

IN MEMORY

*Harry Devlin*

*Died suddenly,  
Liverpool,  
Midsummer's Eve*

## CHAPTER ONE

Harry Devlin stared at the announcement of his death.

The sheet of paper came from an envelope bearing his name. No covering note, no explanation. He turned it all around and upside down, feeling like a volunteer confronted by a stage illusion. No clues leapt out, no hint of the author's identity. Nothing but those stark words in between the black borders.

His brow furrowed. Not even 'In *Loving Memory*'.

The sun sneaked behind a cloud, and his swish new office slumped into shadow. A fortnight in, he still didn't feel at home. The room reeked of paint, the comfort cooling dried his throat and the computer's state-of-the-art hum set his teeth on edge. It might be healthier to crowbar a window open and inhale exhaust fumes wafting up from the Strand.

He swallowed a mouthful of black coffee from a mug that insisted *Old Lawyers Never Die – They Just Lose Their Appeal*. On his way back from court, he'd stopped off to down a couple of pints of Cain's after a torrid morning before

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the magistrates, trying to make crime pay. If his head swam, blame strong ale on an empty stomach, not a weird anonymous message.

A hoax, it had to be. He had nothing to fear.

Midsummer's Eve, what was all that about? He glanced at the desk calendar; a gift from a client who owned a funeral parlour. One page for each day of the year, accompanied by a motto in Gothic script above a logo of a setting sun.

*Change your thoughts and you change your world.*

Monday 18 June. Not quite Midsummer.

He'd fed the envelope into the jaw of a tall box marked 'For Shredding and Recycling – Guaranteed Secure, Environmentally Friendly and Confidential'. A child of two could have prised off the lid. He reached down, as if into a lucky dip, and fished out his prize. A cheap, crumpled envelope, bearing his name in bold type. No stamp, no postmark. It hadn't been sent by the solicitors' document exchange. Hand delivery, must be.

The puzzle provoked him. Someone had invaded his life, and he wanted to find out who, and why.

He grabbed the sheet, and raced down the corridor to an airy space with a welcome desk and chairs that squelched when you sat down. Double glazed windows looked out over the Parish Church gardens and city beyond. A slim woman in a uniform of green jacket and skirt was watering bamboos and weeping figs in pots of fired earth. He might have strayed into the Palm House at Sefton Park instead of Crusoe and Devlin's reception area.

The woman swung round to face him, flicking tendrils of dark hair out of her eyes. The leafy logo of Green and Pleasant Plant Care was embroidered on her jacket breast. Her cast of

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features spoke of Chinese origins, but her accent was born-and-bred Scouse.

‘Posh new premises, Harry. How are things?’

‘Good, thanks, Kay.’ Her full name was Ka-Yu Cheung, but she preferred Kay. ‘And you?’

Her cautious smile revealed perfect teeth. She said she was fine, and he thought she was about to ask a question, but a glance at the woman behind the desk seemed to change her mind. The receptionist had frizzed blonde hair, a solarium tan and the pout of a spoilt child. Her nose was stuck in a dog-eared Danielle Steel and she didn’t favour Harry with a glance until he spoke to her.

‘Suzanne, that letter I picked up when I came back from court.’ He nodded towards an alcove where the post trays squatted. ‘Who brought it in?’

The receptionist sighed, a low gust of patience tried beyond endurance, and book-marked the paperback with her nail file. She screwed up her face in a dumb-show of brain-racking before the inevitable admission of defeat.

‘Haven’t a clue.’

‘It wasn’t with the rest of the morning mail. Someone must have delivered it specially.’

‘I’m only just back from my break.’ A mutinous note crept into her voice. ‘People are always coming and going. Juniors with files, folk filling up the water cooler, tradesmen hammering so loud you can’t hear yourself think. I might as well be sat on a traffic island in the middle of Lime Street. This isn’t like the old building, you know.’

Harry glanced outside. The windows in their last office had been encrusted with grime, so that the city outside was tinted sepia, like an Edwardian photograph in a dusty junk shop.

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Now the glitzy hotels and apartment blocks of twenty-first-century Liverpool shimmered like a mirage in the summer light. Cranes swivelled like sentinels, and drills roared as they churned up paving stones. He'd lived here all his life, yet sometimes he lost his bearings amid the roadworks and the fenced-off sites, with their hard-hat signs and blood-red warnings to put safety first.

'No,' he said, 'it's not the same.'

A gawky figure in St Nicholas Gardens caught his eye. Wasn't that Tom Gunter? Tom was Kay's boyfriend. A skinny, dark-haired young man in a black tee shirt and jeans, his gait was energetic but jerky, as though a puppeteer dangled him on twisted strings.

'Are you all right?' Kay asked.

In Kay's eyes, Tom could do no wrong. He might be moody, but he was misunderstood. A year ago, he'd been charged with stabbing a neighbour to death and Kay persuaded him to ask Harry to conduct his defence. Trouble was, Harry suspected that Tom had stabbed the woman in a cocaine-fuelled rage when he tried it on with her and she'd said no. The psychiatric reports blathered on about anger management issues, and when Harry asked if he'd consider pleading to manslaughter, Tom flew into a temper and sacked him on the spot. He hired another lawyer with fewer scruples and more friends in the underworld, and within weeks the main witness for the prosecution withdrew her evidence. The case collapsed and Tom walked free. Even so, he was the sort to bear a grudge. Maybe he'd dropped in that cryptic note about Midsummer's Eve.

'I can see Tom down in the gardens.'

Kay bent to place the watering can on the floor, giving herself a few seconds to decide what to say.

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‘It’s sunny for once, so this morning we walked into town together.’

‘You walked?’

Last time he’d heard, they lived out in Halewood, miles away.

‘We’ve...we’ve moved to an apartment at the Marina.’

The Marina? That wouldn’t come cheap. She sounded embarrassed rather than proud and a flush came to her olive skin. Harry wondered if she knew about the note. He was seized by the urge to confront Tom, and find out if he’d written it. A spur of the moment decision, no time to stop and think. Best catch up with him before he vanished from sight. With a nod to Kay, Harry shimmied between a pair of palms and thumbed the lift button marked with a downward arrow.

‘Harry...’

As the receptionist leant forward, ears pricking up, Kay’s voice trailed away. Maybe she meant to warn him not to do anything rash. But it was too late to break the habit of a lifetime.

Harry liked Kay. She had a blind spot about the man who shared her life, but her naivety was part of her charm. Even if Tom made trouble for him, it wasn’t fair to drag her into it.

‘Can I catch you later?’

‘Yes, you’re busy. I’ll see you soon.’

As the lift doors closed, she turned to a yucca with leaves like scimitars. He leant against the side of the carriage and rubbed his eyes. At one time, he could have downed a liquid lunch and felt none the worse. He contemplated his reflection in the mirror. A baffled face stared back at him.

*Died suddenly?*

\* \* \*

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The burly ex-docker who guarded the entrance foyer was deep in conversation with a wrinkled crony who resembled the late WH Auden. If a masked gunman ran into John Newton House, Harry rated the odds of his being spotted at evens.

With scant hope, he asked, 'Have you seen a feller in a black shirt go up to the fifth floor in the past hour?'

'Search me, mate.' The concierge shook his head in sorrow. He was an amiable man who was glad to help if it didn't cause him inconvenience. 'We get all sorts in and out of here, don't we?'

The crony clicked his false teeth by way of confirmation. An aroma of cod and vinegar clung to him; he was a fish and chip supper in human form.

'You know how it is, Harry. Hard to keep track.'

'Don't you issue everyone with visitor ID?'

'Run out of badges, mate. New office, landlord cutting corners. Bound to be a few glitches.'

Thanks for nothing. Harry headed through the side door and out into a small courtyard. A narrow pathway led in one direction through gardens stretching towards the lantern spire of the parish church, and in the other to the six-lane highway of the Strand. Harry checked the benches that faced the waterfront, and spotted his quarry.

Tom Gunter sat alone, scanning the horizon in a spaced-out way. His eyes were bloodshot and glazed. Harry strode over to the bench, the announcement of his demise squeezed between thumb and forefinger.

'Hey, Tom. Long time, no see.'

Tom Gunter gazed into nothingness, paid him no heed. Harry flourished the sheet under his nose.

'Did you write this?'

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Tom blinked, like a time traveller adjusting to Planet Earth.  
'Uh?'

'Midsummer's Eve,' Harry snapped. 'Sounds familiar?'

Tom bared his teeth. Spots of anger reddened the pale cheeks.

'What...are you talking about?'

He sprang up and snatched the piece of paper from Harry's hand. He gave it a quick glance, then screwed it into a ball.

'Died suddenly? Is that right?'

He wasn't faking ignorance, there was no point. Besides, the message was enigmatic, and Tom didn't do enigmatic.

'If it's nothing to do with you, fine,' Harry said. 'My apologies, I'll see you around.'

A black Swiss army knife appeared in Tom Gunter's palm. It came from nowhere, flourished with a magician's sleight of hand. A small blade glinted in the sun.

'Bastard,' he said.

Harry gritted his teeth. People said he was too impulsive for a lawyer. One of these days, recklessness would be the death of him. But not today. Tom wasn't that stupid.

'Look, I made a mistake.'

'Dead right.'

Harry glanced around. A minute earlier, half a dozen people were strolling around the garden. Now they had disappeared, perhaps into the church to say a little prayer. They'd better put a good word in for him.

Tom Gunter stood up, caressing the blade as if it were a woman's cheek. Harry didn't move. He'd acted for enough criminals to know better than to give an inch. They often made threats they didn't mean to carry out.

'Put the knife away, Tom. No need for any grief.'

Tom's laugh was packed with scorn.

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‘No need for grief? Bit late for that. You have no...’

His words were drowned by a peal of bells from the church tower. Three o’clock, there must be an afternoon service. At the same moment, a siren rang from the building on the other side of the iron railings that enclosed the garden. Within seconds, a swarm of men and women in business suits buzzed out of the canopied front door. A firm of stockbrokers, observing a fire drill.

Tom lunged forward and Harry lost his footing. He clutched at a black litter bin, but couldn’t save himself from falling. The breath smashed out of his lungs as he hit the ground. Tom’s shadow towered over him. Steel-tipped size ten boots loomed an inch from his forehead

This was Liverpool. Anything might happen.

Harry shut his eyes. His body was taut.

‘Lucky for you I have to...’ Tom muttered. ‘Next time...’

The boots clattered into the distance and when Harry looked, Tom was disappearing into Chapel Street. He hauled himself to his feet and limped over to pick up the screwed-up notice with the report of his death. The chattering stockbrokers took no notice; the grubby marks on his Marks and Spencer suit and scuffed shoes didn’t suggest he was a prospective client of high net worth.

He shielded his eyes. The gardens were full of maritime artefacts and memorials to people who died in the war. The church was dwarfed by the shiny towers of a new Liverpool that knew nothing of the past. Curvy glass buildings winked and preened in the sun, as if to say *Do ya think I’m sexy?*

He rubbed his hip. It felt tender, and tomorrow he would have a bruise. Otherwise, no harm done.

Still five days to go before Midsummer’s Eve.