***The Ellie Quicke Mysteries***

**Murder a the Altar**

***Chapter One***

Too late, she understood.

She understood why Ferdy had been killed in that place, and at that time of day.

The police had been wrong. She had got it wrong herself.

But she had been right in thinking her every move had been watched. She had been afraid, and she had been right to be afraid.

She wanted to scream! She was only just coming to terms with Frank’s death. Now she, too, had run out of time.

She backed up against the door of the church. It did not yield and let her in as it had yielded for Ferdy.

The murderer took a step forward . . .

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It was two days since the funeral.

Ellie had told everyone she would be perfectly all right on her own, but of course she wasn’t. The pills the doctor had given her weren’t helping, either. She couldn’t sleep at night and felt half asleep all day. She knew she would feel more alive if she stopped taking the pills, but she wasn’t sure she could cope if she did.

She stood at the French windows and stared down the slope of her back garden, across the alley and up to the church. The trees around the church had just started to turn yellow when Frank had been taken to hospital. There had been a sharp frost the night he died and now there were more leaves on the lawn than on the trees.

They ought to be cleared up, or the grass would suffer.

Frank had never been interested in growing things, but it had been the joy of Ellie’s life to transform a privet-bound patch of straggly grass into a pretty garden, massed with flowering shrubs and herbaceous plants. A sundial sat in the middle of a circle of lawn, reminding passers-by that ‘Time Passes, and Man is Left to Account for it’.

Frank had passed on with Time. Ellie was still trying to account for it.

The soft green walls and comfortable furniture of the living room behind her had once seemed a serene refuge from the world outside. Now there was dust on the scattered mounds of sympathy cards lying on the table in the bay window overlooking the road. A couple of half-empty coffee mugs sat abandoned on the sideboard, flowers drooped and died in their vases, and there was a litter of newspapers on the cream-coloured carpet by the settee. You must get moving, Ellie told herself. Start clearing out Frank’s clothes, get out of the house to buy some food, return the overdue library books.

She tried to think positively. There was still plenty of colour in the garden even in November. The door of the garden shed had drifted ajar. She must go and secure it. Her shed was haunted by stray cats and a neighbour’s small boy . . . which reminded her that she hadn’t seen the boy since Frank died.

The sun was trying to come out, turning the stone of the garden seat and urns on the patio to a golden glow. Just before Frank had been taken ill, she had filled the urns with winter-flowering pansies and variegated ivies. They were doing well.

The sun was getting brighter, making the church spire stand out black against the sky. It didn’t often stand out as clearly as that. It meant it was going to rain.

The grandmother clock in the magnolia-painted hall behind her chimed sweet and low. Time to get Frank his mid-morning cuppa. She started. No more mid-morning cuppa for Frank. Why couldn’t she remember that?

A heavy-set woman burst out of the side door of the church, arms flailing. Ellie registered that this was unusual but did not move.

Mrs Dawes ran down the path from the church. Ellie felt a faint stir of interest. She’d never seen the stately Mrs Dawes run before.

Mrs Dawes fought her way through the gate which led from the church grounds into the alley. Crossing the alley, she wrenched open the gate into Ellie’s garden. Mrs Dawes’ face was red, and her padded olive-green coat flapped around her as she pounded her way up the garden and banged on Ellie’s kitchen door.

Ellie went to let her in, moving like a sleepwalker.

At first Mrs Dawes couldn’t speak properly. She tore the flowered scarf from her throat and gesticulated.

She needs help, thought Ellie. She felt something stir inside herself in response to Mrs Dawes’ need. She said, ‘Sit down,’ and ran some water into a glass. ‘Drink this. Don’t try to talk for a minute . . .’

‘Phone!’ Mrs Dawes knocked the glass away, spraying water around. ‘Police! Dead man in church!’

Ellie blinked.

‘Stupid girl! Do it!’

Ellie blinked again. At the age of fifty, she no longer considered herself a girl.

‘Ring the police! You’re the nearest. I think it’s one of the workmen, the heating engineers, you know? They’ve been in and out all week. Thought he was drunk! Tried to pull him up . . . !’

She rocked, podgy fingers over her face.

Mrs Dawes, respectable widow and head of the church flower-arranging team, was not a woman to fall apart unless she had seen something particularly nasty.

Grief and shock over Frank’s death tried to keep their hold on Ellie, but she forced herself to be practical. Mrs Dawes had come to her for help, and help she must have.

Ellie rang the police and administered tea and sympathy to Mrs Dawes. Wait till Frank gets home and I tell him, she thought.

Oh. Why do I still keep thinking of things to tell him?

She persuaded Mrs Dawes into the sitting room. Mrs Dawes took Frank’s chair, the best chair. Of course. She was a woman of ample proportions. Even so, Ellie winced at seeing someone else in Frank’s big armchair.

‘I’ve put two sugars in. Have a biscuit. Good for shock.’

Mrs Dawes’ colour was a little better but her breathing was still uneven and her dark-dyed hair was coming down. She put up shaking hands to deal with it.

‘I didn’t notice him at first. I’d just finished the flower-arranging class in the church hall, so I thought I’d pop into the church to see what needed doing to the flowers since the funeral . . .’

Frank’s funeral.

‘Yes,’ said Ellie in a steady voice. ‘You do the flowers at the church so beautifully. Everyone remarked on it the other day.’

Mrs Dawes found the compliment soothing. She inclined her head and finished her tea. Her hands still shook but she held out her cup for a refill.

‘I took in some chrysanths to replace any which might have gone over. As I went up to the altar I nearly fell over him. You don’t expect to see anyone lying on the floor in front of the altar, do you? Touching it. With both hands. Lying on his face.’

‘Who . . . ?’

‘I didn’t see his face. I thought he was drunk.’ She began to cry.

Ellie fetched some of Frank’s beautiful linen hankies. Frank wouldn’t need the hankies so they might as well be used. Ellie still had to tackle the disposal of his clothes, his shoes, his books, his papers. She wouldn’t think about that for the moment.

Mrs Dawes blew her nose and mopped up as the police rang Ellie’s doorbell.

Mrs Dawes repeated her story to the police, finding it not unpleasant to be the focus of attention for two nice-looking young policemen. She refused to accompany them back to the church. The side door to the church was open, she said. They could go in and see for themselves. She herself was not going back till the body had been removed. Ellie could show them the way, couldn’t you, dear?

Ellie showed the policemen the way down through her garden, across the alley and up to the church. A stir of curiosity surprised her. She had to acknowledge that it would have been interesting to have gone into the church with the police, just to see if what Mrs Dawes had said was true.

The police said she should return to sit with Mrs Dawes. They also refused to admit the central heating engineers who arrived at that moment.

Ellie checked them off: the foreman and both of his helpers. So it wasn’t one of them who lay dead in front of the altar.

She got back to find Mrs Dawes combing her hair in front of the mirror.

‘More tea?’

‘No, but I’ll use your loo, if I may.’ Mrs Dawes’ fingers twitched at the bunch of lilies which Ellie had shoved all anyhow into a vase. It had been kind of people to give her flowers at the funeral, but she’d been too distracted to arrange them properly.

‘You shouldn’t cram lilies into a small vase like this,’ said Mrs Dawes, once more on familiar ground. ‘You should have cut an inch and a half off the stems and—’

‘I know, but . . .’

‘Come to my flower-arranging classes,’ said Mrs Dawes. ‘Thursday mornings, 10.30 prompt in the church hall. Those nice young policemen want me to make a statement. Not that I can tell them much. I pulled on his arm, you know, to try to make him get up.’ She shuddered.

Ellie listened and nodded and made more tea for Mrs Dawes and for the policemen when they eventually returned. A different lot of policemen this time, but still requiring tea and biscuits. Familiar actions, listening, nodding agreement, providing food.

She still felt only half awake, but they didn’t seem to notice.