

# MURDER ON OAK STREET by I. M. Foster

## EXCERPT

Daniel O'Halleran stared down at the crumpled body, blood spreading out in a deep crimson pool beneath the man's head. He reached over to close the victim's turquoise eyes. Something wasn't right here, aside from the fact that a body was lying battered and broken on the rough wooden floor. He couldn't put his finger on it, but then that wasn't his job, now was it?

"Well?" Sergeant Timothy O'Halleran asked, a frown creasing his aging brow. "What killed him, then?"

Trying to suppress a smile, Daniel stood up, brushing the dust from his pants. His uncle knew very well what had killed the man, but clearly wanted to make Daniel feel important in his new position as a coroner's physician for the city of New York. "You're well aware what killed him, Uncle Timothy."

His uncle gave a quick glance around before slapping him on the back of the head. "Ye're a professional now, lad. Act like one, eh? Yer da didn't spend all that money for a medical degree for ye to be acting the fool."

This time Daniel did laugh, but he removed the smile from his face quickly as his uncle's frown deepened. He was right. Richard and Sarah Adams had raised him as their own in every respect after his mother had died. For all intents and purposes, they were his parents, even though he'd insisted on retaining his mother's surname. He did want to make them proud of him.

Wiping a hand across his face to remove any remnant of tomfoolery, as his adoptive mother called it, he took a deep breath. "He's cracked his skull and bled out." Daniel bent down again, sniffing the man's clothing. "Probably drunk, but I can't be certain."

"Sure, I can smell it from up here," Timothy said. "Whiskey, I'd say. I'm thinking ye need to be getting out a bit more if ye've any doubt."

“It’s not what he’s been drinking I question, but the amount that made it into his stomach. Most of the smell is coming from his clothing, not his mouth. What self-respecting drunk would let that much liquor go to waste?”

Timothy nodded. “Ye may be right, me boy. I know the man, and he’s not one to be found tipping more than a glass or two, especially in a place such as this.”

Daniel rubbed a thumb beneath his bottom lip, hesitant to say what was on his mind, but the thought was apt to come out anyway. He nodded up the stairs. “Maybe he was here for other reasons. I’ve no doubt that girl was pregnant. If he wanted her to have it aborted . . .”

This time Timothy shook his head. “I’ll not be believing that. More likely he was here to talk her out o’ such a drastic act, and someone caught him at it. The father, perhaps.” He scrubbed the day-old stubble on his chin. “What about the wretched sod in the corner room?”

“I suspect that was natural causes, but I’ll be able to tell you more—”

“I know, when ye get a better look.” His uncle rested a hand on his shoulder. “Ye’d best be quick about it, though. The chief will be wanting this one wrapped up before the widow gets any ideas. She’s way out on Long Island, so ’tis not likely he’ll be spending a great deal o’ time or resources on it.”

“But if the man’s been murdered . . .” Daniel stood, indignant to think the chief might put other considerations before the truth.

Timothy pointed a finger at him. “Now ye listen here, boyo. ’Tis the way things are. If the widow wants to hire someone to investigate, she’s free to do so. The city’s not likely to be spending good money on a drunkard found dead in a tenement, especially with a pregnant lass stabbed to death two floors above. Saints preserve us, lad, the knife’s lying at his fingertips.”

“There’s no proof it’s his knife, or that it was even used in her murder. Perhaps I could try and use that new fingerprint system I’ve heard mentioned to see if—”

“It doesn’t matter,” his uncle said, cutting him off. “’Tis lying beside him, and that’s how the bigwigs will see it, whether ye like it or not.”

“Then why ask me at all?”

“This is a good job, and ye won it fair and square, but ye can lose it just as easily. Give the boss yer opinion and leave it at that. And for the love o’ God, don’t be going making any waves, or ye might find yerself unemployed with a reputation as a troublemaker. Fingerprints, indeed!”

Daniel sighed, his shoulders slumping as if a weight had been laid across them. “It may not matter one way or the other.”

“And why’s that?” Timothy narrowed his eyes. “Out with it.”

“Prudence wants me to resign and go into practice with her father.” He shrugged, trying to shift the heaviness from his shoulders, and rubbed the scar on his forehead. “It certainly pays more, and she’s used to the finer things in life. Besides, I’d actually be helping living people, and if the department’s not going to follow up on anything anyway . . .”

“Humph!” His uncle grumbled in Gaelic, words Daniel didn’t understand, and pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. “That’s all a bunch o’ malarkey, and ye know it. Ever since ye’ve been a wee lad ye’ve spoken o’ naught but joining the police force. Yer da saw how important that was to ye. Sure, he wanted ye to have a grand education and all, and yet he found a way for ye to have both, didn’t he? Now here comes this society lass, asking ye to give it all up. Yer da put yer dreams above his own. He always has. I can’t be saying the same for this lass.”

“Let’s not get into that again.” The longer they dwelled on the topic, the more his forehead ached. “You don’t like Pru. I understand that, but she does love me, and I her.

Shouldn’t that count for something?”

“Then she should be wanting what’s best for ye.”

“And what about me wanting what’s best for her? I have to think of her needs as well.”

His uncle gave a half shrug. “Tis why I never wed meself.”

Daniel chuckled, the ache along his scar easing a little. “You never wed because you eat and drink your job, and you couldn’t find a woman who would put up with it . . . or you.”

“True enough, though when I see yerself all grown like ye are, I do regret it from time to time—not having a lad o’ me own.” He sniffed before continuing and gripped Daniel’s arm. “That aside, I just want ye to be happy, lad. Ye know that.”

“I do, Uncle, though if you don’t let me get going, I’ll be sacked regardless.” He picked up his medical bag, the one his uncle had spent a fortune on for his graduation. “I’ll see you for dinner Wednesday night, seven o’clock sharp. You know how Hattie gets if you’re late.”

“Now there’s a woman that might have turned me head once upon a time.”

“She’d have knocked that thick Irish head of yours off its block.” Daniel walked outside with his uncle and looked up at the dilapidated building. “I know Dr. Scholer will do his best, but if we rule it a murder, will the department at least see if any of the other tenants saw anything?”

Timothy scratched the back of his head. “Ah, Danny! I’ll do me best, but the truth o’ it is there’s likely not a soul in there that heard a thing. Aside from the drink, I’m thinking there might be a good deal o’ opium use going on.”

Daniel nodded. “But you will try?”

“O’ course I will.”

Daniel squeezed his uncle’s shoulder and headed back toward his buggy, his uncle’s voice calling after him.

“Ye’ll be letting me know what ye find?”

Daniel waved his hand, a smile crossing his face once more.