

PERSONS REPORTED

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Despite every effort of the Fire Brigade, and of Detective Sergeant Judy Kane who had been first on the scene, Helen Douglas had died. But it was not the fire that had killed her, Helen had been murdered.

Helen was the wife of Mike Douglas, an Assistant Divisional Officer at Granchester Fire Station. Judy is married to Granchester’s Station Officer, Ben Kane. The four had become close friends, and so for Judy the police investigation becomes a double nightmare with Ben and Mike heading the list of possible suspects.

CHAPTER ONE

The house was burning, but as yet no one had noticed the first curling wisps of smoke seeping in soft grey tendrils from the upper windows. In the nearby centre of Granchester the early morning rush hour was clogging the main road arteries with vehicles, but here on the Lark Meadow Housing Estate the traffic was slight. Most of the early morning commuters had already left, leaving a semi-ghost town, where the majority of garages and driveways were already empty. The large, four-bed-roomed house at the select end of the estate was set in its own lawns, edged with miniature rose bushes, and with a red Japanese maple catching the sun's rays in all its autumn glory. The tree itself might have been on fire, its natural splendour out-glowing the dull glimmer of red that was slowly brightening behind the drawn curtains.

Birds were singing, a paper-boy whistled in the distance. The first faint cracklings of the fire were no louder.

WDS Judy Kane was humming softly to herself as she drove on to the estate. Life, at this particular moment was pretty good. She was twenty-eight years old, fit and healthy, with short cut blonde hair and a figure that could still turn heads. She had just won her promotion from DC and felt that with luck and hard work she could go even higher. Last night she and Ben had celebrated by curling up on the sofa with a bottle of wine and a batch of travel brochures to plan a winter skiing holiday in Switzerland. Afterwards they had made love, gently and then passionately, without interruptions from either of their bleepers, and this morning she was still dreamily happy.

Today she would again be working with DI Harding, but even that thought could not spoil her lingering feeling of warm satisfaction. A year ago Flash Ron (as she privately thought of him), had been a serious pain, but if he chose to be petulant because he couldn't always work with another hard-case male, then that was his problem and she had tried to ignore it. Eventually, as she had gained in experience and confidence, Harding had become only a minor irritant. In fact, Judy was beginning to suspect that by now they might even be forming a grudging respect for each other.

The radio/telephone on the dashboard of the car broke into her thoughts. The calm message from the police control room informed her that there had been a three-car pile-up at the Barford-Granchester crossroads, but it was not for her. She was C.I.D. Two of the traffic patrol cars responded, and she could picture them speeding on their way. However, the interruption did remind her that she too was in a police car and on her way to the station, and she was running late. She speeded up just a little.

At the next T junction she turned left. The road ahead was long and straight, passing through ranks of neat, modern three and four-bed-roomed detached houses. Most of them suggested modest affluence, with frilled curtains, polished brass door furniture, and well groomed gardens and lawns. All was still quiet and peaceful, except for one thing.

The far end of the road was filled with thick black smoke.

Judy stared. The tune she had been humming to herself was instantly forgotten. Her wandering thoughts also vanished as though an ice-cold wind had swept through her idling brain. Her hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel as her arms and shoulders stiffened with the sudden shock.

"Oh, my god," she gasped softly.

For a second that was her only reaction. Then she saw the bright red of the flames lancing through the windows of the burning house. The smoke billowed writhing and evil in all directions. The second of shock was past and her foot stamped down hard on the accelerator as she raced toward the scene, and with one hand she snatched up the radio/telephone.

"Charlie Delta Five to control." She snapped her call sign briskly. "I'm on Carrington Drive on the Lark Meadow estate. There's a house on fire directly in front of me."

"Your message received, Charlie Delta Five." The voice of the duty control officer remained steady and unruffled, as always. "Can you give us some indication of the extent of the fire?"

"It's what Ben would call, Well Alight." After three years of marriage to Station Officer Ben Kane the Fire Service terminology came as easy to her as police procedures. She finished more precisely: "You'd better tell the Brigade to make pumps two, at least."

She dropped the r/t back on to its cradle as she skidded to a stop, mounting the pavement with a shoulder-wrenching jolt to leave the road clear for the emergency vehicles that would follow. She jumped out of the car, slammed the door behind her, and ran the last few yards. The heat hit her, the almost solid blow of a radiating energy field, and with it the second sense of violent shock as she suddenly recognized the house that was now pouring out flames and smoke clouds from its upper levels.

"Oh my god," She said again. And this time it was a heart-felt cry of personal anguish. "It's Helen's house."

On the neatly trimmed front lawn there was a white board with the words THE LOVE NEST engraved in black. The glass-paneled dark oak front door had polished brass furniture; letter box, ornate door knob, and the numbers twenty seven, now fixed by her horrified gaze, as though branding themselves for ever into her mind. These and the splendid Japanese maple left no room for doubt. She and Ben had been here often, for parties, meals, or just wine and cheese or coffee get-togethers --almost as often as Helen and Mike Douglas had come to them. The four of them had been friends for a long time, moving in the same social circle, inviting each other back and forth to their different functions.

She stared up at the windows in anguish, looking for movement, wondering whether Mike or Helen might be inside. A pane of glass cracked and shattered as she watched, and she was aware now of the roaring hunger of the fire. She stared around wildly, and saw another woman, not Helen, standing further back along the pavement. The woman, probably a neighbour, was also transfixed with horror as she stared at the fire.

Judy ran to the other woman and grabbed roughly at her arm, her fear for her two best friends causing her to shout desperately.

"Mike and Helen - do you know if they're inside? Have you seen anyone go in or out?"

"I don't know." The woman was anguished, biting her lip and almost in tears. "I saw Mrs Douglas last night. I think Mr Douglas has gone away. I haven't seen either of them this morning. I just don't know."

Judy left her and ran to the front door. Flames roared above her and another window shattered, showering shards of broken glass all around her as she wrenched at the brass door knob. The door was locked and too solid to break down and she was forced to back off from the heat and falling debris. The smoke stung her eyes and her cheek bled from a flying sliver of glass, but those hurts were nothing compared to the tumult of emotions choking her up from inside.

She realized that it was hopeless trying to make any entry from the front of the building. But if the full force of the fire was in the front bedrooms then there might be a chance from the back. She looked for the woman she has spoken to a few moments before and saw that there was now a small knot of horrified watchers.

"I'm going to try from the back!" She yelled hoarsely. And, trusting that someone amongst them would inform whoever arrived first to back her up, she ran for the wrought-iron gate at the side of the house.

The gate was open, leading as she knew on to a path that ran beside the house and round to the neat patio with its sunbeds and flower tubs, and the long back garden. She ran clear of the house and patio, trampling a bed of stately blue and pink lupins to get a clear view of the rear bedroom windows. They were intact, and although there was some smoke and she could see flickers of red deep inside, she felt room for hope. It looked as though the seat and full ferocity of the fire might still be confined to the front bedroom. She ran back on to the patio to the back door which led into the kitchen.

One professional corner of her mind was still functioning, and registered that the small pane of the kitchen window was broken close by the door, even though there was as yet no direct heat from the fire. The door was not locked, and with a mixture of relief and apprehension she threw it open and went inside.

The kitchen was neat and spotless, recently re-fitted in polished yellow pine. It was Helen's pride and joy. On Judy's last visit it had been filled with the rich aroma of a casserole, and roasting potatoes, and Helen had been preparing strawberries and cream while Mike uncorked the wine. Now there was only raw smoke that started her coughing and forced her down on to her knees. She remembered what Ben had often told her: smoke and heat would always rise, and if there was any breathable air in this kind of situation it would be down at ground level. The air was cleaner near to the floor and she pulled out a handkerchief to hold as a filter over her mouth and nose.

Crouching, she opened the door into the open plan dining and living room. The smoke was thicker but there was no glow of red, no actual fire. A quick look round showed that the ground floor was empty. She could hear the roaring of the fire above her and the crash of a falling ceiling in the bedroom. She knew with a sinking heart and rising terror that above her was an inferno, and that perhaps, at any moment, the ceiling might come crashing down.

Her heart was hammering and the tears were beginning to stream from her smarting eyes. Part of her wanted to go back and get out, to flee from the terror and the danger, but instead she ran quickly to the far door which she knew led into the entrance hall and stairway. She crouched low again, and from the memory of a past conversation she heard Ben quoting Fire Brigade lore in her mind, in a burning building firemen never initially grip a door handle, he had told her, for there could be damaged electrical wiring trailing down to touch the handle on the other side. In that situation the shocked hand would instinctively close into a fist, locking onto the source of the current and probably causing death by electrocution. Instead firemen always tested with the back of the hand. That way any shock would cause the hand to snap into a fist, but jerk away from the lethal contact.

She had forgotten with the first door she had opened, but now she tried to remember everything about fires that Ben had ever told her as she checked the second handle with the back of her hand, feeling heat, but no electric shock. Carefully then she gripped the handle and partially eased open the door, making sure the door itself protected her from any flashover. There was no nightmare burst of flame above her head, and so she risked a quick glance inside.

The heat hit her face and despite her handkerchief the smoke filled her throat and renewed her coughing. Except for the smoke and heat, and the coats on the hallstand, the hallway was empty. Her gaze shifted up the carpeted staircase and the renewal of fear went through her like a sharp, stomach-slicing knife.

It was an inferno up there. The flames glowed bright and red and hungry at the top of the stairs, and trailing over the edge of the landing on to the top step was one limp white hand, the long, slim fingers outstretched, as though begging mutely for help.

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In Granchester fire station it had been a quiet night and the nine a.m. change-over of the duty watch had just taken place. The men of the night watch were climbing into their cars, shouting their farewell catcalls and departing, while in the appliance bay behind the two parked red-and-silver fire engines the oncoming duty crew lined up on parade. Each man had his fire helmet, fire-fighting jacket and boots, stacked neatly in front of him. Most of them were discussing the boxing match that had been, for them, the highlight of the previous night's TV. Two who were non-sporting exchanged bored yawns.

The burly figure of their Sub-officer appeared, clipboard in one hand, ramming his cap on to his blunt, short-cropped head with the other. Mick Duncan was the oldest sub-officer on the station. He had been passed over several times for promotion and transfer and it was generally accepted that he would go no further. But he was still a good, reliable sub, as well-liked as any by his watch. The crew became quiet and came smartly to attention when called.

Duncan began reading them their daily orders from the notes on his clipboard, beginning with their designated roles and places on the first appliance:

"Duty crew on the first pump: Myself, officer-in-charge; driver and pump operator, Fireman Willis; B A wearers, Fireman White and Leading Fireman Palmer; B A control, fireman -- "

He was cut short by the deafening warble of the alarm bells from the speakers on the wall above the watch room door, and the parade broke up as the line of men in front of him scrambled quickly into their fire-fighting gear. Willis, the designated driver, pulled himself nimbly into the driving seat of the nearest pump and had the engine started in seconds. Duncan shouted the names of the last two men to take the final places on the pump over his shoulder as he ran to rip the fire message from the teleprinter.

He collided with Station Office Ben Kane, the fire station's operational commander, who was moving fast out of the watchroom. Kane was a few inches taller than the sub-officer, but less bulky, so that both of them averaged out at the same weight. Kane had fair hair, blue eyes and an easy grin. They were old friends who had come up through the ranks side-by-side, and they read the printed slip together.

It was the call to the house fire on Carington Drive, with the cryptic, adrenalin-pumping addition -- "Make pumps two. Persons reported trapped."

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Half a mile away Geoff Morrison was carefully painting the gable end bargeboards of a large Victorian house on the Cambridge Road. He had no fear of heights and one of the compensations of his job on a bright, sunny morning like this one was the bird's-eye views he often enjoyed over the town centre. From here he could clearly see the soaring cathedral spire and the more stubby stone and flint towers of the town's three churches. Granchester was an ancient market town, grown rich in the middle ages on wheat and wool. The elegant and stately spire was the expression of land-held wealth and piety, the more solid and dependable looking towers the centres of common prayer, or so it always seemed to Morrison. The view was not exactly Oxford or Cambridge, but against the background of blue sky, drifting white clouds and an undulating patchwork of green, gold and brown fields, Granchester from this height did sometimes have a peaceful, dreaming quality.

Morrison was normally a cheerful man, who could frequently be heard whistling as he worked. A self-employed man he worked alone, was well liked, and was usually busy. Today he painted with slow concentration, and his face wore an abstract frown. He was a man deeply preoccupied with his own thoughts, or with worries on his mind.

His range of vision did not extend to the Lark Meadow Estate, where he might have been alerted by the dark smudge of smoke now staining the sky above Carrington Drive. Instead the peace, and his own stressed thoughts, were broken by the urgent bleeping of the retained fireman's pocket alerter clipped in its neat black leather case to his belt. Morrison hesitated for a moment, as though startled or uncertain. Then he began to scramble quickly down his ladder.

Across Granchester more bleepers were sounding as the rest of the town's retained firemen abandoned whatever work they were doing, running to their conveniently parked cars, roaring the engines violently, and racing to the fire station to turn out the second pump.

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For Judy there was no time for any conscious decision. She ducked her face down to the carpet, filled her lungs with the relatively clean air at ground level, and then, holding her breath, made a desperate dash up the stairs.

As her face came above the level of the landing it was seared and blasted with the heat, terrifying her with the thought that her own hair might burst instantly into flames. She snatched the limp wrist with both hands and heaved with all her strength, pulling back down the staircase and dragging the slack body of Helen Douglas over the edge of the landing.

Helen was wearing only a flimsy nylon nightdress, and its bottom edge was already on fire.

There was another crash as another part of the ceiling collapsed, and the flames roared higher above the landing. Judy was blind, her eyes now screwed shut against the streaming tears. Helen was sliding face down over the top stairs and then her body lodged. Judy heaved the dead weight over on to her back and then got both hands under the other woman's armpits. She was choking now but she dragged Helen with her as she continued down the staircase. Her shoulders hit the hall wall and she moved along it until she found the gap that was the doorway that allowed her back into the living room.

There she collapsed on to her knees, lowering her face to the floor again, and gasping to suck in more air.

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The sound of two-tone horns heralded the arrival of the first fire engine. The small group of on-lookers at the front of the house had now swelled to about a dozen people and they hastily cleared the way. A white, Fire Service car with a blue light flashing led the big red and silver engine by a matter of seconds.

Ben Kane stepped out of the car and went directly to the boot. He spun his peaked cap inside, replaced it with his white station officer's helmet encircled with its single black band of rank. He kicked off his shoes and began pulling his leggings and boots on over his uniform. As the pump drew up behind him he shouted to the watching crowd.

"Is there anyone inside that building?"

The neighbour who had been first at the scene took an uncertain step forward.

"We don't know. A woman from that car ran round the back to find out. The front door is locked."

Ben looked toward the car, noticing it for the first time and recognizing it immediately. Only an hour ago when he had left home the smart blue saloon had been parked on his own driveway. Judy had waved to him from the kitchen window, blowing him a kiss that had brought back all the wonderful memories of the previous night. Now the car was here, but Judy was nowhere to be seen. Ben also recognized the burning house and swore softly under his breath. Mick Duncan was now beside him, shouting orders back at the fire crew as they scrambled out on to the road.

"Mick, get your B.A. team round the back." Ben had already started running and threw the explanation over his shoulder as he disappeared round the corner of the house. "That's Judy's car. I think she may have gone inside."

The Sub-Officer turned to hurry up the two firemen wearing breathing apparatus who were standing ready and they quickly went through the set procedures of starting up their sets, checking their gauges, and fitting their face masks. All three hurried after their Station Officer.

Ben found Judy in the back garden, and felt a huge surge of relief when he saw that she was safe. She had dragged Helen Douglas well clear of the burning building and was kneeling over her and desperately applying mouth to mouth resuscitation. Judy was on the point of collapse, her face white and streaked with smoke and tears.

"I'll take over."

Judy heard him but refused to move aside. For the past few minutes she had been frantically breathing into Helen's cold, slack mouth. She had alternated every two inflations with five firm double-handed downward thrusts of heart massage on Helen's chest, and twice she almost believed she had felt a response. Her own senses were reeling but she worked with the blind belief that just a little more effort would bring Helen back to life. To stop now, even for a few seconds while Ben took her place, might mean that they would lose her.

"Judy, it's okay. I'll take over."

Ben spoke more urgently and almost pushed her out of the way. Judy knew that he was right. He was fresh and fit while she was barely able to breathe for herself, and yet still she felt a mixture of guilt and resentment as she reluctantly gave way. She had been praying for Ben to arrive and help her, but now that he was here she did not want to give up her own despairing efforts. Ben squeezed in between his wife and the crumpled figure in the now dew-soaked nightdress, and Judy crouched, gasping hoarsely, on her hands and knees beside them. Ben cupped his hand under Helen's neck, trusted that Judy had already cleared the airway, and closed his mouth over the chalk white lips. He blew firmly to inflate Helen's lungs.

Mick Duncan appeared with his B.A. team, and a fourth fireman pulling a hose-reel and carrying a breathing apparatus control board. Duncan changed direction when he saw the three figures on the lawn and ran toward them. Ben looked up at him briefly between inflations.

"Mick, get your lads in to make a search. And get the oxygen resuscitator."

Duncan acknowledged and ran back to his crew. The four hurried to the still open kitchen door, where the two B.A. wearers handed over their tallies and disappeared inside, taking the hose-reel with them. Duncan took temporary charge of the control board, filling in the times of entry and the cylinder pressure readings for each man, and sent the fourth man running back to their machine for the resuscitator.

Ben continued with the mouth to mouth resuscitation, although instinctively he knew that it was hopeless. When the resuscitator arrived he fitted the mask over Helen's face and opened the cylinder, turning up the regulator to force the maximum flow of pure oxygen directly into her mouth, but still there was no response.

Judy had controlled her coughing and regained some of her breath. She reached out one hand to feel Helen's wrist but there was no pulse. She pressed hard with her fingertips, seeking the flicker of life that a few minutes ago she had momentarily believed was there, but still there was nothing. Her eyes met Ben's and she shook her head wretchedly.

Only then did she notice the blood on the back of her left hand, the hand that had supported the back of Helen's neck when she had begun the initial attempt at mouth to mouth. She turned her hand over and saw more blood smeared on her palm, but there was no cut on her own hand.

Ben saw what she was doing, and slowly removed his own hand from the back of Helen's neck. He too had a palm covered in blood that was not his own.

And Helen Douglas was very definitely dead.