



From Devon With Death

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CHAPTER ONE

The corpse under the bridge had been waiting a long time. You might say it had been waiting for me since I was the one who found it. It's become a habit of mine lately, discovering dead bodies. According to certain members of the local police force it's a nasty habit and I admit it's not something I'm proud of. I had stopped at the Old Mill Brewery, a stone building that stands alone on the ragged fringe of Ashburton, at a place where river and extinct railway come together, where muddy lanes take over from tarmac and a tangle of overgrown bushes hang over the water. Currently, the building is neither mill, nor brewery, but houses Rendells, the auctioneers. I'd come to eye up lots in their forthcoming auction, see if I could spot anything I might want to buy for my antique shop, *Old Nick's*.

I was reminded, as I parked White Van, that this area was about to lose its ramshackle charm: where a farm shop and agricultural suppliers once stood was now a muddy

landscape patrolled by diggers, the site cleared to make way for a development of smart new houses. Lord knows the little town of Ashburton needs affordable housing, but I don't think I'm going to like it, and judging by the prices advertised on the hoarding, some people's idea of affordable is not quite the same as mine.

I watched men and machines at work beyond the wire fence. A few weeks before, a freakish blizzard swept across Dartmoor, forcing isolated hostelrys to open their doors at midnight to trapped motorists, but the snow had cleared in hours and Christmas had been as mild and gentle as the baby in the manger. So far, January had been calm. Beyond a sugary dusting on the high tors we had seen no snow, only an occasional frost, and no rain to speak of. The men behind the wire could work unhindered. The trees were winter-bare but yellow catkins hung like lambs' tails on the riverside alders and people talked hopefully of an early spring.

I don't like mild weather in January. I don't trust it. Winter could lie in wait through the snowdrops, stay hidden until the primroses flower in the hedgerows, then sweep in like an icy blade and scythe the lot. Call me a cynic, but it's happened before.

I decided I would leave White Van parked where it was for a few minutes and nip up the lane behind St Andrew's churchyard to the church hall. A community market was held there weekly, which sometimes proved a source of interesting finds. I'd picked up a three-tier cake stand there last time, and I don't often get the opportunity to look around it. I'm usually busy with errands for Maisie on a Tuesday morning, but her return from a Christmas

visit to her daughter up north had been delayed by a chest infection, so she didn't require my services.

I stopped to look over a low wall at the clear, fast-rushing water of the Ashburn. With no rain or icy meltwater to swell it, it was little more than a brook. It rose no higher than the pink wellies of two little girls who splashed about, giggling with delight, while their mother leant on an empty buggy and chatted to a friend on the little bridge above them.

I was lucky at the market, finding a small corner cupboard in pine not too heavy for me to lug back along the path without the bother of having to move the van. The deal was quickly struck and it was only a few minutes later that I was retracing my steps to the Old Mill Brewery.

I could still hear the toddlers playing in the water, but something seemed to be the matter. I could see them up ahead, the smaller girl clinging to her sister who was stretching her arms towards her mother on the bank, her pink wellies kicking up the water as she stamped up and down in panic. 'Get me out, Mummy!' she was screaming. 'Get me out!'

There were no piranhas in the Ashburn that I was aware of. The little girls didn't appear to be in any danger, but they were frightened. The bank was a steep drop and their mother, whose friend was no longer in sight, was pregnant and in no condition to rescue them. I lowered the pine cupboard to the ground for a moment to rest my arms and watched.

'How did you get down there?' she cried angrily, as if she'd only just noticed where they were. Tentatively, she began to edge down the bank towards the stepping stone

that must have been their way down to the stream.

‘Wait!’ I called out. ‘You’ll hurt yourself if you slip. I’ll get the children out.’ I hoisted up the cupboard once again. ‘Just let me put this in my van. I’ve got wellies in the back.’ I nodded towards the car park. ‘It’ll only take me a moment.’

As I trotted off I heard her say, ‘You’ll just have to hang on, Hayley. The nice lady’s going to help you.’

I returned, booted up, and easily dropped down to the stepping stone and into the water. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked the little girls who were now sobbing piteously.

I picked up the smaller one. She weighed no more than thistledown and I swung her easily onto the bank and held her up to the outstretched arms of her mother. Beneath her blue knitted jacket I could feel her heart racing in her little chest.

‘Come here, baby!’ her mother cooed. ‘What are you keeping on about, Hayley?’ she added more sharply to her sister in the water.

‘There’s a man,’ she sobbed.

‘What man?’

‘A dead man,’ she hiccupped breathily, ‘in the water.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ her mother told her. ‘Course there isn’t!’

I dropped back down into the stream and picked her up. She was heavier, more solid than her sister and she clung to me in fright, burying her face in my curls. ‘Where?’ I asked her softly. ‘Where did you see this man?’

She pointed downstream to the low stone bridge, her face turned away. I carried her up the bank and set her down by her mother. ‘Shall I look?’ I asked. The little girl nodded silently, eyes shiny with tears.

‘It’s probably nothing,’ I told her mother, who by this time was ruthlessly buckling the younger child into the buggy, ‘but I’ll check it out.’

‘Oh, it’s OK,’ she told me. ‘Don’t bother!’

‘We don’t want them having nightmares, do we?’

She hesitated. I could tell she wanted to be off pushing the buggy and forget all about it. She sighed and shook her head, rolling her eyes towards heaven as if it was all too much.

I sloshed my way downstream towards the bridge. The water barely covered my ankles, yet I could feel its rushing force against my boots. It might be no more than a stream now, but the Ashburn had burst its banks and roared through the town like a lion in times gone by. I heard the mother speak again. ‘You’d better not be making this up, Hayley!’

I rather hoped she was. For there was something in the dark water beneath the bridge, something caught. I could make out the roundness of a head, the long fork of a body. Fear knotted my stomach but as I stooped, forced to bend almost double beneath the low stone arch, something about this body struck me as wrong. It was floating. There was no weight, no substance to it.

It was a dummy, the body fashioned from a pair of workman’s overalls, the face a mask. One arm had become stuck between two pointed stones, holding the body still, so that it bobbed obscenely on the surface of the shallow water. I prodded its free arm and something within it rustled. Cautiously, I squeezed. The sleeve was stuffed with packing, with air-filled plastic bags. The whole corpse seemed to be stuffed with the same material;

the head too round to be human, the hands crude balls bandaged into mittens.

I ducked out from under the bridge and stood up. 'It's all right!' I called out to the mother and her girls. 'It's not real.' I smiled up at Hayley, standing nervously on the bank. 'It's just a big doll,' I told her. 'You know, like the one they make for the bonfire on Fireworks Night? Like a scarecrow.'

Hayley stared at me, her fist to her mouth. 'It's not real?' she asked in a tiny voice.

'No. I expect some naughty children threw it in the river.'

'There you are, Hayley, what did I tell you?' her mother said. 'Now, thank the lady.'

'Thank you,' Hayley mumbled obediently as she was grabbed by the hand and dragged away.

I watched her mother as she trundled the buggy in front of her. 'I'm fine down here in the water,' I muttered. 'I can get out without any help, thanks for asking.'

Hayley turned around to look at me and I waved.

I waited until they were out of sight, then ducked back under the bridge. There were things about this dummy that were disturbing. I reached in my pocket for the small torch attached to my key ring and I shone it around. Its slender beam lit the wetly glistening stones above my head, the tiny ferns sprouting between them, and danced like silver glitter on the dark surface of the water.

I shone the light over the dummy, over the face. This was not some cheap Halloween mask bought in a joke shop, but fashioned from papier mâché, carefully painted and varnished to preserve it, the eyes wide and staring, the mouth gaping and ghastly. It was a face frozen in a scream. Where the head was joined to the body a

bandage had been wound around to form a neck, and this was stained blood-red as if the throat had been cut. Pinned to the chest was a postcard protected by a clear plastic envelope. On the front was a coloured picture of some thatched cottages with *From Devon With Love* printed in red. I turned the envelope over. Scrawled on the back of the card in crude letters were the words: *Cutty Dyer Dun This.*

I crouched, the river swirling around my ankles, drips from the wet stones above me falling into my hair. Who would make such a grotesque object and put it into the water? Kids would seem to be the obvious culprits. But there was a strange sophistication about the way it had been put together, about the painting of the face, and despite the clumsy spelling of the note, the crudely scrawled letters, it looked like the work of an adult hand to me.

As I eased myself out from under the bridge, grateful to stand up straight, a familiar voice yelled my name. I nearly bashed my skull on the stone arch.

Two men were staring at me from the bank: one tall and silver-haired, a long pale blue scarf draped with artful carelessness around his shoulders; the other short and round, wearing spectacles and a fedora. Ricky and Morris must have come to take a look at the auction lots. They possessed a magpie's eye for beautiful things and Morris was always hoping to add to his teapot collection.

'What the bleedin' hell are you doing down there?' Ricky demanded.

'Are you all right, Juno?' Morris blinked anxiously over his gold-rimmed specs. 'Do you need a hand up?'

I could have got out by myself, but I accepted Ricky's

proffered arm and let him haul me up the bank. ‘Jesus, Juno!’ he moaned.

‘It’s all muscle,’ I told him.

‘It’s all cake!’

‘Take no notice of him.’ Morris stood on tiptoe to give me a kiss on the cheek. ‘You’re beautiful.’

‘How did you know where I was?’ I asked.

‘We parked next to the old Van Blanc so we knew you were around here somewhere,’ Ricky waved his fag hand at me, his fingers trailing smoke. ‘We went inside Rendells and I shouted, “Has anyone here seen that tall bint with all the red hair . . . you know, looks like a Boudicca who’s lost her chariot . . . ?”’

‘He did no such thing,’ Morris assured me, suppressing a little smile. He needn’t have worried. Ricky would have to work harder than that to wind me up.

‘What were you doing down there in the water, anyway?’

‘Finding a dead body.’

Ricky raised his eyebrows. ‘Again?’

‘Don’t you start. You sound like Inspector Ford!’ I told them about the unpleasant effigy under the bridge and we agreed it was almost certainly the work of kids. ‘Cutty Dyer!’ Ricky shook his head and threw his cigarette butt on the ground causing Morris to tut and mutter beneath his breath. ‘Kids!’ he went on. ‘They probably lobbed the thing over the fence by the skate park.’

‘The fence is quite high there,’ I pointed out. ‘They must be good at lobbing.’

‘They are. Haven’t you seen that big tree in the park?’ he asked. ‘Festooned it is, hanging in trainers.’

Morris turned to more practical subjects. ‘You haven’t

got a day free this week, have you, Juno? All the panto stuff has started to come back.'

'That's right,' Ricky nodded. 'We've got *Aladdin* and *Puss in Boots* piled up in the hall. We can hardly get in the kitchen.'

Before Christmas they'd supplied costumes for pantomimes all around the country. Now the costumes were coming back and they could use my help to unpack. Before I inherited *Old Nick's* I used to give a lot more of my time to their costume hire business. Now time was something I didn't have so much of.

I agreed to go and help them out on Sunday. It was the only day I had free. Then they went into the auctioneers and I realised I'd better get a move on if I wasn't going to be late for my next job. But I still wasn't happy about the dummy in the water and wondered what to do about it. I wasn't convinced this was a childish prank. But if kids weren't responsible, then what kind of nutter would make such a thing? It was obviously intended to be seen, to disturb people, cause upset. That postcard was meant to be read by someone.