

The Antique Hunter's Guide to Murder

by C. L . Miller

Prologue

If Arthur Crockleford had been a normal antiques dealer, then perhaps this night would never have arrived.

Arthur hunched over his desk, making his final preparations. He had just finished gluing the last photograph into his journal when he heard the rumble of tyres on the cobbles behind his antiques shop. He checked the time on his Georgian longcase clock – he adored that clock; it was one of the first antiques he'd ever bought from a dealer on Portobello Road. The brass hands showed twenty-eight minutes past one in the morning.

A rush of icy night air swept through the back door as it opened and down the long corridor to enter the shop, which was lit by the table lamp on Arthur's desk. The gust pricked the hairs on the back of his neck.

They're here.

He shivered, and his fountain pen marked the final full stop in his journal. The clock chimed the half hour.

Time is up.

Arthur rose and hurried to the stairs leading to his flat above the shop. He knew each noisy step and had to climb over a couple to avoid detection. His old knee injury clicked.

At the top of the stairs he stopped, scanning the shadows below him, wondering which one of them had come. All the

lights in the flat were off and he was surrounded by thick black night. A sweep of the rooms reassured him that everything was in order.

The tap of someone's footsteps on the medieval floorboards below made him shudder.

For decades, he had loved every second of his secret life. Until Cairo. If he'd made different choices, left this underground world behind, then maybe tonight could have been avoided. But what was done was done, wasn't it? He could only hope Freya would one day understand. And that it wasn't too late to make things right.

Arthur walked back down the stairs, this time intending to be heard.

In the dim light, he scanned the antiques around him. Each item was priced to sell, but it didn't mean he wanted to part with them. Seeing all the treasures he loved ignited a fury in him, but he knew this was one fight he, at last, would not be able to win. He ran his hand through his shaggy grey hair, readjusting his cravat with the other. If this was to be the end, at least Carole would be proud he'd made an effort to die stylishly.

'Hello? Is anyone there?' he called, hoping the neighbours would hear him. It would give a more accurate time of death, if that was needed.

He positioned himself beside a mahogany tilt-top table which held a couple of his favourite vases.

Maybe he should've tried to set the alarm. Maybe he should've screamed out. Maybe he should've raced for the phone to call the police. But the darker side of the antiques world was finally catching up with him and he conceded that he

The Antique Hunter's Guide to Murder

probably couldn't outrun it forever. He was too old for running.

It's over to you now, Freya.

Out of the coal-black corridor, a figure emerged. Arthur strained his eyes. Shadows hung over the intruder's face, but Arthur could just make out what they were doing: they were tugging at their gloves, checking they were on.

They stepped into the shop and into the light.

'You weren't who I was expecting,' Arthur said.