



*The Michaelmas Murders*

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## CHAPTER ONE

Bonny Grubb and Fluff Wither-Fork stared down at the dead cat. ‘I ain’t seen ’im round ’ere before,’ said Bonny, giving the body an exploratory nudge with her garden boot. ‘E’s not done much for me onion patch, either, Miss. ’E weren’t there yesterdee, when I done some weedin’.’

‘Well, the fact is he’s here now, Bonny, and judging by the look of him, he’s clearly been murdered.’

‘On account of ’im ’avin’ is ’ead bashed in, Miss?’

‘Yes, Bonny – and I would think that the rock lying next to him had a great deal to do with it.’

The sarcasm in Fluff Wither-Fork’s reply passed Bonny by in her keenness to assess the damage to

her onions. Some lay half out of the soil, others were trampled beyond recognition, and all were tainted by the blood of the corpse that lay stretched out in the contorted throws of his final moments. The early-morning sun shone on the body, giving life to his jacket as steam rose from the damp clothing.

‘E ’as the look of a compost ’eap, all steamin’ like that,’ observed Bonny, breaking the silence.

Fluff, who usually enjoyed her Gypsy tenant’s views on life, shook off the prospect of any further conversation by heading back up the allotment. When she reached the gate, she turned back to bark out an order. ‘Cover him up with some sacking and tell no one of this. Leave everything just as it is, Bonny. I’m calling in the professionals.’ In no mood to wait for a reply, Fluff Wither-Fork snapped the gate shut behind her and strode off in the direction of Wither-Fork Hall.

Bonny Grubb stared after her, bereft at the realisation that her onions would not be winning any rosettes at the Michaelmas Flower and Produce Show this year. She returned to her caravan and hauled an old sack out from under the wheels; dragging it back up the allotment, she threw it over her unwanted visitor, then returned to her caravan to fry sausages on her stove and await the professionals that her landlady had promised.

## CHAPTER TWO

The No. 2 Feline Detective Agency had been closed for two whole weeks, as Hettie Bagshot and her friend and chief assistant, Tilly Jenkins, were treating themselves to a late summer holiday. The agency, which they ran from the back of Betty and Beryl Butter's pie and pastry shop on the town's high street, had clocked up enough assignments across the spring and summer months to make the holiday affordable.

The two tabbies had spent a week on their friend Poppa's narrowboat, exploring the cuisine on offer at every riverside hostelry that the waterways could offer, and transferring at the end of their first week to a holiday camp by the sea, where Hettie had developed

sunburnt ears and Tilly had won first prize in the clock golf competition. The two friends had enjoyed every minute of their time away, adding pounds to their tabby waistlines as their pockets grew emptier – but now, the holiday was well and truly over, and their much depleted coffers meant that they would have to get back to work as soon as possible.

The rent on their office, which doubled as a small but comfortable home, was due any minute, and although the Butters charged very little and threw in coal and luncheon vouchers to be exchanged in their bakery, Hettie and Tilly knew that the debt would have to be paid on time. Hettie sat on her fireside chair, still in her dressing gown, cleaning the remains of a cheese triangle from her whiskers as Tilly hauled their office phone out of the staff sideboard. ‘We should have a listen to the answerphone,’ she said. ‘I hope I connected it up properly before we left.’

‘Well, you certainly wasted enough money phoning it up every day. All that palaver we had over trying to find a telephone box that worked.’

‘I just wanted to make sure that everything was all right at home,’ said Tilly, engaging a logic which – as usual – made no sense to anyone but her.

Hettie was tempted to explore the concept further, but no sooner had she opened her mouth to speak than the answerphone sprang into life. The first message was a little distant, but Tilly’s voice was unmistakable: ‘Hello,

Tilly here. We're having a lovely time on Poppa's boat and we're cooking sprats for lunch in the galley – that's what Poppa calls his kitchen, although it's not a proper kitchen, it's really one gas ring plugged into a big gas bottle. We're having our tea at the Shove and Halfpenny later if Hettie can manage the lock gates. Poppa says she's a—' At this point the answering machine appeared to cut Tilly off with a bleep and moved on to the next message. 'Hello, Tilly here. Forgot to say, Poppa caught a very large fish today. He's having it stuffed as he says it's the biggest fish he's ever caught. Hettie wanted to eat it, but Poppa says a big one like that doesn't come along every day and he's putting it on display in his salon – that's what he calls his sitting room on the boat, although it's not really a sitting r—' Once again the answering machine beeped, bringing Tilly's appraisal of Poppa's living quarters to an abrupt end.

Tilly had settled down on her blanket by the fire, enthralled by her audio postcards. More than a little irritated by Tilly's new-found friendship with the machine, Hettie attempted to bring matters to a head by reaching for the pause button before Tilly could continue with her travel log. 'How many messages did you leave on that thing?' she asked. 'It's supposed to be for prospective clients.'

Upset by Hettie's lack of enthusiasm, Tilly pressed the fast-forward button, promising herself a catch-up with her own messages later. 'It says we have twenty-nine

messages, but I'm certain that I only left 28 – two for each day of our holiday. So there's one spare.'

Hettie resisted the temptation to put the answerphone and Tilly back in the staff sideboard, and quickly ran through the messages, fast-forwarding to the final one; according to the time and date setting, it had come in earlier that morning when both cats were still fast asleep. At the sound of a very different and somewhat authoritative cat, Hettie and Tilly drew closer to the machine and the dulcet tones of Fluff Wither-Fork, the town's most illustrious landowner, filled their ears. 'This is an urgent message from Fluff Wither-Fork for the No. 2 Feline Detectives. There has been a murder on my allotments, and I would appreciate your attendance at Wither-Fork Hall at your earliest convenience.' The caller rang off and the answering machine added a series of bleeps, signalling that it had no further messages to offer.

Hettie threw off her dressing gown as Tilly clapped her paws. 'Just in time for the rent, and it sounds like a nice murder to get our teeth into,' she said, springing to the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet to choose a cardigan suitable for the case.

'I'm not sure there's such a thing as a *nice* murder,' said Hettie, pulling on her business slacks. 'If we get a move on, we should catch the ten-thirty bus from outside the post office. It's a bloody nuisance that Bruiser has chosen this week to go fishing with Poppa.'

We're going to have to rely on public transport.'

Tilly nodded, saddened by the fact that Miss Scarlet, their motorbike and sidecar, was out of action; their friend Bruiser was the only cat who could drive it. 'I suppose Bruiser's entitled to a holiday,' she said wistfully, as she took her best mac down from the back of the door.