

# ANNE PERRY

## DEATH OF A STRANGER



WILLIAM MONK NOVEL

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ANNE PERRY

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**To David Thompson,  
for his friendship and his profound help**



## Author's Note

All characters are fictional except William Colman, who won the right to be mentioned as a character in the story, but of course his words and actions in this are invented by me. I hope they are acceptable to him.

# Prologue

**M**ONK *STOOD* on the embankment staring at the lights reflected on the misty waters of the Thames as dusk settled over the city. He had solved his latest case to the satisfaction of his client, and twenty guineas were sitting comfortably in his pocket. Behind him, coaches and carriages moved through the spring evening and the sound of laughter punctuated the clip of hooves and jingle of harness.

It was too far from here to Fitzroy Street for Monk to walk home, and a hansom was an unnecessary expense. The omnibus would do very well. There was no hurry because Hester would not be there. This was one of the nights when she worked at the house in Coldbath Square which had been set up with Callandra Daviot's money in order to give medical help to women of the streets who had been injured or become ill, mostly in the course of their trade.

He was proud of the work Hester did, but he missed her company in the evenings. It startled him how deeply, since his marriage, he had been accustomed to sharing his thoughts with her, to her laughter, her ideas, or simply to looking across the room and seeing her there. There was a warmth in the house that was missing when she was gone.

How unlike his old self that was! In the past he would not have shared the core inside him with anyone, nor allowed someone to become important enough to him that her presence could make or mar his life. He was surprised how much he preferred the man he had become.



Thinking of medical help, and Callandra's assistance, turned his mind to the last murder he had dealt with, and to Kristian Beck, whose life had been torn apart by it. Beck had discovered things about himself and his wife which had overturned his beliefs, even the foundations of his own identity. His entire heritage had not been what he had assumed, nor his culture, his faith, or the core of who he was.

Monk understood in a unique way Beck's shock and the numbing confusion that had gripped him. A coaching accident nearly seven years before had robbed Monk of his own memory before that, and forced on him the need to re-create his identity. He had deduced much about himself from unarguable evidence, and while some things were admirable, there were too many that displeased him and lay shadowed across the yet unknown.

Even in his present happiness the vast spaces of ignorance troubled him from time to time. Kristian's shattering discoveries had woken new doubts in Monk, and a painful awareness that he knew almost nothing of his roots or the people and the beliefs that had cradled him.

He was Northumbrian, from a small seaboard town where his sister, Beth, still lived. He had lost touch with her, which was his own fault, partly out of fear of what she would tell him of himself, partly because he simply felt alienated from a past he could no longer recall. He felt no bond with that life or its cares.

Beth could have told him about his parents and probably his grandparents too. But he had not asked.

Should he try now, when it mattered more urgently, to build a bridge back to her so he could learn? Or might he find, like Kristian, that his heritage was nothing like his present self and he was cut off from his own people? He might find, as Kristian had, that their beliefs and their morality cut against the grain of his own.

For Kristian, the past he believed and that had given him identity had been wrenched out of his hands, shown to be a fabrication created out of the will to survive, easy to understand but not to admire, and bitterly hard to own.

If Monk were at last to know himself as most people do automatically—the religious ties, the allegiances, the family loves and hates—might he, too, discover a stranger inside his skin, and one he could not like?

He turned away from the river and walked along the foot-path toward the nearest place where he could cross the street through the traffic and catch the omnibus home.

Perhaps he would write to Beth again, but not yet. He needed to know more. Kristian's experience weighed on him and would not let him rest. But he was also afraid, because the possibilities were too many, and too disturbing, and what he had created was too dear to risk.

**T**HERE WAS A NOISE outside the women's clinic in Coldbath Square. Hester was on night duty. She turned from the stove as the street door opened, the wood still in her hand. Three women stood in the entrance, half supporting each other. Their cheap clothes were torn and splattered with blood, their faces streaked with it, skin yellow in the light from the gas lamp on the wall. One of them, her fair hair coming loose from an untidy knot, held her left hand as if she feared the wrist were broken.

The middle woman was taller, her dark hair loose, and she was gasping, finding it difficult to get her breath. There was blood on the torn front of her satin dress and smeared across her high cheekbones.

The third woman was older, well into her thirties, and there were bruises purpling on her arms, her neck, and her jaw.

"Hey, missus!" she said, urging the others inside, into the warmth of the long room with its scrubbed board floor and whitewashed walls. "Mrs. Monk, yer gotter give us an 'and again. Kitty 'ere's in a right mess. An' me, an' all. An' I think as Lizzie's broke 'er wrist."

Hester put down the wood and came forward, glancing only once behind her to make sure that Margaret was already getting hot water, cloths, bandages, and the herbs to steep, which would make cleaning the wounds easier and less painful. It was the purpose of this place to care for women of the streets who were injured or ill, but who could not pay a

doctor and would be turned away from more respectable charities. It had been the idea of her friend Callandra Daviot, and Callandra had provided the initial funds before events in her personal life had taken her out of London. It was through her also that Hester had met Margaret Ballinger, desperate to escape a respectable but uninteresting proposal of marriage. Her undertaking work like this had alarmed the gentleman in question so much he had at the last moment balked at making the offer, to Margaret's relief and her mother's chagrin.

Now Hester guided the first woman to one of the chairs in the center of the floor beside the table. "Come in, Nell," she urged. "Sit down." She shook her head. "Did Willie beat you again? Surely you could find a better man?" She looked at the bruises on Nell's arms, plainly made by a gripping hand.

"At my age?" Nell said bitterly, easing herself into the chair. "C'mon, Mrs. Monk! Yer mean well, I daresay, but yer feet in't on the ground. Not unless yer offerin' that nice-lookin' ol' man o' yours?" She leered ruefully. "Then I might take yer up one day. 'E's got an air about 'im as 'e could be summat real special. Kind o' mean but fun, if yer know wot I'm sayin'?" She gave a guffaw of laughter which turned into a racking cough, and she bent double over her knees as the paroxysm shook her.

Without being asked, Margaret poured a little whiskey out of a bottle, replaced the cork, and added hot water from the kettle. Wordlessly she held it until Nell had controlled herself sufficiently to take it, the tears still streaming down her face. She struggled for breath, sipped some of the whiskey, gagged, and then took a deeper gulp.

Hester turned to the woman called Kitty and found her staring with wide, horrified eyes, her body tense, muscles so tight her shoulders all but tore the thin fabric of her bodice.

"Mrs. Monk?" she whispered huskily. "Your husband . . ."

"He's not here," Hester assured her. "There's no one here who will hurt you. Where are you injured?"

Kitty did not reply. She was shuddering so violently her teeth chattered.

"Go on, yer silly cow!" Lizzie said impatiently. "She won't

'urt yer, an' she won't tell no one nuffin'. Nell's only goin' on 'cos she fancies 'er ol' man. Proper gent, 'e is. Smart as a whip. Dresses like the tailor owed 'im, not t'other way 'round." She nursed her broken wrist, wincing with pain. "Get on wiv it, then. You may 'ave got all night—I in't."

Kitty looked once at the iron beds, five along each side of the room, the stone sinks at the far end, and the buckets and ewers of water drawn from the well at the corner of the square. Then she faced Hester, making an intense effort to control herself.

"I got in a fight," she said quietly. "It's not that bad. I dare-say I was frightened as much as anything." Her voice was surprising: it was low and a trifle husky, and her diction was clear. At one time she must have had some education. It struck in Hester a note of pity so sharp that for a moment it was all she could think of. She tried not to let it show in her expression. The woman did not want the intrusion of pity. She would be only too aware of her own fall from grace without anyone else's notice of it.

"Those are bad bruises on your neck." Hester looked at them more closely. It appeared as if someone had held her by the throat, and there was a deep graze across the front of her breastbone, as though a hard fingernail had scored it deliberately. "Is that blood yours?" Hester asked, indicating the splatters across the front of Kitty's bodice.

Kitty gave a shuddering sigh. "No. No! I . . . I reckon I caught his nose when I hit him back. It's not mine. I'll be all right. Nell's bleeding. You should see to that. And Lizzie broke her wrist, or somebody did." She spoke generously, but she was still shivering, and Hester was certain she was far from well enough to leave. She would have liked to know what bruises were hidden under her clothes, or what beatings she had endured in the past, but she did not ask questions. It was one of the rules; they had all agreed that no one pressed for personal information or repeated what they overheard or deduced. The whole purpose of the house was simply to offer such medical help as lay within their skill, or that of Mr. Lockhart, who called by every so often and could be reached

easily enough in an emergency. He had failed his medical exams at the very end of his training through a weakness for drink rather than ignorance or inability. He was happy enough to help in return for company, a little kindness, and the feeling that he belonged somewhere.

He liked to talk, to share food he had been given rather than paid for, and when he was short of funds he slept on one of the beds.

Margaret offered Kitty a hot whiskey and water, and Hester turned to look at Nell's deep gash.

"That'll have to be stitched," she advised.

Nell winced. She had experienced Hester's needlework before.

"Otherwise it will take a long time to heal," Hester warned.

Nell pulled a face. "If yer stitchin's still like yer stitched me 'and, they'd throw yer out of a bleedin' sweatshop," she said good-humoredly. "All it wants is buttons on it!" She drew in her breath between her teeth as Hester pulled the cloth away from the wound and it started to bleed again. "Jeez!" Nell said, her face white. "Be careful, can't yer? Yer got 'ands like a damn navvy!"

Hester was accustomed to the mild abuse and knew it was only Nell's way of covering her fear and her pain. This was the fourth time she had been there in the month and a half since the house had been open.

"Yer'd think since yer'd looked arter soldiers in the Crimea wi' Florence Nightingale an' all, yer'd be a bit gentler, wouldn't yer?" Nell went on. "I bet yer snuffed as many o' our boys as the fightin' ever did. 'Oo paid yer then? The Russkies?" She looked at the needle Margaret had threaded with gut for Hester. Her face went gray and she swiveled her head to avoid seeing the point go through her flesh.

"Keep looking at the door," Hester advised. "I'll be as quick as I can."

"That supposed ter make me feel better?" Nell demanded.

"Yer got that bleedin' fat leech comin' in 'ere again."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Jessop!" Nell said with stinging contempt as the street

door closed again and a large, portly man in a frock coat and brocade waistcoat stood just inside, stamping his feet as if to force water off them, although in fact it was a perfectly dry night.

"Good evening, Mrs. Monk," he said unctuously. "Miss Ballinger." His eyes flickered over the other three women, his lips slightly curled. He made no comment, but in his face was his superiority, his comfortable amusement, the ripple of interest in them which he resented, and would have denied hotly. He looked Hester up and down. "You are a very inconvenient woman to find, ma'am. I don't care for having to walk the streets at this time of night in order to meet with you. I can tell you that with total honesty."

Hester made a very careful stitch in Nell's arm. "I hope you tell me everything with total honesty, Mr. Jessop," she said coldly and without looking up at him.

Nell shifted slightly and sniggered, then turned it into a yell as she felt the thread of gut pulling through her flesh.

"For goodness sake be quiet, woman!" Jessop snapped, but his eyes followed the needle with fascination. "Be grateful that you are being assisted. It is more than most decent folk would do for you." He forced his attention away. "Now, Mrs. Monk, I dislike having to discuss my affairs in front of these unfortunates, but I cannot wait around for you to have time to spare." He put his thumbs in the pockets of his red brocade waistcoat.

"As I am sure you are aware, it is quarter to one in the morning and I have a home to go to. We need to reconsider our arrangements." He freed one hand and flicked it at the room in general. "This is not the best use of property, you know. I am doing you a considerable service in allowing you to rent these premises at such a low rate." He rocked very slightly back and forth on the balls of his feet. "As I say, we must reconsider our arrangement."

Hester held the needle motionless and looked at him. "No, Mr. Jessop, we must keep precisely to our arrangement. It was made and witnessed by the lawyers. It stands."

"I have my reputation to consider," he went on, his eyes



moving for a moment to each of the women, then back to Hester.

"A reputation for charity is good for anyone," she returned, beginning very carefully to stitch again. This time Nell made no sound at all.

"Ah, but there's charity . . . and charity." Jessop pursed his lips and resumed the very slight rocking, his thumbs back in his waistcoat pockets. "There's some as are more deserving than others, if you take my meaning?"

"I'm not concerned with deserving, Mr. Jessop," she replied. "I'm concerned with needing. And that woman"—she indicated Lizzie—"has broken bones which have to be set. We cannot pay you any more, nor should we." She tied the last stitch and looked up to meet his eyes. The thought passed through her mind that they resembled boiled sweets, to be specific, those usually known as humbugs. "A reputation for not keeping his word is bad for a man of business," she added. "In fact, any man at all. And it is good, especially in an area like this, to be trusted."

His face hardened until it was no longer even superficially benign. His lips were tight, his cheeks blotchy. "Are you threatening me, Mrs. Monk?" he said quietly. "That would be most unwise, I can assure you. You need friends, too." He mimicked her tone. "Especially in an area like this."

Before Hester could speak, Nell glared up at Jessop. "You watch yer lip, mister. You might knock around tarts like us." She used the word viciously, as he might have said it. "But Mrs. Monk's a lady, an' wot's more, 'er 'usband used ter be a rozzar, an' now 'e does it private, like, fer anyone as wants it. But that don't mean 'e in't got friends in places wot counts." Admiration gleamed in her eyes, and a harsh satisfaction. "An' 'e's as 'ard as they come w'en 'e needs ter be. If 'e took ter yer nasty, yer'd wish as yer'd never bin born! Ask some o' yer thievin' friends if they'd like ter cross William Monk. Garn, I dare yer! Wet yerself at the thought, yer would!"

The dull color washed up Jessop's face, but he did not reply to her. He glared at Hester. "You wait till renewal time, Mrs.

Monk! You'll be looking for something else, and I'll be warning other propertied men just what sort of a tenant you are. As to Mr. Monk . . ." He spat the words this time. "He can speak to all the police he likes! I've got friends, too, and not all of them are so nice!"

"Garn!" Nell said in mock amazement. "An' 'ere was us thinkin' as yer meant 'Er Majesty, an' all!"

Jessop turned, and after giving Hester one more icy stare he opened the door and let the cold air in off the cobbled square, damp in the early-spring night. The dew was slick on the stones, shining under the gaslight twenty yards away, showing the corner of the end house—grimy, eaves dark and dripping, guttering crooked.

He left the door open behind him and walked smartly down Bath Street toward the Farringdon Road.

"Bastard!" Nell said in disgust, then looked down at her arm. "Yer improvin'," she said grudgingly.

"Thank you," Hester acknowledged with a smile.

Nell suddenly grinned back. "Yer all right, you are! If that fat sod gives yer any trouble, like, let us know. Willie might knock me around a bit, wot's out o' place, but 'e'd be good fer beatin' that slimy pig, an' all."

"Thank you," Hester said seriously. "I'll keep it in mind. Would you like more tea?"

"Yeah! An' a drop o' life in it, too." Nell held out the cup.

"Rather less life this time," Hester directed as Margaret, hiding a smile, obeyed.

Hester moved her attention to Lizzie, who was looking increasingly anxious as her turn approached. Setting her broken bone was going to be very painful. Anesthetic had been available for more serious operations for several years. It made all sorts of deep incisions possible, such as those needed to remove stones from the bladder, or a diseased appendix. But for injuries like this, and for people unable or unwilling to go to a hospital, there was still no help but a stiff dose of alcohol and such herbs as dulled the awareness of pain.

Hester talked all the time, about anything and nothing—the weather, local peddlers and what they were selling—in