

No Accident

Robert Crouch

(Downland Murder Mystery #1)

THURSDAY

ONE

Sometimes I'm my own worst enemy.

When my boss rang me at six thirty this morning and instructed me to hightail it to Tombstone Adventure Park, I should have told her about the restraining order. Miles Birchill will blow a fuse when he finds out I'm here.

Unless he's lying dead on the other side of the barn.

It's a long shot, I know. Downland's wealthiest resident is more likely to be entertaining celebrity friends in his London casino than having a fatal encounter with some machinery in a remote corner of East Sussex.

I switch off the engine and draw a deep breath. I'm still buzzing after an exhausting but satisfying night with the local police. I helped them round up and arrest a gang of badger baiters and their dogs. When my boss rang, I was looking forward to an early breakfast, not the over ripe banana I recovered from the fruit bowl. After a sixty-second shower, and a rub down with a bath towel from the laundry basket, I reached for the only ironed shirt in the wardrobe. An electric blue throwback to my clubbing days, the shirt hung on the rail next to the only suit I own.

While the shirt holds many fond memories, I can't say the same for Tombstone Adventure Park. When the bulldozers cleared the countryside five years ago, only the woodland to the north was spared. It contains a couple of cottages that once housed farm workers and the barn I'm parked beside.

Though it feels cool in the shade of oak, ash and sycamore, the humid weather that's lingered into the third week of September feels oppressive. I leave my jacket and tie on the back seat. After noting my arrival on site at 07.15 am, I exit the car with my notebook and phone. I walk past the patrol car and a silver Peugeot 206 convertible.

Ahead, a charcoal grey hearse waits with its hatch open, ready to swallow a coffin.

My fingers skim along the black weatherboarding that cloaks a modern, steel-framed barn. Large sliding doors, clasped together by a hefty padlock, remain closed behind a healthy growth of weeds. A film of dust and bird droppings obscure the small glass panels in each door.

"Machinery, Mr Fisher. It's full of machinery."

The reek of cigar smoke identifies Alasdair Davenport, long before his lazy drawl reaches my ears. Tollingdon's most successful independent undertaker – as he describes himself in his brochure – has a sympathetic, effortless manner that reassures grieving relatives. But I can't take to a man who's passionate about embalming.

Everything about him is pale, from the thinning blond hair beneath his Stetson to a complexion the colour of bone. He looks me over with eyes the colour of dirty washing-up water.

"The machinery has never been used," he says, staring at my shirt. "I find that unusual, don't you?"

Not as unusual as an undertaker in a lumberjack shirt tucked into old jeans. All he needs

are spurs and he'd be at home in the Wild West theme park. Maybe he sings along to Dolly Parton while he pumps formaldehyde into corpses.

"Some say it's haunted." His colleague, who also looks ready for line dancing, strolls up, eyes wide with intrigue. "Trevor Maynard and his missus died here in a fire before this place were built. Some say their troubled souls remain."

Davenport, who clearly doesn't subscribe to such notions, takes an impassive last draw on the stub of his cigar and blows smoke into the air. "They're waiting for you in the clearing, Mr Fisher."

"Is it as bad as it sounds?"

He grinds the cigar into the dirt. "All violent deaths are bad."

It could be a social comment or a criticism of anything that hampers embalming.

"Not if you're an undertaker," I say, slipping past.

The clearing seems unusually quiet and peaceful. After a steady diet of cop shows on TV, I'd expected to see crime scene officers crawling over the grass in their white coveralls. There's no barrier tape to cordon off the Massey Ferguson tractor and bench mounted circular saw. The two uniformed constables are too far away to stop me trotting down the slope to the fibreglass coffin, resting with its lid to one side.

And where's the officer in charge?

The sound of retching disturbs the stillness. At the far edge of the clearing, a man in jogging pants is bent over some bushes. The nearest constable looks up briefly and then examines his fingernails once more. The second constable, who looks like he spends too much time in the staff canteen, calls out to me.

"Stay where you are. This area's out of bounds."

He hurries over, his cheeks reddening with each step. When he pulls up in front of me, I hold up my ID card. He takes a look and calls over his shoulder. "Miss Montague? The environmental health officer's arrived."

A woman in a white coverall emerges from the vinyl tractor cab and thuds to the ground. Short and stocky, she has a bullish face, dominated by a flattened nose. She swings her arms as she powers up the slope, ploughing through the fan of blood and flesh on the grass. Flies and bluebottles scatter to escape the reek of her cheap perfume, which reaches me seconds before she does.

"Have you come straight from a nightclub?" Her gaze dips from my stubble to the electric blue shirt. "Is that why you're late?"

I smile. "You should demand a refund from the charm school."

Her steel grey eyes give me a piercing stare. "You're not what I expected, Mr Fisher. You don't talk posh. You're nothing like your father, so why do they call you Lord Snooty?"

Only the *Tollington Tribune* calls me that. Many years ago, when the newspaper could afford a lifestyle editor, I was asked why I'd never married. "I prefer animals to people," I said. "Animals never let you down."

If I sounded aloof, it was unintentional, but it coloured the whole article. My father, the Conservative MP for Downland, owned a country estate, so I was dubbed Lord Snooty.

I'm surprised anyone remembers.

"Maybe you should tell me who you are," I say, "in case I misjudge you."

She thrusts out a hand, covered with a disposable glove. "I'm Carolyn Montague, the new Coroner's Officer."

"You're not the inspector in charge?"

“DI Briggs is probably on his second round of toast by now. When he realised we had a work accident he left me in charge. I called your governor, Daniella Frost, over an hour ago.”

I say nothing, wondering why Danni took half an hour to ring me.

“I have three fatalities back at the ranch,” Carolyn says. “You wanted to check the body.”

“I wanted the scene left undisturbed.”

She points at the tractor. “You got any idea what a power takeoff can do? It’s the shaft in the middle that powers the bench saw.”

“It spins at high speed,” I say, aware the guard is missing. “Catch a loose sleeve or cuff and it can rip off your arm.”

“Imagine what it can do if you’re wearing a tie.” She smacks a fist into the palm of her hand. “His face is strewn across the grass, as you can see. I couldn’t leave him like that.”

It’s a fair point, well made. “Is DI Briggs coming back?”

“Not for a simple work accident.”

In my experience, few work accidents are simple. Companies are quick to blame employees for ignorance, breaking rules or horseplay, but employers can be negligent, either intentionally or by omission.

“I thought the police took the lead when there’s a possibility of corporate manslaughter,” I say, going from memory. I didn’t have time to visit the office and read the *Work Related Death Protocol*.

“Corporate manslaughter? The guy got careless. End of.” She heads over to the coffin. “I saw plenty when I was in uniform and Scenes of Crime. That’s why DI Briggs left me in charge. You can ring him if you want.”

I ignore the phone she holds out. “I’m not questioning your competence, Miss Montague. We’ve never had a fatal work accident in Downland.”

“I thought you were the council’s most experienced officer.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ve investigated a fatality. I’d appreciate your help.”

She unzips the body bag, oblivious to the flies gathering around her. “I’ll send you copies of my photographs. It looks like he dropped his cigarette and bent to pick it up. That’s when his tie got caught.”

I point to the man in jogging pants. “Did he witness the accident?”

“Mr Cheung was out running. He came past shortly after the incident. You can have a copy of my interview notes too – unless you want to talk to him.”

Jogging Man, who looks about nineteen or twenty, seems to have had the life sucked out of him. Pale and shaken, he won’t forget this morning in a hurry.

Me neither, I suspect.

“I hope you have a strong stomach, Mr Fisher.”

I’ve seen the suffering and injuries people inflict on animals. And as much as I want to hurt these people, I’ve learned to set aside my emotions to work calmly and effectively.

After a deep breath to prepare myself, I peer into the coffin.

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ROBERT CROUCH

(Downland Murder Mystery #1)

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