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*A Devon Night's Death*

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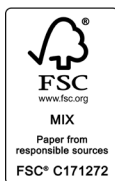
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## PROLOGUE

When you consider my nasty habit of discovering corpses, it's curious that I've never found one when I'm walking the dogs. Dog walkers are the perfect candidates for finding dead bodies. Up early in the morning, they are the first to come across those things dumped secretly in the hours of darkness: a roll of old carpet, a dead microwave, a corpse. They stroll across empty waste grounds, past derelict buildings, their concrete walls garish with graffiti, or by stagnant canals, under bridges where skeletal shopping trolleys rise from shallow water. They amble along shady lanes edged with deep ditches, over rough pasture where nettles and yellow ragwort run riot, through thorny scrub, or in woods where leaf litter lies deep, the perfect place to abandon the odd corpse. To be honest, it's usually the dogs, rather than their owners, who make the discovery. They possess the superior sniffing equipment.

A dog walker once found a body in Ausewell Wood, near Ashburton where I live. It was actually a skeleton in a sleeping bag, and presumed to be a camper or rough sleeper who'd succumbed to exposure. Poor bugger, he must have been lying there a long time. No foul play was ever suspected. It was reported in the local paper, but I don't believe the identity of the unfortunate person was ever discovered.

I get up early each weekday morning and walk five dogs for their owners. The Tribe, I call them – Dylan, Nookie, Boog, E.B. and Schnitzel, in descending order of size. You might think that with an enthusiasm for digging and five times my sniffing power, the Tribe might have unearthed the odd cadaver on our woodland walks, snuffling about under all that undergrowth, but they haven't.

I may have an unfortunate reputation for finding corpses – a member of the local police force laughingly refers to it as my *hobby* – but despite this, I have never discovered a dead body whilst out walking the dogs. Until now.

## CHAPTER ONE

People who seem too good to be true usually are. I should have remembered that when I met Frank Tinkler. But when he walked into *Old Nick's* at the end of a long, quiet afternoon, he seemed like the answer to a prayer.

'This is a very interesting shop,' he observed politely. He was somewhere in his sixties and sported a neatly trimmed grey moustache. He wore a blazer, and Panama hat, which he doffed on entry and which gave him the air of an old school cricket umpire. 'What would you call it exactly, art and crafts?'

'It's really antiques,' I jerked my thumb in the direction of my own selling space at the rear of the building, although *antiques* is a rather grand title for the odd assortment of stuff I currently have to sell, 'and vintage clothes. And over there,' I gestured towards the bookshelves, 'we have second-hand books. We run a book exchange.'

'Ah!'

I got the annoying feeling that he hadn't come in to buy anything. That's the trouble with owning an antique shop: as many people come in to sell you things as come in to buy. I'd just refused a woman who took it personally when I didn't want to purchase her Royal Doulton figurines. As I tried to explain, however dainty and finely crafted they were, there is no market for porcelain ladies in crinolines at the moment.

I frequently wonder why I don't sell *Old Nick's*. I'd never wanted to own an antique shop but Nick left it to me in his will. Quite why is something of a mystery. I had only been working for him for a matter of months when he was killed. His family think he left it to me out of spite, although whether it was to spite them or me, I've never been sure. It was getting on for five-thirty, closing time and I didn't want to hang around for a chat with this man if there wasn't going to be a satisfying ping on the till at the end of it. 'Were you looking for anything in particular?' I asked, hoping to speed things up.

'I heard a rumour you have spaces to rent.'

I must have beamed. I've had trouble renting out selling space. My last paying tenant, Fizz, only stayed a few months and by then I was glad to see the back of her. She now runs a swanky gallery of her own in North Street. 'You heard correctly.' I gestured towards an empty area by the bookshelves that I'd long been wanting to fill. 'That space there is available—'

'No, no.' He cut me off with a firm sweep of the hand. 'I need my own room. You see, I've always had a workshop at home, in the spare bedroom. But my daughter and her children have come back to live with us – lovely to have

them with us, of course,' he added hastily, 'but I've lost my working space.'

'I've got two rooms upstairs.' These had once formed part of Nick's flat and I led him up to what had been his former living room. It was also the room where he'd been murdered but I didn't mention that.

He pointed to the sink in the corner. 'That's excellent. I need running water for my work.'

'What do you do exactly, Mr . . . er . . .'

'Tinkler,' he answered with a charming smile. 'Call me Frank.'

I pointed to myself. 'Juno.'

'I know who you are, Miss Browne. All of Ashburton must be aware of your exploits.'

'What exactly do you sell?' I asked, anxious to move on before the conversation turned to my unfortunate sleuthing activities in any more detail.

'Marbled paper.'

I wasn't sure I'd heard right.

'I marble it myself,' he went on. 'I used to be a bookbinder by trade and I still do the odd bit of restoration work, but I'm retired really. The paper-marbling is just a hobby.' He opened a book that he'd been carrying tucked under his arm since his arrival. 'Here are some samples.'

I took the book from him. Each page was different, patterned with coloured inks to look like marble or rippled sand, feathers or leaves, or peacock tails in shades of red and gold. Some were just abstract works of art in wild swirling colours. I ran my fingers over the paper. 'You do this by hand?'

‘Oh yes,’ he answered modestly.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I breathed. ‘Is there a market for it?’

‘Indeed, there is. I sell my work to bookbinders for the endpapers of bibles, atlases, legal and medical journals – that sort of thing – as well as for the antiquarian market.’ He looked around him. ‘This room would make a splendid workshop.’

‘It’s actually a retail unit,’ I pointed out. When I’d converted Nick’s old flat into rental space, I’d had to apply to the council for a change of use. I didn’t want to fall foul of the regulations.

‘I could sell these.’ He opened his blazer and pulled some greetings cards from his pocket, abstract patterns in bright, fresh colours. ‘I do these greetings cards and notebooks just for fun.’

‘They’re lovely.’ I took one from him. ‘We could display them downstairs.’ On some of those empty shelves, I added to myself.

‘I’d like to move in as soon as possible, if that’s all right with you. We need to discuss rent of course, but one or two questions first if I may.’

I was eager to discuss rent too. ‘Please, fire away.’

‘I often find myself burning the midnight oil, particularly if I’ve got a large demand to fill. Would it be in order if I were here working after hours, when the shop was closed?’

I nodded, anxious to please. ‘I can give you a key to the old flat door at the bottom of the stairs. It opens on to the alley at the side. Then you can let yourself in and out when you like without having to go through the shop.’



‘That would be perfect,’ he smiled. Then he added, after a slight hesitation, ‘Also, would you object if I put some kind of lock on this door, for when I’m not here?’

I wasn’t so sure about that. I didn’t like the idea of not being able to get into the room. What if he left a tap running and caused a flood in the shop downstairs? That’s exactly the sort of thing Fizz had been likely to do.

‘Some of the books I am asked to restore are quite rare volumes,’ he pointed out, ‘and naturally I am responsible for them while they’re in my care. And I notice you don’t seem to have a burglar alarm or any CCTV on the premises.’

He was right there. I hadn’t got around to affording any. ‘No,’ I admitted. ‘I suppose . . .’

Frank smiled. ‘I don’t smoke. I promise you I won’t start a fire.’

‘Well, in that case.’ A voice in my head still niggled, but somehow his polite, persuasive manner made my fears seem unreasonable. Besides, I was anxious to let the room and once we’d agreed a figure, he was ready with the rent. Paid up front, in fact. When I first opened the shop, I had intended to insist on a six-month tenancy agreement for anyone renting space but my experience with Fizz made me wary of lumbering myself with someone I couldn’t easily get rid of. Frank and I agreed on one month’s notice, either way.

I phoned Sophie after he’d gone, and Pat, as they’d both be on duty in the shop next day, to warn them of Frank’s arrival and make sure one of them gave him a key to the side door. They’re both too penniless to pay me any rent, so they man the shop in return for free working and selling

space, an arrangement that allows me time for my proper job working as a domestic goddess, which basically means clearing up after other people.

‘He’s not going to play loud pop music all the time, is he?’ Pat demanded, ‘Like that last one.’

‘I wouldn’t think so. Frank strikes me as more of a Radio Three man.’

Pat grunted. ‘Is he going to be minding the shop?’

‘I haven’t asked him to,’ I admitted. ‘I thought we’d see how he settled in before I suggested leaving him on his own.’ At one time I’d thought everyone could take it in turns to man the shop, but Fizz had been a disaster.

‘Good thinking,’ Pat agreed. ‘Besides, Sophie and me manage things OK between us. And Her Ladyship comes in to cover now and again. I don’t think we want too many people left in charge.’

I stifled a laugh. By ‘Her Ladyship’, she meant Elizabeth, a friend who helped out in the shop when she wasn’t busy as a part-time receptionist at the doctors’ surgery. She’s a retired teacher with a gracious but crisp, no-nonsense manner, which seems to inspire Pat with a grudging sense of awe. ‘You’re probably right. Anyway, as long as you and Soph know he’s coming,’ I wouldn’t get to *Old Nick’s* until the end of the day myself, I’d be busy working.

It was a relief to close up, to escape the gloom of Shadow Lane and be released into the early evening sunshine. June had been hot and dry with very little rain and July was promising to be even hotter. I strolled down the narrow lane to my little white van. Every time I see it, it reminds me that it’s time it had a new paint job. Its white anonymity is

a waste of advertising space. I used to call it White Van, till a friend christened it Van Blanc, which I prefer. I'd parked it in the shade, but I still felt as if I was climbing into an oven, the hot plastic smell of vehicle interior overwhelmed by the even stronger aroma left by the Tribe who got picked up in it every morning, the unmistakeable, comfy smell of dog.

I drove out of Ashburton, up the hill, a shady road through green woods, which eventually wound its way on to the open moor. I turned off at Druid Cross, towards my old friends Ricky and Morris's place. They live in an impressive Georgian pile high above the town, looking down over the valley. From here they run their theatrical costume hire company. I'd phoned them earlier to see if I could borrow their shower. The boiler in my flat had gasped its last, leaving the entire house without hot water for days.

When I got there, the hallway was blocked by several large laundry hampers, costumes returned from a recent theatrical production and waiting to be unpacked. It's the kind of job I often help Ricky and Morris out with.

After my shower, we all sat in the breakfast room, drinking wine, the garden doors flung open to let in the shimmering summer evening, my damp curls fluffing up horribly because I'd forgotten to bring my conditioner. I told them about my new tenant.

'Tinkler?' Ricky looked thoughtful. 'That name rings a bell.'

'Spare me the dreadful jokes. He seems very nice. Anyway, I need his rent so unless he's a secret axe-murderer I'm prepared to take his money.' I took a sip from my glass. 'How's the theatrical project going?' They were planning to stage *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in their garden at Druid

Lodge. The rolling lawns and thick shrubbery make it the perfect setting for outdoor theatre. It was to be a community production with all the profits going to local charities.

Ricky moaned, performing a dramatic roll with his eyeballs. ‘I wish we’d never got involved now. We should never have applied for that funding.’

‘You mean the Arts Council Funding?’ I asked. ‘Why not? What’s the matter?’

‘It’s Gabriel Dark,’ Morris murmured.

‘Who’s he?’

‘He’s the professional director the Arts Council are sending us.’ He blinked, his round eyes solemn. ‘Of course, we don’t get a choice but . . .’

Ricky blew cigarette smoke down his nostrils. ‘I wish we were still directing the show ourselves.’

‘I don’t understand why you’re not.’ The original plan was that they would direct the play between them. They’ve done it before. They’re old hands at all this theatrical stuff, they’ve been doing it all their lives. But they’d learnt about an Arts Council Outreach Project that would pay for the services of a professional director from London.

‘We thought it would be good for the cast, being directed by a young, professional director,’ Morris explained, ‘someone who’s actually working in live theatre today—’

‘—instead of a pair of knackered old has-beens like us,’ Ricky finished for him.

‘You’re not has-beens.’ I kept quiet about the knackered old bit. But they were making a mistake. I

was sure no one could do a better job than they could. ‘So, what’s wrong with this Gabriel Dark?’ I asked, apart from sounding as if he’d come from some kids’ book about wizards.

‘Well, I haven’t worked with him personally,’ Morris admitted, laying a plate of bread and olives on the table, overcome as always by the compulsion to feed me, ‘but he has a certain reputation.’

‘No one wants to work with him twice.’ Ricky laughed slyly, ‘That’s probably how he’s ended up doing outreach projects with amateur provincials.’

Morris returned from the kitchen with crackers and cheese. He cast Ricky an anxious glance over his little gold specs. ‘Perhaps it was just a case of you and him not getting on,’ he suggested, ‘after all, it was a long time ago.’

‘It was,’ Ricky agreed. ‘I was in his production of *Hamlet*, it must be twenty years ago. He was a real brat, fresh out of drama school, trying to make a name for himself.’

He lobbed his fag end into the garden and strolled to the table, walking his long fingers across the surface to pinch an olive.

‘Perhaps he’s changed over the years,’ Morris said optimistically.

Ricky shook his head. ‘There’ll be trouble, you’ll see.’

I was grateful I’d only volunteered to help with costumes. Acting is not my thing.

After a glass of Malbec, some excellent local cheese and an hour of listening to Ricky prophesying that their theatrical production was doomed, I made my excuses and came away.

The van rattled down the hill into Ashburton. I turned over the little stone bridge that crosses the shallow Ashburn and past a row of old weavers' cottages. Drinkers enjoying the last of the evening sunshine lingered on the grass outside of the Victoria Inn, the pink sky behind the surrounding hills promising another fine day tomorrow. The air was still warm. I passed the town hall with its little clock tower, the ramshackle row of old shops. Then on an impulse, I turned and made a detour down Shadow Lane.

In the dimness of the narrow alleyway, *Old Nick's* shone like a jewel, its pale green paintwork, its name on the swinging sign above the door picked out in gold, the displays in the windows highlighted by spotlights. I felt a little stab of pride, remembering what a shabby, run-down hole it was when Nick was alive. If I sold it, I could afford to buy my own home and stop renting the upstairs of Kate and Adam's decrepit house. Except that they need my rent, and probably wouldn't find another tenant without having to spend squillions doing the place up. And if I sold the shop, where would Sophie find a place to paint, or Pat sell the things she makes to raise money for the animal sanctuary she runs with her sister and brother-in-law? There's the problem: it's not just about me any more. And even if the shop is stuck down a dark alley where the sun never shines and tourists fear to tread, I want to make a success of it. And I had a new rent-paying tenant now, Frank Tinkler. Perhaps things were about to look up.

Kate appeared in the hallway as soon as I got home,

glowing and beautiful and all mumsy-to-be, her thick dark plait hanging down over her shoulder. ‘Juno, can I have a word?’ There was a worried look in her eyes.

My own must have narrowed in suspicion. ‘What’s up?’ I demanded. ‘Are you OK?’

Instinctively, she stroked her rounded tummy. ‘Yes. I’m fine. It’s nothing like that.’

She smiled brightly. ‘The good news is, the boiler’s in.’

‘We’ve got hot water again. Excellent. And the bad news?’

Her words tumbled out in a rush. ‘Well, there’s been a slight accident in your bathroom.

‘Adam and I thought it was time you had a proper shower, so we’d asked the plumber to put one in over your bath—’

*Yay*, I thought. I’d be able to wash my hair without having to submerge myself in the bath every time.

‘But when he drilled the wall to fix the shower unit in,’ she plunged on, ‘most of the tiles fell off, bringing the plaster down with them and well . . . the whole bathroom needs plastering and retiling. We’ve got to get a plasterer in.’

‘Ah.’

‘The plumber had to rush off and he’s left it in a bit of a mess. Adam’s up there now. He was trying to clear it up before you got back.’

‘I’d better go and see how he’s getting on.’

‘It is a bit of a mess,’ she repeated with an apologetic shrug. ‘I’m just warning you.’

As I approached the door of my flat, I could hear a noise like someone shovelling shale. I called out ‘Hi!’ and detected muttered cursing. I poked my head gingerly around the bathroom door.

A bit of a mess was an understatement. The bath was full of broken shards of white tile and chunks of wet red plaster. Adam was on his knees with a dustpan, shovelling the mess into a garden bucket. Red dust coated his hair, beard and eyebrows and clung to his sweaty face. It hung in the air and covered the walls, as well as my soap and toothbrush. He squinted up at me and coughed. ‘Sorry about this.’

‘Hmmm. Shall I fetch some bin bags?’

‘They’re not strong enough.’

‘Well, there’s obviously not room for two of us in here,’ I said benevolently, ‘so I’ll leave you to it, shall I?’

He slid another dustpan full of broken tiles and dust into the rapidly filling bucket, groaning as he got off his knees. ‘I’ll just lug this down to the back garden,’ he croaked, wiping his face with his sleeve. ‘It’s only my eighth trip.’

‘I can tell it’s not your first by the state of the living room carpet.’

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s a bit late to put newspaper down now,’ I observed as he crunched across the living room, grinding gritty dust into the pile. ‘Perhaps we could consider a new carpet?’ I called out after him and heard more swearing as he lugged the skip downstairs.

I didn’t really care about the carpet. It’s threadbare in places with a beige swirly pattern that was probably the height of internal decor fifty years ago. And as a domestic goddess I spend too much time hoovering other people’s carpets to fuss with housework when I get home. But Daniel was coming at the weekend and, whilst I suspect my lover is



not fussy either, we haven't been together long and I don't want to give him the impression that I wallow in filth. The idea that the bathroom might not even be operational was depressing. A cosy romantic soak surrounded by scented candles was obviously off the agenda.

'Do you think this will be sorted out by the weekend?' I asked as Adam reappeared with his empty bucket.

We stared together at the ruined bathroom walls, the chunks of missing plaster, the old lath strips showing underneath, and he puffed out his cheeks in a sigh. 'We'll do our best. The plumber's promised he'll come back and finish the shower tomorrow. It's the plastering and retiling that might hold things up.'

I nodded sadly. There was obviously nothing more he could do. I grabbed a dustpan and brush from under the sink and whilst he lugged the next load of tiles and plaster downstairs, began to brush down the surfaces. Four buckets later the bath was empty.

'I'll wash it all down,' I told Adam. 'You've done enough.' In the morning he had to be up even earlier than me, to cook breakfasts at *Sunflowers*. Kate's morning sickness was preventing her from going in to help him in the cafe first thing and they couldn't afford to pay for extra staff. If the dog walking hadn't prevented me, I'd have gone in to help him myself. We wished each other goodnight and I set to washing down the bathroom. Finally, I lathered the dust off my soap. I decided to junk the toothbrush. Then I ran the vacuum cleaner over the living room carpet, the gritty dust rattling inside as if it was crunching on muesli.

It was only when I flopped into a chair at the end of all this labour, my thoughts turning towards a cosy read in bed, that I noticed the light on my ancient telephone answering machine winking at me like an evil red eye. Full of foreboding, I pressed *play*. It was Daniel's voice, asking me to ring him back.

'Is that Miss Browne with an "e"?' he asked as soon as he picked up. The warmth in his voice made me smile.

'It is, Mr Thorncroft. What's up?'

'I'm sorry, Juno, change of plan. I'm not going to be able to make it at the weekend.'

I ignored the sinking feeling. He was currently working in Ireland on a peat conservation project. 'Stuck in the peat bog?' I stifled a sigh. I could hardly complain when he's trying to save the planet.

'Up to my neck,' he responded. 'There's a problem and it'll be better if I stay here and get it sorted now.'

'You'll miss the concert,' I reminded him. 'I've bought tickets.'

'Blast! Sorry, Miss B. Can you find someone else to go with?'

'Expect so,' I muttered glumly.

'Then I'll definitely be free to come over the following weekend when the caravan arrives.'

'Caravan?'

'I've bought one online. It's being delivered to Moorview Farm a week on Saturday. I'll need to be there for that.'

I cheered up a little. The farmhouse Daniel had inherited was a ruin and he'd been planning to buy a caravan so he could stay onsite whilst the building work was done. It was also intended to be a private place where he and I could

satisfy our passion for each other without worrying about disturbing the slumbers of Kate and Adam downstairs. Now he'd finally got around to buying it. Despite the fact that I wouldn't see him for another ten days I came off the phone feeling cheerful and celebrated by making hot chocolate and snuggling down in bed.

I'd barely opened my book before there was a light thump next to me and Bill meowed a welcome. He'd been keeping out of the way during the bustle in the bathroom, although the trail of pink paw-prints he left across the duvet meant he must have been sniffing around in there since. 'You're not my cat,' I told him. 'Why aren't you downstairs with Kate and Adam where you belong?' He didn't have an answer, just curled up next to me, purring.

I tried a second question. 'What can go wrong in a peat bog?' But he didn't have an answer for that either, just closed his one green eye, tucked his paws under and left me to my reading. I must have been tired. I woke up next morning with the bedside lamp still on and hot chocolate coagulating in its mug.