

# THE ADVENT OF MURDER

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A FAITH MORGAN MYSTERY

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WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO REBECCA JENKINS



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## CHAPTER

# 1

Faith wiped at the vomit stain on her skirt with a tissue, trying to keep her eyes on the road. It would need to be dry-cleaned – just one more job to do.

Despite the unfortunate incident with a three-year-old boy called Nathan, the visit to the nursery attached to Green Lane Primary had gone exactly to time. Monday task, no. 6: Check! And it was still only half way through the morning.

Faith took a deep breath. Just two weeks to go before Christmas Day. Thanks to an operation of military precision (or so she told herself) involving well-maintained databases, computer labels and a printed circular, she finished feeding the Christmas cards into the postbox on the Green at 6:32 a.m. The Christmas pageant script was in the hands of Clarisse and Sue, the stalwarts in charge of rehearsals and marshalling the angels and shepherds, and she – Faith Morgan, vicar of St James's, Little Worthy (it still gave her a thrill to think of her official designation) – was on her way to see Oliver Markham, aka her Joseph. She sang along to the haunting melody of her favourite carol on the Advent CD:

*Tomorrow shall be my dancing day,  
I would my true love did so chance  
For to see the legend of my play,  
To call my true love to my dance.*

Oliver Markham and his wife were newcomers to St James's. As a relative newcomer herself, having taken up the "cure of souls" – as they used to say – of St James's parish just a few months previously, Faith found it particularly pleasing to be making someone else welcome to where she now belonged: *her parish, her home.*

The Markhams had arrived with their two daughters last summer, moving into a property down by the River Itchen. Julie Markham worked away quite a bit – as a lawyer or something high-powered in London. Oliver, a master carpenter, made bespoke furniture. Their teenage girls had taken to rural life immediately, but Faith sensed some tension between the couple. Perhaps their escape to the country might have seemed a little rushed – in one partner's eyes at least?

To be honest, Markham's ready agreement to play Joseph in the Christmas pageant surprised Faith, because she usually had a struggle to get the fathers involved in any sort of performance. She smiled as she pictured Oliver Markham, so exactly right for the part. Tall and steady-looking, good with animals too...

Task no. 1 flashed in red neon from the back of her mind. *Oh dear! The blessed donkey!*

Faith refocused on her driving. Council funds never stretched to gritting side roads, and last night's plummeting temperatures had frozen surface water from a weekend's heavy rainfall into a skin of ice. Sparkling frost this morning transformed the countryside into a magical scene, and the

roads into a death-trap. Faith tasted spicy mincemeat and something else in the back of her throat. The nursery children had made their own mince pies and she hadn't had the heart to refuse their festive treats, offered with such pride and jauntily trimmed with a holly sprig; besides, she'd missed breakfast. Baked with more enthusiasm than skill, the half-cooked pastry now lay like lead in her stomach. Evidently little Nathan had sampled one too many.

The car slid round a mild bend. She *really* didn't like driving on ice. *Not too much brake or accelerator. Find an optimum speed and try to ride the road, not confront it.* That's what Dad used to say. He had taught her to drive in just such a winter as this.

For an instant, missing him engulfed her, as raw and intense as the day she lost him. The sensation passed quickly. A full-grown, self-sufficient woman now, Faith had learned to find refuge from sadness in professional purpose and pressing responsibilities...

One of which was to book the blessed donkey for her pageant. Pat Montesque would never forgive her if Little Worthy's Joseph and Mary didn't parade with a real-life donkey this year. She hadn't meant to leave things so late. The task had sunk out of sight in the Advent rush. She'd managed to do some ringing round over the weekend, only to find the better-known local donkeys were all booked. She knew Pat suspected. The churchwarden had been mentioning with increasing frequency how Faith's predecessor-but-one, Pat's favourite vicar of all time (who had only left Little Worthy because he'd been called to higher office as an archdeacon in Wales) *always* made the Christmas pageant the highlight of the year. It was *the* moment when every inhabitant of Little Worthy, churchgoer or not, could watch Joseph and Mary

make their way down the aisle of their ancient Saxon church and feel Christmas truly beginning.

“*Not*” – and here Pat would look at Faith severely down her small nose, the rolling of her Rs betraying her Scottish origins and the depth of her emotion – “*not* an opporrtrtunity to be squanderrrrred lightly.”

The car swung sideways on a patch of black ice. Faith’s stomach lurched sickeningly in response. Thank goodness there was nothing coming the other way. A close call. She slowed her speed and the tyres settled to the road again. Not far now. The Markham farm was just round that bend. Her fingers felt stiff from gripping the steering wheel so hard, so Faith wiggled her shoulders, willing herself to relax.

Around the next bend she saw a red post van canted into the ditch. It must have slid on the ice. No obvious broken glass. She hoped the driver was all right. It didn’t look too bad – but why all the police cars?

Vehicles jammed the space in front of Markham’s farm. A couple of uniformed constables stood unrolling blue-and-white police tape. At the back of a van, scene-of-crime officers were pulling on white body suits. A green Vauxhall Astra had pulled off the road at an angle. A pair of plain clothes officers stood by it, both tall and very familiar – one with gingery hair and an open face, Sergeant Peter Gray; the other dark and saturnine.

She hadn’t seen Ben for eight weeks or more. They’d last met in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy that had engulfed Bishop Anthony’s family. The scandal had disjointed everything and the bishop and his wife retired soon after, leaving the diocese still waiting for his successor’s appointment.

As Faith parked to one side of the lane, Detective Inspector Ben Shorter acknowledged her presence with

a glance that lingered for barely a second. She pressed the switch and the sheet of glass between them slid down into the window casing, letting in the freezing air.

Faith glimpsed the figure in the back seat of the green car behind him. A man in the uniform of the Royal Mail; he looked pale and distressed.

“What’s happened?” she asked, glancing back over her shoulder at the red van in the ditch. Then she caught sight of the forensic tent being carried across the field stretching down towards the river.

“What brings you here?” Ben asked.

“Are the family all right?” she said.

Ben’s expression gave nothing away. “I asked you a question first,” he said.

Faith could have told him that wasn’t quite the case, but nothing would be gained from arguing. “I’m on church business to visit Oliver Markham,” she said. “He’s a parishioner.”

“Of course he is!” Ben rolled his eyes. “Well, Mr Markham is not in a position to receive visitors at this time.”

Faith’s hand went to her mouth in an involuntary action she’d seen many times herself. “He’s not dead?”

Ben’s expression softened. “The family are all safe,” he said, “but...” He turned to one of his juniors, hovering nearby.

“What?” he asked.

“The pathologist is just wondering...”

“I am on my way.” The junior was dismissed. Ben walked over to the back of the van and began pulling on a pair of white overalls.

Sergeant Peter Gray smiled at her apologetically. He and his wife, Sandra, had become friends since Faith met them

over that first case. They were regulars now at St James's with their two boys.

"We've found a boy's body by the river on his land."

"A boy?"

"Well, a teenager."

"Doesn't anybody know who he is?"

"Not yet. We only got the call forty minutes ago."

"Sergeant! When you're ready." Ben walked back over to them, fastening the tabs on his forensic suit.

"Sorry, boss," Peter responded cheerfully. *He must be getting Ben's measure*, Faith thought. There was a time when he would have jumped at Ben's chivvying. Now he responded in his own time.

Ben leant his hand on the car roof and bent his head towards hers. His bulk filled the window.

"Want to come take a peek?" His face wore his insufferable *I-know-what-you're-thinking* expression. She struggled with her demon curiosity for a moment. He watched her lose the fight. He tapped the roof of the car. "Of course you do. Park up over there and join us. You'll have to suit up." He walked off without waiting for a reply.

## CHAPTER

# 2

Ben crossed the field at a rapid stride. Peter followed with Faith at a more reasonable pace.

"Do you have an ID?" Faith asked.

"Not yet. I don't recognize him. I somehow doubt he's a churchgoer." Peter blushed. "Sorry, that's uncharitable of me. See what you think."

Faith avoided a patch of mud with an ungainly skip. "You don't think Markham's involved?"

Peter's flat tone as he reeled off his answer took her by surprise. He was in professional mode – it felt strange to see him like that. She found him so open and approachable as a friend.

"He's got some explaining to do. He says he's on his tractor clearing debris brought down the river by the rain at the weekend. The postman has an accident and ends up in the ditch. He sees Markham on his tractor; goes over to ask him if he'll give him a pull out so he can get back on his rounds – Christmas rush and all that."

"And?" Faith prompted. She couldn't see anything so bad so far.