

## A Frightfully Fatal Affair

Hannah Hendy lives in a small town in South Wales with her long-suffering wife and two spoilt cats. A professional chef by trade, she started writing to fill the time between shifts. She is the author of The Dinner Lady Detectives series, published by Canelo Crime.

**Also by Hannah Hendy**

**The Dinner Lady Detectives**

*The Dinner Lady Detectives*  
*An Unfortunate Christmas Murder*  
*A Terrible Village Poisoning*  
*A Frightfully Fatal Affair*

*A  
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Affair*

HANNAH  
HENDY

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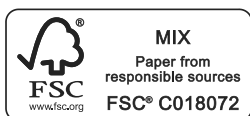
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*For Alan Baker. Thanks for comparing me to Charles Dickens,  
but I think I've got a long way to go!*

## *Prologue*

It isn't always so dark in Dewstow woods. Usually, during an autumn day, light streams through every branch of every tree, as it does in the summer. The short grass and dead leaves on the ground glow gold and orange, like they are on fire. But today the sky is smothered in a gloom and the sun doesn't reach far enough through the trees to make even the slightest difference. It may as well be night.

It's not always so quiet in the woods either. Most days you would meet at least one person if you were to walk the easy few miles through from the little town of Dewstow to its neighbour, Ittonvale. Bump into an acquaintance, or nod agreeably at a dogwalker coming the other way down the well-trodden paths. That is not what today had in store.

Today the air is cold and the breeze whistles through the creaking tree, beneath which the body lies. A dead weight under dead leaves. No longer a person, growing colder and colder. Just a vessel that used to hold something much more. Useless now. Legs and arms draped at horrible angles. Lungs empty. Eyes still open and staring in a terrible unseeing way, waiting for the flies that will surely come and eat them. Buzz over and land on the face that can no longer brush them off. Crawl inside nostrils and lay eggs inside the skin. The circle of life.

Worse still than any of that, the body lies terribly, terribly alone. Though, can you feel lonely when you don't exist anymore? Some questions don't have answers, couldn't possibly have them. Or are only known by those that can no longer tell.

There's a bark of laughter down the path, disturbing the peace, and the sounds of tramping through the trees gets closer and closer. Not long ago there would have been someone here, for it hasn't been long. Still, it lies there, waiting to be found.

## *Chapter One*

‘What on earth’s wrong with that marrow?’ Clementine asked. ‘Did you feed one of the Year Sevens to it?’

Margery chuckled as they watched Summerview School’s deputy head and drama teacher struggling to place the vegetable on the trestle table, which creaked horribly under the weight of it. Rose ignored them both, brushed down her smart trouser suit, turned on her heels and swooped away across the hall, back out through the fire escape to her car. Probably to get another hideously large vegetable, Margery thought. Staff member Seren, Rose’s unlikely best friend, tottered along behind her with her own arms full of misshapen potatoes.

‘She’s got six more sacks of them in the car,’ Seren whispered to Margery as she put them down on the table. ‘I’ve told her she can’t win if she’s a judge, but she keeps saying that rules were meant to be broken.’

Rose barked Seren’s name across the hall and she jumped to attention, scuttling back the way she came.

‘Gosh, we’ve got some competition if even Rose is joining in.’ Margery smiled at her wife.

‘Well, I don’t think we’re going to win anyway.’ Clementine gestured at their own trestle table, with its autumnal-leaf patterned tablecloth and very sparse selection of ugly parsnips and long stringy carrots. They had tried their best, but neither Margery nor Clementine had



ever been particularly green-fingered. The best Margery had ever managed was a few sad strawberries in their garden and a house plant they had managed to keep alive for a few months. Until it had been put on the same schedule as Clementine's dusting, that is, and died sadly of dehydration, forgotten on the windowsill next to the ornamental cats.

'You speak for yourself.' Gloria, Margery's second-in-command, had snuck up behind them both with a basket of her homemade jams. 'I fully intend on winning something this year. I didn't slave over the stove all last night for nothing.'

Summerview School's yearly harvest festival was, as always, being held in the sports hall of Dewstow Leisure Centre. Though that meant that it was open to the public and so members of Ittonvale Comprehensive School were more inclined to show their faces to laugh at the paltry selection the Summerview staff were presenting. This year Mrs Blossom, Head of Drama at Ittonvale, had also managed to force herself onto the judging committee, along with Margery and Clementine's neighbour Dawn Simmonds, and their vague acquaintance and school council member, Mr Fitzgerald. Joining them were the food tech teacher, Mrs Plum, and one of the science teachers, Dr Roberts.

It was a motley crew at best and they were all taking it much too seriously; Clementine had sworn she had seen them all in the library first thing, sharpening pencils and printing elaborate score sheets. Mr Fitzgerald always started his scoring at zero for the first item and then scored everything else around that, meaning that sometimes his sheet was a baffling arrangement of fractions and minus numbers. He said that the first score was the benchmark

for all the other scores to be arranged around, but Margery was convinced he just enjoyed seeing all the confused faces each year. Last year's winning pumpkin had hung in the balance for an extra hour until the cryptic score card had been decoded. It hadn't helped that Mr Fitzgerald had taken a liking to the blackberry wine a teacher in the English department made.

Margery and her team of Education Centre Nourishment Consultants had been dragged into it all again this year, as they were every year, to supply refreshments as well as their own special harvest festival table. Though she always tried to explain that being a dinner lady and a cook didn't mean you necessarily cared about the harvest festival. Their little plot at the bottom of the school grounds had never produced much more than a few sad vegetables and the odd accidental blackberry. In fact, the Year Eight's patch of vegetables towered over it. Margery was sure that nothing could have grown in the shadow of their tomato plants.

The hall was beginning to fill with students, parents and staff members, all of whom looked particularly annoyed to have been kept after work hours for school business, the first term of the year always being the hardest. Once they got back it would be a steady downhill run to Christmas, taking them all with it like a runaway snowball. The first frost of the year had settled in comfortably and it made the town look marvellous.

All the nastiness of the summer holidays was long over – the seaside poisoning case she and Clementine had solved was all neatly squared away. A silly harvest festival seemed a much better prospect than being dead, and besides, she had finally had the plaster cast on her leg removed the week before and was still enjoying the

freedom of movement without a crutch. Before any of the events of the summer, death had been planned for in a very theoretical sense, in the same way that Clementine bought packs of Christmas cards in the January sales. Now that she had somehow managed to evade death, life seemed as real and as close as the paper coffee cups in front of her. There would be far fewer moments to be alive than she would like there to be, even if she lived to one hundred. When she did finally go, she wanted to be able to say, 'I had a great time, thanks for inviting me, I think I'll be off now,' rather than clawing to stay in the world like so many recently departed had.

'We ready?' Part-time dinner lady young Ceri-Ann wandered over with her own basket of dried herbs and lavender, a tray of cakes in her other arm. It was unusual for her to be free to stay behind after work – she was always so busy flitting between her make-up and graphic design businesses, her second year of college and doctor's appointments, but she had managed it today. Margery was glad, they needed all the help they could get.

'You can't carry that in your condition!' Gloria whisked the basket away from her, nearly stumbling at how light it was and plonking it down on their vegetable table. Ceri-Ann put the cakes down on their hot drinks serving table.

'I've got months yet, let me lift stuff,' Ceri-Ann scoffed, but she put her hand on her stomach unconsciously, as though checking the baby was still there. Gloria gave her a stern look that Margery had only seen used on her own children, who were less than half Ceri-Ann's age.

'Good afternoon, everyone!' came the booming voice of the headmaster across the hall. They all turned in surprise. 'Welcome to Summerview School's annual

harvest festival!’ Mr Barrow was tall enough to stare over most of the gathered crowd. He smiled at them all. ‘We’ve got some lovely things on sale today, and all proceeds will go towards the new school minibus for school events and tournaments.’

Mr Evans, the PE teacher, looked particularly pleased beside the headmaster, his large face beaming from ear to ear like a smug frog. His muscular neck seemed non-existent in a bright-yellow football top that seemed to be two sizes too small. His arms hung at his sides like two huge baseball bats. ‘Well, enjoy and don’t forget to enter the raffle!’

There was a brief round of applause, then people began to swarm around the hall. Gloria turned to her in a panic, her black plait whipping around and nearly hitting Clementine in the eyes.

‘Oh god, we aren’t ready!’ Margery cried. Clementine and Gloria began to rearrange the table, nearly folding it shut again in their haste as Ceri-Ann turned on the plug for the soup kettle, which Seren had filled with their homemade butternut squash soup. Sharon and Karen were trying to open the little money lockbox on the harvest table in a panic as Mrs Mugglethwaite, the town gossip-monger, lunged forward with her gang to buy parsnips.

‘Gosh, why does he never give any warning before he opens anything?’ Gloria said as she grasped for the paper cups. ‘Remember when he started the hundred-metre relay before any of the students had even arrived?’

‘Yes, and the first student to get there won.’ Clementine tutted as she rearranged the plastic teaspoons and single-serve sachets of sugar. ‘I think he does it on purpose to keep us on our toes.’

‘Hello, ladies.’

Margery looked up from where she was desperately trying to fumble open the packets of plastic teaspoons and into the face of one of Summerview's newer staff, Mr Weaver, who merely looked amused by their panic. He flipped his wavy hair back from his face, looking more like a film star than a secondary school maths teacher. Margery could see Ceri-Ann and Gloria swooning at the sight of his chiselled jaw and dark hair. Luckily, she and Clementine were immune to his charms or the service in the canteen would collapse into chaos every time he entered to buy his lunch.

'Hello,' Margery said back, hoping her smile didn't look too much like a grimace and the stress was not showing outwardly. 'Would you like some soup, or a coffee?' She waved her arms towards the portable water jugs in front of her. He smiled at her, avoiding looking at the scar that ran through her right eyebrow, past her eye and down over her cheek, like most polite people did since she had acquired it during the summer.

'What've you got milk-wise?' Mr Weaver asked, pointing at the milk jugs with his left hand, his wedding ring glinting in the light. 'I don't really do cow's milk anymore.'

'We've got oat, soya as well, will either of those do?' Margery asked, but he was not looking at her anymore, his eyes drawn across the bustling hall. 'Mr Weaver?'

He finally turned back to her, his eyes wide and startled. 'Oh, no thank you, Margery. I'd better...' He gestured towards the other side of the hall and then strode away as fast as he had arrived.

'Why'd you chase him away, Margery?' Gloria chastised her, beginning to serve drinks to the queue of people that had built up behind Mr Weaver.

‘I didn’t!’ Margery said, as the perpetually track-suited PE teacher approached the table. Today’s sweatshirt and matching trousers had the logo of the town centre’s weightlifting fitness centre embroidered to the front of them.

‘Did I just see Liam over here?’ Mr Evans asked them, looking over in the direction that Mr Weaver had disappeared. He didn’t wait for them to answer before storming after him but Mr Weaver saw him coming and picked up his speed, almost running over to the other side of the hall. The crowd was too packed for him to escape, and Mr Evans caught up to him easily. Mr Evans was red in the face, spit flying from his mouth as he spoke. His hand reached out to grasp at Mr Weaver’s sleeve, Mr Weaver gesticulating madly before he slid through a parting in the crowd to escape. Margery watched Dr Roberts from the science department staring at them, her eyebrows raised.

‘What’s that all about?’ Clementine asked, but any thoughts Margery had about an answer were quickly washed away by Mrs Mugglethwaite’s scream.

‘Fire!’ she shrieked, stabbing her finger towards them.

Margery swung her head around and gasped at the soup kettle billowing with smoke. Ceri-Ann lifted the metal part containing the soup out of the kettle with a cloth as Gloria tried to stop her lifting anything and a plume of smoke followed.

‘We’re actually just announcing a new pope,’ Clementine said, giving Mrs Mugglethwaite a frayed smile. ‘Completely intentional, no need to update the risk assessments.’

‘Seren must have forgotten to put water in the bottom of it,’ Ceri-Ann said, peering into it as the smoke continued to curl out.

‘She’s got to be distracted by something, hasn’t she?’ Margery groaned. Seren suddenly forgetting how to do her job was not what was needed this early in the school year.

‘Yeah, she’s been weird since term started, she keeps rushing off as soon as we finish work. I’m running out of excuses to give Rose when she comes to pick her up,’ Gloria agreed. Gloria had been watching over the kitchen management duties while Margery recovered, but Sharon and Karen also nodded vigorously.

‘Well, we can’t worry about that now.’ Margery sighed over the crowd continuing to bray for coffee. She looked over to where Mr Weaver and Mr Evans had been arguing and found that they had both disappeared.