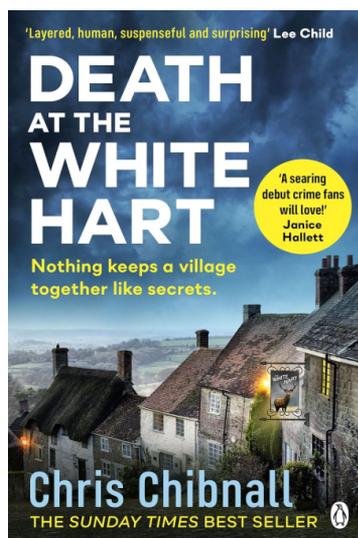


Death at the White Hart

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MICHAEL  JOSEPH
Est. 1925

I

It was dark when Ewan made the return journey.

He felt a familiar relief driving past the sign for Dorset. Ewan and Devon had never got on. As his car grumbled along the empty moonlit road, he fought to keep his mind on what was in front, rather than where he'd just been.

Think about positive things, he told himself. With a bit of luck, the remnants of last night's not-too-dreadful lasagne should still be knocking about at home. Maybe he could find a cold bottle of cider to go with it. A 2 a.m. treat.

As much as he tried to focus his mind on the road ahead, it kept drifting back to the image of his funny, startling mum in her prime, whirling daftly about the kitchen, making him giggle in front of half-eaten fishfingers. The woman he had just visited was barely an echo of that. A shell, reliant on care provided by others. Ewan scratched at his beard, trying to rub away the stab of guilt.

Be more like the dog, he told himself. The dog lives in the present; only alert to now. That's how to cope. (Back home the following afternoon, Ewan shares this thought with his wife, who says, 'The dog shits in the garden. Are you going to do that as well?' and turns her attention back to eBay.)

As the car lumbered over the brow of the hill, Ewan took in the glistening coastline beyond. This was the best section of the drive, any time of day or night. Now, on this September midnight stretch, the world was his alone.

He exhaled, in the manner he'd learned from a long-deleted mindfulness app, appreciating the view of the inky-black water dappled with diamonds of shimmering moonlight. The curve of the bay to his right.

His eyes drifted back to the road, a shocking stab of panic –

– *something in the middle of the road* –

– *you're going to smash into it!* –

He swerved—

The car pulling out of his control—

Sharp, hard brake—

Slam. Jolt. Stop.

Breathe.

The bodywork ticked and creaked in protest at the emergency halt. The engine had stalled at his carelessness.

Ewan checked himself. Spike of adrenaline subsiding.

First thought: *maybe it's a deer.*

Second thought, as he peered through the windscreen: *that's not a deer.*

Ewan's shaking finger fumbled at the car's hazard lights button.

He got out of his car and began to walk hesitantly towards the unmoving shape in the middle of the empty A35, oblivious to the fact he'd left the door open, not hearing the alert repeatedly pinging, nagging its now-absent driver. Ewan didn't notice the flashing hazards turning the dark of night intermittently orange. He was too distracted by the object ahead.

As he approached it, Ewan felt for a moment like he was looking down on himself from above in the night. A tiny lone figure in a vast vista. The smell of grass and sea salt tickled his nostrils. The silence of the night air deafened him.

Ewan approached the object placed across the two lanes of the road. He had not hit it. Momentary relief, immediately compromised by the realization of what the object was.

Not a deer.

A dead body.

A dead man. A dead adult man.

Sitting upright on a high-backed wooden chair. Trussed to it. Seemingly naked, his lower half placed inside an old sack, tied at the waist.

Left here. Like he – *it, the body, the corpse; bloody hell, a corpse* – had been put here, placed deliberately. The chair bisecting the white lines down the middle of the road.

Arranged.

But the arrangement of the corpse on the chair was not the most startling thing.

Attached to his head was a huge crown of deer antlers.

Ewan reached out instinctively to touch them but then realized he probably shouldn't. He pulled his arm back.

He took his phone from his pocket. Hesitated. Was this a 999? Bit late for an ambulance now.

He dialled anyway and told the operator he thought he probably needed the police.

As the call came in, the bedside clock read 03.17. Nicola Bridge was not asleep.

She had managed just under four hours, waking around 2.42 a.m. Since then, she had been lying still, refusing the urge to pick up her phone or turn a light on, instead keeping her head on the pillow and examining the new ceiling. The light from the hall – they still kept it on overnight, despite their son, Ethan, now being seventeen, a habit from his childhood years none of them yet wished to break – was coming through the gap in the door, casting a narrow shaft of light across the floor and the end of the bed.

Nicola had not yet managed an undisturbed night in the new house. Seven weeks and counting. She didn't think it was the house. The house was fine. The bedroom was fine. She even hoped to like it, in time. But she found herself jolting awake around three o'clock every morning.

Angry.

She had always been a light sleeper. That only increased with Ethan's birth, when she had found herself more sensitive to night noise, alert to the needs of her new son. In the years since, undisturbed nights had become panaceas enjoyed only by others, including Mike. When they first got together, she had boggled with admiration at the way he slept: rarely moving, seemingly at peace. He claimed never to dream, either. She had found that suspicious.

She'd learned to live with her own nocturnal wakefulness. Previously she had even liked having the dark to herself. The silence meant she could think, sometimes about work, sometimes about life. It occasionally brought clarity or a new perspective. That had changed since the move. Her 3 a.m. thoughts were no longer ones she wanted to be alone with. Quite the opposite.

She could feel the anger rising as she lay there. The sweep of bedbound emotion usually followed the same pattern. Anger would become resentment, which would slowly slide into self-doubt, guilt, ultimately falling into a pit of profound existential dread, before once again rising up into what she could only describe as a seethe. Her heart would be racing once she hit seethe mode, and this was the moment she would attempt to regulate her breathing.

Some nights she would be lucky and get back to sleep by five or so. Others, she would lie there till seven, having at some point shoved in earphones and started listening to her playlist of songs which took her back to being seventeen and full of hope.

The question that tugged at her, the undertow of every concern as she lay there in the early hours of every morning, was simple: *have I made the right decision? Have I been a fool?*

Her ceiling-staring was harshly interrupted by the buzzing on the bedside table. Nicola was still in the habit of laying her phone, switched to vibrate, on a soft flannel overnight so that any call would disturb only her, as the lighter sleeper of the two. The flannel now was moot, but she hadn't changed the habit. She grabbed the phone quickly, feeling it buzz in

her hand, answered the call and took in the urgency of the voice on the other end of the line.

Detective Sergeant Nicola Bridge listened to the description of what she was being summoned to with rising incredulity.

As she attempted to slip noiselessly out of the bedroom and into the light of the landing, she crashed into two as yet unpacked moving boxes and swore. Ethan must have moved them out of his own way as he stumbled to bed, repositioning them as a trip hazard for anyone else: the oblivious self-regard of a seventeen-year-old expressed in cardboard.

The door of the spare bedroom opened a crack and a bleary-eyed Mike peered out.

‘Sorry, sorry . . .’ whispered Nicola.

‘Everything all right?’ he mumbled back, still half asleep.

‘Got a shout,’ she said, holding up her mobile as documentary evidence.

Mike nodded. ‘Go safe,’ he said, and retreated mole-like to the darkness of the spare room, softly closing the door.

I’m glad *you’re* sleeping fine, thought Nicola uncharitably as she headed downstairs.

At least, she thought as she drove westwards through the night, this hadn’t happened during the day. An obstruction at the top of the A35 just past Wynstone, where the dual carriageway funnelled into a single lane, would bring traffic to a standstill during daylight hours. The A35 was the main artery taking travellers west, shadowing the coast. It got busy fast and blocked even faster. With a bit of luck and effort, an

incident at night could be cleared before the morning traffic began.

At the site, she got out of her car into the chill night air, clasping the tea that was her lifeline. She took in the white tent SOCO had already erected, an incongruous beacon in the dark, atop the hill. She looked around: fields either side of the carriageway. The sea distant. Road diversion barriers already in place, warning flashes of yellows and blues illuminating the dark. A fresh-faced young uniform officer she didn't yet know the name of was standing ready to direct the currently non-existent traffic around. He smiled at her, hopeful for acknowledgement, the keenness of youth undimmed by the early hour. 'Let's hope we're not still here at rush hour, eh, Skip!'

Nicola smiled back. 'Were you first here?'

At this his undaunted smile faltered, replaced by a shadow of unease. 'I was, yeah. Bit of a weird one, if I'm honest.'

She moved on and past him, perturbed by the way his face had clouded.

Outside the tent, she pushed her long arms and legs into the white scene-of-crime hazmat suit. She had been taunted by girls at school that she was a rake. Bony Maronie. Later, told by men that she was svelte. Once, sylph-like. Even now, at thirty-eight, she was never sure which to believe.

In her own view, she was tallish, five foot eleven (she could still remember being relieved in her late teens that she had remained under six foot, as if it had been inculcated into her from early on in her life – *had it?* – that there was nothing worse than a tall woman), and thinnish. She had good bones: *wonderful bone structure*, she had once been told by a photographer taking her portrait for a professional profile. On her

best days, in the rare stylish clothes she kept for even rarer posh nights out, she would confess she could feel briefly elegant. On her worst days, in baggy or ill-fitting workwear, spindly. Most days: between the two.

Gloves. Shoe coverings. Medium-length dark hair tied back, hood up. Ready. She liked the structure of the process: a ritual during which her mind set itself. Observe, process, analyse. *Don't miss anything*. She could already see the difficulty of scene preservation, the possibility of contamination. How many car tyres had already whizzed across this scene?

Nicola strode in through the entrance flap of the tent with a nod and a courteous smile to the scene-of-crime officer working. Older woman, fifties at a guess. Nicola hated not having been back here long enough to know everybody's name. But before she could introduce herself, she saw it.

A man's body. Seemingly unclothed; lower half covered in an old hessian sack. Arms bound behind his back. Lifeless grey face streaked with blood which had trickled down from the top of his head. Eyes were open, staring ahead, unseeing. Scruffy dark hair ruffled. In his forties, or well-worn thirties, at a guess. He was placed upright on an old wooden chair, his bound arms locking him in position.

On his head had been placed what Nicola, who admittedly knew little about wildlife, assumed were stag antlers. Seemingly bound into place with rope which had been criss-crossed in an X pattern back and forth over the back of the head and face, distorting his features. It was gruesome.

Nicola looked to her SOCO colleague quizzically. The woman raised an eyebrow, as if to say: *messed up, right?*

'Reeta Patel – don't think we've met.'

‘Nicola. Bridge. Detective Sergeant,’ Nicola replied. All the right words, but not necessarily in the right order.

The body resembled a trophy, on a poor man’s throne. Sightless eyes, trussed up, and a crown of antlers.

Nicola walked around it, slowly circling, looking at the object, peering at details as if it were an installation in a gallery.

Her level of unease was rising. A gnawing feeling was establishing itself in the pit of her stomach. Clearly this was not a minor incident. Utterly uncharacteristic of this area, where major crimes were few and far between.

Few and far between. That was the whole point in coming back here.

‘Time of death?’ Nicola asked Reeta.

‘Three or four hours ago, maybe less. Dumped here, not killed here. Too soon to be sure on cause, but the back of the head has evidence of blunt force trauma. The blood seems to be from the deer scalp, rather than his.’

Nicola could already feel herself dividing into two states of being. The first was detached, professional, factual: OK, major incident. She knew the last murder in the west of the county had been more than a decade ago.

The other state was human and emotional: a life had been ended. A few hours ago, this man was going about his day, presumably with no inkling of what was to come. The people who loved this man would not yet know they had lost him. The ripples of this death hadn’t yet begun to spread. Soon they would affect everyone who’d known him.

Killed somewhere else, deposited here. Trussed, transported, left.

Where was he killed? Why move him? Why here? And those antlers. Why antlers?

Most importantly, who was he? *Was he local? If not, where was he from?* Where should he have been right now in the normal run of things? The normal run which was now a distant and alternative reality.

‘No ID, I presume?’ Nicola asked, stating the obvious, given the absence of clothing.

‘Not on him, no,’ said Reeta, humouring Nicola. ‘Not that we need it.’

‘How d’you mean?’

Reeta Patel looked back at Nicola, grim. ‘We know who this is.’

3

Less than four hours later in the small market town of Bredy, some five miles from where the antlered body had been found, Frankie Winters finished disinfecting the razors and scissors and arranged the display of products they'd brought in from the company van on arrival that morning. Frankie stared at the empty black leather chair, still absent a client.

Frankie looked at the clock: 7.47 a.m. The chair should have been occupied since seven thirty. First Wednesday of every month, that was the appointment. Regular as clockwork.

But not today.

Not after last night.

It was bad. Frankie knew it was bad.

The door opened, the bell tinkling.

'All right?' A lad Frankie didn't recognize, couple of years older than them, probably. Frankie put him at twenty-threeish. He peered, sizing Frankie up.

Frankie flicked on the big, beaming smile. 'Hi, mate!'

An upward flick of the head passed for hello. 'You do skin fades?'

Dub. 'Oh yeah.'

'How long's the wait?'

Frankie gestured round the otherwise empty shop with

a grin. It was a small site, smartly kitted out with the latest equipment. Frankie kept it glistening.

‘You’re in luck. Had a cancellation, so I can do you now. Wanna hang your coat up there?’

The lad looked around, taking his North Face off awkwardly. New surroundings, not sure where to put things. Frankie knew the type, saw them in here most days. Outwardly a little cocky, but not that practised at life. Probably been to the same hairdresser all his life. Now, in this new place, a recent opening, he was nervous and didn’t want to signal it.

‘You always open this early?’ he asked as he placed the coat on the rack.

‘Wednesdays and Saturdays,’ said Frankie, spinning the chair towards him. It had been Frankie’s suggestion, knowing plenty of market workers, tradespeople and teens who griped about hairdresser opening hours. The boss had initially balked and later recanted. Frankie knew the idiosyncrasies of this town.

As the new client sat down, Frankie fluttering and fastening the apron around him, he said, ‘Just a skin fade. Long on top. I don’t want the nose- and ear-fire thing.’

‘Got it,’ said Frankie.

‘My mate got proper singed at a place last week.’

‘Not here?’ queried Frankie.

‘Oh no, not here,’ came the hasty response, a mixture of twentysomething laddish bravado and a desire not to upset Frankie. The fear of a bad haircut from an accidental insult played across his face. Frankie knew that look.

‘I was gonna say,’ said Frankie, continuing to establish authority, ‘we’re all proper trained.’

‘It was over Weymouth,’ said the lad.

‘Weymouth – what d’you expect?’ smiled Frankie, gratified to see this new client grin and relax.

‘Exactly! That’s what I said to him.’

He was looking at Frankie in the mirror now as Frankie set to work, selecting the shaver setting.

Here we go, thought Frankie.

‘Where do I know you from?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Did you go Fairfax?’

‘Mm-hmm.’ Frankie started work. Felt his eyes on them, like this was a Year 7 maths problem to be solved.

‘When d’you leave?’

‘Five years ago.’

‘After A levels?’

‘No. Did a college apprenticeship.’ Frankie brandished the shaver and smiled. ‘So I don’t set fire to people.’

‘So, if you’re twenty-one now—’

‘Soon—’

‘Right, you’d’ve been two years below us then. What’s your name?’

‘Frankie.’

The lad’s brow furrowed as he silently began to ransack his memory. Frankie kept working, not making eye contact. Frankie had finessed this conversation over many haircuts. Here we go.

‘But I used to go by Alice.’

The lad looked in the mirror, staring now at Frankie. Checking the features beneath the short bleach-blond crop-cut.

‘Alice Winters!’

‘Frankie Winters, now.’

‘Yeah! I knew I recognized you!’

Long silence. Frankie worked away at the lad’s neck. They had navigated this conversational slalom many times: one of the delights of identifying as non-binary in a public-facing job. Frankie could almost hear him thinking what to say or ask. Then:

‘How long you been Frankie?’

‘Four years, give or take.’

The lad nodded. Frankie knew this was the moment things went one of two ways.

‘My cousin did the same. She used to be Jessica. Now she’s – no, sorry, now *they’re* – Jack.’

‘Ah, right!’

‘Nine months since. My sister’s still not really sure.’

‘It takes some people a sec to get their heads around.’

He was looking hard in the mirror, at Frankie absorbed in their work on the back of his head. ‘D’you get much shit for it?’

Frankie looked up, met his gaze. ‘Not really.’ This was the second pivot point, when the conversation could sometimes become a bit more aggy. Frankie had strategies to deal with that. They watched for a half second as the lad took this in.

He half nodded. ‘That’s good.’

A minor flood of relief washed through Frankie’s body. They gave no outward signal of it. ‘Yep. It’s mostly the pronouns people get worried by.’

‘Huh. Yeah. Same.’ Frankie noticed with gratitude that he’d finished with that subject now, lost interest, and was looking around the shop, when he remembered a juicy nugget. ‘Oh my God, you heard they found a dead body?’

Shit.

Frankie paused, but didn't look up. 'No. What's that?'

'Out on the A35 by Wynstone, early this morning.'

The back was taking shape. 'Jeez.'

'Yeah. Left in the middle of the road. Summink weird about it, apparently.'

'How d'you know all this?'

'Bloke two doors down is a community support officer. PCSO. He only does it for the gossip. He tells us all sorts of things he shouldn't. Bloke in his forties. That's all he'd say. He does that; he's like guess what I know, and then he'll be: oh, I can't tell you. He's a bit of a twat, if I'm honest.'

As the lad was talking, Frankie could feel cold beads of sweat dot their forehead. They had started to use the scissors on the top of the lad's head. Frankie looked at their hand moving. The hand was shaking.

Frankie was instantly back in college: *It is never desirable, said the lecturer as she berated a hung-over and nervous student, for a hand holding a deadly sharp instrument in close proximity to a human head to show signs of losing control. Shaking hands are what we do everything to avoid.*

Frankie's forehead tingled. They stared, focused, willing those scissors to become calmer, more controlled. No, shit, it was getting worse. It was in the blood now, in the veins. The feeling, the coldness, the panic. Now the feeling was in Frankie's eyes. They were pricking.

A few more trims, get the length right, keep going.

Frankie was fighting a losing battle. Paused. 'Sorry, d'you mind if I go and blow my nose a sec? Worried I'm gonna do a massive sneeze.' Frankie's smile was full wattage. Only their eyes, gaining redness by the second, betrayed them.

‘Course.’ The lad, oblivious, reached under the apron and pulled his phone out.

Frankie walked calmly through the screened-off arch into the tiny bathroom and locked the door. Sat on the lid-down loo, heart racing.

It was all they could do not to lift the lid and vomit into the bowl.

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