

# Horror on the bridge



Mum

**My mum had gone missing and I was worried sick. Then my sister called with devastating news.**

*By Jeanette Hall, 41*



Alan Foster



Where it happened



Police at the flat



Noreen and me

I arrived home after a long day at work and found my mum Pauline and daughter Erin cuddled up on the sofa reading together.

'Have you had a good afternoon with Granny?' I asked Erin.

'Yes, we went for a walk and read stories,' she replied.

It was a great help to me that Mum could pick Erin up from nursery a few times a week, and Erin loved her afternoons with Granny.

Being around Erin and my older son Owen was good for Mum too. For years she'd struggled with a drinking problem.

The seeds of her struggles were sowed when I was about six and my baby brother, Richard, died hours after being born prematurely.

Mum was overwhelmed with grief. But back then there was no support for bereaved parents. Mum was given antidepressants and expected to pull herself together.

But her heart was broken and she never got over it. She used drink to numb the pain.

My brothers and sisters and I never knew what mood she'd be in when she came home the worse for wear.

As the second eldest I did my best to protect the younger kids, but it was hard to see our once happy family life falling apart.

We'd beg her to stop drinking and to get help. Sometimes she'd become angry and defensive, other times she'd crumble and promise to stop.

She often went weeks or even months without touching a drop, and she'd be back to her normal self.

Then something would happen

and she'd hit the bottle again.

Helping out with her grandchildren, who she adored, seemed to give her a focus.

But over the next months, things got on top of Mum again and this time her drinking really spiralled out of control.

I knew she'd never drink around the kids, but her behaviour was becoming erratic.

She'd say she would come over but then wouldn't turn up, or she'd call me when she was drunk and we'd end up rowing on the phone.

Having grown up with this uncertainty, I refused to put my own children through it.

So I made a difficult decision.

I called Dad and said: 'Can you tell Mum I've made other arrangements for Erin.'

He understood and said he'd pass it on.

Later, Mum called me herself. She was furious, but I stuck to my guns.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Our door is always open, but I don't want you around the kids until you straighten yourself out.'

She hung up and I cried.

'Maybe seeing what she has to lose will be a wake-up call,' my husband said.

'I hope so,' I replied.

But over the next years her addiction got worse. She split from Dad and soon after my sister told me Mum had moved to Antrim, 12 miles from where we lived.

There she met a man called David Foster and moved in with him. None

of us knew much about him, but we'd heard he liked a drink too.

Occasionally Mum would call me. I was happy to talk when she was sober. But more often than not she wasn't and we'd end up arguing.

I loved Mum and I desperately wanted to help her, but she had to want to help herself first.

One day she called out of the blue.

'I've got a hospital appointment,' she said. 'Can you take me?'

I felt instantly angry. I'd been having some health problems of my own and, facing surgery, I could've done with Mum's support.

'You're so selfish,' I told her. 'Why should I help you when you're never there for me?'

Then I slammed the phone down. A few weeks later my sister Noreen called.

'Mum's missing,' she said. 'The

police are looking for her.'

'Try not to worry,' I told her. 'She's probably gone to see a friend. She'll turn up.'

But that night I hardly slept and the next morning there was still no sign of her.

Later that day Noreen called again. She was sobbing hysterically.

'Mum's dead. Police have found a body in the river,' she said.

'Are you sure it's her?' I asked.

'It has to be,' she replied.

As soon as we'd spoken, I clicked on to the local news website.

My heart hammered in my chest as the breaking news flashed up that a body had pulled from Lough Neagh, a freshwater lake near Mum's home.

'Please don't let it be Mum,' I said.

But even as those words came out

of my mouth, I knew in my heart she was gone.

Later, at Dad's, the police came to speak to us.

'We believe it is Pauline, but we need someone to identify the body,' one of the officers explained.

'I'll do it,' I said.

On the drive to the mortuary my stomach churned. I felt suddenly very alone when they showed me Mum's body.

Fighting back tears I said: 'It's definitely her.'

Mum looked so tiny and fragile, like a little bird. Her hair was matted with leaves from the water.

That last disastrous phone call between us flashed through my mind and I felt a wave of guilt and sadness.

How could it have ended like this?

But there was worse to come as

the police explained they'd now launched a murder investigation.

This was no accident. Mum hadn't fallen in. We knew she'd never have jumped in of her own free will because she was scared of water. Someone had forced her in and left her to struggle and drown.

I shuddered when I thought about how terrified she must have been.

The police told us they'd arrested David Foster's son, Alan, a former soldier who'd been living with them.

They couldn't tell us any more, but in time he was charged with Mum's murder.

It meant there'd be a trial. But first, a few months after Mum's funeral, her partner David Foster, 60, admitted assaulting her days before she was killed.

Antrim Magistrates' Court heard

he'd shoved and slapped her as they left a town centre bar. Although his attack on Mum had been caught on CCTV he had no recollection of it because he'd been intoxicated following a five-day drinking binge.

Foster was given a two-month jail sentence, suspended for two years.

It was upsetting for all of us to think about how Mum had suffered at his and his son's hands.

Soon after, Alan Foster, 38, of Hillside, Antrim, admitted murdering Mum.

In time, I left my home in Ballyclare, County Antrim, and went to the Crown Court in Belfast to see him sentenced.

The court heard Foster was angry because Mum had called police to remove him from the flat where he was partying with two women.

He picked her up, put her over his shoulder and told his friends he was going to throw her over a bridge.

Then he carried her out of the flat. She was dressed in her pink and white fleecy pyjamas, and after beating her around the face and body, Foster hurled her off a 40ft-high bridge into the river below. There he left her to drown and be washed away.

Foster then lied about where Mum was, telling people she'd gone back to Ballyclare.

The court was told Foster was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after serving with the Royal Irish Regiment in Bosnia, Iraq

and Northern Ireland.

This was taken into account when the judge sentenced him to life to serve at least nine years behind bars before being considered for parole.

I wept with anger and frustration when I heard that. We had been given a life sentence because we'd never get to see Mum again and our kids would grow up without their granny. But that brute could be a free man in under a decade.

Where was the justice in that?

Almost a year has passed now since he was jailed and it still makes me angry.

Mum was a lost soul because of her drinking. But despite her demons she was also kind, generous and loving.

It makes me unbearably sad to think what she went through living with Alan and David Foster, and I'm haunted by the thought of how scared she must have been during those final moments.

But I hope in time we'll be able to focus on the happy memories we have of her.



Me now