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THE DEVIL'S DICE

Written by Roz Watkins

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The Devil's Dice

Roz Watkins



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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1
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For my parents.

Thank you for your support, encouragement,
and advice on how to kill people.

PROLOGUE

The man clambered into the cave on shaking legs, sucked in a lungful of stale air and stared wide-eyed into the blackness. When the dark mellowed, he shuffled inside and sank onto the seat that a long-dead troglodyte had hewn into the cave wall. The familiar coldness seeped through his trousers and into his flesh. The discomfort pleased him.

He fished out his torch and stood it upright, so the light beamed up and bounced onto the glistening floor. Bats hung above him, their tiny feet grasping at the rock, furry bodies tucked into cavities.

The solitude was soothing. No judgemental glances from colleagues. No clients clamouring for his attention like swarms of angry insects. No wife shooting arrows of disappointment his way.

He placed the book by his side. Eased the cake from his pocket, pulled open the crinkly plastic wrapper and took the soft weight in his hand. He hesitated; then brought it to his lips, bit firmly and chewed fast. Another two bites and it was gone.

The air went thick. His throat tightened. He leant back against the cave wall. There wasn't enough oxygen. He gasped. Clamped his eyes shut. An image of his long-dead mother slid into his head. Slumped in her wheelchair, head lolling to one side. And an earlier one – way back when his memories flitted like fish in shining water – smiling down at him and walking on her legs like a normal parent.

He rose. Stumbled to the back of the cave, grasped at the ferns

on the wall, fell against them. His stomach clenched and his upper body folded forwards. He was retching, choking.

More snapshots in his head. Kate's face on their honeymoon. Beaming in the light of a foreign island, laughing and raising a glass to sun-chapped lips. He gasped. Air wouldn't come. Drowning. That time in Cornwall, still a child. Beach huts against the bright blue sky and then the waves throwing him down. Dragging him along the sea bed, his terror bitter and astonishing.

He crashed to the cave floor. An image of a childhood cat, orange-furred and ferocious, but loved so much. The cat dead on the lane. Now a girl hanging deep in the Labyrinth, the noose straight and still. Please, not his girl.

A terrible burning, like maggots burrowing into his cheeks. He clawed at his face, nails hacking into skin, gouging into eyes.

Blackness coming in from above and below. The image of his mother again, in bed, both emaciated and swollen. Suffocating. Pleading.

Chapter 1

I accelerated up the lane, tyres skidding in the mud, and prayed to the gods of murder investigations. *Please bestow upon me the competence to act like a proper detective and not screw up in my new job.*

The gods were silent, but my boss's voice boomed from the hands-free phone. 'Meg, did you get the details? Body in a cave... almond smell... philosophy book...'

I squinted at the phone, as if that would help. Richard's monologue style of conversation meant he hadn't noticed the bad signal. Had he really said 'philosophy'? Our usual deaths were chaotic and drunken, with absolutely no philosophy involved.

Another snatch of Richard's voice. 'Scratches on his face...' Then the line went dead.

I swerved to avoid a rock and dragged my attention back to the road, which climbed between fields sprinkled with disgruntled-looking sheep and edged with crumbling dry-stone walls. A mist of evidence-destroying drizzle hung in the air. As the farmland on the left merged into woods, I saw a couple of police vehicles in a bleak parking area, and the sat nav announced that I'd reached my destination.

I pulled in and took a moment to compose myself. Of course it was terrible that a man was dead, but if he'd had to die, at least he'd done it in an intriguing way, and when I happened to be nearby. I was an Inspector now. I could handle it. *Mission 'Reinvent*

Self in Derbyshire’ was on track. I took a fortifying breath, climbed from the car, and set off along a corridor marked with blue and white tape.

The path sloped up towards the base of an abandoned quarry. I trudged through the fallen leaves, the mud emphasising my limp and sucking at my feet with an intensity that felt personal. I needed to rethink my fitness regime, which mainly consisted of reading articles in *New Scientist* about the benefits of exercise. It wasn’t cutting it in my chubby mid-thirties.

Through the trees I saw the face of a cliff, tinted pink by the evening light. An area around its base was enclosed by ribbons of tape stretched between rocks and shade-stunted oaks, and a police tent squatted just outside. I walked over and encased my genetic matter in a protective body suit, face mask, overshoes and two pairs of gloves.

The duty sergeant was a bearded man who looked slightly too large for his uniform.

‘Sergeant Pearson,’ he said. ‘Ben. No evidence trampled. All under control.’

I didn’t know him, but I recognised the name. According to the (admittedly unreliable) Station grapevine, he was extensively tattooed. Nothing was visible but apparently his torso was completely covered and was the subject of much fascination, which just demonstrated the poor standard of gossip in the Derbyshire force.

‘DI Meg Dalton,’ I said, and looked around the taped area. There was no-one who was obviously dead.

Ben pointed to the cliff. ‘In the cave house.’

A narrow set of steps, smooth and concave through years of use, crawled sideways up the face of the cliff. At the top, about fifteen feet up, a dark, person-sized archway led into the rock.

‘There’s a house up there, burrowed into the rock? With a corpse in it?’

‘Yep,’ Ben said.

‘That’s a bit creepy.’

Ben squeezed his eyebrows together in a quick frown. ‘Oh. Have you heard...?’ He glanced up at the black entrance to the cave.

‘Heard what?’

‘Sorry. I thought you said something else. Never mind. It’s not important.’

I sighed. ‘Okay, so what about our iffy body?’

‘Pathologist said he died within the last few hours. And SOCO have been up.’ He nodded towards a white-swathed man peering at what looked like a pile of vomit at the base of the cliff.

‘Who’s been sick?’

‘The dog. Seems to have eaten something nasty.’

‘The dog?’

‘That’s how they found the body. Bloke lost his dog. Searched everywhere for it. Eventually heard noises up there.’ Ben thumbed at the gap in the rock. ‘Climbed up, saw the body, found the dog licking something.’

‘I hope it wasn’t tucking into the corpse?’

‘It was a Labrador, so I don’t suppose it would have turned it down. But I think it was the plastic wrapper from a cake or something. Looks like it might have been poisoned.’

‘Is the dog okay? Where’s the owner? Has someone taken a statement from him?’

‘It’s all here for you. They’ve gone to the vet, but the dog seems fine. Only ate a few crumbs, he thought.’

‘Interesting location for a body,’ I said. ‘I’ve always been kind of fascinated by cave houses.’

Ben inched towards the cliff and touched the rock. ‘This area’s riddled with caves. Not many of them were ever lived in, of course.’ He hesitated as if wondering whether to say more, given that a corpse was waiting for my attention.

‘I’d better press on,’ I said, although I wasn’t looking forward to getting my bad foot up the stone steps. Besides, there was something unsettling about the black mouth of the cave. ‘What were you going to say earlier? When I said it was creepy?’

Ben laughed, but it didn't go to his eyes. 'Oh, don't worry. I grew up round here. There was a rumour. Nothing important.'

'What rumour?'

'Just silliness. It's supposed to be haunted.'

I laughed too, just in case he thought I cared. 'Well, I don't suppose our man was killed by a ghost.' I imagined pale creatures emerging from the deep and prodding the corpse with long fingers. I forced them from my mind. 'I was told the dead man smells of almonds. Cyanide almonds?'

'Yep, slightly. You only really get the almondy smell on a corpse when you open up the stomach.' Ben's stance changed to lecture-giving – legs wide apart and chest thrust forward. I hoped he wasn't going to come over all patronising on me. I wasn't even blonde any more – I'd dyed my hair a more intelligent shade of brown, matched to my mum's for authenticity. But I was stuck with being small and having a sympathy-inducing limp.

'Yes. Thanks. I know,' I said, a little sharply. 'So, do we have a name?'

Ben glanced at his notes. 'Peter Hugo Hamilton.'

'And he was dead when he was found?'

'That's right. Although I've seen deader.'

'Can you be just a little bit dead?'

Ben folded his arms. 'If there are no maggots, you're not that dead.'

'Okay, I'll have a look.' I edged towards the steps and started to climb. A few steps up, I felt a twinge in my ankle. I paused and glanced down. Ben held his arms out awkwardly as if he wanted to lever my bottom upwards, a prospect I didn't relish. I kept going, climbing steadily until I could just peer into the cave. A faint shaft of light hit the back wall but the rest of it was in darkness. I waited for my eyes to adjust, then climbed on up and heaved myself in.

A musty smell caught in my throat. The cave was cool and silent, its roof low and claustrophobic. It was the size of a small room, although its walls blended into the darkness so there could have

been tunnels leading deeper into the rock. A tiny window and the slim door cast a muted light which didn't reach its edges. I pulled out my torch and swooped it around. I had an irrational feeling that something was going to leap out of the darkness, or that the corpse was going to lunge at me. I scraped my hair from my clammy face and told myself to calm the hell down and do my job.

The dead man lay at the back of the cave, his body stretched out straight and stiff. One hand clutched his stomach and the other grasped his throat. I shone my torch at his face. Scratches ran down his cheeks and trickles of blood had seeped from them. The blood gleamed bright, cherry red in the torch light.

A trail of vomit ran from the side of the man's mouth onto the cave floor.

I crouched and looked at his fingers. They were smeared red. Poor man seemed to have scratched at his own face. Under the nails were flecks of green, as if he'd clawed his way through foliage.

Resting near one of the man's bent arms was a book – *The Discourses of Epictetus*.

A plastic wrapper lay on the stone floor. I could just read the label. *Susie's Cakes. Dark chocolate and almond*. I lowered myself onto my hands and knees and smelt the wrapper, wishing I hadn't given up Pilates. I couldn't smell anything, but I didn't know if I was one of the lucky few who could smell cyanide.

I stood again and shone my torch at the wall of the cave behind the man's body. Water seeped from a tiny crack in the cave roof, and in the places where light from the door and window hit the wall, ferns had grown. Some were crushed where it looked as if the man had fallen against them, and others had been pulled away from the cave wall.

I felt a wave of horror. This was a real person, not just a corpse in an interesting investigation. He was only about my age. I thought about his years lost, how he'd never grow old, how his loved ones would wake up tomorrow with their lives all collapsed like a sink-hole in a suburban garden.

I breathed out slowly through my mouth, like I'd been taught, then stepped closer and pointed my torch at the area where the ferns had been flattened. Was that a mark on the stone? I gently pulled at more ferns with my gloved hands, trying to reveal what was underneath. It was a carving, clearly decades old, with lichen growing over the indentations in the rock like on a Victorian gravestone. It must have been completely covered until the dying man grasped at the ferns.

Something pale popped into my peripheral vision. I spun round and saw a SOCO climbing into the cave house. His voice cut the silence. 'We found a wallet with his name and photo driving licence. And a note. Handwritten. It said, *P middle name.*' He showed me a crumpled Post-it, encased in a plastic evidence bag.

'Has the back wall been photographed, where he pulled at the ferns?'

The man nodded.

'Okay, let's see what's under there.' I pointed at the marks I'd seen in the rock.

Together we tugged at the ferns, carefully peeling them off the cave wall.

The SOCO took a step back. 'Ugh. What's that?'

We pulled away more foliage and the full carving came into view. My chest tightened and it felt hard to draw the cold cave air into my lungs. It was an image of The Grim Reaper – hooded, with a grinning skull and skeletal body, its scythe held high above its head. The image was simply drawn with just a few lines cut into the rock, but it seemed all the more sinister for that. It stood over the dead man as if it had attacked him.

'Hold on a sec,' the SOCO said. 'There's some writing under the image. Is it a date?' He gently tore away more ferns.

I crouched and directed my torch at the lettering in the rock. A prickling crept up my spine to the base of my neck. 'Not a date,' I said.

The SOCO leant closer to the rock, and then froze. 'How can

that be? That carving must be a good hundred years old – the writing the same – and covered up for years before we cut the foliage back.’ His voice was loud in the still air, but I heard the tremor in it. ‘I don’t understand... The dead man’s initials?’

I didn’t understand either. I stepped away from the cave wall and wiped my face with my green-stained gloves.

Carved into the stone below the Grim Reaper image were the words, ‘Coming for PHH’.

Chapter 2

I emerged and climbed down from the cave, backwards, trying not to slip on the worn stone. Relieved to be outside, I jumped awkwardly down the final few steps and enjoyed the smell of damp trees and the feel of solid ground and daylight.

Ben sidled up. 'What do you think?'

What did I think? I had no idea. 'The dead man's initials are cut into the cave wall,' I blurted. 'But they look like they've been there for decades.'

Ben jerked his head back and wiped his forehead. 'No. It can't be.'

I felt a shiver of unease. 'What do you mean?'

'It's...'

Ben took a step sideways. 'I don't like to talk about it.'

'Well, if it might be relevant to our body, you'd better talk about it.'

'You know the Labyrinth? On the other side of the valley.'

I shook my head. 'What about it?'

Ben opened his mouth and paused. 'Okay. It's a vast cave system below the Devil's Dice, you know, the rock formation. It's not a good place. The tunnels go for miles and miles. Some of it's underwater. And there's a noose in a cavern deep inside. Teenagers go there to commit suicide.'

I felt a flush of adrenaline, hot then cold. Why was he telling me this? I didn't want to know.

Ben continued. ‘The rumour is – if you can’t find the noose, it’s your sign you should live.’

I stared at the light filtering through the trees, feeling the familiar thickness in my throat. I couldn’t let it get to me. I was over all that now. Reinvented. I firmed up my stomach. ‘And the relevance of this?’

‘So, the point is, if you *can* find the noose, they say you find your initials have already been cut into the cave wall behind it.’

‘Cut into the wall by someone?’

‘They’re said to appear on their own.’

‘Have you been there?’

Ben hesitated, then licked his lips and nodded. ‘We tried to save a girl. We were too late. I’m a caver – I should have got to her quicker.’ He looked clammy and kind of avocado coloured. He pressed his hands against his stomach. ‘I could never go back there. Never.’

I tried to stop myself picturing the noose hanging still and straight, deep inside a cavern. My hands clenched into fists, nails digging into palms. ‘And the initials?’

‘Well, there were initials engraved into the cave wall. Lots of them. They looked old. We didn’t check for our girl’s.’

‘So it’s not a recent thing?’

‘It started in the times of the witch trials, apparently. If a girl was suspected of being a witch, she’d be led into the Labyrinth. If they could find the noose, then her initials would already be on the wall behind, and she’d be forced to hang herself. If they couldn’t find the noose, she was innocent, but she had to find her own way out.’

‘Jesus.’

‘I know. So then in Victorian times, there was a spate of girls going in to commit suicide.’

‘And this one more recently?’

He shifted from one foot to the other. ‘Yes. It was about ten years ago.’

I imagined the cave wall, covered with the initials of dead people.

‘If people kept hanging themselves, why didn’t someone get rid of the damn noose?’

‘They put bars across the cave entrance after... that girl. But you can still get in from above, if you know how.’

★

Two hours later, fully prepped and preened, DCI Richard Atkins and I walked into the incident room back at the Station. The large quantity of cops crammed into a small space had given the room the fugginess of damp trainers and wet dogs, but the electricity of a suspicious death zapped around underneath.

A board at one end was covered with photographs of the dead man and his surroundings. I stepped forward to take a closer look while Richard bustled to and fro pinning names and assignments onto a grey board opposite. Low tech, but at least it wouldn’t crash.

DS Craig Cooper was peering at the photos and invading my personal space. Craig had worked his way up in the traditional manner and seemed to be the worst kind of old-fashioned police bloke – casually homophobic, with a fifty-inch TV, a subscription to Sky Sports, and a plastic-headed wife. I suspected he felt entitled to the job I’d been given, and I didn’t know how to handle him. I folded my arms into a defensive position.

‘Okay!’ Richard strode to the front of the room. He’d removed his jacket, and dark marks stained his armpits. His face glistened. I slid into what I judged was an appropriate second-in-command spot.

‘We have a male in his thirties, Peter Hamilton, found today in a cave house fifteen foot up a cliff face in Eldercliffe quarry.’ Richard looked at his notes. ‘Time of death around the middle of the day. We’re waiting on lab results and the post mortem but early suggestions are he was killed by cyanide poisoning.’

A rumble of voices filled the room. They liked the cyanide, with its hints of Agatha Christie.

‘In a cave house?’ DS Jai Sanghera squinted his surprise. ‘Fifteen foot up a cliff face?’

Jai was a lapsed, un-turbaned and de-bearded Sikh. He’d always appeared mild-mannered, but was apparently prone to occasional explosive incidents which no one had ever witnessed but everyone seemed to know about.

‘Yes, Jai,’ Richard said testily. ‘It’s a cave, and people used to live in it. You have to climb steps to get there. We’re pretty sure he went up alive.’

‘Unless the murderer was the reigning Mr Universe,’ Craig said.

‘Yes, yes, or the victim was a zombie, climbing glassy-eyed and un-dead up to the cave house.’ Richard was in a creative mood.

‘Did it to himself then.’ Craig’s tone was scathing. He clearly had little time for the suicidal.

‘We don’t know. There were some odd things about it. Meg’ll fill you in.’

I moved sideways into the hot spot; steeled myself. An unnerving smirk crept across Craig’s fleshy face.

I told them about the probably poisoned cake, the carving on the cave wall, and the strange fact of the man’s initials appearing under it.

‘Was it home-made or shop-bought cake?’ Jai jiggled his leg up and down as if he was keen to sprint off and get started.

‘Bloody hell, Jai, have you been on the speed again?’ Craig said.

‘We don’t know for sure.’ I ignored Craig. I’d noticed that was what Richard did – his years of experience hadn’t given him a more advanced strategy. ‘The wrapper had a paper label stuck to it saying “Susie’s Cakes” and it had a “best before” date months away.’

‘Interesting,’ Jai said, also ignoring Craig. ‘What’s the history of the cave house?’

‘That bit of cliff hasn’t been quarried since pre-Victorian times.

They think the cave house was created in the mid 1800s and people lived in it until about fifty years ago.'

Jai said, 'I heard it was supposed to be haunted.'

Craig snorted.

'It could be relevant,' I said. 'If it affects people's behaviour.'

'It's why no one goes in there,' Jai said. 'No kids or tramps or anything.'

Craig made ridiculous *X-Files* noises. But Jai was right about no one going in the cave house. There'd been none of the usual beer cans, fag-butts or tortured teenage poetry.

Richard elbowed me out of the way. 'Thank you, Jai, but I don't think this man was killed by a ghost. Anyway, back to the cake.' He swung his gaze around the room like Derren Brown about to reveal something astonishing. 'We've already tried to trace "Susie's Cakes" and there seems to be no such company. Unless it's incredibly obscure.'

'Won't be obscure for long if they put cyanide in their cakes,' Jai said. Gentle snickering passed through the room. Richard shot Jai a disapproving look.

'Okay.' Jai pursed his lips as if to emphasise that he was now being serious. 'So someone put cyanide in the cake and made it look like shop-bought so he'd think it was okay and eat it? So, we're talking murder, not suicide?'

'Bit hasty there, Jai.' Craig folded his chunky arms over his fledgling beer gut. 'It could be suicide but he made it look like murder so his dependants still get his life insurance.'

'If he gave a shit about his family, he wouldn't have killed himself,' Jai said. I took an audible breath before I could stop myself and Jai glanced at me, his face turning purple. I smiled weakly at him and mouthed reassurances. I didn't want people walking on eggshells around me.

'Yes,' I said, trying to take control again. 'It could be murder or suicide or deliberate contamination of cakes.'

‘If it’s not suicide, it’s probably the wife.’ Richard had recently been through a difficult divorce.

‘Yes, I’m keeping an open mind too.’ I couldn’t let that go, but statistically speaking he was probably right.

‘Who found him?’ Jai was bouncing his leg again, probably just to annoy Craig now.

‘A Labrador. It was after the cake.’

‘Is it okay?’

‘Didn’t think your lot liked dogs,’ Craig said.

I smiled at Jai. ‘He’s fine. We think he only ate—’

‘The dog’s fine, Jai.’ Richard rocked on his heels. ‘It’s admirable that you’re all so concerned about our loyal canine friends, but we do have a dead man as well as a slightly queasy dog.’

‘So he died in a haunted cave,’ Jai said. ‘And there was a hundred-year-old carving on the cave wall that seemed to predict his death?’

I gave a slow, deliberate nod.

Jai had stopped fidgeting. ‘Do we need to call an exorcist?’



We ended the briefing and everyone dispersed to do their stuff. I turned for another look at the photographs, and sensed Craig standing behind me, too close again.

‘I hope you’re up to this,’ he said.

I spun round. ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

I felt the blush come over me, hot and sharp like needles.

‘Are you alright?’ Craig said. ‘You’re sweating like a paedo in a Santa suit.’

‘Yes, thank you, Craig, I’m perfectly fine.’

He took a step closer. His breath smelt of mint and stale garlic. ‘Don’t worry,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll be keeping an eye on you.’