

Bryant & May and the Burning Man: A Peculiar Crimes Unit Mystery

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No case is too curious for Arthur Bryant and John May, London's most ingenious detectives. But with their beloved city engulfed in turmoil, they'll have to work fast to hold a sinister killer's feet to the fire.

In the week before Guy Fawkes Night, London's peaceful streets break out in sudden unrest. Enraged by a scandal involving a corrupt financier accused of insider trading, demonstrators are rioting outside the Findersbury Private Bank, chanting, marching, and growing violent. But when someone hurls a Molotov cocktail at the bank's front door, killing a homeless man on its steps, Bryant, May, and the rest of the Peculiar Crimes Unit is called in. Is this an act of protest gone terribly wrong? Or a devious, premeditated murder?

Their investigation heats up when a second victim is reported dead in similar fiery circumstances. May discovers the latest victim has ties to the troubled bank, and Bryant refuses to believe this is mere coincidence. As the riots grow more intense and the body count climbs, Bryant and May hunt for a killer who's adopting incendiary methods of execution, on a snaking trail of clues with roots in London's history of rebellion, anarchy, and harsh justice. Now, they'll have to throw themselves in the line of fire before the entire investigation goes up in smoke.

Suspenseful, smart, and wickedly funny, Bryant & May and the Burning Man is a brilliantly crafted mystery from the beloved Christopher Fowler.

Praise for Bryant & May and the Burning Man

"Fabulously unorthodox . . . [Fowler] takes delight in stuffing his books with esoteric facts; together with a cast of splendidly eccentric characters [and] corkscrew plots, wit, verve and some apposite social commentary, they make for unbeatable fun."-The Guardian

"Winningly eccentric . . . The books are set in a skillful synthesis of a phantasmagorical earlier era and the modern age."-Financial Times

"The most delightfully, wickedly entertaining duo in crime fiction . . . Fowler's tale is a rich mix of laugh-out-loud lines, acerbic wit, obscure British history and a wonderfully puzzling story. Grade: A"-The Plain Dealer

"Fowler is even better than usual at getting readers to care about his squad of misfits."-Publishers Weekly

"Not even Arthur Bryant's alarming behavior can dampen the twelfth installment in the most joyously inventive mystery series of our time."-Kirkus Reviews

"Fascinating and intriguing . . . This book is definitely a standalone novel that keeps the reader absorbed in the story, and will make everyone want to go back and read them all. . . . This is a very solid story and a great addition to Fowler's long-running series. The mystery is fascinating and readers will definitely want to know what happens next. And for newcomers to the series, this will be an excellent place to start."-Suspense Magazine

"Fans of the Bryant and May series will welcome this latest installment with plenty of obscure historical details mixed with outré crimes and the banter of the PCU members. Newcomers will find plenty to enjoy as well without finding the amount of details included from earlier outings overwhelming."-Library Journal

"Witty with a dry sense of humor . . . finely plotted . . . complex and funny."-RT Book Reviews

"A fascinating investigation with lots of false leads and a plethora of historical factoids."-Mystery Scene

Christopher Fowler is the acclaimed author of the award-winning Full Dark House and ten other Peculiar Crimes Unit mysteries: The Water Room, Seventy-Seven Clocks, Ten Second Staircase, White Corridor, The Victoria Vanishes, Bryant & May on the Loose, Bryant & May off the Rails, The Memory of Blood, The Invisible Code, and Bryant & May and the Bleeding Heart. In 2015, Fowler won the coveted Crime Writers' Association Dagger in the Library Award in recognition for his body of work. He lives in London, where he is at work on his next Peculiar Crimes Unit novel, Bryant & May: Strange Tide.

1.

Riot!

London. The protracted summer lately over, and the bankers sitting in Threadneedle Street, returned from their villas in Provence and Tuscany. Relentless October weather. As much water in the streets as if the tide had newly swelled from the Thames, and it would not be wonderful to find a whale beached beneath Holborn viaduct, the traffic parting around it like an ocean current. Umbrellas up in the soft grey drizzle, and insurrection in the air.

Riots everywhere. Riots outside the Bank of England and around St Paul's Cathedral. Protestors swelling on Cheapside and Poultry and Lombard Street. Marchers roaring on Cornhill and Eastcheap and Fenchurch Street. Barricades on Cannon Street and across the London Bridge. Police armoured and battened down in black and yellow like phalanxes of tensed wasps. Chants and megaphones and the drone of choppers overhead.

Hurled fire, catapulted bricks, shattering glass and the blast of water hoses. It was as if, after a drowsy, sluggish summer, the streets had undergone spontaneous combustion.

It had taken just one match to ignite this inferno, going by the name of Mr Dexter Cornell. A gentleman first fattened by fine living, then driven to flesh and bone by fear and failure. A partner in the Findersbury Private Bank of Crutched Friars until he bankrupted it. A banker, then, that bogeyman of the early twenty-first century, a Thug of Threadneedle Street, purportedly the very worst of his kind, for he arrogantly gambled with other people's money and lost. And because his board of elderly directors got wind of his dealings they were able to protect themselves, and so Mr Cornell was parting company with the bank to the grudging approval of both sides, taking away a tidy fortune of several millions and leaving behind the acrid stink of insider trading.

At which point the public, in one of its periodic fits of outrage, discovered his misdeeds and turned against him, and the City of London erupted. Fingers were pointed in the press, questions were asked in the House, but nothing at all was done, and so the populace abandoned its frog-chorus of complaint and got up off its collective arse to make its feelings known by burning down a few buildings and looting some computer showrooms.

As the banners were hoisted the police arrived, barriers were erected and the containment began. The incandescent crowds spilled into the roads like champagne from an uncorked bottle, and the TV pundits immediately started their newsroom analyses. And once more, as had happened so many times in the past, the City of London found itself on fire.

He had been walking in the drizzle all evening.

After slipping off the kerb crossing Farringdon Road, it became obvious that he would not be able to walk much further. By the time he arrived at the hostel behind Clerkenwell Green he was hobbling badly, and his ankle was turning black.

Earlier in the week, a homeless guy he'd spoken to a couple of times before had told him that he might find a short-notice bed here, but as the girl behind the scratched Plexiglas counter shield searched her monitor, he knew he would have no luck. She looked harassed and empathetic, as if she was the one who might end up in a shop doorway tonight, not him. She was wearing a pink plastic Hello Kitty brooch on her sweater.

"You've left it a bit too late, love," she said, still searching her spreadsheet. The colour was turned up too high on the monitor, bathing her features in an odd shade of mauve, but as she studied the columns, trying to juggle the spaces in her head, he could tell she was genuinely anxious to help him. "We always fill up earlier right after the weekend. There - aren't so many shops open on Sundays so people are forced outside more, and they tend to get worn out just wandering around. The last bed went a few minutes ago."

"Are you sure you've got nothing?" he asked. "I was told you usually find extra spaces."

"Was it the one I saw you talking to outside the other night?"

"Yeah. I don't know his name."

"Well, he's a bit weird. I've seen him hanging around here, looking for someone to talk to. You shouldn't trust him. There's a lot of troubled lads like him about. We used to keep two or three beds spare for busy nights, but Health & Safety stopped us. I'm really sorry."

"Is there anyplace else around here?"

She sat back from the screen and checked her printed lists. "Normally I'd say the Barbican or St George's up by Aldgate, but I know they're full tonight because I had to call them earlier." She was new to the job, he could tell. For a moment he actually thought she was about to get upset. He knew he didn't fit the usual profile. "Sorry, what are you going to do?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I'll find somewhere to shelter tonight and come back tomorrow."

"Please do." She pulled out a drawer and slipped a card under the Plexiglas. "Ask for me, Karin Scott. I'm part-time but I'll be on tomorrow night. Okay?"

"Thanks, Karin.' He didn't volunteer his name.

"Tell you what, if you write down your details I'll try to make sure you get a place tomorrow.' She pushed another card and a Biro under the window.

"I don't like to give out my details.'

"Then how can I save you a bed, love?'

Reluctantly, he scrawled on the back of the card and returned it.

"Is that all?' she said. "'F. Weeks"?''

"Well, I'm not exactly in a position to pick up my emails,' he replied with a touch of bitterness.

"Sorry,' she said again. Judging by the rate at which she kept apologising, he felt sure she wouldn't last long at the front desk. The first crazy street-lifer who hammered on the counter shield would probably finish her off. "Is that F for Frank?'

"No,' he said. "Freddie-Freddie Weeks.' He limped away before she could detain him any longer. Karin was still in that early stage of her job when she thought she could befriend the homeless people she liked and maybe find some way around the rules to help them, but he knew that she would have to raise a barrier against him sooner or later. Getting involved would mean breaking council rules and losing her job.

The streets were wet and deserted. Tomorrow was Halloween, but it would be happening somewhere else, out in the suburbs, where mothers and fathers were preparing to shepherd their children around the neighbourhood in fancy dress, in imitation of the American custom of trick or treat. It seemed unlikely to take place anywhere around here; there were no children. Clerkenwell was the habitat of the single executive, and no lights showed in the minimalist apartments that had been newly carved from warehouses and factories. There was no-one to whom he could turn, and nowhere he could go.

He was tired of walking around the city, tired of being forced to take a few pence wherever he could in order to survive another night. Passing another restaurant window where slender girls sat sipping white wine beneath coppery lampshades, he could no longer remember his old way of life. What was it like to go out for a drink and not check your change all the time? Friends vanished like dogs before thunderstorms the moment things went wrong and you stopped being flush.

Below and to the East lay the City's financial district. The dense cloud base was the colour of bad milk, but something flickered gold closer to the rooftops. Drawn to the brightness, he limped in its direction.

It took him half an hour to reach the source of the light, and what he saw made him forget the pain.

Open fires were glowing and crackling in the middle of the road. A damaged yellow KEEP LEFT bollard drooped like a collapsed cake over a traffic island. The front of a Pret A Manger was boarded up, its walls blackened with soot. In the distance he glimpsed protestors in white plastic masks running and yelling between the buildings, then vanishing within the turbulent movement of the shadows. It was as if the threat of a truly anarchic Halloween had finally been realised. Everyone was on the move. Only the lemon-coloured Hi-Viz jackets of the police remained immobile, evenly spaced across the road, a human ring of steel.

Like an avatar in a videogame he was forced from one route to another by the warning signs, the metal barriers, the plastic cordons. He knew that after two weeks on the street, homeless people developed a frayed grey look that repelled the public and attracted police attention, but there was one more thing he had to do.

The filigreed canopies of Leadenhall Market were sectioned off by yellow police tape as if marked for demolition, so he cut down to Fenchurch Street, making his way east until he reached the slender avenue called Crutched Friars. Just ahead, beyond the low-slung railway bridge, was the entrance to the bank. Its wide grey marble doorway, stepped and recessed, was carpeted with flattened cardboard cartons. Pulling a black nylon pod from his backpack, he unfolded a thin sleeping bag and prepared to bed down for the night under London's warrior skies.

2.

Cocktail

B

efore the day dawned, the air around the Royal Exchange and the Bank of England still held the acrid tang of burnt varnish, rubber and charcoal, just as it had after the Blitz and the City of London IRA bomb of 1993.

The protestors had been dispersed for now, but the steel police barriers remained in place. The various groups eyed each other from a wary distance. One subset known as Make Capitalism History had attempted to pitch camp in Cannon Street, while members of the official Occupy movement were still amicably negotiating with City of London officers, standing around with cardboard cups of coffee like technicians on a film set. A newer, brasher protest outfit calling itself Break the Banks was attracting a younger membership, thanks to its tactic of planning flash-mob demos via social network sites. A smaller, more violent splinter group, Disobey, hung back in the shadows of the buildings. They had been denied official recognition and were now arguing among themselves about the best way to be effective. Unfortunately, they couldn't agree on who was allowed to speak.

The police had adopted a bait-and-switch approach in their determination to keep all of the demonstrators from returning at the same time, but just after first light the main groups started to drift back into the same areas they had filled the night before. To make matters worse, it was now officially Mischief Night, a time when it was understood-at least

by civilians—that wild spirits would be tolerated and even encouraged. But there was a danger that mere mischief would turn to something nastier and less treatable.

Before the rush hour had even started a crowd of several hundred people had formed, and would not be dispersed. Some carried placards bearing photographs of Dexter Cornell, the banker upon whom their hatred had found a focus. The chanting began, and as special interest groups from around Europe (plus a branch from Canada and another from Venezuela) were disgorged from Bank and Monument tube stations to descend upon the Square Mile, the City of London police wearily realised that they were likely to have another grinding day of disobedience on their hands. Every move they made would be recorded, analysed and denigrated by a hostile press, most of whom could see which way the wind was blowing and were taking the side of the aggrieved public. The police hoped the protests had reached their peripeteia, but the demonstrators expected the same thing from an opposite viewpoint, and had the city's turbulent history on their side. Tonight, they felt sure, the time was right for the forces of anarchy to overwhelm those of law and order.

It was, everyone agreed, a right bloody mess.

Crutched Friars is a short, narrow road capped by a dark railway bridge at one end. It houses a couple of pubs, a coffee shop and a handful of financial institutions, one of which is the Fin dersbury Private Bank. The bank had been closed over the weekend, so the protestors had not assembled outside it, but as it prepared to open its doors for its final week the mob instinctively made its way over there, on the hunt for Dexter Cornell and his cowardly coconspirators.

One of the protestors was a fake. He had adopted the name of Flannery, and as he prepared to make his move, he knew that he would have to time it just right.

There were no suspended black eyes that he could see, although there had to be some CCTV globes tucked around somewhere, so he stayed in the shadows beneath the railway bridge on Crutched Friars, smoking nervously until it was time to act. The sky was so grey with cloud that it seemed unlikely ever to get light. Thick black smoke unfurled like funeral ribbons above the roof of the nearest building, and he could hear angry shouting in the distance. Moving anxiously from one foot to the other, he waited for the right moment.

Here came the protestors, pouring into the far end of the street. The police were nowhere to be seen. He darted forward, unzipping his tool bag as he ran. He stayed in the gloom that bordered the edge of the buildings until he reached the entrance of the bank, then lit the bottle and threw it.

The glass smashed, but at first he thought the cocktail had failed to ignite. Reaching the protection of the railway arch once more, he looked back and saw a harsh saffron light pulsing out from the doorway. It grew brighter by the second, and covered the entire entrance by the time the first protestors arrived.

Riot police were pouring in from the Armed Response Vehicles parked in Seething Lane, so he dropped back beneath the railway arch and made his way down to the river, loping through the shadows. The first part of his plan was now complete. It was time to start making arrangements for tomorrow, and the day after. By the end of the week, he felt sure, the whole of the City would be engulfed in flames.

3.

Pyrophobia

The match sizzled, flared and settled to a soft yellow flame.

It was touched to the branches that had been hacked from the surrounding ash trees, and soon the inferno roared and leapt upwards, orange sparks pulsing into the starry black sky. Behind the spitting, crackling forest a man was caged within its wooded heart. He grew increasingly agitated as he failed to find an exit and was seared by the heat. His cries were lost in the growing thunder of consumed branches. As his clothes burned away, his skin blistered in the conflagration until he...

Other Books

Bryant & May - England's Finest, 'Winningly eccentric . . . London, in all its non-homogenous, sprawling splendour, is as much a character as Fowler's sleuthing duo' Barry Forshaw, Financial Times The Peculiar Crimes Unit has solved many extraordinary cases over the

years, but some were hushed up and hidden away. Until now. Arthur Bryant remembers these lost cases as if they were yesterday. Unfortunately, he doesn't remember yesterday, so the newly revealed facts could come as a surprise to everyone, including his exasperated partner John May. Here, then, is the truth about the Covent Garden opera diva and the seventh reindeer, the body that falls from the Tate Gallery, the ordinary London street corner where strange accidents keep occurring, the consul's son discovered buried in the unit's basement, the corpse pulled from a swamp of Chinese dinners, a Halloween crime in the Post Office Tower, and the impossible death that's the fault of a forgotten London legend. All of the unit's oddest characters are here, plus the detectives' long-suffering sergeant Janice Longbright gets to reveal her own forgotten mystery. These twelve crimes must be solved without the help of modern technology, mainly because nobody knows how to use it. Expect misunderstood clues, lost evidence, arguments about Dickens, churches, pubs and disorderly conduct from the investigative officers they laughingly call 'England's Finest!' What readers are saying: *****

'Another gem from Christopher Fowler' ***** 'I've loved Bryant & May since I first discovered them' ***** 'A perfect collection of implausibly, improbably impossible mysteries for readers of Bryant and May both old and new'

..... Expect misunderstood clues, lost evidence, arguments about Dickens, churches, pubs and disorderly conduct from the investigative officers they laughingly call 'England's Finest!' What readers are saying: ***** ..."