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# THE DEAD EX

Written by Jane Corry

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# The Dead Ex

JANE CORRY



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For my husband, who makes me laugh every day,
and to my wonderful, talented, loving children.
Also to my 'babies', who light up my life.

## DAILY TELEGRAPH, *5 NOVEMBER 2018*

A body has been found, washed up on the shore at the outlet of Deadman's Creek on the North Cornwall coast. A police spokesman said that no further details are available at this time.

# PART ONE

Sage, savin, rue, red thyme. People assume that aromatherapy oils are safe. But these little beauties can be highly toxic if used in the wrong way.

Or so some say.

Often it's hard to know the truth.

Take this woman I once knew, who killed the man she loved.

She didn't mean to.

Well, that's what she told the rest of us . . .

He'd been cheating, but he'd promised to give this other woman up.

Then she caught him on the phone.

So she reached for the object closest to hand – a screwdriver, as it happened, which she plunged into his neck.

**Of course she meant to kill him**, I thought at the time.

But now I'm not so sure.

# 1

## *Vicki*
## *14 February 2018*

I unscrew the lid, inhale the deep, heady smell – straight to the nostrils – and carefully measure out three drops into the glass measuring jug. Pure lavender. My favourite. More important, perhaps, this clever little remedy (not to be confused with spike lavender) is renowned for its healthy level of esters, otherwise known, in my business, as 'healing properties'.

Healing? Who am I kidding? Nothing and no one can save me. I might look like a fairly average woman in her forties. But deep down, I'm a walking time bomb.

It could happen any second. You might wait for weeks, maybe months. All quiet. And then, hey presto, along it comes when your guard is down. 'Don't think about it,' they advised me. Easier said than done. Sometimes I liken it to an actress coming off stage to be consoled on her performance even though she can't remember a single damn thing.

Standing on my tiptoes, I reach up to the shelf for a second bottle and add ylang-ylang, or 'poor man's jasmine'. Second-best can be just as good. Or so I tell myself.

But let's be honest here. There is no escape from my underworld.

Now for petitgrain. I take down the third phial carefully, remembering the lesson in which I learned that the contents

are made from the leaves of the bitter orange tree. Blend with grapefruit? Possibly. It depends on the client.

We all behave in different ways, especially in this 'club' of mine. Of course, there are things we can do to minimize damage, but at the end of the day, if something goes wrong, the ultimate price is death. The oils need to be treated with respect in order to minimize the dangers.

I love aromatherapy. Its magic is both distracting and calming.

But tonight isn't about me. It's about my new client. Though she's not a fellow sufferer, her face bears similarities to mine, with those soft creases around her eyes, suggesting laughter and tears, and the slightly saggy, soft-looking pouches underneath them, which she has tried to hide with a light-reflective concealer.

Silently I admire her peach lipstick. I no longer bother with it myself. I always used to wear 'Beautiful Beige' to prove my femininity. The woman before me has blonde hair, tied back loosely with the odd wisp escaping. What I'd give for a colour like that! The 'freckly redhead' tag from school days still stings. But David had loved it. 'My very own beautiful Titian,' he used to say.

Both my client and I wear brave smiles which say, 'I'm fine, really.' But she's not, or she wouldn't be here. And nor would I.

'I just need something to help me relax,' she says. 'I've had a lot of stress.'

It's not my job to be a counsellor. Even so, there are times when I want to interrupt and tell my own story to show these women (I've never had a male client) that they aren't alone. Of course, that wouldn't be wise, because it

might scare them off. And I need them. Not just for my business. But to prove myself.

What happened to the strong, confident woman I used to be? The one who wouldn't take any nonsense. 'Vicki's got breasts *and* balls,' they used to say. But that was in my old life.

Time to go over my client's medical history. 'Are you pregnant?'

I have to ask this question even though her disclaimer form states that – like me – she is forty-six. It's still possible. She gives a short laugh. 'I've done all that. Why do you ask, anyway?'

'There are some aromatherapy oils which aren't suitable for expectant mothers,' I say. I move on swiftly. 'Do you have high blood pressure?'

'No. Though I feel I should have. Can this stuff affect that too?'

She glances with suspicion at the bottles lined up above us with all the colours of the rainbow trapped inside. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. For a minute I'm aged nine, in the small northern mining town where I grew up, reciting them to the teacher. Some patterns you don't forget.

'No, but it's good for me to know. The oils are like medicine.' I hear my tutor's words tripping out of my mouth. 'Very good for you when used appropriately.'

We run through more details. She's declared on the disclaimer form that she has no medical issues. Yet, for some reason, I feel apprehensive.

'Would you like to change?' I suggest. 'I'll leave the room for a few minutes to give you privacy.'

She's clearly nervous. Then again, so are many of my clients who've never had this kind of treatment before. I see her glancing at my certificate on the wall for reassurance.

Vicki Goudman. MIFA. ITEC LEVEL 3.

Member of the International Federation of Aromatherapists. Sometimes I don't believe it myself. It's certainly not what I'd planned.

When I go back into the room, my client (or lady, as I was taught to say) is lying face down on the treatment couch as instructed. Her bare shoulders, which reveal a dark mole on the right blade, are thin. Scrawny. Her skin is cold even though I've got the heating on high at this time of year.

'I haven't felt like eating much recently,' she says. 'I've lost weight.'

Trauma does that to you. Or it can make you pile on the pounds. I've done both. I turn on the CD player. The angel music is soft. Healing. Sleepy.

'Mmmm,' she says in a different voice as I massage the oil in deft circular motions down her spine. 'You've got a real touch. I love that smell. What is it again?'

I repeat the ingredients. Lavender. Ylang-ylang. Petitgrain. Grapefruit juice.

'How do you know what to use?' she asks, her voice muffled because of her position.

'It's a bit like a marriage,' I say. 'You match the oil to the client's needs. And you follow your instinct.'

There's a snort. I think, for a minute, that it's laughter, but then I realize she's crying. 'If I'd listened to my own instinct,' she sobs, 'I might have kept my husband.'

There it is again. That temptation to give away too

much about yourself. You think you're doing it to put them at their ease. But really it's giving in to your own need. Afterwards, you regret it. The client feels awkward on the next visit. And so do you. This is a business arrangement. Not a friendship.

So I hold back the longing to tell my lady that David and I would have been coming up to our sixth wedding anniversary in a few months. I also resist the temptation to remind myself that it is Valentine's Day. That on our first – and only – one together he had given me a pair of crystal drop earrings which I can no longer bring myself to wear. Instead, I breathe in the lavender and imagine it's wrapped around my body like a protective cloak.

'Sometimes,' I say, kneading the stress knots, 'you have to go through the dark to get to the light.'

My client relaxes more then. I'd like to think that it's my words that have soothed her. But it's the magic. The lavender is getting into my own skin too. That's the thing about oils. They're always the same. A constant.

Unlike love.

'Is there anything in particular stressing you out?' I ask gently.

She gives a *Where do I start?* laugh. 'The kids are driving me crazy, especially the little one. He's impossible.'

'How old is he?'

'Four. Going on ten.'

Now it's *my* skin that goes cold.

'He's in trouble at school for biting this new boy in his class, and the teachers think it's my fault. They've actually asked me if there is violence in our family.'

Is there? The question lies unspoken.

She wriggles slightly on the couch. 'Do you have kids?'

My hands dig deeper into her muscle knots. 'I have a son. He's four too.'

'What's his name?'

'Patrick.'

'Is he a good boy?'

I think of the picture in my pocket.

'He's perfect.'

'You're lucky. Who looks after him when you're working?'

I pause briefly. 'He's with my dad.'

'Really? You hear a lot about grandparents helping out nowadays.'

My thumbs are really pressing down now.

'Actually, that's hurting.'

'Sorry.' I release the pressure with a slight degree of reluctance.

After that we continue in silence with only the angel music in the background. Some like to talk throughout. Others don't say a word. Many begin to confide and then stop, like this one. She might tell me more at the next session. I sense she'll come back. But I hope she won't. She's too nosy.

'Thank you,' she says when I leave her to get dressed. I return to my notes. I write down, in purple ink, the exact treatment and areas of the body which still need attention. Those knots were stubborn. They are often related to the knots in the mind. After David, my shoulders were stiff for months.

'Would you rather have cash or a cheque?' she asks.

'Cheque, please.'

Paper payment – or an electronic transfer – allows me

to be absolutely certain who has paid me and when. My business must be above board. If nothing else, I've learned that.

She puts on her coat. It's cold out there. The wind is rattling the windows.

'I like your place,' she says, looking around as if seeing it properly now she is about to go.

'Thank you.'

I like it too. One joy of being on your own is that you can do exactly as you wish. David had liked modern. I chose a converted ground-floor flat in a Victorian house. My ex was a black-and-white man. My consulting chair is draped with a restful duck-egg blue woollen throw. The lighting is soft. Unlit scented candles (lavender again) line the low table that I painted myself in a creamy white. The pale purple rug, which I take with me every time I move, along with anything else that's portable, disguises the stain on the carpet beneath. No stairs. The front door leads straight onto the street opposite the seafront. There is nothing about my home that could hurt. Unless I choose it to.

'Wish *I* could work from home,' says my client. 'I had to give up my job in the bank after my second child.'

There are pros and cons, I could say. You don't get out enough if you are busy. You don't have office colleagues to talk to. To joke with. To share problems with. A sudden wave of loneliness engulfs me.

'May I make another appointment now?' she says suddenly.

'Sure,' I say, vowing to keep quiet about my own personal situation the next time. No more talk about Patrick.

And that's when the door sounds. I specifically chose a

place with its own front entrance. I also, with the landlord's permission, disconnected the bell. Sharp noises disturb me. A knocker is less strident. But this thud makes me jump.

Why is someone here now, at this time of night? Have I forgotten about another client? Usually I am very careful to write things down, but there have been one or two mistakes recently.

'Would you mind waiting a minute in the studio?' I ask.

It takes a while to open up. I have a thick safety chain and I've double locked it, as always. There's another knock as I search for the key. There it is, on the side table. Once more, I must have forgotten to put it in its place on the hook. Not a good sign.

'Coming,' I call out as the knocker thuds again.

The open door brings in the biting wind with a trace of fog.

I do a double take. A woman is standing on the doorstep brandishing a warrant card. Her face carries all the hallmarks of stress. Immediately my mind springs into action as I mentally concoct a mixture which would soothe her. Lavender. Maybe lemon grass too.

The man next to her is sporting a fawn raincoat. He appears angry. Defensive. I learned to read body language the hard way. Not that it did any good in the end. Neither looks like a possible client.

'May I help you?'

'Vicki Goudman?'

I nod, taking in this man and his strikingly assured air.

'Former wife of David Goudman?' he continues.

I nod again. Less certainly this time.

Now he too is flashing ID at me. 'Detective Inspector Gareth Vine. This is my colleague Sergeant Sarah Brown. May we come in?'

My throat has swollen with apprehension. I run my hands through my hair, which I've started to grow again as part of the 'new me'. Sweat trickles down my back. My mouth is dry.

'What's happened?' I ask.

He ignores the question. 'May I ask when you last saw your ex-husband?'

The question is so unexpected that I cannot think. My right sinus – always partially blocked – now clears itself with shock. I feel a sick knot in the pit of my stomach.

'Years ago. Why?' The sour taste of bile is in my mouth as I speak.

The woman in uniform is staring at me. Her eyes are sharp. Appraising. 'The present Mrs Goudman has reported him missing.'

Sometimes I wonder how it's possible for another woman to carry my name, let alone Tanya, his former secretary, or 'the bitch' as I sometimes call her in my head.

'How long . . . ? When . . . ? Is he all right?'

Even as I ask the last question, I'm aware it's a ridiculous one. If he was OK, they wouldn't be here.

It's the inspector who answers. 'That's what we're trying to ascertain.' He rubs his chin. 'David Goudman has been missing now for fifteen days. His wife is insistent that it is out of character, so we are exploring various lines of enquiry.'

My body begins to twitch. Stress is a significant trigger. So too, is lack of sleep, and even certain music pitches. It

was one of the first things they told me. And if it does go wrong, well, I can't be held responsible for either myself or anyone else.

'You said just now you hadn't seen him for years,' continues the detective. 'Can you be more precise than that?'

'Since 2013.' I swallow. 'It's when we got divorced.'

'I see.'

He says this as though he doesn't. Or perhaps he does – all too clearly.

'Where exactly were you on 31 January this year?'

That's easy. I rarely leave this place. 'Here. At home. Or maybe on the seafront. I usually walk along it once a day for some air.'

'Can anyone confirm that?'

I stare hard at him. 'No. I live alone.'

'Any friends who might have seen you out and about?'

'Not been here long enough.'

'Don't you want to check your diary?'

'There's no need.'

There's a brief silence during which I force myself not to speak any more, conscious that I haven't sounded very convincing.

'Mind if we take a look round?' asks the woman.

'I have a client here,' I say.

'Ah yes. I believe you are a masseuse?'

Her manner of speaking suggests that I offer a different kind of service. It wouldn't be the first time that my occupation has been misinterpreted.

'Aromatherapist, actually.'

The man stares at me blankly. Those who aren't familiar

with alternative treatments can easily get the wrong end of the stick.

'I do massage people, but with essential oils.'

As if on cue, there is an 'excuse me' cough behind. My lady has clearly got bored with waiting. 'I can see you are busy.' She glances nervously at my two visitors. 'I'll ring later to make that appointment.'

She slips out into the dark. I suspect I won't see her again. Despite my earlier wish that she wouldn't return, I am not comforted. That one will talk.

I gesture my visitors towards my studio, wondering momentarily whether I've remembered to close the trapdoor fully. Thankfully, I have.

They look suspiciously at the phials of liquid on the shelf above my desk. 'Do you make your own potions?' says the woman.

I resist a smile at her use of a word which suggests witchcraft or black magic. 'We call them essences. Actually, I buy them from a mail-order site.'

'What does this stuff do?' asks the detective.

Just what I'd asked at the beginning. 'Relaxes you. Helps restore memory. Gives you strength.'

The woman is picking up the lavender oil and smelling it. 'I've always wanted to try it out.'

'I can give you my card if you like.'

'We know where you are.'

Of course.

'So you work from home?' says the man.

'I'm registered.' My tone is more defensive now.

It doesn't take long to do the 'tour'. It's a compact, two-bedroom, one-level apartment (one of the bedrooms

having become my studio) right on the seafront, 'boasting easy access to the amenities of Penzance', as described by the estate agents.

'Nice view,' says the woman, looking out at the sea from my bedroom.

It's why I came here. This morning, the water was a particularly striking azure blue. Yesterday it was green. The day before, black. Too dangerous for me to swim, even if I had a wet suit like some of the keen locals.

'You don't miss city life, then?'

It's as though they are purposefully ignoring the elephant in the room.

'David,' I say desperately. 'Where was he when he went missing?'

The woman swivels round. 'We were hoping you could tell us.'

'Why should I know?'

'Come on, Vicki.' It's the detective this time. Voice silky smooth. Reeking of suspicion. 'Mrs Goudman tells us that she saw you near their home in Kingston just before Christmas.' He gets out a notepad. '"Standing at the gate and staring at my house." Those were her exact words.'

'I had an appointment with a consultant,' I say hotly.

His eyes narrow. 'In London? That's a long way to go.'

I shrug. 'The outskirts, actually. He wasn't far from my old house, so I walked past. I felt nostalgic. Anyone would be.'

I note a swift flicker of sympathy in the policewoman's face.

'They'd dug up my roses and replaced them with a

hideous rockery,' I add. I've never cared for rockeries. Too cemetery-like.

'You can prove that?'

'The roses?'

'Your visit to your "consultant". His voice is tight, as if he thinks I'm taking the mickey. I'm not. I'm still livid about those roses. 'Peace', they were called. A beautiful creamy petal with a to-die-for smell.

I reach for my address book and scribble down a name and number. 'There. Ring that.'

'We will.'

'The lounge is through here,' I say, anxious in case they make too close an inspection of another room.

We go into the small lounge with its duck-egg blue throw on the sofa (just like my studio).

'No television?' the woman remarks, looking around.

'No.'

She raises an eyebrow and then hands me a card. I want to turn it down, as she had done earlier to me.

'If you do hear from your ex-husband, please get in touch immediately.'

I nod. They go. I double lock the door. Put the safety chain up. Run to my bedroom.

Then I pick up the phone and dial the number, which is firmly engraved in my head.

'*This is David. You know what to do.*'

My ex-husband's voice is deep. Dark. Comforting, despite everything, in its familiarity.

'Please answer,' I choke. 'It's me.'