

Excerpt from Smoke and Mirrors

Prologue

The small convoy of vehicles rolled appropriately along the dual carriageway like a funeral procession. At its head, a police car carried two constables and a uniformed inspector. Next, a police van, the title *Incident Unit* painted on the sides. Behind it, another car. At the rear, a second van, unmarked, dark blue. Anyone familiar with police activity would have identified it immediately as a mortuary van.

They converged on a village in the south of Northamptonshire, not far from the ancient borough of Stony Stratford and the Victorian railway town of Wolverton.

Seven o'clock on a bright mid-summer morning. The sun broke free of cloud cover as the cortege turned off the dual carriageway at a sign indicating Knightly St John. A minute later the leading driver caught sight of the tall square tower of the church, rising up from among the trees. Progress was slow on the narrow, twisting road. It led to a sharp left-hand bend where they passed the first cottages on entering the high street.

Glimpsing houses and cottages of pale limestone under roofs of slate or thatch, they cruised the full length of the street, passing the church on their left and the pub on their right. Just beyond the primary school they turned left and followed the road round in a sweeping curve. The church tower dominated the skyline, the clock face looking down on them like an impassive eye. It registered five past seven as the convoy steered into a modern executive housing estate, known as Martyrs Close, behind the church and came to a halt beside a grass triangle partly covered with bramble bushes, opposite the churchyard's back door.

A man and a woman were chatting together beside the brambles. Seeing the police vehicles arrive, they stopped talking and turned to face their visitors. The man, in overalls and leaning on a shovel, was stocky with thinning cropped grey hair. The woman wore a grey dress and a dog collar. The Reverend Angela Hemingway, vicar of Knightly St John, shook hands with the inspector and introduced Henry Tutt, church groundsman and grave digger.

After examining and photographing the site, the police began unloading equipment. The inspector gave Henry Tutt the go-ahead; he cleared the bramble bushes away with a chainsaw and dragged them into a pile against the churchyard wall. An open-sided tent like a small marquee provided shade for Henry and one of the constables as they dug down into the clay soil. The young officer was amazed at the work rate of the older man who was well into his sixties but dug steadily, flinging the earth onto a pile just outside the tent.

The excavation had attracted the attention of the neighbours, who watched the sombre working party from behind their curtains. The exhumation of a grave engendered a morbid fascination, but no-one wanted to be seen standing in the street gawping at the proceedings.

The diggers had just reached a heavier layer of damp clay, and even Henry had had to slow down, when the door opened in the churchyard wall and a girl stepped through. She was thin and blonde, almost waif-like, wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Nobody paid her any attention, apart from Angela Hemingway who acknowledged her with a nod. The girl held back at first but gradually advanced until she was standing beside the vicar. They exchanged murmured greetings and watched the digging in silence.

Then it happened. Henry thrust his spade into the earth and met resistance. The police officers stared into the hole. Someone remarked that it was not as deep as they had expected. Henry grunted agreement and, alone in the grave, began shovelling more carefully. He took a gardener's trowel from his back pocket and scraped the wet clay into a bucket. To the accompaniment of mutterings from Henry, the grave's contents were gradually revealed. Henry scratched his head and looked over at the vicar, bewildered. Some of the officers dropped to their knees for a closer inspection.

A gesture from Henry summoned Angela closer, and both she and the thin girl advanced to the graveside. Angela gasped and put a hand to her mouth. The girl stared wide-eyed at what lay in the dark damp ground by Henry's muddy boots.

Pain

The old pain was still there, even after two years. Marnie pulled out the battered blue folder which she kept in her desk in the office barn. It lay concealed at the back of the bottom drawer and had not been brought out into the light of day since she first put it there the summer before last.

It was a quiet morning, the sun rising through a clear sky, as Marnie carried the folder through the spinney towards the canal. She emerged in sunlight close to the docking area where her narrowboat, *Sally Ann*, was moored. In the galley she prepared coffee and settled in a safari chair at the table in the saloon. Being on *Sally Ann* was somehow comforting.

Even now, she could still only just bear to read the notes and cuttings from that time. Toni Petrie, the Reverend Toni Petrie, had been killed in her own church. Her ministry had lasted barely a month, and even though they outwardly had little in common – Marnie was an agnostic and no church-goer – in that time they had become friends. Marnie had envisaged a friendship that would endure, but it had been cut down, just as Toni had been cut down by the same hand that had almost put an end to Marnie herself.

Toni had been the victim of the same hatred that had caused the death, the *murder*, of the vicar of the parish church of Knightly St John some three and a half centuries earlier in the time of the English Civil Wars. That summer, the brief summer of Toni Petrie, had stirred up ancient conflicts and tensions. And now Marnie feared they were about to be aroused again.

Angel of death

'No! I can't believe I'm hearing this. Tell me it isn't true.'

Marnie paused before replying. 'It *is* true, Beth. I'd hardly ring to tell you something *wasn't* true, would I? Think about it.'

'But they can't be *serious*, not after all the trouble there was two years ago.'

Marnie looked over to the window of her office, a small converted barn, its heavy timber doors drawn back in the daytime, revealing tinted glass like a shop front. Across the cobbled yard she could see roses climbing up the walls of three renovated cottages. The old stone farm buildings were bathed in pale summer sunshine, an idyllic peaceful English scene like a *Country Living* calendar.

'Well, they are serious, in fact they've already made a start.'

'Already?'

'This morning. Anne's gone up to have a look. She was half frightened, half bursting with curiosity. In the end the curious side won.'

Beth groaned. 'Oh god. At eighteen, kids aren't nervous about things like that. But Anne really ought to know better. Think how much she was involved in that business with the murder of the vicar, *vicars* I ought to say. I wish they weren't digging all that up again.'

'They've decided to go ahead as a kind of tribute to Toni's memory. You know it was her wish to move Sarah into the churchyard.'

Marnie's eyes strayed to the blue folder that was now lying on her desk. She had read it through that morning. The memory of that other morning when she had chanced upon the grave had come back vividly. Attracted by a doorway in the churchyard wall, half hidden by ivy, she had walked through to discover part of a headstone concealed in a tangle of brambles. It marked the grave of a young woman who had died in 1645.

Why had she been buried *outside* the churchyard? The question had sparked the interest of both Toni Petrie and her predecessor, Randall Hughes. He had just left the parish in an atmosphere of open hostility to become rural dean. Research had revealed that the young woman, Sarah Anne Day, committed suicide out of shame at the part her family had played in the death of the vicar. The Reverend Jonathan Goldsworthy was a royalist sympathiser in the first civil war; the village predominantly supported Parliament.

'I still don't like it, Marnie. You should stop them. You don't know where this will lead.'

'I should stop them? Beth, I don't think there was a letter in the post telling me I was now Head of the Church of England, and no messages from anyone in Canterbury as far as I know.'

'Marnie, the Archbishop of Canterbury is based in Lambeth Palace in London.'

'Of course. Perhaps I should just check the answerphone again.'

'You know what I mean.' Beth had a logic all her own. 'I only hope it will all pass over smoothly without unpleasantness, so everyone can get back to a normal life.'

'Normal life in these parts takes some unusual turns.' Marnie spoke from the heart. She had run into one bizarre event after another since leaving London two years earlier to start a new life and a new business. 'Everywhere I go there seem to be bodies lying around.'

Beth agreed. 'True. Let's hope this time things will be different.'

Marnie sighed. 'Well *hardly*, Beth. They're exhuming a *grave*. I think that *might* involve a body. That's the whole *point*. They're going to re-inter that poor girl.'

'What's her name again?'

'Sarah Anne Day.'

'Yes, well you should keep out of it. You don't want to be getting the reputation as an Angel of Death. It might ruin your business. I can't see anyone renting a cottage or barn conversion from you if they think something unpleasant is going to fall out of the closet.'

'I have no intention of going anywhere near the church until the whole matter is finished.'

Out of the corner of her eye Marnie noticed rapid movement in the courtyard. Seconds later Anne appeared breathless in the doorway. She was about to speak when she realised Marnie was on the phone. Panting, she crossed the office and flopped down onto the chair by her desk. 'Look, Beth, I'm going to have to go now. There's a lot to do. I'll call you later.'

After disconnecting, Marnie waited while Anne got her breath back. 'That was a dramatic entrance. What's up?'

Anne's slight chest was heaving. 'You'll never guess what it is.'

'You're right.'

Anne bit her lip. 'They've found a body in the grave.'

'Ah. In that case, you're wrong. That's just what I was expecting.'

'Really?'

'It's hardly surprising. A grave's a dead cert for a body, if you see what I mean.'

She had no idea why she was treating everything so lightly. Correction. She knew perfectly well. Anne had already been through enough drama in her young life and, although Marnie was aware of her friend's depth of character, she had no wish to add to her experience in that direction. *Angel of Death*, indeed!

Anne collected herself. 'Sorry. I'm not making much sense, am I? I'll start again. They've dug down into Sarah's grave and found *two* bodies.'

'*Two*?' Marnie frowned. 'How can there be two?'

Anne sat upright in the chair. 'The body on top of the coffin didn't date back to the sixteen hundreds. I heard one of the men say he thought it could be modern. It just looked like muddy bones to me ... *horrible*.' She grimaced.

Marnie mulled this over. On one point she was absolutely clear.

'Anne (with an 'e'), we're not going to get involved in this. It's none of our business and we're going to keep well out of it.'

Anne pulled a face. 'Er, that might be difficult.'

Suspicion. 'How might it be difficult?'

'Angela sent me to ask you to come up straight away. She said they'll need a statement from you as you were the person who originally found the grave.'

Marnie was puzzled. 'Why should the church want a statement from me?'

'Not the church, Marnie. The police.'

'The *police*?'

Anne nodded. 'Angela rang Randall, as he's the rural dean. He's coming over too from Brackley. And a detective is on his way. They want you and me to be available ... to give evidence.'

Marnie sighed. 'Oh god. Here we go again.'

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Marnie drove them to the grave site in deference to Anne's earlier exertions. On the way up the field track that led to the village, she had the foreboding that the finding of the extra body in Sarah's grave was going to unlock further tragedy.

She parked the Land Rover Discovery outside one of the Martyrs Close executive houses and they walked a short distance towards the churchyard wall. The grave's location was easy to spot under the white tent on the grass.

Uniformed police officers were busy beside the tent, cordoning it off with yellow tape. As Marnie and Anne approached, one of the men looked in their direction. He knew them both from previous encounters. Marnie had the reputation of not always being as co-operative as they would have wished, but he had to admit he liked the way she looked. She was thirty or so, fairly tall, slim, with dark shoulder-length wavy hair, clean regular features and an intelligent face. That day her expression was serious.

Beside her, Anne looked young for her age. She could easily have passed for fifteen or sixteen, though he knew she was older. She drove around in a bright red Mini, which he rightly guessed had been a present for her eighteenth birthday. Marnie and Ralph had presented her with it, and the car had become the proverbial pride and joy. Anne was almost as tall as Marnie, with pale skin and a thin boyish figure. Her eyes were bright with curiosity.

The constable stepped forward. Before he could speak, a voice called out from behind him.

'It's all right, officer. Marnie's been asked to come.'

The policeman turned. It was another woman who had spoken. Women seemed to be taking over the world. This one was a vicar, about Marnie's height with a long face that was horsy but not unpleasant.

'I knew that, miss. I was only going to inform Mrs Walker that my colleagues had had to leave the site.'

'Oh.' Marnie stopped in front of the constable. 'Does that mean you want me to go back or wait here?'

'It means we don't need to interview you here and now. I'm sorry for the inconvenience.'

Marnie saw that Angela had been in conversation with another woman, whom she did not recognise. The latter was dressed in a smartly-tailored jacket and slacks, the English rose type, blonde hair in the style of Princess Diana, like so many women at that time. The two of them came closer, while the constable resumed his taping.

Marnie turned to Anne. 'We seem to have had a wasted journey.'

Angela stepped forward. 'Sorry, Marnie. We wanted to stop you before you set off, but I didn't have your number with me.' She indicated her companion. 'I'm not sure if you know Celia, Celia Devere?'

Marnie offered a hand. 'Hallo. Marnie Walker. This is my friend and colleague, Anne Price. Are you involved in the reburial?'

The newcomer seemed uncertain how to answer the question. 'Well, er, not actually. Though I suppose ... You see, we ... we own the land.'

Marnie looked at the triangle, which was no bigger than a small lawn. 'This piece of ground here?'

More hesitation. 'Well, no.' She made a gesture that encompassed the whole area around them. 'All of this, really.'

Angela stepped in. 'Celia's family owns the land on which these houses are built and most of the land around here. They live at the Court.'

Marnie smiled. 'Sorry to be thick, but what court?'

'Knightly Court.' Angela pointed down the street. 'It's the big house beyond the far wall.'

Marnie and Anne followed Angela's finger and noticed for the first time that Martyrs Close ended as a cul-de-sac at a high stone wall.

Angela continued. 'I suppose, technically, your family are lords of the manor, aren't they, Celia?'

'I suppose so.' Celia turned to Marnie. 'You live in the village?'

'Glebe Farm, down by the canal.'

'Of course. I've heard about you. You actually live on a boat, isn't that right?'

'Temporarily. We're renovating the farm. I hope to move into the farmhouse shortly. We don't farm, of course, but we have a few acres of land.'

'My husband's a property developer, but perhaps you knew that. Is that your line of business?'

'Only because most of the buildings at Glebe Farm are ruins, or rather they *were*. I'm an interior designer.'

Celia looked steadily at Marnie. 'How interesting. You have your own company?'

Marnie inclined her head towards Anne. 'Standing beside me. We're what you'd call a close-knit team. Talking of which, we'd better get back to the drawing board.'

'It's been nice meeting you, Marnie.' Celia lowered her voice. 'Angela was just telling me that you originally found the grave here.'

'By chance. I walked through the gate from the churchyard and there it was.'

'You're not a member of the congregation, are you? I don't remember you being involved in the church.'

Marnie had the impression that Celia did not want her to go. 'No,' she said simply.

'I was just wondering.' Celia said, 'how you came to be passing this way on the day you found the grave.'

'I was taking a walk, getting to know the village. We hadn't long moved in.'

'Ah yes, of course. I couldn't imagine why anyone would be searching among the brambles.' Celia held out a hand to Marnie. 'See you again, no doubt.'

She walked over to a car and drove off. Marnie and the others watched her go and strolled along the pavement.

'What did you say her name was, Angela, your Princess Di look-alike?'

'Devere, Celia Devere. Oh yes, I see what you mean about the *look-alike*. It's the hair, I suppose.'

'Same hair, same colouring, same style. Same car too: Audi convertible. It's odd that I've never seen Knightly Court, or even heard of it.'

'Not really, Marnie. You approach it from a road that only leads to their house and grounds. They also have a gate into the churchyard, further round.'

Anne joined in. 'Manor houses usually had their own private entrance, didn't they? Did the Devere family build the church?'

Angela frowned in concentration. 'I don't think they go back that far. Randall will know the history, if you're interested. I think they took over the manor at about the time of Henry VIII, or thereabouts.'

'And her husband's the lord of the manor?'

'Oh no. It's his father, old Marcus Devere, who owns the place. Celia and her husband live in one wing. It's a very big house.'

They arrived at Marnie's car.

'Did the police say who they thought it might be in Sarah's grave? Presumably her coffin is down there as well?'

Angela grimaced. 'It's horrible, Marnie. They found human remains, partly wrapped in some sort of material, resting on top of Sarah's coffin.'

'You saw them?'

Angela's eyes flickered towards Anne. 'Yes, we both did. They couldn't identify the ... whoever it was. The body was little more than skin and bones in what looked like a shroud.'

'Well, this has been a wasted journey for me, as it turns out. I expect I'll get back to find the police in their usual parking place in the courtyard.'

'Usual place?' Angela looked puzzled. 'The detective said he had to speak to Henry Tutt in private without delay. He wanted to see all the tools in his shed as a priority.'

Marnie took the car keys from her pocket. 'That figures.'

'He asked if I knew your phone number.'

Marnie laughed. 'I thought the police know it by heart.'

'Do you know this officer then, Marnie?'

'Let me guess, was it Chief Inspector Bartlett or Sergeant Marriner?'

'Neither of those. Let me think. What did he say his name was?' Angela reflected. 'Binns, yes, DS Ian Binns. That's it.'

Anne made a faint snorting sound as if she had suppressed a sneeze. Marnie pulled the car door open.

'That's a new one on me. Binns. Never heard of him. Oh well, a pleasure in store, no doubt.'

On the drive back to Glebe Farm, Marnie heard another odd sound from Anne and glanced across to see her struggling to control her expression.

‘Are you laughing, Anne? What’s so funny?’

‘Binns!’ Anne exclaimed. ‘It’s a good job he works here and not in London.’

Marnie looked totally blank. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘Really not, Marnie? If he were in the Met, he’d be ... Binns of the Yard!’ Anne shrieked like a fishwife.

Marnie laughed, relieved that Anne could see the funny side of things. She had the feeling that the euphoria would not last.