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The Corpse's Tale

Katherine John

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CHAPTER ONE

'Here's to Anna Harris. The next Catherine Zeta Jones to head for Hollywood from Wales.' Bob Evans, the richest farmer in Llan, lifted his glass to an eye-catching blue-eyed blonde. Anna was sitting, surrounded by women at a corner table in the bar of the Angel Inn.

'Thank you, Mr Evans.' Anna lifted her glass in return and every customer in the bar did the same. 'But I have three years in Drama School before I can think of Hollywood.'

'You'll get there, love.' Rita James, the landlord's wife, bustled over and collected empty glasses from Anna's table. 'I was only saying the other day, Anna's too pretty and talented to live out her life in a small village like Llan.'

'You deserve your scholarship, Anna,' Judy Oliver, the vicar's wife, agreed. 'Although I don't know what I'm going to do for a leading lady in the dramatic society after September.'

'Slap more greasepaint on the older members,' her sister-in-law Angela George, a police officer's wife, quipped. 'That's a

stunning watch, Anna. It's like yours isn't it, Judy?'

'Similar,' Judy agreed.

'Isn't it gorgeous?' Anna held out her hand so they could admire the gold and diamond bracelet watch.

'Birthday present?' Angela asked.

Anna winked. 'From a secret admirer.'

'Say no more. I don't like romantic stories – they make me realize what I'm missing.' Rita carried the glasses into the kitchen where her plump, middle-aged husband, Tyrone, was refilling the ice bucket.

'Bob Evans is a dirty old man.' Rita dumped the tray on the draining board. 'He watches every move Anna Harris makes.'

'As does every man around here, love.' Tyrone shook more cubes into the bucket. 'There's no harm in looking. Anna's pretty enough to set any man's hormones raging, even one on the brink of the grave.'

'Which Bob Evans soon will be, if he carries on drinking at the rate he is.'

'Be glad he decided to spend his retirement here. Half our weekly profits are down to him.'

'Anna Harris is young enough to be his granddaughter.'

'And she'll be gone from here for good in a

couple of weeks, more's the pity.' Tyrone returned to the bar.

Anna finished her drink and draped her shawl around her shoulders.

'You're not going? I was just about to get in another round,' Angela complained.

'My parents are away at an antiques fair. I promised I'd open the shop in the morning.'

'Let's hope the fine weather brings out the tourists. The church fund could do with a boost.' Judy set up a stall every Saturday outside the church gate and sold honey and donated local produce to raise money.

'So could the shop. The more money Dad makes, the more generous he'll be to his poor student daughter. Goodnight everyone.'

Before Anna closed the door she heard Bob Evans say, 'Nice girl, that one. Got a kind word for everyone.'

She shuddered. She'd never liked Bob Evans. Even as a little girl she'd felt he was mentally undressing her.

She walked through the car park. The night air was warm, still and scented with roses and lavender. Lights shone in the rows of cottages and shops that bordered the road, but the village square was deserted. The medieval market place was shrouded in darkness

beneath its slate roof. She loved Llan, its picture-postcard prettiness and friendly neighbourliness. She'd been fortunate to have been born and brought up in the place but it was time to move on. July was almost over; another month and she'd be living a new life in a city. If she was successful, she'd never spend another summer here.

Laughter from the Angel echoed behind her when she crossed the road. She rubbed a smudge from the corner of the glass in front of the church notice board and saw her mirrored reflection. Her long blonde hair shimmered silver in the moonlight and her pastel calf-length frock floated lightly around her slim figure. She pictured herself on stage – Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – or even better, Juliet.

She looked up and down one last time. Seeing no one, she opened the gate and ran up the path that led between the tombstones to the church. It was a shortcut the whole village used. The church was situated between the pub and shops on one side and rows of cottages on the other. It was easier to walk across the churchyard than around it.

Lost in thoughts of her glittering future, she passed the small shed behind the vestry at the

back of the church. A hand shot out and clamped over her mouth. Helpless, unable even to scream, she was yanked into darkness, beneath a yew tree, too deep for moonlight to reach. The man whispered her name into her ear and lifted a finger to his lips before releasing her.

She locked her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. He swung her off her feet and carried her to a raised tomb built against the church wall. Their figures merged and slipped low into the darkness.

Snatches of conversation continued to drift into the village square from the inn. The clock in the church tower struck ten and a dozen women tumbled out of the pub. They lingered, laughing and joking for a few minutes before heading off in different directions.

A man, thickset, heavily built, left the row of cottages on the opposite side of the church to the inn, opened the gate and shambled into the churchyard. Stooping low, he clicked his fingers and rattled a lead. He called out to every rustle in the shrubs planted among the graves. When he reached the gate that faced the Angel, he turned and retraced his steps.

He sobbed and wiped his eyes as he closed the gate behind him. He headed down the

lane, past the cottages, still rattling the lead and calling out to every shadow that moved in the puddles of moonlight.

Tyrone ushered the last customers from the Angel and locked the doors. Men and women shouted "goodnight" before dispersing. Half a dozen women linked arms and danced into the market singing "I Whistle a Happy Tune".

One by one, the lights in the cottages and pub were extinguished. Cats prowled the street and gardens. A fox trotted across the churchyard, stopped and sniffed, only to run off at speed when a dog barked.

The figures in the shadows at the back of the church rose. They separated and merged again briefly before separating one final time. The man walked away quickly, towards the back of the churchyard. He vaulted the wall. Soon, he was lost to sight in a copse of trees.

Anna sat on the tomb and began to fasten the row of buttons on the bodice of her dress. An owl screeched and swooped low over a scuttling in the hedgerow of a cottage garden. She froze.

The gate at the cottages side of the yard creaked and Anna shrank against the wall. Footsteps crunched over the gravel path. They

passed the church but she didn't move until she heard the gate close opposite the inn. Jumping down from the tomb she moved her feet over the grass, searching for her shoes. She found one, picked it up and slipped it on, lifting her leg to hook the back over her heel.

She sensed movement, glanced up, and saw the glint of reflected moonlight above her head. Before she had time to register what it was, it crashed down. She fell, swallowed by agonizing, unbearable pain. Lights swirled before her eyes. Unable even to crawl, she reached out, grabbed flesh and dug in her nails.

Her fingers weakened. The pools of moonlight merged with the shadows into unrelieved blackness. As the colour bled from the scene, so did her pain.

Badgers prowled, knocking over bins in search of food. The owl returned to its roost in a barn. Foxes rooted in the mess the badgers had left. But all was quiet when the first rays of the sun touched the eastern hills. It rose steadily and when the church clock struck five the valley was bathed in soft, golden light.

Tom the baker was the first to leave home. Dressed in his white overall, his chef's cap pushed to the back of his head, he closed his

front door at five minutes past five and walked to his shop two doors up from the pub. Ten minutes later his apprentice hurtled down the road and banged on the shop door.

At six o'clock a van dropped off a bundle of newspapers outside the general store and Post Office. Three boys from the council houses arrived just as Gareth Morris, Postmaster, newsagent and store manager opened the door.

At half past six, the boys were out on the road with their newspaper-filled sacks. The church clock struck seven, the postman appeared and David "Dai Helpful" Morgan left his cottage in Church Row. He blew a kiss to his mother and crossed to the churchyard, his puppy, Sammy running at his heels.

Dai felt good. His mam had cooked him his favourite breakfast of bacon, eggs and leek and pork sausages. He'd chopped only half the load of logs Mr Jones had donated to the church and chopping was his favourite job. And his mam was roasting a chicken for dinner.

"Dai Helpful", as he was known to everyone in Llan, was thirty years old. He knew he was different from other men. His mother had explained that his brain had been starved of oxygen when he was born. That made him slower than most and not as clever. But his

mam had taught him to be grateful for his good home and kind friends and neighbours.

The vicar, Mr Tony, employed him three days a week. Dai enjoyed keeping the church clean and the graveyard tidy. In summer he was offered more odd gardening jobs than he could do. In winter he walked people's dogs along with his own. And there was always someone who needed wood chopped, or trees trimmed. Mr and Mrs Harris, who lived next door to him and his mam, paid him to work in their antique shop on auction days to help with the lifting. Most weeks, he earned more than enough to pay his mam for his keep and buy his clothes and the odd pint of beer.

He headed for the shed where he kept his tools, then remembered he hadn't put his axe away the day before. He'd left it in the chopping block behind the shed. He hoped a child hadn't found it and hurt themselves.

Something glittered on the path and he picked it up. It was an earring, a gold one. There was dirt on it and he tried to rub it clean but the mark wouldn't come off. Sammy bounded ahead. He dropped the earring into his pocket and ordered Sammy back sharply. He was cross with Sammy for running off the

night before. His Mam had told him to have more patience because the dog was young. But his last dog, Toby, had never run off, not even when he'd been a puppy.

Sammy slunk back with his tail between his legs. Dai crouched to pat him and saw a girl's legs behind the shed. He leaned forward. She was lying on the grass next to a tomb. An axe – his axe, he recognised the marks on the handle – in her head. He was so frightened he couldn't breathe.

He knew he should try to help her. The axe must be hurting her, so he lifted it. It came out easily. Too easily. He fell back on the path and cried out. His hands and shirt were covered with blood. And the girl still hadn't moved.

He looked up and saw Mr Tony staring at him.

'Someone put my axe in her head, Mr Tony. I took it out.'

The vicar's eyes rounded in horror.

'It wasn't me that put my axe in her head, Mr Tony. She'll tell you.' Dai looked back at the girl. Her head was covered in blood. She was naked. His mam had told him it wasn't right to look at naked girls. He turned away. But he could still see her foot. A fly landed on her toe. She still didn't move and she was stiff. As stiff

as the animals the people in the village sometimes asked him to bury.

'It wasn't me that did it, Mr Tony,' he whispered. 'It wasn't me.'