

MURDER OF A CHINESE GIRL



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Brian O'Hare

Murder of a Chinese Girl

By

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Edited by Denna Holm

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A Short Prequel to
The Trafficking Murders
[Book Five in the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries series]

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday, 21st October, 2018.

Chen Li was losing it. She had been losing it for some time, finding it harder and harder to toe the line, to obey the rules, to cater to the increasingly prurient demands of the rich clients sent to her by the anonymous electronic voice on her cell phone. How much longer was she prepared to allow this robotic, emotionless voice to rule her life? She felt a sudden, sharp pain. “Ow! What are you doing?”

Chen Li was lying face down on her bed, wearing only white briefs. Another blow landed on her bare back, this one with even more force. “Stop it,” she commanded angrily, lifting her head to glare at the overweight client who was brandishing a leather riding crop, one of a number of items the rules demanded she keep on her premises. But their use was for make-believe, for feather-light touches. This moron was trying to hurt her. She rose to her knees on the bed and faced him. “What the hell d’you think you’re playing at?”

The client leered at her, his thick, wet lips parted in a lustful grin. “Am I turning you on?”

She stared at the gross figure before her, at the fleshy, repulsive features, at the pasty paunch sagging over voluminous, ridiculously scarlet boxers. She experienced a massive spasm of revulsion. *What am I doing allowing perverts like this into my bedroom?* The instructions that had been drummed into her rang again in her head: *Treat the clients with respect. Accept their foibles. Pander to their whims.* She shook the thoughts away, angry now. *No more bloody pandering.* “Turned on?” she said with an expression of acute disgust. “Are you serious? By an ugly brute like you?”

The riding crop thwacked viciously against her right thigh. She groaned in pain and leapt off the far side of the bed, hastily donning a flower-patterned robe that hung over a bedside chair. As she was knotting the belt around her waist, the client began to move around the bottom of the bed, slapping the riding crop into the palm of his left hand with little smacking noises.

“Oh, so you want to play games?” he said, his expression a mix of lust and cruelty. “I love games.”

Feeling frightened now, she cast her eyes around the room, desperately seeking some form of defence. On the dressing table beside her was a solid glass paperweight about the size of a tennis ball. It had been a present from Raymond, a beautiful little globe that contained a delicate Chinese flower with painted birds flying above it. As the client continued his menacing approach, Li grabbed the paperweight and hit him on the forehead with it as hard as she could.

The man grunted, reeled backwards, dropping the riding crop. Both hands flew to the bleeding wound as he sought to protect himself from further blows. Li whacked him again on the backs of his hands and dived for the riding crop. Overcome by rage now, she began to flay him with the crop—back, sides, legs—driving him towards the door of her bedroom and out into the main lounge. She grabbed the bundle of clothes that had been lying on the floor and thrust them into his chest. “Get out!” she screamed, still flailing with the crop. “Get out! Get out!” She bundled the cowed client from her apartment and into the corridor outside, slamming the door behind him and engaging all of its security locks.

She leaned back against the door, shivering uncontrollably, aware the consequences of this loss of control would be dire. The client would go crying to the unknown dark entity that ran the organisation, and that entity, or his goons, would come looking for her. She dreaded to think what they might do.

She closed her mind to the fear and pushed herself from the door, heading towards a small drinks’ cabinet. Pouring herself an undiluted half-glass of brandy, she downed it in one gulp, gasping as the harsh liquid hit the back of her throat. Without conscious thought, she grabbed a large suitcase from a wardrobe and began tossing as many clothes into it as it would hold. She dressed hurriedly in jeans, woollen sweater and black leather jacket, and forced the lid of the case shut. She also pulled a small briefcase from the bottom of the wardrobe and, from a drawer in the dressing table, piled banknotes, credit cards, watches, jewellery, driver’s licence, and passport into the briefcase. They were followed by the paperweight and a couple of small ornamental clocks.

She stared for a moment at the books and folders on a couple of wall shelves, material she would need to complete her degree. But she knew she was racing against time. *I’ll arrange to have them sent to me later.* She did, however, grab her laptop and put that, too, into the briefcase.

Reaching for the bedside phone, she called for a taxi. She didn't need to look up the number. It was a call she had made many times over the past couple of years. She hefted both cases and headed for the door, thinking, *I'll get a room in the Europa for tonight and try to figure out tomorrow where I need to go from there.*

CHAPTER TWO

The Shadow's face was suffused with fury. The hand that clenched the phone was white-knuckled. "Stupid, stupid bitch! Where is she now?"

The voice on the line said, "We went to the apartment immediately, but she'd already gone. Most of her clothes and other belongings are gone, too."

"I want all eyes looking for her," The Shadow hissed, and rang off, not waiting for a reply.

The cell phone rang again immediately. It was the same voice. "How do we deal with Lord Mourne?"

"You called back to ask me that?" The Shadow snapped. "Pay him off and offer him another girl ... somebody more compliant. And find Chen Li." Again the call was ended with angry abruptness.

The Shadow stared at the wall opposite, breathing heavily, mind racing. Chen Li was becoming a liability. After some moments, first checking to ensure the voice changer on the phone was still properly attached, The Shadow made a call. When the call was answered, The Shadow, without preamble, read the numbers of three credit cards into the phone, then added, "Contact me the minute you find any activity connected with those cards. You hear? Take no action. Just contact me. Immediately."

The Shadow's lips were tightly compressed as this call suffered the same abrupt ending as the previous one. Chen Li had originally been a great addition to the stable of high-class escorts. Beautiful, with a model's figure, she had been an ideal find. Because she was a Chinese scholarship student at Queen's University in Belfast, it had been easy for Raymond Grant to groom her. A handsome young lecturer paying special attention to an impressionable first-year student? The starry-eyed Chen Li didn't stand a chance. Once Grant had her under his control, he was able to persuade her to ease slowly, and for a time unknowingly, into the life of an expensive escort.

The job had been made deliberately easy for the first few months. She had been offered a deluxe apartment to live in, with more money and new clothes than she could have ever imagined having. She simply had to escort rich clients to dinners, theatre shows, conferences—nothing too demanding. She had actually adapted to the life with surprising ease. The lure of the

money, the clothes, the attention she was accorded by the celebrated and the wealthy, all served to make her feel that she, too, was living a celebrity life. And for a time, she'd loved it. The Shadow knew that. Grant's regular and detailed reports ensured every detail of Chen Li's life was an open book.

But the time came for Grant to be assigned to fresh fields and pastures new. Without Grant's calming influence, Chen Li's stubborn nature began to reassert itself. Not immediately, of course. She was too attached to the status this life gave her, to the rich rewards. For those, she was prepared to tolerate increasing levels of demand on her time ... and on her body. But latterly she had begun refusing to entertain certain clients who, she said, were deleted from her repeat list.

The Shadow had initially tolerated this. The incidents were rare, and Chen Li commanded the highest fees in the stable. The Shadow was reluctant to upset that delicate balance. But this business with Lord Mourne ... The hands resting on the desk closed to tight fists. That was outrageous. If it was allowed to go unpunished and any of the other girls got to hear of it, it could engender discontent in the ranks. For The Shadow, managing unrest, maybe even burgeoning dissension, was insupportable. It smacked almost of negotiation. Never. The Shadow demanded total and unquestioning obedience. The fists clenched again. Chen Li's high earnings would have to be sacrificed, and Chen Li would have to pay. Her punishment would send an absolute and unequivocal message to any of the other girls with mutinous ideas.

CHAPTER THREE

Wednesday, 24th October, 2018

Head hidden in the large hood of a heavy duffle coat, hands in the pockets, The Shadow strode purposefully across Iveagh Street and into Iveagh Crescent. It was past eleven o'clock in the evening and the terrace houses were shrouded in darkness. The red brick walls were only visible here and there in the wash of the occasional streetlamp, but The Shadow had no problem finding the small house that Chen Li was currently renting.

The street was quiet, hardly surprising given the cold October wind and the constant skiffs of rain. The Shadow drew back into a dark corner as a lone car drove by, then checked both ways for pedestrians before stepping out into the open. After swinging open a small iron gate, The Shadow walked through quickly to the front door of the house.

When Chen Li responded to the bell, her eyes widened, and she stepped back, momentarily slack-jawed, as The Shadow said casually, "Hi, Li. It's been a while."

Pulling The Shadow by the arm into the tiny hall, Chen Li turned back to the front door and peered anxiously up and down the street. Closing and locking the door behind her, she came back into the hall, tense and anxious. It was clear from her attitude that she was comfortable with her visitor, but her voice was filled with anxiety as she led the way into the small sitting room. "Come in. Come in. Sit. Sit. Throw your coat over there." Her eyes were worried as she perched awkwardly on the edge of a small armchair. "How did you find me? I thought I had covered my tracks. Does anyone else know you're here?"

The Shadow raised a reassuring hand. "Relax, Li. Relax. Nobody knows I'm here."

"But how did you find me? How did you find me?" Chen Li said, almost panicking.

"Don't worry. It was a pure fluke," The Shadow lied. "Just one of those odd coincidences. I was giving a lift this morning to a friend who lives near here and I saw you going into the house."

"You saw me? Why didn't you stop?"

"I'd heard rumours you'd gone into hiding, so I didn't want to draw

any attention to you by stopping. In fact, even now my car's parked a couple of streets away in case someone should recognise it. I was really concerned about you and needed to find out what was up and how you're doing, so I waited for a safe time, or as a safe as I could make it."

The Shadow looked around the small, impoverished room, at the cheap furniture, at the struggling coal fire smouldering in the tiny grate. "So what's going on, Li? Why are you hiding in this ... this...?" The raised eyebrows and the unfinished sentence spoke volumes.

Li stared at her visitor, saying in a rush, "You don't know what it's like, that life. I couldn't stand it anymore, and I attacked one of the clients. I know they'll be looking for me, and I don't know what to do. I need time to think."

"Should you not go back and talk to somebody? Say you're sorry and get back to normal. It was a great life you had."

"No. It was a horrible life. I'm never going back to it." Li was almost babbling.

"Okay! Okay!" The Shadow said soothingly. "Calm down. We'll think of something. So what are you planning to do?"

"I'll have to wait this out somewhere. I'm hoping to finish my degree at Queen's when it all dies down and live a normal life."

The Shadow nodded sympathetically. "Hmmm! That won't happen today or tomorrow, but..." And then with a start, added urgently, "Do you have your mobile phone with you?"

Chen Li nodded, puzzled.

"Oh, my God! If the people you work for are as powerful as their reputation, they'll not be long using it to track you here ... if they haven't done so already. Is it switched on?"

Chen Li was shocked, but said, "No. I didn't want anybody calling me."

The Shadow looked anxious. "Okay. But I still think you should dump it. Look, I don't think it's safe for you here. You need to pack your things and come with me. We'll find somewhere else tomorrow. And seriously, get rid of that mobile."

Chen Li was on her feet, panicking, seeming incapable of movement. "What ... what...?"

The Shadow pushed the terrified girl towards the stairs. "Go. Go. Pack. Don't try to think. Leave the thinking to me. Hurry now."

While Li dashed up the narrow stairs to the bedroom, The Shadow turned to the small fireplace, picked up a brass-handled iron poker that was leaning against the wall, and stared at it thoughtfully. When Li came rushing back into the room, wearing her black leather jacket and carrying her luggage, The Shadow was standing in the middle of the room, pointing at the fire with the poker. “Do you think it’ll be all right to leave the fire like that?”

Li turned, bending slightly to examine the fire. She didn’t see the iron poker flash round in a long, vicious arc into the back of her head, crushing her skull and forcing pieces of bone fragments into her cerebral cortex. She lurched sideways, narrowly avoiding falling into the fire, and crumpled noiselessly to the floor. The Shadow glared dispassionately at the dead girl and spat out the words, “Ungrateful bitch.”

The Shadow studied the victim’s shattered skull, satisfied that a further blow was not needed, and muttered, “When it all dies down? Seriously?” The voice was an unfeeling sneer. “This is the only dying down that’s going to happen.” The cold eyes ranged the scene again. “Such a mess! I’m going to have to come up with a better method next time.”

Next time? The unbidden thought stopped The Shadow short. It was quickly followed by a further thought. *Who knows?* Again the eyes turned to the bloodied head. *But more tidily.*

Moving back carefully to avoid stepping in any blood spatter, The Shadow, eerily calm and utterly unaffected by what had just happened, donned a pair of plastic gloves from a pocket in the duffle coat and went into the small kitchen just off the living room. It was the work of only a couple of minutes to wash and wipe all prints from the poker and toss it to the floor beside Chen Li’s lifeless body.

Picking up the two cases, The Shadow took them to the front door and left them on the hall floor before returning to the room once more to bend over Chen Li’s corpse, searching the jacket for the victim’s mobile phone. Dialling a number, The Shadow waited for an answer and, in a disguised falsetto voice, sounding panicked, cried, “Police? Police? There’s a dead body in a house on Iveagh Crescent.”

Immediately ending the call, The Shadow switched off the power and pocketed the phone, giving the dead girl one last look before saying matter-of-factly, “No use making an example of you, Li, if no one gets to know about it.”

Returning to the front door, first opening it a crack to ensure the street

outside was empty, The Shadow lifted the two cases and hurried out into the darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Inspector Robert Williams and Sergeant Gerald Mulholland arrived at the scene, the house had already been cordoned off with yellow crime-scene tape. A team of Scene-of-Crime officers, dressed from head to toe in white plastic coveralls, were wandering in and out. Lights were on in all of the windows, torches gleamed on the tiny drive and on the postage-stamp front lawn. Heavy footsteps echoed down from the upper floor. There was scarcely room in the cramped dwelling for anyone to move, but the officers seemed to know what they were doing and went quietly and efficiently about their work.

Williams, a man in his early fifties with a slight build and greying hair, spoke to one of them at the door. "What've we got?"

"Dead young woman. Horrible sight, sir. Her skull's battered to a pulp."

Williams winced. "Anything pointing to the perp?"

The officer shook his head. "No, sir. Nothing. No forced entry. Same prints all over the place, probably the victim's. No other sets that we can find." Seeing the inspector's sudden frown, he added hastily, "But we're still looking. The weapon's lying near the body, but there's nothing in the house that might help with identification."

"What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"The place has been cleaned out, sir. No clothes other than those the victim was wearing." Expression puzzled, he spread his hands. "No handbag, no purse, no papers, no books, no phone, no iPad, no cards, no money, no photos ... no nothing. Weird. As the Americans might say, a total Jane Doe."

"Robbery gone wrong?"

"Hard to say, sir. I don't get that impression."

Williams' eyebrows furrowed. "Okay. Thanks."

He turned to follow his sergeant, who was now shouldering his way through the SOCOs into the front room. Mulholland, young, strong, and athletic, had no problem clearing a path for his boss. Once there, they eyed the corpse with a mixture of horror and pity.

"My God," was all Mulholland could say.

Williams' lips were set tight. He didn't respond.

After some seconds, Mulholland spoke again. "There was a wee girl

murdered not far from here in a house very like this one. It was a few years ago. Remember, sir? The Social Worker. Could this be some sort of copycat or what?"

Williams remembered very well. Another case he had hoped would earn him the coveted 'Chief' status. But yet again, Jim Sheehan had been called in to sort that one out. Chief Inspector Sheehan was a friend. Williams never thought of him in any other way. But he wished, just for once, he could clear up a murder without Sheehan's help. He looked down guiltily at the shattered and bloodied head of the young victim. *You poor thing. Sorry. These are selfish thoughts you don't need to hear.*

But his thoughts had a will of their own. Almost without pause, he was again thinking maybe this was the case that would turn his luck. He knew he was a methodical and dedicated policeman, and second-to-none at organising, filing, and detailing the minutiae of an investigation. But he could never make those sudden jumps of intuition for which Jim Sheehan was famed, those vital insights that brought all the pieces of an investigation together.

Still, he could read a crime scene every bit as well as his friend, and he said to Mulholland, "No. Forget that. It's not a copycat. The Social Worker was one of a targeted series of victims by that weird psycho with the Messiah complex. This is nothing like that."

"I know the body isn't naked like the other one, boss, but are there not other similarities?"

"No. The Doom Killer was very methodical. He created his crime scenes like small theatrical tableaux. Each victim was almost just another prop." He studied the corpse. "This poor girl is entirely different. She thought the killer was a friend, but the killer was anything but. They obviously knew each other, and the killer was able to play the part of friend very well. Good acting, considering he almost certainly harboured a deep-seated animosity towards her."

The gaze Mulholland turned towards his boss was tinged with scepticism. "You having me on, sir?"

Williams continued to study the body. In the brief silence, the sound of a SOCO camera clicking seemed suddenly loud. "There was no forced entry. Apart from the corpse, the room is neat and tidy. No signs of a struggle, no furniture dislodged, as might happen had the victim tried to defend herself or avoid any form of attack. The two of them were probably just sitting in the room chatting before the attack."

“Surely she would have seen him coming at her with a poker?”

“Another reason why we can deduce that the victim saw the killer as a friend. You can tell from the blood spatter that the victim was struck from behind. Clearly, she had no reservations about turning her back to the killer.”

Mulholland peered at the blood stains around the corpse, trying to see patterns. “You know about blood spatter, boss?”

“When you’ve been around as many death scenes as I have over the years, you tend to pick up a few things. Blood-spatter-pattern analysis can usually give vital evidence that would help work out what happened at a crime scene. Our SOCOs report will give us more detail about what happened here. Blunt trauma to the body obviously doesn’t produce much blood spatter since most of the damage would be internal. But blunt trauma to the head almost always results in blood-spatter patterns. Not always the same. Sometimes if there’s a series of blows, blood spatter is thrown from the weapon each time it is raised and brought down again on the victim. That kind of spatter can land on ceilings, walls, the floor, depending on the force and direction of the inflicted blows.” He pointed to the fireplace, the walls, the ceiling. “We don’t see any of that here, so our killer was controlled, deliberate. Just one well-timed, violent blow.”

Mulholland was nodding, interested. “A real stone-cold killer, for sure.”

“Yes. Our killer is cold ... and clever,” Williams went on. “He had no problem biding his time. Somehow or another he was able to get the poker in his hand without exciting suspicion.” He glanced at the still warm embers in the fireplace. “Maybe he offered to poke the fire or something. However he did it, the victim never saw the blow coming. I would assume she had her back to him at that point.”

“Deep-seated animosity, sir?”

“Again, the spatter angle of impact indicates the blow came from a long and aggressive swing. The width of the blow would have greatly increased the power of the strike. It takes some serious rancour or malice to make someone smash a person’s skull as violently and as deliberately as that.”

Mulholland studied the victim’s bloodied head. “I see what you mean, boss.” His eyes lifted and ranged around the room. “You think the killer took all her stuff away? Maybe to try to prevent us from finding out who the victim is?”

Williams shrugged. “Maybe.” His eyes were suddenly intent.

“Sir?”

“That black jacket. Looks expensive.”

Mulholland glanced down. “If you say so, sir.”

“See if you can get anything off the label at the back of the collar.”

Mulholland grimaced. “Me, sir?”

Williams glared at him. “You think I should call in the woman next door?”

Mulholland knelt by the body, fastidiously trying to read the label on the collar without getting blood on his gloves. “Uh, it looks like...” He began to spell it out, “...A L Y X 9 S M.”

Williams wrote it down in his notebook, tore the page out and handed it to the sergeant. “Okay. First thing in the morning, go to one of the big clothes stores in town and ask if they recognise that label. One of them’s bound to retail it. It’s good quality. An expensive item like that should be easy to find. Maybe the wee lassie paid for it by credit card. If she did, the store will have a record of her name.”

Mulholland pocketed the paper. “First thing in the morning, boss.”

Williams turned away, hearing Dr Richard Campbell’s voice as he tried to find his way into the room. “Excuse me. Thank you. Excuse me. Could you let me past, please? Thank you.”

“Over here, Dick.” Williams began ushering some of the SOCOs out of the room. “Wee bit of space for the pathologist, please.”

Dr Campbell, State Forensic Pathologist, was paunchy, balding, and pleasant looking. He made his way over to the detectives and said, “Bob. Good to see you. You, too, Gerry.” He looked at the body on the floor. “And what have we here?”

“A young woman, beaten to death by a fireplace poker.”

Campbell’s head bowed as he looked at the body, his face filled with sympathy. “Oh, dear! Oh, dear. You poor, poor thing.” He held out a hand to the Inspector, seeking support as he struggled to kneel beside the body. He opened his briefcase, left it lying on the floor beside him, and reached out to feel around the victim’s neck and shoulders. His face expressed sudden surprise. “Good heavens! We’re early at this crime scene, Bob. No sign of *rigor mortis*. Time of death is very recent.”

“Sometime around eleven-thirty,” Williams said casually.

“Well, aren’t you the clever boy.”

Williams grinned. “Just before midnight someone phoned in to alert us

to the killing. We think it might have been the killer.”

“My goodness! Why would he do that?”

The sides of Williams’ mouth went down. “That’s the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question, Dick. We can’t figure out what he’s playing at. He obviously wanted us to know about the murder. But why...?” He shrugged.

Still shaking his head, still experiencing pity at the sight of the shattered skull, Campbell took a medical wipe from a packet in the case and began to gently clean some of the blood from the victim’s face. He stopped suddenly and turned his head to Williams. “Your young woman, Bob, is a young *Asian* woman.”

Williams stared at the corpse and then looked meaningfully at Mulholland. “That should narrow your search a bit in the morning.” Catching Campbell’s quizzical look, he explained, “We’ve absolutely no clue who the victim is ... was. Mulholland is going to try to trace the retailer of her jacket. We might learn something there.”

Campbell nodded. “The damage to the head is extensive, but I should be able to clean it up a bit at the mortuary and get you some passable photographs.” He shook his head as he again studied the victim. “Poor girl. Such abuse. Such terrible abuse.”

“I take it the head trauma is the cause of death?” Williams asked.

“No reason to think otherwise, but I’ll need to check the body for drugs or poisons at the post-mortem before I can confirm. Could even have been the heart. We can’t know about that now.”

He struggled to his feet again, slipping off his rubber gloves. “Okay! There’s nothing I can do here. I’ll send the paramedics in to take the body away.” He eased his way around a large SOCO who was vacuuming debris from the sofa, and said over his shoulder, “Gimme a day or so and I’ll have a couple of photos for you.”

“Thanks, Dick. Talk soon,” Williams said. He tapped the large SOCO on the shoulder. “Anything, Jack?”

The officer spread his hands. “The victim must have been living like a hermit, sir. I’ve never seen a house so devoid of possessions. Nothing. No photos. No pictures. Nothing.”

“Maybe the killer took it all away?” Williams suggested.

The officer didn’t seem convinced. “The killer obviously took some stuff, maybe a mobile, possibly a laptop. Cash and cards as well, probably. There’s no sign of any of them. But he couldn’t have cleared the house to this

extent.”

Williams shook his head. “Puzzling.”

The officer uttered a mirthless chuckle. “That’s for sure, sir.” He made to move away. “We’ll keep looking.”

“Thanks, Jack.” He looked at his watch and went back over to Mulholland. “Well after midnight. Nobody would thank us for banging on their doors this hour of the night. Get a team of uniforms doing a door-to-door first thing in the morning. Maybe somebody saw something. And check around for any CCTV cameras. Unlikely in this neighbourhood, but...” He was struck with a sudden thought. “...I passed a small mini-market a couple of streets back. See if they have anything.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The following morning, Inspector Williams and two other members of his Serious Crimes team were setting up an Incident Room. Photographs of the scene, taken by the forensic officers, were now pinned to a large white board near the head of the room, flanked by a couple of enlarged Google street maps. A photo of the dead girl was pinned to the centre of the board. An arrow, drawn with a heavy black highlighter, was pointing directly at it. At the rear of the arrow was a large black question mark. Williams and the officers were bent over a table, sorting through some early forensic reports, preparing them for the board.

Williams' mobile buzzed in his pocket. "Well, Sergeant, what have you got?"

"I'm just outside The House of Fraser, sir. They've sold four of those jackets in the past six months. Three of them were paid for by credit cards, the other with cash."

Williams felt immediately depressed. Maybe it was the tone of his sergeant's voice. He sighed and said, "And none of the three who used credit cards was Asian, right?"

"I'm 'fraid so, sir," Mulholland said. "The credit card customers are wealthy ladies who shop there regularly. They're well known to the staff. All Caucasian."

"So, did you get anything at all on the fourth customer?"

"Well, yes and no. I'm pretty sure it was our victim. The Department Head found the salesperson who sold the fourth jacket. Turns out she remembered the sale very well. A young Chinese girl was in with a friend, trying on clothes, giggling and laughing. The salesgirl particularly remembers them because the jackets they were looking at cost well over a thousand. She expected they'd walk out without buying. But the Chinese girl selected one of the dearer jackets and casually pulled out a wad of fifty-pound notes to pay for it. The price didn't seem to affect her in the slightest."

"The sales assistant get a name?"

"No. It was a cash sale. She simply rang up the sale at the till, and the two girls left."

"She didn't hear what they were talking about or pick up anything that

might help us find her?”

“I asked her that. She says she gets young girls in all the time lifting clothes off the rails and trying things on. She rarely pays any attention to what they talk about.”

“Damn! What about the door-to-door? Anybody see anything?”

“No reports yet, sir. I’m away over to that wee mini-market to see if they have CCTV. I’ll get back to you later.”

Williams slowly put his mobile back in his pocket, frowning. *Bloody hell. Where do we even start?*” He went back to his office and took refuge in the one aspect of police work that he loved. He began to prepare a file on the killing, writing detailed and meticulous notes on the investigation to date. About an hour later, his mobile buzzed again. “Williams.”

“Mulholland again, sir. The wee supermarket does have CCTV. It’s been robbed loads of times, so the owner got it in a few months ago. We were lucky. He usually wipes the tapes during the morning so he doesn’t have to keep buying new ones, but he hadn’t got round to that when I got there.”

“You get anything?”

“Hard to say, sir. I went through the hours from about nine until after midnight. Bad night, so there were very few people about. I was able to fast forward a fair bit of it. But there was one figure who caught my eye. I got the owner to print me off a couple of stills. I’m on my way over with them now, sir.”

It wasn’t long before Mulholland had joined the others in front of the white board. Two grainy still frames from the CCTV were now pinned to the board as well. The street lighting was very poor, and the CCTV equipment was undoubtedly cheap, so the photographs were of poor quality. Both showed different shots of a barely discernible hooded figure, head down, hands in pockets.

“So what are we looking at here, Sarge?” Ian Short, one of the other detectives, asked. “That could be anybody out for a walk. Where was it taken?”

“Very close to the murder scene, just a couple of streets away. And it was taken about forty minutes before the time of the phone call.”

Inspector Williams looked very dubious. “They’re hardly earth-shattering, Sergeant. What do you see that I don’t?”

Mulholland said, “There’s not much there, that’s for sure, sir. But the store owner is used to looking at these videos and he said two interesting

things.”

“Did he now?” Williams said caustically. “Any chance you might share them?”

“Uh, I was going to, sir.”

“Well?”

“Sir, the store owner says the figure wasn’t just strolling. The walk was purposeful, deliberately heading somewhere.”

Three pairs of eyes turned back to the black and white picture. None appeared convinced.

“The owner also thinks the figure might be a woman.”

The eyes peered more closely at the photographs, suddenly intent.

“Can’t see it,” Ian Short said. “Just a bulky figure in a heavy hoodie. Could equally be male. Where’s he getting this idea from?”

“It’s the walk again,” Mulholland said. He shrugged. “The guy must have something in his head about the way people walk. Anyway, he says if he was pushed, he’d say it was a woman’s walk.”

“Did you get the tape?”

“Yes, I have it here.”

“Get forensics to have a look at it and see what they think.”

“Any chance the killer stepped in the blood spatter?” Mulholland said. “Maybe the size of the prints would give us an idea.”

“No mention of that in any of the preliminary reports,” Williams said. “And none of the SOCOs last night got even the slightest hint the killer might be a woman. And even if this is a woman in the video, there’s nothing to indicate she was heading for the murder scene or that she’s our killer.”

“Sorry, boss, it’s all we’ve got. The door-to-doors aren’t giving us anything either.”

The third detective, Pete Rushe, who normally didn’t speak much, cleared his throat.

Williams glanced at him. “What is it, Rushe?”

“Sir, you remember that case of the missing Chinese boy a few months back in District B?”

Williams nodded.

“Well, a mate of mine was working on that, and I remember him mentioning to me he was heading over to, uh, I forget the full name of it, but there’s some sort of Chinese People’s Support Centre with an office over on the Stranmillis Embankment. Maybe if you ... uh, or somebody ... took over

a couple of those mortuary photographs, somebody might recognise her.”

Williams was nodding vigorously even before Rushe had stopped speaking. “Excellent idea, Rushe. I’ll phone Dr Campbell and ask him to make us a few extra copies. We might be able to get the organiser or the manager, or whoever it is, to post some of them on the walls of ... of...”

Mulholland’s thumbs had already been clicking rapidly on his smart phone. “Here it is, sir. It’s called the Chinese Community Welfare Support Office. It seems to be a fairly big place. They probably have a right few clients in and out of there. Worth a shot.”

Williams looked at his watch. “Okay. You and I’ll take a run round to the mortuary at the Royal Victoria and see if we can get Dick Campbell to speed up those photos.”

Mulholland winced. “He’ll go nuts, sir.”

Williams was already on his way to the door. “We’ll have to live with that.”

CHAPTER SIX

Dr Campbell turned to look over the tops of his spectacles as Williams and Mulholland entered the mortuary. “Bob? Gerry? What on earth are you doing here? I’ve barely had time to get the young lady’s body on to my table.” He sounded cross.

“Sorry, Dick,” Williams replied. “I know you wouldn’t have a report so soon. We can wait for that. It’s just we’re a bit desperate for the photographs. We’ve learned there’s a Chinese Support Community Office where somebody might be able to recognise our victim.”

Campbell seemed mollified. He turned to the corpse he had been examining. “Do you hear that, my dear young lady? There’s a chance we might become even better acquainted.”

He straightened and nodded to his deputy, a tall, handsome, black man. “Anthony, could you get those snaps, please?”

As Dr Jones went to an adjoining office, Campbell said, “I was able to clean the facial features reasonably well. The photographs are a good likeness.”

“Thanks, Dick. That’s great. Uh, have you come to any conclusions at all about the cause of death?” The doctor’s sudden frown gave Williams pause. He held up a defensive hand. “Just a broad sweep, Dick. We don’t expect details.”

Campbell sniffed. “You’re pushing it, Bob. All I can give you would be guesses.”

“That’ll do, Dick. Just so we can be on our way.”

“Okay. No drugs or poisons. Our young lady lived a clean life, so I think we can go with blunt-force trauma. But I will need more time to be precise as to the nature of the trauma.”

Williams sensed one of Campbell’s lectures was coming but didn’t want to risk annoying him further by asking him to desist.

The doctor placed a caring hand on the corpse’s head. “Poor thing! The blow was vicious and very severe. I’m pretty sure the brain was immediately damaged. It could be the blow destroyed the vertebral arteries that supply oxygenated blood to the brain, which is probably the most rapid cause of death in closed-cranial trauma. Or again, maybe the blow smashed the brain

itself, shutting off life irreversibly. Or again, we might have a case of internal decapitation.”

Williams peered questioningly at the girl’s head and neck.

“Decapitation?”

“Yes. A sufficiently forceful blow can cause the atlas vertebra to dislocate from the occipital cranium, potentially destroying the pons, medulla, the interface between the medulla and the rest of the nervous system, and the vertebral arteries as well.”

“Dick, for God’s sake.”

Campbell raised his eyes to the ceiling and shook his head with an exasperated sigh. “Goodness. You’re worse than Jim Sheehan. I was speaking perfectly plainly. A sudden impact can cause the head to snap forward, or sideways, or any which way, and can cause internal decapitation. It’s a kind of whiplash circumstance that causes fatal damage to the nerve cells deep in the white matter of the brain.”

“So which one is it?”

Campbell shrugged. “I’ve no idea. You asked for guesses. I’ve still to carry out the post-mortem. You’ll get the definitive answer in my report.”

Williams looked at his watch as Dr Jones came back into the mortuary, carrying an A4-sized envelope. “Gosh, Dick. I’m really sorry. We’re wasting your valuable time here.” He reached for the envelope, nodding a ‘thank you’ at Jones as he took it from him. “We’ll just take these and get out of your hair.” He couldn’t control a guilty glance at the pathologist’s bald pate, but wisely decided to stop digging.

“I’ve a couple of other options I’ll be checking for,” the doctor said, a forefinger in the air.

Williams began pushing Mulholland towards the door. “No, no. It’s okay. We’ve wasted enough of your time, Dick. That’s not fair on you. We’ll wait for your report.” He held up the envelope. “Thanks for this. Much appreciated.”

He turned, still pushing Mulholland in front of him, and left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A bright October sun shone on the River Lagan as it curved its scenic route along the Stranmillis Embankment. Williams and Mulholland, however, had eyes only for the oddly designed building in front of them. It seemed almost as if one massive concrete container with windows had been lowered down and off-set on top of another one. They made their way to the entrance through a large iron security gate into a wide hall where a helpful receptionist led them to the director's office.

She knocked on the door, waited briefly for a summons to enter, and opened it. "Two gentlemen to see you, Mr. Zhao," she said to the person inside, standing aside to allow the detectives to pass.

A Chinese man, late twenties, early thirties, formally dressed in a Western suit, stood up behind his desk as they entered. "Thank you, Li Na." He raised a finger to arrest her departure. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Coffee?" His accent was something of a surprise, strongly Northern Irish.

"No, thanks. We're good," Williams replied, thinking, *This guy has probably lived here all his life.*

The man nodded to the receptionist, who left, closing the door behind her.

The director indicated two chairs in front of his desk. "Please sit, gentlemen." He was smiling, but Williams detected something wary behind the man's eyes. "My name is Zhao Liang." He shrugged, continuing to smile. "That's the Chinese way. Surname first. You might be more comfortable with Liang Zhao." He sat down behind his desk. "So, what can I do for you, gentlemen?"

Williams showed him his warrant card. "Inspector Williams, PSNI. This is Sergeant Mulholland."

Shutters seemed to fall across Zhao's eyes, but the smile remained fixed. "Police? My goodness."

Williams studied him for a moment before continuing. The man seemed pleasant, but something about him was slightly off. Zhao smiled through the scrutiny, unmoving, waiting. Williams laid an A4 business envelope on the desk and took out a couple of colour photographs which

showed the face and bare neck of a young Chinese woman. “Sorry to be so blunt,” he said, “but this is a photo of a young Chinese woman who was murdered last night. We couldn’t find any indication of who she might be. Someone suggested you, or some of your staff, might be able to help us identify her.”

Zhao bent forward to look at the photos. “Murdered? Good gracious! How awful.” He studied the photographs for some further seconds before shaking his head. “Sorry! I don’t know this young woman.” He shrugged, almost casually. “But we have many visitors here from the Chinese community, and a number of counsellors and advisers, each with their own office. I would meet only a small percentage of the people who come in and out of the Centre’s doors.” He took a smart phone from his pocket and held it up. “Do you mind?”

Williams was puzzled. “Mind?”

“I would like to photograph these pictures and email them to my staff. One of them might have met this young lady at some point.”

“Oh! Yes, go ahead.”

The man held his mobile over the pictures and clicked a couple of times. He put the phone back in his pocket and said, “I’ll get those photos out to my staff as soon as you leave. Hopefully, one of them might be able to help. Oh, do you have a card where I can contact you if anyone recognises her?”

“Of course.” Williams reached into his jacket for his wallet, extracted a card and handed it to Zhao. *He’s taken total control of the situation. That doesn’t happen often.* “Good idea. Please contact us the minute you hear anything.”

“Count on it, Inspector. It’s horrible to see one of us treated like that. Was it a racist attack?”

Williams shook his head. “Sorry, Mr. Zhao. We really don’t know anything at this point. Our investigation has only just begun.” He put the photos back in the envelope and pushed it towards the director. “Is there a public notice board where you could post these pictures, maybe with a notice asking if anyone knows this person? You could leave my name and phone number on the notice.”

Zhao still had the card in his hand. He glanced briefly at it before putting it in the breast pocket of his jacket. “Of course. I’ll be happy to do that.” He started to rise. “Sorry I couldn’t have been of more help, gentlemen.

Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Good grief! We're being dismissed. What is it with this guy? "Not right now, thanks," Williams said, rising too. Mulholland rose with him. "But it's early days. We might have to talk to you again when we know more."

Zhao reached to a corner of his desk and lifted a business card. "Please feel free to contact me at any time, Inspector." He handed the card to the detective. "Here's my number."

Outside again in the car, Williams said to Mulholland, "What do you make of that guy?"

"Bit smarmy. All smiley."

"Anything else?"

"Like what?"

"Did you notice his reaction when we showed him the photographs and told him why we were there?"

Mulholland gave the question some thought. "Uh, he was all business-like. Efficient."

Williams nodded. "True."

Mulholland started the car and checked the rearview mirror before easing out on to the road. "What am I missing, boss?"

Williams was silent for a few moments. "Murder is a shocking thing, Sergeant, even to us hardened policemen who come across it often enough in our duties."

"That's very true, sir."

"For a lay person, someone who would normally never come across one, a murder would be really shocking."

"I guess so, sir."

"Yet, although Zhao made a few tutting noises, he didn't seem shocked at all. Indeed, he was barely affected by the news. He just starts taking snaps of the mortuary pictures with his phone camera."

"Bloody hell, sir. You're right. He wasn't fazed at all."

"So what are we to make of that?"

Mulholland eased out past a delivery lorry parked at the edge of the road before saying, "You don't think he's involved, do you, sir?"

"No. No, Sergeant. It's far too early for that. There's something not right about the guy. I can't put a finger on it, but that doesn't mean he had anything to do with the dead girl." He joined his fingers on his lap and started circling his thumbs around one another. He gazed unseeing through the

windscreen for a while before adding, “But I think he might be worth keeping an eye on.”

He pulled his mobile from his pocket and searched for a contact. He waited for a response and said, “Rushe. That friend of yours in Strandtown; you know, the one involved with the disappearance of the Chinese kid. You still in touch?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ask him if his investigation led to a Mr. Liang Zhao ... or Zhao Liang. He’s Director of the Chinese Support Centre, but I want to know if he’s up to anything else. Find out all you can about him, any connections he might have.”

Williams heard the rustling of paper as Rushe wrote something down. “I’ll see what I can do, boss. You fancy him for the killing?”

“No, just a line of enquiry. It mightn’t lead anywhere, but get me what you can.”

“On it, sir. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Good man.” He put the phone back in his pocket and said to Mulholland. “Let’s get back to the station.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was over an hour before Rushe got back to them. Williams was working in his office when he took the call.

“Not an awful lot to report, boss,” Rushe said. “My mate’s team did come across Zhao. Apparently, he was polite and tried to be helpful, but he wasn’t able to do much for them. They had no reason to suspect him of anything, so they didn’t bother him anymore.”

Williams shook his head, disappointed. “Nothing funny in his background?”

“Well, as I said, sir, they didn’t poke too much into him. Nothing surfaced during the time they were dealing with him.”

Williams was experiencing a sinking feeling in his stomach, a feeling which he was all too familiar with. “Thanks anyway, Ian.” He made to end the call when Rushe added,

“There was something else came up, sir.”

Williams straightened. “Well?”

“They did come across a shadowy figure in the Chinese community. Apparently, he has his finger in a lot of pies but is always invisible in the background. But he’s got the community by the throat, and they’re scared out of their skulls of him.”

“You get his name?”

“Yes, sir. It’s Huang Tao. Tao is—”

“I know. It’s his first name. Was he connected to the child’s disappearance?”

“Don’t know, sir. They couldn’t make a case against him. They did check him out. He owns a restaurant and is a kind of unofficial community leader.”

“So what’s so scary about him?”

“Apparently, he’s a wrinkly old guy who wears traditional Chinese clothes, even has the old-style braided pigtail. My mate says it’s called a ‘queue’. He seems deeply attached to the old ways and hates the intrusion of Western lifestyles into the culture of the young Chinese people. The word is that a number of young girls in the community have been severely threatened, even abused and beaten, for simply wearing jeans or going into the city and

associating with Western boys.”

Williams straightened in his chair. “Threatened how?”

“Not sure. He has these two huge bodyguards who go with him everywhere. Maybe they’re the threat.”

Williams’ mind was racing now. “Do Chinese people go in for those honour killings like the Middle East or Egypt and places like that?”

“No idea, sir.”

Williams wrote furiously on his notepad. “Okay, don’t worry about it. But we need to find out if our victim came from Huang’s community. Maybe she got on the wrong side of him. She was definitely wearing stylish and expensive Western clothes.”

“It’s a line of enquiry, sir.”

“It is. Come in and grab some copies of Campbell’s photographs. Bring Short with you and get back out there with a few uniforms to canvas the area. Maybe somebody’ll recognise her.”

“I’ll get on it right away, sir.”

“And Pete, call into the Chinese Support Centre. Have a chat with Zhao. Give him the usual guff about a process of elimination but see if he has an alibi for between eleven o’clock and midnight on the night of the murder. In the meantime, Mulholland and I will try to have a wee chat with this old Patriarch or Mandarin or whatever he thinks he is. Did you get the name of that restaurant?”

“Hold on, sir. I have it here.”

Williams could hear the sound of paper rustling.

“Here it is, sir. It’s the Imperial Dynasty Restaurant.”

“Humph! Of course it is.” A thought popped into his head. “One last thing, Pete. See if there’s any kind of connection between Zhao and Huang. If the old crook is some kind of powerful unofficial community chief, Zhao’s bound to know about him.”

“I’ll see what I can find out, boss.”

CHAPTER NINE

Huang had spared no expense on The Imperial Dynasty Restaurant. Black marble steps at the entrance, hand carved railings, gleaming jade columns—Williams was impressed. The dining area was a wash of reds, golds, and blacks, with many alcoves for Chinese statuary, large paintings of Chinese scenes, and Oriental *objets d'arts*. He had no doubt that the clients eating at the many tables would have had no idea who owned the place. For them, the occasion would just have been a memorable dining experience.

A young Chinese waitress wearing a bright blue and yellow high-necked cheongsam met them at the bottom of the steps into the main dining room. “Good evening, gentlemen.” Her Chinese accent was strong, but lilting and attractive. “Do you have a reservation?”

“We would like to speak with Mr. Huang,” Williams said politely.

The girl, immediately flustered, hesitated. “Mr. Huang is not receiving visitors just now.”

Williams showed her his warrant card. His voice hardened. “We’d rather not make a fuss in the dining room. Please show us to his office.”

The waitress’ gaze traversed the many heads bent over plates. Nodding, she turned and said, “This way.”

At the office door, she signalled for them to wait outside. She left the door slightly ajar when she went in, and the detectives could hear some whispering and angry hisses in Chinese. Sensing they were unlikely to receive any kind of warm welcome, Williams pushed through the door, brandishing his warrant card. “Inspector Williams, PSNI. Could I have a few minutes of your time, please?”

As he stood aside to let the waitress scurry out, two huge, completely bald, muscular guards, who had been standing just inside the door, moved menacingly towards him. Both were dressed in black Mao suits.

“I would think twice about that,” Williams snapped, with a great deal more bravado than he was feeling. His warrant card suddenly seemed a deal less bulletproof than normal.

A bent, old Chinese man was standing behind the desk, his dress and general appearance giving the impression he had been transplanted into the wrong century. He flicked a bony, long-nailed forefinger at the guards, who

moved back, their faces impassive, their eyes never leaving Williams. “What want?” Huang hissed at the detectives. His face was expressionless, but his cold, black eyes glittered venomously. “Very busy. Make appointment.”

“This won’t take long,” Williams said, holding out the A4 envelope and moving towards the desk. He took out a photograph of Chen Li and laid it in front of Huang. “We understand you are an important elder among the Chinese community. Do you recognise this girl?”

Huang barely glanced at the photograph. “Not know. Who she?”

“We don’t know either,” Williams said. “She was found murdered on Wednesday night. Could you have another look at the photograph, please? Surely you must feel concern that a member of your community has been murdered?”

“Not my community,” Huang said coldly. “Not know girl. Not hear about murder. Not care about foreign girls or decadent university students.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Leave now. Very busy.”

Williams reached forward and quietly retrieved the photograph. His mind was working furiously. *Queen’s university? You know a lot more than you’re letting on, you arrogant old wretch.* Mulholland was moving forward, clearly angry. Williams stopped him with a nod. “Let’s go, Sergeant.” He turned to Huang and said neutrally, “Thank you for your help.” He took a card from his breast pocket and held it out to Huang. “Here’s my number. If you should think of anything else, please give me a call.”

Huang just stared at him, ignoring the card. One of the heavies came forward, calmly took the card from Williams, crushed it in his massive fist, and allowed it to fall casually to the floor. His eyes never left Williams. There was no triumph on his face, no sneer, just a hard, dispassionate stare.

Mulholland uttered an angry, “Hey!” but Williams took him by the arm and ushered him out of the office.

On their way to the car, Mulholland said, “You caved in pretty easily, sir.” He was trying not to be impertinent, but his tone was aggrieved.

“Didn’t you hear what the old guy said?” Williams sounded tense, excited.

“Yeah! He didn’t know anything.”

“But he did,” Williams insisted. “He did. He said he’d no time for decadent university students. Did you miss that? Thinks he’s Fu bloody Manchu. Pound to a penny he knew the girl and knows she was a student at Queen’s University. Evil bastard. He’s behind her murder. I’ll bet my

pension on it.”

“Motive, sir?”

“Motive? Isn’t it obvious? The poor girl has somehow or another transgressed against the old despot’s antagonism to Western culture and paid a heavy price.” His hand was shaking when he looked at his watch, convinced he was experiencing the kind of insight that enabled Jim Sheehan to close cases, and he could hardly contain himself. He needed peace to think. “Drop me off at the station and get yourself round to Queen’s. There’s plenty of time. See what you can find out.”

His mobile rang. Putting it to his ear, he said, “Rushe, what’ve you got?” Glancing at Mulholland, he added, “Wait a minute.” He put the phone on speaker and held it out so Mulholland could hear.

“Zhao’s got a solid alibi for Wednesday night,” Rushe told them. “There was some sort of celebratory meal at a restaurant in the city. He has several witnesses to support his alibi. Some of them are well-known politicians and members of the City Council.”

Williams sighed. “Did you ask him about Huang?”

“Yes, sir. He was quite open about him. Said he knew him very well, that Mr. Huang is a highly respected leader of the community. He said part of his role as Director of the Community Support Centre was to meet with Huang from time to time about community issues. A necessary requirement, he said, sir.”

“What kind of issues?”

“Nothing exciting, sir. Social housing, misbehaving adolescents, integration of new arrivals from China, that sort of thing.”

“Did you believe him?”

“He convinced me and Short, sir. He wasn’t hiding anything. He was very matter of fact about it. He didn’t appear to be fazed in the slightest by the question.”

“All right. Thanks, Pete. I’ll see you back at the station.”

CHAPTER TEN

Williams sat at his desk, studying his files, writing new notes, still annoyed by Huang Tao's utter disrespect of him and Mulholland. He could hardly think straight, convinced the man was behind the young woman's murder. *I'll show him disrespect.*

He began to write again, forming the basis of an information-seeking campaign against the old reprobate. Plain-clothes detectives would canvas the Chinese community, trying to find anyone who would talk to them. Undercover officers would dine in Huang's restaurant, keeping their ears to the ground, maybe even flirting with one or two of the waitresses. Uniformed officers would knock doors and stop passers-by, showing photographs of the dead girl. Someone would crack. Someone, even if they had to be bribed, would let something slip about any nefarious activities Huang might be engaged in.

He thought about Zhao. It would do no harm to check into him, too, but he couldn't help but feel that, despite his smarminess, Zhao was pretty much what he appeared to be. *No! Huang's the killer. I just need to prove it.*

His phone interrupted his thoughts. He looked at the screen. Mulholland. "Yes, Sergeant?"

"Got our victim's name, sir. It's Chen Li. A scholarship student from China. She comes from a university over there called Shenzhen University. It has strong links with Queen's University here in Belfast. One of the women in the International Office in Queen's recognised her."

"Great!" Williams said, reaching for his notepad. "What else did you get from her?"

"Sorry, sir. That was about it. They have about six hundred Chinese students in Queen's and they don't really keep tabs on them unless the students themselves come in for help. Nobody contacted them about any problems with Chen Li, so they don't really know what's been going on with her."

Williams chewed on that. "What about her parents? Where do they live?"

"Dunno, sir. Probably China."

"Go back and find out. They're going to have to be notified, but I was

thinking that ... what's her name again?"

"Chen Li."

"I was thinking Chen Li must have been corresponding with her parents if she's over here on a scholarship. She knew her killer. There might be a mention about him in her letters."

"Right enough, sir." Mulholland said, his voice enthusiastic. "We need to get our hands on those letters."

"We'll have to try to get the parents over here. Or maybe somebody can accompany the body back to China when the coroner releases it." He scratched his head furiously. "This is starting to get complicated. I'll have a think about it. Did you learn anything else about the girl?"

"Yes. I asked at the office about Chen Li's programme of study and then went to the students' canteen looking for anybody on that course who might know her."

"Oh, well done. Did you find anyone?"

Mulholland exhaled a loud breath. "I sure as hell felt uncomfortable doing the search, sir. Obviously, I was targeting young Chinese girls for info, and I was getting some very questioning looks. I think they thought I was some kind of pervert."

"That's what your warrant card's for. You should've been flashing it all over the place."

"Didn't want to scare anybody off, sir. Police and all that. But I finally found two girls from her course. They said Chen Li had been attending classes only very irregularly for the past several months. They thought she might've got a job somewhere because she was turning up in lots of new clothes, all made up and posh-looking."

"Where was this job?"

"They weren't even sure she had a job, sir. They were just surmising since Chen Li suddenly seemed to have a lot of money."

"Please tell me you got something else."

"I did, sir. Apparently, Chen Li had a fling of sorts with one of the course's lecturers. Good-looking guy. Seems to have something of a thing for Chinese girls, especially students. I'm thinking he might know something?"

"You got his name, I hope?"

"Redmond Grant, sir. Dr Grant. I went to the Human Resources office. Uh, they actually call it the Employee and Labour Relations Unit. I was able to get his address. Should we nip round there and have a chat with him?"

“Doctor?” Williams was silent for a couple of minutes, drumming his fingers on the desk.

“You still on the line, sir?”

“Yes, Gerry. Just thinking. Highly qualified. He’ll probably be very self-assured. It might be better if we bring him in to the station for questioning and see how he holds up in an interrogation room. If he knows anything, he might be more likely to let something slip there than during a civil chat at his own place.”

“You could be right, sir.”

“Send a couple of uniforms to his place to pick him up. Don’t tell them why. We don’t want them saying anything that might alert him.”

“On it, sir.”

“Oh, Gerry. Ask them to check if he has a duffle coat. If he has, tell them to bring it with them.”

* * *

Grant, handsome, barely thirty, was dressed in an elegant jacket, brown corduroy slacks, and expensive loafers. He seemed unconcerned at finding himself in a police interrogation room, but glanced up at the two detectives as they came into the room and said, “Ah, gentlemen, would one of you mind telling me what I’m doing here?”

Williams studied their witness. Disappointingly, there had been no duffle coat. Looking now at the well-dressed young man in front of him, he wasn’t surprised. *Definitely not hoodie material.* “Just a routine enquiry, sir,” Williams said. “Your name came up in the course of an investigation we’re conducting. Best to get any issues sorted and out of the way as soon as possible. I’m sure you’d agree with that.”

“Can’t imagine why my name has come up in one of your investigations,” Grant said easily. “But, sure. Fire away.” He sat back in the chair, his left forearm resting on the table, his right arm thrown over the back of his chair. “What do you need to know?”

Williams shuffled some of the pages on the table in front of him and looked up. “Do you know a young Chinese lady named Chen Li?”

Grant sat forward, suddenly concerned. “I do. Has something happened to her?”

Williams ignored the question. “How do you know her, sir?”

“We went out together for a while ... the odd meal, some visits to the theatre. It didn’t last long. But that was months ago. I haven’t seen her since.”

Williams extracted one of Dr Campbell’s photographs from his papers and placed it in front of Grant, watching intently for any reaction. “Is this her?”

Grant bent over to look at the photograph. He was nodding recognition for a couple of seconds when his eyes suddenly widened in shock. “Why are her eyes closed? Is she...?” He looked up at Williams, his expression stunned. “She’s dead? Oh, my God!”

“She was murdered on Wednesday night,” Williams confirmed bluntly. “Would you have any idea who might want to harm her?”

For a second, Grant’s eyes slid furtively sideways. *What’s that about?* Williams wondered. But Grant was already shaking his head. “I’ve no idea. She was a nice girl, friendly. She had no enemies that I’m aware of.”

Williams stared at him intently. Grant seemed unable to meet his gaze. His eyes were deliberately focused on the photograph. *What’s going on here?* He decided to push a bit harder. “Are you sure you aren’t holding something back, Dr Grant? You seem a little bit edgy.”

Grant’s head shot up, his expression suddenly angry. “Edgy? Edgy? I’m dragged into a police interrogation room without having a clue why. You show me a photograph of a murdered girl I once had a relationship with. I’m being asked questions about a situation I know absolutely nothing about, and I’m scared shitless I’ll say something that’ll be misinterpreted ... and ... and...” He raised his hands and glared again at both detectives. “And you say I look edgy.”

If he’s acting, Williams thought, he’s pretty damn convincing. “Where were you between eleven o’clock and midnight on Wednesday, the twenty-fourth of October?”

“What? You think I had something to do with Li’s murder?” Grant looked horrified.

Williams said calmly, “Where were you, sir?”

Grant’s lips tightened, but his expression indicated he was searching his memory. “Wednesday night? Uh, oh, yes. I was home, grading assignments.”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“No. I was alone ... unless one of the other people in the apartment block saw me going in. You’ll have to ask them.”

“We will. So you don’t have an alibi for the time of the murder?”

Grant gave him a furious look. "I do. I've just given it to you."

"Might any of her friends know something that would help us?"

Grant shook his head. "Sorry. I didn't get to meet any of her friends."

Williams' heart sank. Whatever he thought he might have perceived earlier, he now found himself believing this witness. He's full of himself, obviously basks in the attention of young girls, but that doesn't make him a murderer. If he's banging college students, that's a matter for the college, not for us. *Which leaves me where? With Huang, that's where.*

"Alright! You can go now," Williams said abruptly, too abruptly, perhaps, to judge from the look of incomprehension on Mulholland's face.

When Grant had left, Mulholland said, "Letting him off a bit light, sir, wouldn't you think?"

Williams shook his head. "No. He might be a bit of a Lothario running about, but he's no good to us. We need to focus on Huang."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Some cases hurtle to an inevitable conclusion. Some require diligent and determined investigation until the effort expended is rewarded. Some cases defy the most strenuous striving, remaining stubbornly impervious to all probing, all enquiry, all scrutiny. The Chinese Girl Murder fell inexorably into this final category. Weeks of enquiry yielded little of any import. One by one, lines of investigation began to peter out. Other cases came and went, demanding more and more time, relegating Chen Li's murder to the back burner.

November came, then December, but the team was no closer to a resolution. New Year came and went, and on a cold morning in February, Williams found himself sitting in his office, disconsolately leafing through an ever-growing pile of new case files. He threw the sheets back on his desk, leaned forward and placed his head in his hands. He had just come from an angry exchange with the Assistant Chief Constable and his head was throbbing.

"Where are you with this Chinese girl's killing, Bob?" the ACC had asked.

"It's a difficult case, sir," Williams answered. "I believe I know who the killer is, or at least, the person who arranged the killing, but I'm having trouble compiling the evidence I need."

"But you've had weeks, Bob. Months. You're way over budget on this." He reached forward and lifted an expenses application from his desk. "And talking about budget. What the hell's this?"

"What, sir?"

"Two return plane tickets to China. What's that about?"

"We believed the parents would have letters from the dead girl and we needed to see them. We also agreed to pay their expenses to come over to Belfast and take their daughter back to China for burial."

"Why was that down to us?" The ACC said, almost shouting.

"It was a legitimate expense, sir," Williams argued. "They were dead poor. There was no way they could have afforded to come here. We needed to talk to them. And we needed those letters."

"They could have posted them."

It was on the tip of Williams' tongue to ask if the ACC expected them to post the daughter to China, but he chose discretion. "I felt we needed to speak to them in person, sir, to ensure any nuances would be picked up."

"Nuances," the ACC snorted. "So, did you get anything?"

"Unfortunately not, sir."

"Did you get any nuances from the letters?"

"No, sir."

"Yet these expenses include several hours of a translator's time, costing thirty pounds an hour. Was that your idea, too?"

"None of us can read or speak Chinese, sir."

"The city's coming down with Chinese people, for goodness sake. A little judicious searching would've found someone a lot cheaper than that."

Williams remained carefully silent. He'd learned a long time ago to give the ACC as little ammunition as possible.

"Look, Bob. This case had been running for almost five months now. You're either going to have to wrap it up or shelve it."

"I still think we can get our man, sir," William said, almost desperate.

"Have you consulted with Jim Sheehan? Fresh eye and all that?"

"The Chief Inspector's got a lot on his plate, sir. I didn't want to bother him. Give me a few more days, sir. I'm close. I can feel it."

The ACC's lips tightened. "A few days, Bob. Then I'm pulling the plug."

Still smarting, Williams raised his head, staring blankly at the sheets on his desk. The fact-finding onslaught on the Chinese Community had yielded virtually nothing. Initially, the officers were met with polite shaking of heads and regretful shrugs, but they did get a vague whisper that Huang's tentacles reached into the city and he had the ear of some influential people on the City Council. They also learned early in the process that Huang was also known as 'The Purse.' No explanation for this nickname was found. Williams assumed Huang must have a money-lending business, probably giving him iron control over the community's impoverished.

But a concentrated onslaught like that was never going to go unnoticed. As the enquiries persisted, a wall of silence began to emerge. And the more the police probed Huang's affairs, the darker and more sinister became the silence. The polite responses became defensive shakes of the head, raised arms, doors closing in the officers' faces. No one could meet the eyes of the

investigators, and what was originally, ‘Don’t know’, gradually changed to a frightened, ‘No speak English’.

After weeks of unproductive enquiry, Williams was enduring yet again the stomach-churning realisation that the case was disintegrating before his eyes. But he couldn’t shake the conviction Huang was the killer. He kept thinking, *Sheehan must feel this same conviction when he gets his hunches.*

But what Williams failed to realise was that Sheehan’s hunches were not simply hunches. They invariably emerged out of several pieces of evidence Sheehan’s analytical mind was able to read in a way that allowed the facts to coalesce into a discernible pattern. Had Sheehan known what was going on in Williams’ head, he would have been the first to say, “Wait for the evidence, Bob. See where it leads. Don’t grab a theory out of the blue and try to make the evidence fit into it. You’ll fail, and you’ll also miss other vital lines of enquiry sitting right under your nose.”

And that was precisely why Williams’ case eventually foundered. The fatal flaw in the case was his obsession with Huang. No motive materialised during the investigation other than Williams’ initial surmise that Chen had earned Huang’s displeasure, a surmise that over time became a certainty, an indisputable truth, a guiding principle that was to exert undue influence on all future lines of enquiry. Williams did, of course, allow the team their head, but nothing they brought him could excite his curiosity. His blindness left him incapable of giving proper consideration to other possibilities, and thus a number of useful avenues of exploration were completely missed.

Fettered by the limitations of their boss’s narrow focus, the team’s enthusiasm inevitably waned, and they turned their energies to new cases coming in. The fact that the ACC eventually disallowed any further expenditure on the case was the final nail in its coffin.

Williams’ failures were basic and probably inexcusable. He had allowed focus on Zhao to slip. Had he thought to check Zhao’s academic background, he would have found a productive new trail to follow. But he didn’t. He barely gave a thought to the Shenzhen/Queen’s connection. Yet had he pursued some enquiries there, he’d have been driven to investigate the scholarship girls and might well have found his way to information about the Shadow’s Escort Service. He didn’t. That failure also meant he would remain utterly unaware of The Shadow’s existence, a cardinal error. Nor did he choose to pursue enquiries into Redmond Grant’s predilection for young Chinese students. He simply perceived Grant as a somewhat licentious but

essentially irrelevant witness. Had he chosen to dig deeper into the young man's life and loves, again he might have found his way to the Escort Service.

Even more useful lines of enquiry would have been opened had Williams insisted on finding the real reason for Huang's nickname, The Purse. This name stemmed from an altogether more insidious practice than merely lending money at a high rate of interest to needy Community members. Another missed opportunity, and another one of Sheehan's axioms ignored: *check everything. Don't make assumptions.*

Little condemnation came Williams' way at his failure to solve yet another murder. The simple truth was, no one really expected him to succeed. Solving murders was not his *metier*. Everyone knew that. The pattern was always the same. Williams would meticulously gather and collate all evidence, painstakingly prepare detailed and complete files, and then the case, and the files, would invariably end up in the hands of a more savvy colleague.

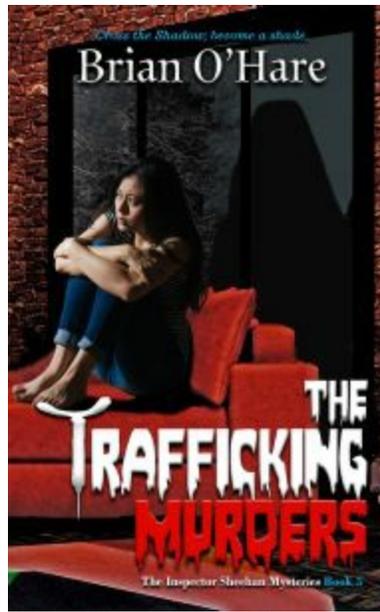
The end result of the Chinese Girl Murder investigation wound its inexorable way to the same outcome. With the continued passing of weeks, it became clear Williams had backed himself into a dark corner and had nowhere left to turn. The investigation ended in a blank *cul-de-sac* and no further light illumined the dying files. New cases required more and more of his and his team's attention. Fewer and fewer leads presented themselves in the Chen Li case, and although Williams tried from time to time to keep interest in it alive, it languished on the books unsolved.

On a morning in September, 2019, Williams came across a report about the murder of a Chinese girl in Chief Inspector Sheehan's patch. His shoulders slumped in near despair and the bitter gall of defeat gnawed at his guts. The unavoidable parallel ensured his case, too, would end up on Sheehan's desk. Bowing to the inevitable, he didn't wait for instructions from the ACC. He immediately spent a couple of hours preparing a detailed but very concise summary of the evidence in the Chen Li case. When he had finished, he slipped the few typed sheets into a thin manila folder, along with a couple of photographs (the next team would have full access to any of the piled evidence if they needed it) and left his office to meet with Jim Sheehan at Strandtown Station. At this point, Williams was to learn from his conversation with Sheehan, that during the time elapsed since the murder of Chen Li, The Shadow had murdered three more victims, and was

aggressively hunting a fourth—another terrified young Chinese woman, forced to flit from cheap lodgings to cheap lodgings in the city, lost and alone, without help or support, living a life of increasing panic and despair.

* * *

Will Sheehan be any more successful than Williams in bringing this elusive killer to justice? Find out in *The Trafficking Murders*, recently published and currently available on Amazon (and other key outlets) for the special introductory price of \$1.99 (or £1.99).



[The Trafficking Murders](#)

Lin Hui and Cheung Mingzhu win scholarships to study at Queen's University in Belfast. Alina Balauru departs a poor farm in Romania for well-paid work in Northern Ireland. Three lives harbouring long-cherished dreams. Three lives headed for tragedy.

Sheehan and his Serious Crimes Unit discover the body of one of the young women in the garden of an upmarket residence. Confronted with violent Chinese racketeers, brutal human-traffickers and a fiendishly clever killer called The Shadow, they are baffled by a case that seems to lead in two entirely different directions.

Can they find out who The Shadow is in time to save the other two victims?

"Thought-provoking, emotional and gut-wrenching. An exceptional crime-thriller and a must-read for any thriller lover." [Eric Praschan, Author of *Blind Evil* and *The Burden of Silence*]

"This is mystery writing of the highest quality by an author who deserves very wide recognition." [Grady Harp, Hall of Fame Top 100 Reviewer]

"I am a fan of detective novels and this book reminds me pretty much of Stephen King's or Jeffrey Deaver's works." [Phg. Ngx., Online Book Club]

“I have no doubt Brian O'Hare will be the next big name in mystery novels.” [Sarah Pingley. Amazon Reviewer]

Thank you for choosing this book. If you enjoyed it, please consider telling your friends or leaving a review on Goodreads or the site where you bought it. Word of mouth is an author's best friend and much appreciated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Because of a childhood disease that required a liver transplant, Dr Brian O'Hare took early retirement in 1998 from his post as Assistant Director of the Southern Regional College in Newry in Northern Ireland. He now enjoys full health, plays golf several times a week, and travels occasionally.

He is author of several academic works as well as two memoirs, and five award-winning fiction novels, including the Crimson Cloak's Inspector Sheehan Mysteries series. Look for the first four award-winning books in the Sheehan series, *The Doom Murders*, *The 11.05 Murders*, *The Coven Murders*, and *The Dark Web Murders*, available from a variety of distributors such as Amazon, Smashwords, Barnes and Noble, Ingram, and the Crimson Cloak Publishing shop at: <http://www.crimsoncloakpublishing.com/>.

There are also three Crimson Short Stories featuring Inspector Sheehan: *Murder at Loftus House*, *Murder at the Roadside Cafe*, and *Murder at the Woodlands Care Home*.

Also by Brian O'Hare

The Miracle Ship— award winning religious non-fiction.

Fallen Men – award winning contemporary fiction.

A Spiritual Odyssey— a spiritual/medical memoir.

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Amazon Author Page:

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CHECK OUT THE OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES



THE DOOM MURDERS

[Vol. 1 of the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries Series]

Published 2016 Crimson Cloak

<https://tinyurl.com/yym56nbh>

Prominent figures in Belfast are being murdered. The bodies are left naked and posed in grotesquely distorted shapes. No clues are left at the forensically immaculate crime scenes except odd theatrical props and some concealed random numbers and letters left by the killer. How are the victims linked? What is the connection between these killings and a famous mediaeval painting of The Last Judgement? Chief Inspector Jim Sheehan is baffled. Faced with one of the most complex cases of his career, he turns to an eminent professor at Queen's University and a senior cleric who is a biblical expert. With their help, Sheehan begins to piece together some understanding of the killer's psychopathy, but can he learn enough to identify the killer and put an end the murders?

The Doom Murders has been the recipient of four literary awards - The IDB Award in 2014; The New Apple Award, 2014, for Excellence in

Independent Publishing; and the 2015 Readers' Favourite International Book Awards. And Literary Titan's Gold Five-Star award

"The Chief Inspector, Jim Sheehan, is drawn so deftly and with such genuineness, you can feel him breathing." (Eugene Fournier, novelist and screenwriter, film and TV)

"The most subtle of clues are intricately interwoven into the storyline, and even the most astute mystery buff is apt to miss them." (Donna Cummins, Author of the Blacklick Valley Mystery Series)

"Incredibly addictive page turner." (Meghan, Amazon Top 1000 Reviewer)

"O'Hare leans toward the human side of his characters, imbuing them with a real-world presence that is in turn witty and passionate." (Roy T. James, for Readers' Favourite)

THE 11:05 MURDERS

[Vol. 2 of the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries Series]

Published 2017. Crimson Cloak

<http://tinyurl.com/ztpouc>

Three people are murdered on separate Tuesday evenings at precisely 11.05. Random clues point to random suspects, but too many questions remain unanswered. Why 11.05pm for each killing? Is there any connection between these deaths and a rape that occurred at Queen's university twelve years before? What is the connection between the killings and Sergeant Stewart's mystery informant? Who is the violent stalker who twice nearly kills Detective Allen? What is his connection, if any, to the murders? This is a murderer who comes and goes as he pleases. Even when the police know the target, the date and the time of his next murder, he still kills his victim, kidnaps a key member of the team, and escapes without being apprehended. Who can hope to catch a killer who is so ruthlessly clever and efficient? Inspector Sheehan has literally only minutes to make sense of these questions if he is to save his colleague's life.

The 11.05 Murders has won Top Medal Honours for its category in the The New Apple Award, 2015, for Excellence in Independent Publishing

"The first thing I thought after reading this book is: why isn't Brian O'Hare better known in the crime writing world? This man is extremely talented, and his book a wonderful 'whodunnit' that left me guessing until the

end.” [Joseph Sousa, Crime-writer]

“Head and shoulders above most mystery authors who are published today, Brian O’Hare deserves far wider recognition. You won’t regret purchasing his books.” [CBT, Amazon Reviewer]

“Brian O’Hare is an intelligent and compassionate storyteller who takes his chosen genre a decent literary distance beyond your average ‘whodunnit’.” [Robin Chambers, author]

“An explosive mystery that keeps you guessing until the very end, riddled with unseen surprises and breathless suspense!” [Wesley Thomas, writer and blogger]

THE COVEN MURDERS

[Vol. 3 of the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries Series]

Published 2018, Crimson Cloak

<https://tinyurl.com/ybkx8bkh>

The Coven Murders opens with a horrifying account of a ritual Black Mass and a human sacrifice in an abandoned church. Twenty-one years later, near an old, ruined church in an area of outstanding natural beauty, Chief Inspector Sheehan and his team discover the skeleton of a young woman. But what seems initially to be a straightforward case, brings the team into conflict with a powerful Satanist who has plans to offer up to Satan another human sacrifice on the evening of the great Illuminati feast of Lughnasa. Several murders occur, baffling the Inspector until he makes a connection between the modern murders and the twenty-one-year-old skeleton. The team’s pursuit of the murderer and their determination to protect a young woman who is targeted by the coven, leads to a horrific climax in a hellish underground crypt where Sheehan and his team, supported by an exorcist and a bishop, attempt to do battle with the coven and a powerful demon, Baphomet, jeopardising not only their lives, but risking the wrath of Satan upon their immortal souls.

Like its predecessors, The Coven Murders has won The New Apple Award and Readers Favourite Award

“A whirlwind of a ride, frightening, disturbing, and so intent do we become in rescuing the sacrificial victim in time that we almost forget that the murderer has not yet been named. Hang on because the final scene is a shocker!” [C. Todd, Amazon Review]

“It’s impossible to get into without some serious spoilers, so I’ll leave you with this: It will make the hairs on your arms and neck stand up straight.” [Kendra Morgan, Amazon Customer]

“The end took me completely by surprise. I’m willing to bet there are few out there who will guess this one.” Denna Holm, Writer of Paranormal and Sci-fi novels.

THE DARK WEB MURDERS

[Vol 4 of the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries Series]

Published 2019. Crimson Cloak

<https://tinyurl.com/yxhzlpmq>

I am Nemein. I am not a murderer. I am emotionally detached from my killings. I am, therefore, an instrument of Nemesis, a punisher. This is a theme running through a number of blogs on the Dark Web, written by a serial killer. He is highly intelligent and employs philosophical argument to justify a series of gruesome murders. However, he describes the killings in lurid detail, and with such gloating relish, that he utterly negates his delusion of detachment and reveals himself to be a cold-blooded, narcissistic psychopath.

Sheehan and his team rush headlong down a series of blind alleys in the pursuit of the psychopath, who continues to murder his victims with impunity. He is fiendishly clever, utterly ruthless, and tests Sheehan’s famed intuition to the limit. Indeed, Sheehan only learns the truth during a horrific climax when some members of his team experience a most harrowing ‘laceration of the soul’ that they will never be able to forget. It is unlikely that the reader will either.

So far *The Dark Web Murders* has received the Top Medal Honours Award from the 2019 New Apple Awards for Excellence.

“O’Hare has developed his characters very successfully as they have tackled their various cases. I, for one, am eagerly awaiting their next challenge in what is a crime series which undoubtedly deserves a much wider audience.” A.P. Martin, Author of Codename Lazarus and Spytrap.

“I’m not surprised by the accolades and the praise bestowed on this novel. There are weird murders, a clever and truly twisted murderer, bizarre clues and possible motives, plenty of red herrings, twists and turns galore and a fascinating background to the story. Another gripping book by Brian

O'Hare. I am eagerly awaiting the next one.” Olga Núñez Miret, Writer.
Ph.D. (American Literature). MSc (Criminology)

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O'Hare, Brian

Murder of a Chinese Girl

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