

THE MALICE OF ANGELS

The mystery of a nurse's wartime disappearance forces Esme Quentin to confront her own painful past in a search for the truth...

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It wasn't until she turned into the narrow medieval passageway of Fish Street that Esme Quentin suspected she was being followed. He – if it was a he, it was difficult to be sure, encased as the walker was in a hooded trench coat – seemed to be keeping his distance. He slowed as she slowed, held back if she paused, as though biding his time before approaching her. Perhaps she should grab the initiative and challenge him? Demand to know who he was and what he thought he was doing creeping up on a middle-aged woman in the dark?

She stopped and deliberately looked round, but he must have pulled back out of the halo of the street lamp as he'd disappeared into the shadows.

She shook her head and carried on down the cobbled street with a greater sense of urgency. Had he been in the records office? There was something vaguely familiar about the way he walked, a loping manner which she felt she should know. Thinking about it, she may have seen him before. He'd been watching from across the road as she'd hurried into the archives that morning. Had he been admiring the architecture of the old half-timbered building? Waiting for someone? Waiting for *her*? So why not come right out and seek her out? Why hover on the perimeter with intent only to follow her at the end of the day? And what did he want? To engage her genealogy research services? Perhaps he was shy or had a dark family secret he needed her help to uncover and was coy about explaining it. She'd been engaged by a couple of eccentric clients in her time but not one who'd used stalking as their modus operandi. At least, not that she'd noticed.

But she had no time to waste speculating. She had more than enough to do getting ready for the morning. She'd already cut it fine by staying so long in the records office – she should have been heading home ages ago. But despite telling herself that she was merely tying up loose ends of this case before tomorrow's deadline, she'd succumbed to her usual habit of being sucked into a story as her research unfolded. Once hooked she always found it so difficult to drag herself away.

Today it should have been just an hour or two adding a little local information to the story of her client's great-aunt, a member of the Queen Alexandra Nursing Corps who'd served in Singapore during the Second World War. The nursing sister had survived a shipwreck due to enemy attack and subsequent massacre of survivors in the water, only to be picked up days later by the Japanese navy and suffer the inhumanity of a prisoner of war camp.

She paused at the corner of the street to glance behind her. All was quiet and she could see no one. Perhaps she'd imagined the whole thing? Perhaps he'd been merely taking the same path as her and had now arrived at his destination. She'd passed a small hotel a moment ago. He was probably staying there.

She let out a long sigh and allowed herself an indulgent giggle at her imagined melodrama, blaming her oversensitivity on an afternoon of reading first-hand accounts of wartime traumas.

The street narrowed into the passageway which exited on to the high street. As Esme plunged into the shadow between the two buildings, someone stepped out in front of her and grabbed her arm.