

The following is a sample chapter from one of the
'David Lemon Murder Mysteries' by Edith Speers

Chapter 1 of 'Murder in the Wrong Place'
Set in Hobart, Tasmania, this is the first book in the series.

MURDER IN THE WRONG PLACE

Chapter 1

I have seen him. I have seen the murdered man. I have seen the murderer, too. Which one of them it is I cannot yet conclude. First I must gather more facts.

No amount of preparation, no amount of calm perspective can control one's whole being in the presence of murder. I had been expecting this murder for two weeks and still it had the same horrific effect of every murder I have encountered.

The nerves freeze. The heart stops for one beat. The scalp goes numb. And nothing, nothing, can stop you from turning to look over right shoulder, then look over left shoulder - no matter how empty the street and how silent the night - before you bend down to make sure that the body is dead. That is what I did. And I made myself breathe. I made myself crouch slowly and look closely. I carefully lifted aside the draped jacket edge so that I could see, and be sure.

Yes, it was a knife sunk to the hilt in his heart. No, this was not just a drunk in the doorway. Yes, that movement of liquid toward the grated drain beside him was not spilled beer - the bottle was upright, but I had to be sure - and it was not urine, nor any other liquid except blood, the man's own blood, which had gushed from his heart and drenched down through his belted baggy trousers and kept gushing so it was still liquid when it dripped into the grooved gutter of the concrete where he sat. He sat just like a drunk in a doorway.

The glass doors were flanked by wood-framed glass panels and only the right hand door had a knob. Through the glass I saw shops and a courtyard. I drew out my handkerchief and draped it on the doorknob. Turned. Turned harder. Pushed. Nothing budged. Good. No one got out this way. I folded my handkerchief back into my breast pocket.

Seven people had walked down Montague Lane while I sat and smoked a cigarette. I knew that one was a murderer. Ealier today I thought I knew which one. But whom would he kill?

John Mortlake was a very nasty fellow and he had good reason for murdering any of those six people. Unfortunately the dead body in the doorway was the murderous drunkard himself. John Mortlake was dead, and those half-dozen souls I had thought of as the possible victims suddenly became the suspects.

I made myself look again at the knife, at the pretty little handle jutting out from Mortlake's chest. Yes, that sculpture was a salamander, or a lizard, anyway. And the lizard was crawling on its belly toward the dead man. The knife had been held correctly, deliberately, and the blade pushed between his ribs and straight into his heart. I knew that knife. It was one of a kind.

I stood up and again glanced around. Montague Lane was like a tunnel, just wide enough for single-lane traffic. It was a dead end. Just past the cafe, a pair of high steel mesh gates were chained and padlocked. The old three-storey buildings rose sheer on each side. Bare lightbulbs hung from a cord draped high up the stone

walls. The windows were barred. Someone had stepped out of the tunnel of the lane, out of my line of sight, and slid a knife into John Mortlake. Only three doorways were recessed, and the third of them led into the cafe.

The first doorway was ideal. Like a cave, with a low arch cut deep into the massive stone and a door of solid timber, its shadows were perfect for the most private act: murder. It was the right place for murder. But the dead man was not there. He was sitting in the more shallow, the more open, the better-lit recess of the second archway, the archway just a few steps from the cafe, the archway not with solid timber doors to complete the sense of privacy, but with plate glass panels and glass doors. Anyone walking to or from the cafe, anyone within the court yard, could have seen the murder.

There was no doubt about it. By all the unwritten but well-understood rules of the most private act, John Mortlake had been murdered in the wrong place.

Seven people walked down this lane in the space of ten minutes while I watched from a park bench. All of them were going toward the light at the end of the tunnel, the light spilling from an open cafe and from the small spot light aimed at the sign hung from a metal rod above its arched stone entrance. The murdered man got two-thirds of the way. The six possible murderers got all the way. They were in the cafe now, doing what John Mortlake would never be doing again - ordering coffee or food or a carafe of wine.

John Mortlake was sitting out here beside me. He looked just like a drunk in a doorway, with an unfinished bottle of beer upright near his foot, almost within grasp of his slack right hand. His back was against the stone of the archway, his head dropped forward, his knees up. His knees up, just like a drunk who had nodded off to sleep. But his blood was dark glue in the gutter.

Like many others before him, he was in my life because he had been murdered. But this time I was not going to run. No casual mugger had used that salamander knife. Murder was done, and the killer was one of the six people who walked down this lane a few minutes ago, one of the six people who had been feuding today with John Mortlake. I knew all of them. If I wanted to find the killer, I was going to have to know them better, much better. This was a new direction in my life. I do not like people and I do not like to get any closer to them than courtesy requires. Most certainly, given my history, I was not going to call the police.

But I did take the first steps in this new direction in my life. Those steps took me across the end of Montague Lane and into the cafe.