It was a skill well worth cultivating – a technique proven to enhance eyewitness recall by up to forty-five per cent – a subject so well received she’d been invited to eat with the group afterwards to carry on discussions down at the pub. Despite her best efforts to avoid it, she’d been late getting home.

‘You got an address?’ she asked.

‘Number 24 Court Mews. Drop down to the Quayside on Dean Street, go east along the river for about half a mile. You can’t miss it.’

‘Who’s the SIO?’ Daniels hoped for someone decent; not a detective with less experience than she had – someone recently promoted because his face happened to fit.

‘You are. This isn’t Night Owls calling.’

‘Very funny. Where’s Bright?’

‘Busy with another victim in the west end . . .’ Brooks raised his voice above others in the control room. ‘Nasty one too, by all accounts, so it looks like you’re on your own.’

‘You’re kidding?’

‘No, I’m deadly serious.’

Daniels punched the air. Some would say it was her lucky day, though in reality luck had little to do with it. Her first crack at Senior Investigating Officer had been a long time coming but finally it was here. Just thinking about it put a smile on her face.

‘Who do you want out?’ Brooks said, interrupting her private celebration.

‘DS Gormley.’

‘Ask a stupid question. You want to be careful, ma’am – people will talk.’

‘You don’t say?’ Daniels had a wry smile to herself. ‘And you’ve been nicknamed *The Font* by accident, I suppose?’

‘Ouch! You really know how to hurt people.’

‘Speak to you later, Pete. I’ve got to go.’

She hung up. Eight minutes later, she was on her way . . .

The road was unusually busy as she headed across town

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hoping Brooks had made the call. He had. As she turned the corner, she saw her DS sitting on his garden wall. Hank Gormley stood up as he heard her car approaching. He binned his cigarette, grinding it out on the pavement with his foot. Daniels stopped at the kerb just long enough for him to dive into the passenger seat, then did a quick U-turn and put her foot down heading for Newcastle city centre.

Gormley settled back in his seat. 'What's the mutter from the gutter?'

Negotiating a right-hand bend, Daniels told him what little she knew. Details were sketchy. The key-holder from Salieri's, a popular Italian restaurant, had reported the shooting. He'd been about to lock up for the night when a woman ran in screaming blue murder. Gormley listened to every word and didn't interrupt. It was his patience and good nature she appreciated most about him.

As they neared the city, she engaged the blue flashing light on her unmarked police car and took a short cut, driving the wrong way up a one-way street. The strategy backfired as traffic ground to halt in a haphazard line in front of St Mary's Cathedral. Drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, Daniels stared blankly through the window at the building. Its impressive architecture was lost on her. She was somewhere else entirely, suffocating in thoughts of death, priests, and one church in particular.

Gormley followed her gaze. 'You've probably got time for three Hail Marys . . .' His joke went down like a lead balloon. 'What's up? You're a good Catholic girl, aren't you?'

'Was, Hank . . . not any more,' Daniels said, jabbing her horn at the driver in front, who refused to shift out of her way.

Realizing he'd said the wrong thing, Gormley tried to make amends. 'Listen, what happened at St Camillus would shake anybody's faith.'

'Don't even go there, Hank; it has *nothing* to do with that!'

'If you say so.'

'I know so . . .' She edged forward, nudging the bumper of the car in front. 'Let's just say, I haven't been to church since my mother died and leave it at that, shall we?'

'But you *did* go back . . . after that.'

'To St Camillus?' An image of two dead bodies flashed across Daniels' mind. Their discovery had affected her deeply, occupying every working day since, keeping her awake at night. 'Yeah, and look where it got me.'

Gormley said nothing as she moved forward in the line, troubled, but in no mood to elaborate. She blasted her horn again, keeping it depressed until the car in front mounted the pavement. She was angry . . . though not necessarily with the driver. That didn't stop her glowering in his direction as she drove by.

The Quayside was buzzing with energy. On the south side of the river, the Sage music centre sat like a giant silver bubble gleaming in the moonlight. To the left of it, the Gateshead Millennium Bridge offered the best view of the celebrations. On the north quay, there were scores of people milling about, more than usual for the time of night: a few drunks, the odd worker off the late shift making their way home, but mostly just people having a good time.

'They got no homes to go to?' Gormley asked.

'Stragglers from Guy Fawkes, I suppose,' Daniels offered vaguely.

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‘Well, I wish they’d move. We’ve a gunpowder plot of our own to attend to.’

Daniels inched forward, frustrated with the lack of progress she was making. Tail lights up ahead were another reminder of the previous Christmas Eve – though on that night it was winter weather, not crowds, obstructing her journey.

Five minutes later, she glanced sideways. Gormley was hanging like a bat from his seat belt, catching up on lost sleep. She could see the steady rise and fall of his chest, hear his breathing changing gear as he sank deeper and deeper into unconsciousness. He snorted loudly. Sensing her interest, he opened his eyes, then shut them again when he realized they were stationary with still a way to go.

Daniels tried in vain to drag her thoughts away from St Camillus. But the memory was so vivid she brushed the side of her face expecting to feel wet tears streaming silently down her cheeks, hot and salty as they crept into her mouth. She flinched as a firework exploded on the bonnet of the car. It ricocheted off into the night, transporting her back to the church, to a lit candle on a stone-flagged floor.

‘I’ll make the bastard pay.’

‘What did you just say?’

She didn’t know he’d woken, was too busy trying to shake off the image of Sarah Short’s funeral. The poor girl had been buried at St Camillus less than three weeks from taking her last agonizing breath. The church was packed. Hundreds of mourners had come to pay their respects, outraged and saddened by the senseless act of violence that had brought about her death. The case had touched the nation from the outset, was reported widely in the press, repeated on every news

bulletin, discussed by young and old, in every home, workplace, school and university. The worst of it was, the killer was still out there. And Daniels found that impossible to live with.

‘Nothing,’ she said finally. ‘Just thinking out loud.’

They were approaching a block of executive apartments in a renovated seventeenth-century warehouse. A young officer in the street saw her coming and sprang into action, lifting cones, directing her into a parking space. He seemed to be having difficulty controlling a group of drunken females at the main entrance, a well-dressed crowd wearing little but smiles and goose pimples – including a much older woman trying her best to keep up appearances.

Daniels got out of the car, telling him to get rid of rent-a-crowd.

He flushed up. ‘Yes. Ma’am.’

The older woman grinned. ‘Who does she think she is, fucking Juliet Bravo?’

One of her mates pulled a face. ‘Juliet who?’

Daniels and Gormley stifled a laugh as the young officer tried to prevent the older woman from giving him something, finally managing to penetrate his trouser pocket.

‘My mobile number,’ she said. ‘Call me when your *marm*’s not around.’

The foyer of Court Mews was a little pretentious for Daniels’ liking. She took a cursory look around, finding nothing out of the ordinary. As the lift doors slid open, she moved forward with Gormley hot on her heels. She turned, lifted her hand to his chest and pointed to the stairwell door. Gormley headed off . . .

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Moments later, Daniels left the lift on the fourth floor. A female officer standing guard outside number 24 greeted her. The scene was secured with thick tape: *Police Crime Scene Do Not Enter*. Before Daniels had a chance to introduce herself, Gormley arrived through a set of double doors. He bent double with his hands on his knees, taking a moment to get his breath back.

‘I’ve got to get back in the gym,’ he said.

Daniels smiled at the policewoman. ‘He’s being ironic. It makes our grim task a bit more bearable. He hasn’t seen the inside of a gymnasium since leaving junior school.’ Then, to Gormley: ‘Find anything?’

‘Negative . . . but it *was* different, I’ll give you that.’

‘In what way?’

‘No hypodermics, no used condoms . . . no stink of piss. Hardly our usual murder scene, is it?’ He looked at his watch and then at the WPC. ‘Time our visit please. This is DCI Daniels and I’m DS Gormley. Where’s the body?’

‘Second door on the right as you go in, Sarge.’

‘Who found him?’ Daniels asked.

‘His wife, Monica Stephens.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘Hospital, ma’am.’

Daniels thanked her and led Gormley by the arm into the apartment, checking the door frame for signs of a forced entry. It was clean. They walked on along a wide hallway, peering into the rooms on either side. Each one appeared to be immaculate; a place for everything and everything in its place, as far as they could tell – until they reached the lounge.

The room was cold and uninviting. Daniels didn’t care

much for the decor: barring the blood on the walls, everything in the room was white. Surreal was the word that sprang to mind. It was more like a chilling art exhibit than someone's private living space. It was as if an artist had deliberately splashed red paint across a white canvas for others to appreciate, placing the corpse of a white male carefully at its centre for effect.

In a London gallery it would probably win a prize.

'I think we can safely assume he's dead,' Daniels said. 'Call out the troops and contact Area Command. Tell them to start the house-to-house immediately. I want a mobile incident caravan too. The whole nine yards, if you can get it.'

Gormley made the call, then crouched down beside the body to get a closer look. The dead man was dressed in a dinner suit; his clothing intact, apart from a missing bow tie. A bullet wound had caused enormous trauma to one side of his skull.

'Bet that smarted a bit . . .' he said. 'He must really have upset someone, given that it's not a robbery.'

'What makes you say that?'

Gormley looked up. 'His wallet's on the table by the door.'

Daniels knelt down beside him. But she didn't stay there long. Although she'd seen death in all its grisly forms, for the second time in under a year she suddenly recoiled from a body. It was like this with Sarah Short and now – almost twelve months later – it was happening all over again.

Her actions telegraphed alarm to Gormley, who couldn't fathom what he'd missed. His eyes shifted to a photograph she was staring at. He gave her a moment to compose herself, curiosity getting the better of him.

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With her DS breathing down her neck, Daniels moved to the table near the door. She took out a pen and used it to open up the wallet. Inside was a driver's licence and money – lots of it.

Gormley read over her shoulder. 'Alan James Stephens. D'you know him?'

'Trick of the light.' She held up her glasses. 'If I wore these more often, maybe I'd see a whole lot better.'

Gormley eyed her warily and chose to leave it alone.