

Kent Fisher Mystery #1

Robert Crouch

No Accident

The perfect murder can never be an accident.



"Agatha Christie fans will love it!"

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(Downland Murder Mystery #1)

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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.

Two

The victim's face is a mess of red raw flesh and shredded muscle, clinging to the bone beneath. Blood, congealed into dark syrup, leaks over the shirt and boiler suit he's wearing. The odour of death reminds me of a slaughterhouse.

"Doesn't look like he could face today," I hear myself saying.

Carolyn nods. "Gallows humour. I like it."

I take a closer look at the victim. He has grey hair, cut military style, and a deep scar that bisects his right eyebrow. That's all I can determine with any certainty.

"You mentioned a tie, Carolyn."

"I cut what was left away to release him. It's bagged if you want to look."

I glance up the slope, wishing Lucy would hurry up with our Grab Bag. It contains everything we need for emergencies, including digital camera, blank notices and witness statement forms, tape measure, flashlight, and our emergency procedures. While I wait, I take some photographs with my phone. If the guard had not been removed from the takeoff the victim would be alive. Had he buttoned

his boiler suit, or not worn a tie, I'd be asleep in bed.

I step aside to let the undertakers remove the coffin. While I make notes, Carolyn peels off her coverall and shoe protectors and balls them into a polythene bag. Her black blouse and jeans are a little too tight and her old trainers are practical rather than fashionable. After a mouthful of mineral water, she strides over.

“The first one's always the worst. How do you feel?”

“Puzzled,” I reply, looking up. “Why was he wearing a tie?”

“My dad wore a shirt and tie when he mowed the lawn.”

Mine too, but lawn mowers don't kill. “What time did the accident happen?”

“Mr Cheung ran past around six twenty.”

“Two hours ago? That's a bit early to start work, isn't it?”

She gestures at my shirt. “Or a bit late to go to bed.”

I glance at the machinery, set in an isolated clearing in the middle of woodland at least a mile from the main park. What's it doing here, adjacent a barn that's never used?

“Have you identified him?” I ask.

She reaches into a flight case and pulls out an evidence bag, containing credit cards and a driving licence. “Sydney Collins with two 'Y's. Why, I don't

know.” Her self-conscious laugh doesn’t make the joke any better. “Have you heard of him?”

“No.”

“You know Miles Birchill, though.”

He would be my specialist subject on Mastermind. He worked for my father in the stables for years until tack and valuables began to go missing. While he was never charged with theft, he disappeared from the scene. He emerged a few years later, buying rundown rented properties in Brighton and Hove during the 80s and 90s.

“He evicted tenants from their flats and sold the properties with vacant possession,” I say. “He made a killing.”

Carolyn nods. “Collins did the evicting. Men or women – he didn’t discriminate. He threw them out of windows, dumped them naked on the South Downs in winter, you name it. People were too scared to complain,” she says, sensing my question. “He claimed he knew their families, where their children went to school. Well, he can’t intimidate anyone now, can he? Not that anyone’s going to miss him.”

His family might. “I’ll check the tractor now.”

Collins kept the Massey Ferguson clean and polished on the outside, repairing the splits in the vinyl cabin with clear waterproof tape. I step onto the footplate and peer inside. Everything is coated in dust, except the stack of *Nuts* magazines in the foot well. The few editions I check feature models

with impossibly black hair, fake tans, and oversized boobs.

Carolyn jumps up beside me. “They’re in date order, in case you’re interested.”

I step down and head to the rear of the tractor. The power takeoff and three-point linkage that connects the bench saw to the tractor are splattered with blood and tissue. Even though the takeoff isn’t spinning, I don’t want to get too close. I step back, wondering what brought Collins out here so early. I walk over to a small enclosure crammed with fence posts. They’re sharpened to points and stand in rows like giant pencils. The timber has greyed in the months, maybe years, since they were made. There’s no timber waiting to be cut, so he didn’t come out here to make more posts.

Back at the tractor, I drop to my knees. Cigarette butts, all filter tipped, pepper the ground. If the power takeoff hadn’t killed him, lung cancer would have. I’m about to get to my feet when I spot a rollup cigarette, speckled with blood, directly below the takeoff.

“Carolyn, do you have an evidence bag?”

She retrieves one from her flight case. “What have you found?”

“A rollup among the filter tips. Someone else was here.”

“David Cheung rolls his own.”

I glance across at Jogging Man. “Runners don’t usually smoke.”

“He does. Maybe he dropped it when he spotted Collins.”

“Then it wouldn’t be covered with blood.”

“Good point. Maybe it belonged to Collins and when he bent to retrieve it, his tie became entangled.”

A diet of Columbo films has made me curious about anything that’s out of place or unusual. I doubt if the rollup will play any part in the investigation, but at least it looks like I know what I’m doing. I stretch my arms between the lower linkage and takeoff, careful to avoid any contact, and nudge the rollup into the evidence bag with my pen.

“Why did Collins come here this morning?” I ask when I’m back on my feet. “He didn’t need any fence posts.”

Carolyn shrugs. “I gave up trying to guess why people do what they do a long time ago. Stick to the facts, Kent. Collins wouldn’t be the first worker to take a short cut, would he?”

“Tombstone wouldn’t be the first employer to default in its duty to provide and maintain safe equipment.”

“That’s why we’re here.” She pauses, distracted by something behind me. “Is this your glamorous assistant?”

Lucy would laugh all the way to the Doc Marten shop if anyone described her as glamorous. It can only mean Danni has sent Gemma, the Chief Executive’s niece. She joined the team a few months

ago to give her something worthwhile to do. Apparently, waiting tables isn't a worthy career choice.

She's dressed more for the beach than for work in a sleeveless white dress and matching sandals with diamante trims. Her glossy brown hair tumbles in thick waves around her slim face, half hidden by Audrey Hepburn sunglasses.

Though petite, her muscles are toned and supple, giving her the strength to grapple with the Grab Bag. She hoists the strap over her shoulder and brushes past the young constable, who looks desperate to help her. Gravity and the weight of the bag threaten to overbalance her as she careers down the slope, stumbling to a halt in front of me.

She gives me a relieved smile. "I nearly went arse over tit there. Just think, Kent, you nearly had the pleasure of me laid out on the grass."

I had that pleasure seven years ago.

We met when I called at La Floret, Tollington's most exclusive restaurant. Armed with my white coat, I went inside to carry out a food hygiene inspection. I wasn't expecting to find a young waitress on a chair, reaching up to change a light bulb. There's something about a white blouse, stretched to transparency over a well filled bra, which fires my imagination. Add a short black skirt, a mischievous smile, and remarks like, 'If anything takes your fancy, just ask,' and you'll understand my weakness for waitresses.

“Be careful,” I said, as she stretched on tiptoes. “You might fall.”

She looked down and smiled. “Then you’d better catch me.”

By the time she jumped down and stumbled into my arms, I was hooked.

The thud of the Grab Bag on the ground brings me back to the present. She removes her glasses to reveal sexy eyes, the colour of dark chocolate. “I’m so pleased you chose me, Kent. I won’t let you down.”

“Even though I requested Lucy?”

“Am I not good enough for you?” When I don’t answer, she shrugs. “What do you want me to do?”

“Watch where you put your feet,” I say, pointing at the grass.

“Ugh, gross!” She places a hot hand on my shoulder and raises her foot to check the underside of her sandal. “You could have warned me.”

Her face is inches from mine, radiating heat from her lightly-toasted skin. The subtle scent of soap wafts towards me as she checks the other shoe. “That was close. I paid a fortune for these.”

“A pair of trainers would have been more sensible.”

“You know I don’t do sensible.”

I lead her to the tractor and place the Grab Bag on the footplate. She pulls out the camera and points it at me. “Didn’t you wear a shirt like that the day we met?”

I don’t tell her it’s the same shirt.

The arrival of a text message distracts her. She hands me the camera and fishes her phone out of a small flap in the bag. “It’s Uncle Frank, wishing me luck. He’s delighted you asked me to help.”

“You called him? No wonder you took an eternity to get here.”

“I called him so I could get the office key and collect the Grab Bag.”

I nod and take her round the machinery, telling her what I want photographed. I ask for scene setting shots of the clearing, the barn, the tractor and the fence post enclosure.

“Take plenty at the back here. Zoom in on the power takeoff. Give each photograph a unique code – date, initials and consecutive reference numbers. Record them in your notebook so we can use them as evidence later. Can you manage that, Gemma?”

“I can if you promise not to patronise me.”

I return to Carolyn, who’s grinning. “I wish she looked at me the way she looks at you.”

“I wish she’d dress appropriately. Look at those shoes. No toe protection, no arch support.”

“I’m only saying she likes you, Kent. She’s very pretty.”

“She’s engaged to a solicitor and I’m almost twice her age.”

“So what? Your father’s much older than your mother.”

I should be used to people comparing me to my father. “Actually, she’s my stepmother.”

“And here’s your favourite cowboy.”

I follow her gaze to the top of the clearing, where a black Mercedes glides to a halt. The last time I spoke to Miles Birchill, I'd just emptied the contents of a muck spreader into his convertible.

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