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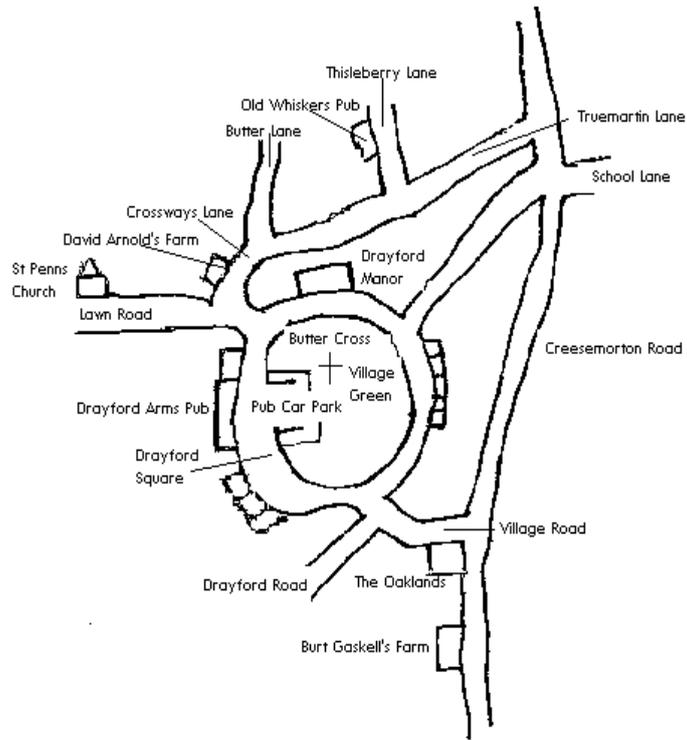
SYNOPSIS

“Now then. Let’s get started.” Monster Man scrapes the chair a little further forward and settles himself. “I’m going to tell you a story. Are you sitting comfortably? Good. Then I’ll begin. Once upon a time ...”

In Drayford Village, serious crimes were unheard of. Then the abductions began. There is no rational connection. No links between the victims that make any sense. And even when the bodies are discovered, the horrifying tableau only provides more questions than answers.

But the Abductor is still holding all the cards. And he has another hand to play, in a twisted plan for revenge a hundred years in the making.

Drayford Village Map



Dedicated to my parents

PROLOGUE

12 July 2006

Craig Gardener, Head Librarian at Creesemorton Library, never saw the photographs. Of course, except for the investigating officers, no one did at this time, but in the coming months Craig would at least catch a glimpse of them. And Todd Skerratt described the horrible scene to him so vividly that he saw it all clearly through his eyes.

Todd, a divorcee from Creesemorton, and prior to that Easthampton, had joined Dr Lawson's practice in Drayford Village. But with a population of only two hundred and ninety, according to the last census, they were busy but not overworked. For the past five years he had been doubling up as police surgeon.

So it was, in the summer of '99, that Todd became Craig's next-door neighbour, their houses being about thirty-five yards apart and separated by a five-foot wall bordered with evergreen shrubbery on either side. His son, Luke, was a bright and well-behaved eleven-year-old with ginger hair and so many freckles that from a distance he looked tanned. He spent alternate weekends with his father and Craig had become very fond of him.

Two years later and cosily settled into his new life, Todd was rather put out when Dr Lawson – who had vowed to keep on working as long as his brain didn't

give out – dropped dead of a heart attack while fishing in Breechers Lake, which lies between the villages of Drayford and Pendon. He was only sixty-four, so it came as a bit of a shock to everyone. But none more so than Todd, for it meant that he would now have to advertise for a new partner. Chief Superintendent Roy Shoreson asked him to temporarily assume Doc's duties as police surgeon, just until someone else could be appointed. Todd was extremely reluctant, but he finally consented on the understanding that it was just a temporary appointment. This temporary appointment had so far lasted five years.

Until three days ago, Todd had been relatively happy with the arrangement since none of the deaths he had been called upon to attend by the police were suspicious, which is no surprise considering the serious crime rate for Drayford and its environs was pretty low. At least, it was until a few months ago.

Craig hadn't seen Todd for three days, which was predictable given the circumstances. Alex Rowmeyer, a reporter for the local paper, *The Creesemorton Post*, had given a sketchy outline of the grisly discovery in Drayford Village but very few details had been released to a general public hungry for information. So, naturally enough, Craig was eager to speak to Todd.

It was a balmy evening in July. Craig was sitting out on his front porch enjoying the last of the sunshine as it headed west on a ribbon of bright orange. A late garden reveller, a Painted Lady, was hovering close to the hedge. Fascinated, Craig couldn't take his eyes off it. He was trying to catch sight of the hind wings to see which variety of *Vanessa cardui* it was when he caught sight of Todd.

When he stepped onto the porch he ran a tired hand through his straggly fair hair and sighed deeply as he took up a chair opposite the porch swing where Craig was sitting. ‘Evening,’ he managed.

‘Evening. By the looks of you, it has to be the usual order of the day, I think.’

‘Too right. Make it a large one, please.’

‘Want lemonade with it?’

He hesitated, seemed unable to make up his mind. Then he nodded.

Craig rushed off to fetch the drinks. As he placed the tray on the rickety table between them, he couldn’t help but see that Todd’s normally pleasing features were set in a grim line. It gave him a rather ugly look, a sad reflection of his dark thoughts.

Craig handed Todd his drink then sat back on the swing seat, dragging his feet to avoid motion. Todd’s tie was hanging askew and Craig noticed a grey line around the collar of his shirt. The dark blue suit he was wearing looked crumpled and ready for the dry cleaners, his jacket unbuttoned and flopping open to reveal his slight paunch. He clearly hadn’t shaved for a while. Taking off his spectacles and carelessly balancing them on his knee, he rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palms before he picked up the tumbler and took a long drink. The ice clinked against the sides of the glass as he returned it to the table.

The soft breeze picked up a faint odour of disinfectant, sweet and sickly. Underlying that was the smell of the mortuary, of dissected bodies stripped of their rights as living human beings. It was the smell of death. And it brought home the shocking realisation of the grisly ordeal that Todd had endured over the past

few days. *He would spend a long time in the shower tonight*, thought Craig, and much, much longer attempting to cleanse his mind.

Craig waited patiently. He wasn't going to push him before he was ready to speak about it. 'Is Luke coming this weekend?'

'He should be. But with all this going on I was thinking I might put him off.'

'Oh, don't do that. Surely your part in it is finished for the time being. Isn't it?'

'Mmm, s'ppose so.'

The dialogue fizzled out. But the silence between them wasn't awkward. Todd and Craig often shared an early evening drink: when he first moved in Craig made a positive effort to become his friend, quickly seeing in him someone whom he could share his confidences with. It hadn't taken long for them to fall into an easy rapport.

After a while Todd grunted, took several more gulps of his drink, almost emptying his glass, and then stared at Craig with a sort of blanked out look. 'I've told Shoreson I'm not up for this kind of work anymore. I thought I'd left it all behind seven years ago. I'll see this lot through, of course. But afterwards he'll have to appoint someone else for this so-called *temporary* job.'

Craig knew it was coming and nodded as he obligingly refilled Todd's glass. He picked up the glass but didn't drink from it. 'Thanks,' he said. Then his mouth curled down as if he had a nasty taste in it. When he began to speak, his tone was flat and emotionless.

* * *

The police had cordoned off the entire building, even the grounds. Todd left his car on the roadside and walked the short distance to the open entrance gates. The road was empty of other vehicles but that wouldn't last for much longer. Soon there would be the rumble of vans and the attendant rabble of the press.

The two policemen on the gates nodded him in. There was a quiet hush about the place as he strode past the sign: *The Oaklands*. He made his way along the wide gravelled drive leading to the front entrance of the main building. The trees lining the perimeter wall were unattended and overgrown. Surrounding the main edifice were several outbuildings. Over to the left and following another gravelled pathway was a row of separate small constructions: the water sewerage building with a ten-thousand gallon tank at the side some thirty feet high, the administration block, the discharging block and the mortuary. To the right of the main building was the ambulance house and old stabling block, more recently used as a garage; then the isolation block, the laundry block with the incinerator at the back, and several other small, higgledy-piggledy brick buildings. At the forefront was the old wooden schoolhouse which resembled nothing more than a long hut with small-paned windows along each side. Small patches of dark green paint could still be seen on the peeled and rotting surface and the structure was leaning quite precariously. A large sign had been erected:

DANGEROUS BUILDINGS – KEEP OUT.

A steel fire escape at the side of the building served all four upper floors. Unlike everything else, it looked to be well maintained. But the air of

abandonment about the place was palpable, especially now that some of the small glass panes in the windows were broken.

Todd reached the entrance doorway to the main building. It was just a plain wooden single door, painted dark brown with a small sign indicating the reception beyond. Over the door and set in stone was a plaque commemorating its date of construction: 1906. The policeman manning the door shook his head. 'Not in here, Dr Skerratt. You want the old mortuary block.' He stepped forward a few paces and pointed it out. 'It's that one there, at the end of the row.'

Todd followed the direction of his finger and saw another nondescript brick building. It was about twenty-five feet square, and he murmured something about it being appropriate. He strode off, walking across the long grass with his footsteps dragging in trepidation as he drew near the ramshackle brick building. There was more activity here, though it was so hushed that he hadn't noticed it before. A team of detectives, some gowned and gloved, were quietly and systematically going through the other buildings. Several uniformed officers were milling about and among them he spotted Chief Superintendent Roy Shoreson robustly blowing his nose.

As Todd approached him, Roy gave one final trumpet into his handkerchief and carefully folded it before stuffing it back into his pocket. 'Hay fever, a damned nuisance,' he said, his loose jowls vibrating as he shook his head vigorously. 'This way. It's not pretty I'm afraid.'

'Sorry I'm late. I got here as fast as possible,' Todd said.

'You're all right. It'll take Joy a while to get here.'

Joy Baxter was the Home Office pathologist, on her way from Easthampton.

On entering the building the first thing Todd saw was a row of three old Belfast sinks, glazed and cracked but relatively clean. The ancient taps were leaning and the pipework was rusty and bent, although some attempt had been made to set them in working order. There was only one mortuary slab, which had obviously been recently used, as it seemed to have been cleaned as well as possible given that it was over a hundred years old. Above that, attached to the ceiling, was a gruesome looking hook, the sort you see in a butcher's shop. It was old, but surely a recent addition. The walls and ceiling had been recently whitewashed. It all looked impossibly clean for such an old building and, with its newly decorated interior, ready for use. The only other item in this room, parked in a corner, was an old-fashioned wheelchair, the seat sagging on one side. It had two sets of worn leather restraints, upper and lower, and some new-looking rope attached to the back.

Todd glanced enquiringly at the chief superintendent who contorted his face into a look of utter disgust. Roy nodded towards a door on the opposite side of the room. It too was painted a brilliant white with a shimmering gloss that reflected the daylight from the open door of the building, marred only by the residue of forensic materials. Looking over his shoulder, Roy shut the outer door and followed Todd, who went to take hold of the old doorknob, which was clean but tarnished. His hand hovering, he asked if forensics had been completed yet.

‘Yes, all done.’

‘What’s with the paint job?’

Roy shrugged his shoulders. ‘Who knows? Easier to see if you’ve left it clean of obvious evidence, perhaps?’ Then he gave Todd an encouraging nod.

Todd donned a pair of gloves before taking hold of the handle. He turned it gently and pushed open the door.

An involuntary gasp exploded over his lips as he beheld the scene before him, illuminated by the arc lights they had erected. The walls and ceiling in here had also been renovated in pristine white. He had been prepared for the nauseating smell that usually accompanies these things. But it wasn’t too bad, and anyway, that didn’t immediately register with him, as he was too busy trying to assimilate the montage before him.

Six chairs were placed around a table, five of which were occupied. The sixth was pulled out as if the occupant had just left and was expected to return at any minute. A pack of playing-cards had been dealt out for six hands.

At first, Todd made no move towards this grisly tableau, transfixed by the sheer horror of it. The Abductor had wrapped all five bodies in bandages. They looked like Egyptian mummies. The bandages around the head of one had been partially unwrapped. Roy explained that the officer first on the scene had initially thought it was a sick hoax. The patch of dark brown hair and a narrow strip of greying, fossil-like skin peeping through had quickly dispelled that notion.

The oddest thing, though, was the paint adorning the mummies’ wrappings. When Todd looked closer he could see that they were small dabs of almost perfect red spots with yellow centres and a few orange spots with a pale greenish tint, some running into each other. He was immediately struck by the resemblance to

some sort of rash. Around the necks of the cadavers were makeshift nameplates made up of paper chains and a strip at the front for their surnames.

Todd went over to the nearest cadaver and took a closer look, wondering if they were genuinely mummified. The ancient Egyptians allowed 70 days to complete the process. These people had been murdered precisely one month apart: impatience or ineptitude? ‘Has everything been photographed, Roy?’

‘Yes, they finished just before you arrived.’

The ‘mummies’ were very carefully arranged around the table. Some were holding playing-cards in their bandaged hands, with their heads bent over as if they were studying them. Others had their heads turned at a jaunty angle so that it looked as if they were chatting with each other.

Todd said, ‘I can’t even imagine the sort of mind that could come up with this. You?’

Roy gave a grim shake of his head. ‘Bizarre isn’t the word.’

‘The facilities at Cresemorton might not be able to cope with such a sudden influx of corpses. And we’ll need some help with the autopsies if quick answers are wanted.’

Most likely, Todd would be assisting Joy Baxter in the post mortems. But, already, he was wondering if they could cope with five corpses in one go, especially as there were only two technicians at the police mortuary and neither of them, to Todd’s knowledge, had dealt with mummified corpses before; neither had he, come to think about it.

‘I’d deem it a personal favour if you could manage, Todd. There’s already some sniffing round from Easthampton force as it is. This is a high profile case and everyone wants in on it. But I’d prefer to keep it local. We’re already looking like a bunch of dim-witted morons, seeing as this place was supposed to have been thoroughly searched before. Anyway, do your best, eh?’

Three ambulances were used to ferry the victims to Creesemorton, an operation which Todd supervised lest the wrappings, and in particular the paint markings, be disturbed. Dreading what lay ahead, he followed the last ambulance to the police mortuary with its small but adequate pathology department. On the way, they passed a stream of vehicles going in the opposite direction, all ignoring the speed limit.

* * *

Having described all of this, Todd paused and drained his glass. By this time the sun had all but disappeared behind a glowing horizon with just a narrow strip of fading orange and violet already melting into the night sky. Craig left the swing chair to switch on the porch light and when he returned Todd was leaning back in the old garden chair with his eyes closed. As Craig sat back on the swing, causing it to creak, Todd opened his eyes and fixed him with that awful blank look again. Craig was wondering how many details of the autopsies he would reveal, but even then something was beginning to churn in his mind; something that had been

grasping at the edge of his consciousness since the fourth victim had disappeared. But this thought was pushed aside as Todd resumed his discourse.

All the corpses, he told Craig, had been clumsily divested of their internal organs and drained of blood. Two had had the flesh on their legs burnt off, probably using an oxyacetylene torch. The heads had been left intact. What was left of the corpses had been dried out in a ham-fisted manner and, in some instances, perfumed with an aromatic substance which he had yet to identify. He was awaiting the test results for this, along with a host of others.

The bandage wrapping alone must have taken a considerable time to complete, possibly to create a macabre, mind-blowing scene for whoever discovered the corpses. But Todd had no fast opinion on the whys and wherefores, and was at a loss to comprehend the psyche of such a villain. Relatives had been informed that the bodies could now be released for funerals and separate inquests would be held. The coroner had already set the date for the first of them to take place: two weeks from Wednesday.

A reminder for Craig to keep his every word completely confidential was unnecessary, and Craig was glad he didn't voice it. 'It's all completely beyond me,' Todd said in a slightly tremulous tone. 'Why go to such elaborate lengths?'

Craig shrugged, lost for an answer, and after a moment's reflection Todd shook his head as if trying to clear it of nightmarish images. Then he said, 'I'll be asked my opinion on the murderer's idea of decoration – namely those paint spots. But Roy's going to have a word with the coroner because he wants to hold that back from the public for the time being. I think they're meant to represent pustules;

chicken pox or more likely smallpox.’ Then he buried his face in his hands. ‘I still can’t believe it. They were all there.’

As he rattled off the names, Craig’s spine tingled. His scalp prickled. And he wasn’t even aware that his body had jerked upright, almost poker-straight at the mention of the word ‘pustules’. And the names! It all came together in one mad rush and his backside came dangerously close to the edge of the seat. ‘My God! I must phone Roy. I don’t know who killed them but I’m almost certain I know why. Although it seems crazy, I think maybe all this relates to something that happened over a hundred years ago. It must. It’s the names, you see.’

‘No, I don’t see.’

‘I can understand the motive back in 1903, but I can’t possibly see how it relates to now, in this day and age.’ Craig was babbling, more to himself than to Todd’s gaping face. Disregarding his urgent interruptions, Craig got to his feet and ran into the house, almost tripping over himself in the rush to get to the phone.

PART ONE

A GAME OF CARDS

CHAPTER ONE

27 February 2006

The first one to disappear was Warren Leadbetter in late February. Warren, just fifteen years old, was the only child of Geoff and Karen Leadbetter. He must have made a relatively easy target on his paper route; the route is fairly lonely and takes over an hour and half to complete.

At precisely 4:30 pm on Tuesday the twenty-seventh of February, Warren leaned his bicycle up against the wall of Jack Morrissey's paper shop in Creesemorton and went in to fetch the paper bag for the deliveries to Drayford Village and its environs. Just five minutes later he was back on the road, pedalling back to Drayford. His first stop was Gaskell Farm, on the outskirts of the village.

It was already well dark by this time. Burt Gaskell was just turning into the drive up to his yard and stopped his tractor just long enough to take the evening paper from Warren to save him the arduous task of pedalling up the unmade track.

'Thought anymore about that weekend job, Warren?' he asked over the noise of the old engine. 'I could really do with the extra help now that Boyd's up and gone. There's no way I could match what he's getting at Seetons'. But I'll pay you a fair wage. How about it, lad?'

‘I’m not sure, Mr Gaskell. What with the paper route and helping Mr Arnold out most evenings, I barely get my homework finished in time for school most days. I’m always getting told off as it is.’

‘Ah, well, just thought I’d ask. What about your pals? Will you ask around for me?’

‘Sure. I can do that, Mr Gaskell.’ And with that Warren turned his bicycle around, threw a casual wave over his shoulder and sped off down the road, heading for Truemartin Lane.

The paper route around Drayford Village was a well-cycled one. Over the years the faces delivering the newspapers had changed but there had been only a few additions in the number of houses, all built alongside existing properties. The village itself was quite compact, the most heavily populated area being that surrounding one of two local pubs, the Drayford Arms. It sat in an area referred to as the Square, which was a bit contradictory as the curtilage was more of a circle. The tills rang mostly to passing trade, and most locals preferred the less pretentious rooms of a little pub down Thisleberry Lane, which veered off from Truemartin Lane. This pub, enigmatically called Old Whiskers, was Warren’s next port of call. No one actually saw him but the paper was delivered, and on time.

His route now took him onto Crossways Lane. But he bypassed David Arnold’s farm, since he would be going back there once he finished his paper route to help clean the milking equipment. He did this in the evenings after his paper route, Monday through to Friday every week. David later attested that he never saw Warren passing since he was busy in the milking shed at this time.

At the end of Crossways Lane, Warren turned into the village itself and delivered all the papers along Drayford Road, leading to the Drayford Arms. The pub sat in an area surrounded by domestic dwellings on three sides. Directly opposite the pub was its car park and beyond that the village green, known as the *pound* in olden days, and it still had a large butter cross as its centrepiece. On the left hand side of the pub was Drayford Hall, a large, imposing manor house.

Stanley Cummings, the landlord of the Drayford Arms, was taking in supplies for his restaurant and remembered last seeing Warren rolling up a paper and putting it in the post box on the wall of Drayford Hall. After that Warren was presumed to have cycled down past the pub and into Lawn Road, which went past St Penns Church and led to just seven more properties. The papers were never delivered to these houses. With the exception of Karen and Geoff Leadbetter, the residents along here didn't think too deeply on this and wouldn't think to complain until the following morning, and then not at all when they learned of the circumstances.

The first hint of trouble came at about 9:30 that evening, when David Arnold rang Mrs Leadbetter to enquire about Warren's non-appearance. His attitude was gruff as he had completed the cleaning of his milking equipment alone, not to mention the lack of an evening paper. David Arnold managed his small farm entirely alone. His mother was deceased and his elderly father was no longer able to do any physical labour. He had no siblings and couldn't afford to take on professional help. So with the farm and his father, David was finding it increasingly difficult to cope and relied heavily on Warren's nightly help. Also, he

liked the boy enormously and set great store by his character. He knew it was uncommon for Warren to have let him down without a warning.

David therefore contacted Warren's parents, who themselves had just begun to worry about the lateness of the hour: Warren should have been back home by 9:00 pm. Karen's first reaction was one of immediate alarm, since he never went anywhere without first informing his parents. She immediately dispatched her husband Geoff to go out and look for him.

'Don't worry,' he said as he picked up his car keys and headed for the door. 'He's probably hanging out in the Square with a few mates.' But he still sounded worried.

At 10:40 pm Geoff phoned Roy Shoreson who happened to live directly opposite the Drayford Arms. He got the call smack in the middle of a film on TV he had been looking forward to watching. All the same, he jumped in his car and drove straight to Geoff's house, already on the lookout for Warren as he travelled the short distance there.

Geoff opened the door the moment he spotted Roy's car turning into the lane. To Roy, Geoff seemed calm – too calm for his liking, which worried him more than Karen's open anxiety. He explained to Roy that he had followed Warren's paper route, all the while looking for his son or any of his friends along the way, and stopping off at a few houses to check if they had received their evening paper. Of course, it had taken Geoff only forty-five minutes by car. Upon his return he had systematically phoned all of Warren's known friends, but none of them had seen him since leaving school at around 4:00 pm.

Karen was already on the edge of tears as she distractedly paced the front room, stopping at the windows and peering out with an awful, desolate look on her face. She kept wringing her hands and when she spoke it was only to say the same thing over and over: 'Where can he be?'

Finally, Roy asked them both to sit down. Geoff immediately sat down on the end of the sofa, close to the edge as if ready to spring back to his feet at a moment's notice. But Karen took her time, wandering about the living room until Roy gently prompted her once more. She looked momentarily confused and then chose to sit at the other end of the sofa.

Roy took a seat opposite them. 'How's Warren getting on at school? I mean, has he indicated that he's in any trouble at all?'

It was Karen who answered. 'No. No way.'

'Well, have there been any domestic problems?'

'I know how this works and what you're getting at, Roy. Warren's a good boy. We've never had a bit of trouble with him. If you're suggesting he's run away, forget it.' Karen's tone was snappish, but Roy ignored it.

'What about you, Geoff? Any recent disagreements? I know what boys are like at this age.'

Geoff cleared his throat. 'No. Nothing. It's like Karen says, he's a son to be proud of. There's no trouble of any kind.' He spoke quietly and evenly but a tinge of red crept up his neck.

Karen leapt to her feet. 'We're wasting time. Something's wrong. Please, Roy, do something.' At this point she began weeping copiously. Geoff went to comfort

her. As he wrapped her in his arms, he stared at Roy over his shoulder, the entreaty in his own fast-brimming eyes palpable.

* * *

Word spread quickly around town. The first Craig Gardener knew about any of it was the following morning.

Todd and Craig lived in Truemartin Lane. There were six detached houses in all: picturesque in their individuality without looking *too* quaint. They usually left for work about the same time each day and so it was on this gloomy, bitter cold morning in February. They stopped by the hedge on the way to their respective garages to say good morning, and there Craig learned that Warren Leadbetter was missing. Todd had been called out at 1:30 in the morning to attend to Karen for hysteria. He had given her a mild sedative, preferring to save the heavy stuff until later in the event that Warren didn't turn up with body and soul intact – which Todd very much feared, bearing in mind the boy's good character.

As Craig drove into Creesemorton, he came to the conclusion that Todd was probably right. Unless there was something going on in Warren's life that no one knew about – something that might prompt him to run away, which was highly unlikely – then the chances of him turning up alive and well seemed minimal. But there was still hope that he had suffered a not too serious accident and was lying in one of the many drainage ditches at one of the roadsides along his route, which were all being systematically searched right then.

And so this was the day that a heavy cloud of misery drifted in over the small community and chose to settle permanently on those whose lives would forever be blighted.

As Craig drove along High Street in Creesemorton, he noticed a small group of people already gathered outside Morrissey's newsagents. After parking his car on the 'Residents Free' patch at the end of the street, he walked back to ask them if there was any news. The group was made up of Jack Morrissey, James Beecham – who ran Beecham's Hardware next to the paper shop – and Adele Turner, owner of the Coffee & Cream café on the opposite side of the street, together with her only waitress, Pauline Vale.

Craig had an immediate opening since they had all quietly watched his approach, probably wondering if he might have something to add to their discussion. Directing his question at Jack, Craig asked, 'Is there any news of Warren?' And he saw an immediate and collective expression of disappointment.

Jack shook his head gloomily. 'Not a word. He came in last evening to collect the bag for Drayford and that's the last I saw of him. The police knocked me up at about one this morning. They wanted to know if I'd noticed anything odd about his behaviour. But I told them he was cheerful and polite, same as always.'

Adele said, 'I always thought you had to wait about forty-eight hours before the police would do anything in missing persons' cases, unless it's a young child.'

James put in his twopenn'orth. 'I guess these are special circumstances. Roy Shoreson knows Warren wouldn't just run off. It's not looking good, is it?'

Adele, tapping Pauline's arm, said, 'Well, I'd better open up. If any of you hear anything, let me know.' And she moved her hefty bulk to cross over the road to

the Coffee & Cream. After this, the rest of the group wandered off, and Craig followed Adele over the road, making his way to the library at the other end of the street.

Creese Morton Town was on the coast. But, aside from its busy harbour, holidaymakers usually made for Easthampton. The town sometimes got the odd tourist dropping in, usually someone who had lost his way and found it accidentally. But this was how the locals liked it; quiet, peaceful and with a closed, compact community. However, there was still a tourist's shop selling all those little knick-knacks at inflated prices that people seem to enjoy packing in their suitcases, but usually end up wondering what to do with once they have unpacked them at home. It was called Doodles Gifts, two shops up from the Coffee & Cream café. Ralph and Jenny Penham ran it and made quite a good living out of it. Next to Doodles Gifts was the small post office, which everyone had fought tooth and nail to keep open. Meg Porter – a sprightly seventy-three – was the postmistress. She lived in a flat above the shop, entirely independent and still doing most of her own chores. Of course, the biggest fear was that once she retired or passed on, this small branch of the postal service would close. Consequently, all of Creese Morton took an active interest in Meg's state of health, which amused her no end.

Further along the street and on the same side was a licensed restaurant aptly but unimaginatively named the Eating House. This was owned and run by Elliott Dandridge. For visitors he had a different priced menu that he would never admit to, but the food was excellent – Craig ate there often and got along with Elliott very well. He was a garrulous tittle-tattle, but often amusing. He did spend the

odd night or two out of town when he wasn't busy. As he was just about the only gay man in town his disappearances did trigger the odd comment now and again by those given to gossip, but by and large he was well liked.

At the far end of High Street were the premises of *The Creesemorton Post*. Directly opposite was Reg's Bar, frequented for the most part by the workforce of High Street as an alternative to the Coffee & Cream. It used to be called Reg & Anne's Bar, but Reg renamed it after his wife ran off with a bankrupt chandler.

There was a small but adequate supermarket on Creesemorton Road, a tiny cinema, a small branch of Barclays Bank, and a few other shops alongside it, offering various services: a unisex hairdressers, Patricia's Hair & Beauty Salon; a TV repair shop; and, last in the row, a butcher's shop.

At 10:30 am Craig told Jeanette, his assistant, that he was going to take his morning break over at the Coffee & Cream. The work at the library could be tedious at times, so this wasn't unusual. There was no one in the library, though it was never left unattended. Craig was eager to find out if there was any news of Warren and the café was the best place in town to hear all the local gossip.

The café was busy with all the regulars but Craig managed to find himself an empty table by the window. He only wanted a coffee, but after Pauline ran through a whole list of coffee variations and then fixed him with an expression that spelt *stingy* in any language when he asked for one cup of plain filtered, he felt obliged to order toast along with it.

When his order arrived he was already eavesdropping on the conversations going on around him. And the only topic, as far as he could tell, was the disappearance of Warren Leadbetter. To outsiders, this grave concern about one

adolescent boy missing for less than 24 hours would probably seem histrionic, considering the number of people who go missing on a daily basis. But Warren was part of a close-knit community and well liked by all who knew him. It was only natural that everyone should be alarmed. And nothing like this had ever happened before in this quiet village.

Everyone agreed that if something nasty had happened to Warren then some heinous bastard from outside the district must have been responsible. This was expressed by several strident voices, provoking a host of nodding heads. But then Freddie Mason, who lent himself to the title 'Jack of all Trades', operating from a run-down house on the back streets of Cresemorton, said, 'Well, if the poor lad fell foul of an arse bandit, there's only one 'round here we can point the finger at, and we all know where he is.' And he jerked his finger over his shoulder, indicating the Eating House, where Elliott Dandridge was presently setting his tables for lunch.

'Freddie,' Craig said, in the hush following his malicious comment, 'if I were you, I'd keep silly opinions like that to myself. Elliott's got more goodness in his little finger than some I could mention.' And Craig jerked a trenchant nod in Freddie's direction to indicate that he was referring specifically to him.

The best that could be said about Freddie Mason was that everyone tolerated him. The whole town suspected that he laid the odd fist on his poor wife Shirley, though she always tried to pass off the bruises as a result of her own clumsiness, which didn't fool anyone.

Full of false bravado, Freddie gave Craig the finger, but went back to eating his applejacks, silenced for the moment. Craig could see he was embarrassed, though;

a telling colour was highlighting his bloated cheeks and he shifted the large bulk of his body responsively as he dipped his head. He was sitting on a stool at the end of the bar, and as Pauline passed him the syrup she plainly smirked at his discomfiture. Flicking a stray dark hair behind her ear, she threw Craig a wide grin of satisfaction, deepening her dimples. Young as she was, at seventeen Pauline Vale had quickly learned how to turn the tables on men like Freddie, having taken an early lead from Adele on how to deal with thugs – mercifully, few and far between. But Freddie, despite several lashings of Adele’s tongue, always came back for more.

Just as Craig thought the whole thing was over, Adele went over and slapped his receipt on the counter beside Freddie’s plate, clearly meant as a warning. Everyone was watching. She placed her big hands palm down on the counter, slightly curled back her thin lips, and then paused just long enough to give him the chance to bad-mouth her or anyone else. Freddie concentrated hard on his applejacks, but sneaked a quick look at Adele’s broad back as she returned to the hotplates where she was juggling pancakes, eggs and bacon between three. Every now and then she turned to look over her shoulder and stare at Freddie over the rim of her glasses. On one occasion she removed them and polished off the grease with her apron as she appraised him, her bulky arms shaking with unnecessary effort. If Adele’s height – five-eleven in stocking feet – didn’t intimidate, her ferocious features would. She had this peculiar way of pulling up her prominent nose, flaring her nostrils intensely and with a half open mouth, one would swear she was about to breathe fire.

James Beecham came in about this time. He went over to the bar area, strung his lanky figure over a bar stool, and ordered a cappuccino. ‘Not too much chocolate, please.’ Then he looked around, surveying the faces with his bushy eyebrows raised and an enquiring look on his angular face. Those who caught his eye shook their heads sadly.

By this time Craig had eaten his toast and almost drained his cup. On checking his watch he found that he was already five minutes overdue, so he left the charge on the table and headed for the door, murmuring his goodbyes. As he went through the door he heard Freddie say: ‘See, he isn’t married either. And heading for forty as well, isn’t he? It wouldn’t surprise me if he turned out to be a shirt-lifter too.’

Craig halted in his tracks. After throwing Freddie one outraged look, he chose to leave, preferring not to rise to his bait. But he had the satisfaction of hearing Adele start in on Freddie as the door swung shut behind him. And anyone who had ever been unfortunate enough to be on the sharp end of her tongue would know it was better to brave the licking forks of an open fire than the searing heat of her words once she got going.

* * *

A week passed. Warren was still missing. There was no sign of him. His bicycle, paper bag and clothes were also absent. It was as if he had literally vanished into thin air. Photographs of him, kindly reproduced in hundreds by Alex Rowmeyer, were plastered everywhere, serving as a constant reminder of his handsome young

face. Karen and Geoff Leadbetter hadn't been seen at work since the day of Warren's disappearance. They had made the usual heart-rending plea on TV for his safe return, promising no retribution if only the person holding him would just release him unharmed. For all who watched and cared, there couldn't have been a dry eye at the end of it. Roy went along with this, though later he said that he would rather give a rabid dog a pat on the back than let off a child-abductor.

There was very little response. Everyone who could give any information, no matter how seemingly insignificant, had already volunteered it – all excepting the person or persons holding Warren, that is. Karen was under heavy sedation. Geoff spent nearly all his time, day and night, driving around, his radius ever widening as he relentlessly searched for his son. And the dark circles under his eyes grew darker still as time went by with no word.

As the days turned into weeks, Todd Skerratt was becoming increasingly concerned about the long-term effects of the drugs he was administering to Karen. Without telling her, he decided to gradually reduce the potency. Geoff had never asked for any medication and seemed to be living in a vacuum. He telephoned Roy Shoreson every single day, sometimes twice. Despite the monotony of it, Roy never tired of repeating that everything possible was being done. And it was, but all to no avail.

Without a body Karen and Geoff would not accept the possibility of Warren's death. But already, in closed circles, the rest of the community was performing a lament for the dead.

Then, almost one month to the day after Warren's disappearance, Kate Beecham vanished.

CHAPTER TWO

Back in early January, over a month before Warren disappeared, Craig was enjoying his regular Sunday lie-in. He'd heard the sound of hammering, angry hammering, the blows being struck in a heavy regular *thwack, thwack, thwack*. He glanced at the clock and was surprised to see that it wasn't yet eight o'clock. With a groan he dragged himself from his warm, comfortable bed and shrugged on his dressing gown.

Craig went directly to the window and pulled back the curtains. There had been a heavy snowfall just after the New Year and it was thawing to a grey slush, but it was still bitterly cold. Shivering, Craig cleared a patch of condensation and peered out through the cold glass. He was astonished to see Todd Skerratt out in his back garden with a pile of wooden planks, nailing them together. He was well muffled against the weather but Craig could still make out his thunderous expression as he continued to hammer the wood. The thought of climbing back into bed briefly flitted through his mind, but with another heavy groan he traipsed off to the bathroom.

All through his shave, shower, and right through breakfast the sound of that thwacking accompanied his every move. It must have been getting on 9:30 by the time he pulled on his coat and went out to see what Todd was putting together –

or more likely, what had got him so riled up that he was doing it at such an early hour.

‘What’re you making?’ Craig asked without preamble.

‘Doghouse.’

‘Why the rush?’

He paused, nail poised, and looked up at him from his kneeling position. Craig could see that the lower half of his trousers were soaked where he had repeatedly changed position, but it didn’t seem to be bothering him. ‘That puppy I got Luke for Christmas. Elaine won’t let him keep it. Says it’s peeing everywhere and making the house smell. Luke’s upset and says if I don’t take it she’ll have it put down.’

‘I see. So you’re going to keep the dog here. And this,’ Craig said, pointing at the wood, ‘is going to be a kennel?’ He smiled; he couldn’t help it. From Todd’s efforts so far, it rather resembled something that Freddie Mason might have had a hand in.

‘That’s right. And I’ve got to fetch the dog this morning at the latest, or it’ll be on the way to the vet this afternoon – Sunday or not. At least, that’s the threat. It’ll have to stay outside. I’m out most every day so it’ll be almost impossible to house train.’

‘Can’t you find anyone else to take it?’

‘Ah, you know what kids’re like. Luke already thinks of it as his soul mate, so there’s no alternative. It’s my own fault, I suppose. I should have asked *her* first. But you know how he’s always gone on about wanting a dog. I thought once she

saw it, she'd fall in love with it. She can be a cold-hearted bitch at times. So that's it.' He started hammering again, but with a little less ardour.

* * *

Luke named the dog Jinks. It was a beautiful golden retriever and to Craig's knowledge Jinks never ventured a paw inside the doghouse, and more commonly used it to cock a leg on. Jinks spent more time at Craig's place than he did at Todd's, often sleeping over. Almost from the first day of his arrival he decided to familiarise himself with Craig's garden, finding and sneaking through a hole in the fence at the back. Craig spotted him immediately and was forced to go out and check his movements, lest he damage the shrubs. But it wasn't long before Craig was as sappy over him as both Luke and Todd.

Because of Todd's evening surgery it then fell to Craig to walk Jinks every evening around seven, barring weekends. Luke, if staying, used to take Jinks for his evening constitutional, but that was curtailed after Warren's disappearance.

On his walks Craig often passed familiar faces and sometimes stopped for a brief word. Almost every Friday evening he would see the three Beecham girls walking down Truemartin Lane to catch the bus into Creesemorton. They would wave exuberantly, shouting: 'Hello, Mr Gardener.' As if they hadn't seen him for months. Then they would continue on down the lane, talking and giggling with their heads close together as young girls do.

In Creesemorton they would usually head for the cinema and afterwards go on to Reg's Bar where, all three being underage, only soft drinks were on offer. The

Coffee & Cream was closed by the time the film ended and everyone piled out looking for a meal or a drink.

On the night Kate Beecham disappeared, Thursday 29 March, Craig saw the three sisters – Kate, Claire and Sara – together for the last time as they turned the corner from Thisleberry Lane where James Beecham’s family lived in the old Victorian rectory. Craig waved to them as they trotted into Truemartin Lane but they were too far away to exchange words.

* * *

Kate Beecham was just seventeen and still at college. She used to catch the 8:30 train every weekday morning into Easthampton during term time, preferring to commute rather than take up the more usual option of a student flat. She wasn’t particularly striking when it came to looks. She favoured her father; tall, lanky and sporting those same angular features, though without James’s bushy eyebrows. The eldest of James’s three daughters, she often helped out her father on Saturdays at Beecham’s Hardware, earning a little extra pocket money while she studied to go on to medical school. Her ambition was to become a doctor, specialising in obstetrics.

Kate was a nice enough girl, but nothing to really distinguish her from the crowd. She seemed to have plenty of friends, among them her own two younger sisters, Claire and Sara, with whom she spent most weekend evenings hanging out at the Coffee & Cream or the local youth club.

A little after the start of the film, Kate complained of severe stomach cramps. She left her seat to visit the ladies' and returned only long enough to whisper that she must have caught some sort of bug and was going straight home. Neither Claire nor Sara thought to accompany her.

There wouldn't be a bus destined for Drayford Village for a further twenty minutes. Feeling so poorly, she decided she couldn't wait and used her mobile phone to call Robert Vale's Creesemorton Taxis for a faster ride home.

Robert had just started his company and so it was really just a one-man band, since he had only the one taxi, which he drove. His younger sister, Rachael, monitored his calls for him during the day from her small flat in Creesemorton over at Patricia's Hair & Beauty Salon, where she helped out with the more menial tasks. Pat let her run a phone extension for Robert in her shop. Robert's wife Maggie manned the telephone by night from their home. So it was Maggie Vale who took Kate's call and advised her that though Robert was already ferrying a passenger, he would be with her in a few minutes.

Whilst waiting for Robert to turn up, Kate must have slipped into the public toilets at the end of High Street, and in the meantime Robert came along. Since she was nowhere in sight he thought she had changed her mind. But he did wait at least five minutes before driving off, and only then because he got another call.

The bus arrived soon afterwards and Kate didn't bother to call Maggie again. Pauline Vale, Robert's other sister and the youngest of the three siblings, was walking along High Street to Reg's Bar after finishing work at the Coffee & Cream when she spotted Kate and a couple of others boarding the bus for Drayford at 9:30 pm.

The bus was practically empty with only two other passengers; an elderly couple on their way back from visiting their son in Creesemorton. In their statements they said she looked very pale and was clearly uncomfortable as she kept shifting in her seat. When questioned, the bus driver stated that he picked up a set of headlights in his rear view mirror on the approach to Drayford. But he wasn't taking much notice and couldn't identify the vehicle. When the bus reached the stop at the end of Truemartin Lane, it overtook him and headed into Thisleberry Lane. According to the elderly couple, Kate also headed for Thisleberry Lane after alighting from the bus, slightly bent over and holding her tummy as she hurried towards the lane. This was the last sighting anyone had of her.

Roy Shoreson chose Detective Inspector Trace Spalden to head the team investigating the disappearance of both victims. He figured that since Trace was single and extremely ambitious his keenness might produce quick results. He divided his men into two teams, one concentrating on Warren Leadbetter and the other on Kate Beecham. But they were all under strict instructions to liaise carefully in the *unlikely* event that the disappearance of the two missing teenagers was linked.

It seemed unthinkable that a resident from Creesemorton or any of the surrounding small villages could have abducted Warren Leadbetter, and the police were trying to trace every customer of the Drayford Arms on the night of his disappearance, acting on the probability that someone passing through had grabbed him. Nevertheless, every resident was being systematically checked out for past criminal records and alibis. This was time consuming but the only

direction the investigation could take without any solid leads. When Kate vanished it gave the investigation a new impetus, but the idea that the two abductions, as they were now regarded, could be linked was only briefly considered due to the gender difference of the victims.

By Sunday teatime the whole town knew that Kate Beecham had been abducted. The phone lines had been red hot throughout the day with everyone speculating on this latest atrocity to bedevil the small community.

* * *

About a week later Craig was having lunch in the Coffee & Cream when he, along with everyone else, spotted Freddie Mason outside – he was difficult to miss. He kept walking a couple of steps and then stopping, as if he couldn't decide on his direction, all the time staring in through the big plate glass window. The faces staring back at him displayed meaningful smirks, which caused him to curl back his mouth in a snarling grimace. One of his front teeth was missing, leaving an ugly black gap between the remainder of his yellowing broken set.

‘Hey, Adele, have you barred Freddie again?’

Adele came out of the back carrying a tray of fresh rolls which she plonked down on the counter. ‘Not today. But there's time yet. Why?’

One of the clientele pointed to Freddie's huddled figure pressed against the glass. Freddie replied by giving everyone the finger, slowly letting the jutting appendage rove from one side of the room to the other. Then he turned his back, bent over and wagged his backside at everyone. The cafe's response was raucous

laughter. After one more crude gesture, he moved off down the street, laughing as well.

There were so many with grudges against Freddie it was difficult to even hazard a guess as to who had whispered his name to the police, but it was probably not done with any real malice. However, when Freddie couldn't account for his movements at the time of the two disappearances, Trace Spalden assigned two men in plain clothes to watch his movements for a couple of days.

The common opinion was that Freddie hadn't the brains to differentiate between dirt and soil. Stanley Cummings could attest to this quite literally. He ordered some topsoil from Freddie who offered him prompt delivery, providing he could have payment up front. Stanley unwittingly handed over the money and shook Freddie's hand on a verbal agreement. Freddie was true to his word and made the delivery the following day. Unfortunately, Stanley was out at the time. When he got back and went out to check on the quality, he found that Freddie had sold him a pile of first class dirt. Stanley never got his money back. Naturally, Stanley barred him from ever again entering the Drayford Arms. But since it was never one of Freddie's favourite watering holes, he didn't suffer any hardship.

There were a number of witnesses to Freddie's expertise, or rather lack of it, on a whole range of things from washing machines to carpentry. At the end of a job, sometimes sooner, he'd expect and be ready for the complaints. Half the time he'd just look at you with that dumb expression of his and plead ignorance, saying things like: 'Well, you never told me about that.' Or, 'If I'd only known, I would've done it another way.' Despite being so inept, Freddie still got work on account of being so cheap and sometimes, yes *sometimes*, the jobs turned out

right. But the townspeople knew that Freddie didn't have the intelligence to plan, much less execute, a kidnapping, and the whisperer was just being mischievous.

It turned out Freddie wasn't entirely lacking in wits; he spotted his two shadows on the morning of the second day of surveillance and recognised one of them. By the end of the third day he got tired of them dogging his heels – some say because this prevented him from carrying out some of his more dubious activities. Meg Porter saw the whole thing from the post office window during a quiet spell. The two policemen were sitting in their unmarked VW Golf, watching Freddie's progress down High Street, when he suddenly turned on his heel and casually walked back to their car. He tapped on the windscreen, then dropped his trousers before turning and mooning his bare arse at their gaping faces. After recovering from their astonishment, they leaped out of the vehicle and there was the mother of all struggles as they tried to arrest him, which resulted in the loss of Freddie's front tooth. They finally subdued him and hauled him off to the station where they charged him with indecent exposure. But Trace let the charge drop, feeling it would be a waste of taxpayers' money to prosecute him.

* * *

Two weeks after the second abduction, the police were no nearer to tracing Kate's whereabouts as they were to Warren's. Now there were two fathers roaming the roads in their respective vehicles searching for their missing children.

Craig Gardener was cataloguing the new additions on the computer and stamping the respective books as he entered them one Monday morning. Jeanette came over and waved to get his attention.

‘Mr Gardener,’ she began. Then seeing his dour expression – Monday mornings were not the best time of the working week for interruptions – she said, ‘I’m sorry to bother you, but we have a little anomaly on our local history shelf.’

‘What is it?’ Craig asked in a patient tone, trying to hide his annoyance. He placed a ruler on the delivery note he was entering, to keep his place.

‘*Drayford Village on the Fringe of Easthampton* is missing. Both copies.’

‘Really? Have you checked who last took them out?’

‘Yes, well that’s the point. According to the computer record, one copy was taken out in September and returned, and the other hasn’t been borrowed since August the previous year. That entry is also flagged as returned.’

Craig walked over to the historical non-fiction aisle and halted at the shelf holding the local history books and pamphlets. Running his finger along, he passed Pendon Village, Creesemorton, Rimdone Village, and Peesegorton among several others but no copies of Drayford Village. He then walked over to the computer used to log the incomings and outgoings. He checked the log for both copies, fully expecting Jeanette to be correct on both counts. She was.

‘Oh dear. You know what this means, don’t you Jeanette?’

‘Surely not, Mr Gardener.’

‘How can it be otherwise? But rather odd, don’t you think. What cretin would want to steal not one but two copies of that particular book?’

Jeanette looked perplexed and shrugged her shoulders.

Craig frowned. ‘I can’t believe that any of our regulars would steal a book, let alone this one. Has anyone recently joined us?’

She was already shaking her head, before she even started to check the list. ‘No. And I haven’t seen any strangers in here either.’

‘Neither have I. Ah well, we’ll just have to put it down to experience and order a new copy. But it’s the *two* copies I can’t get over. I’ve got a copy of this book myself, at home, so I’ll lend it to the library – if you’ll pardon the pun – until a new one arrives. How did you find out, by the way?’

‘Roy Shoreson’s little girl, Emily. She wanted it for a school project.’

‘Right. I’ll drop my copy off at Roy’s house then, this evening. Wouldn’t like to think we were holding up Emily’s swotting for the sake of one little book.’ And it occurred to Craig to wonder why the school hadn’t got a copy.

At the time, the theft of these books, whilst mildly irritating and certainly mystifying, seemed relatively unimportant and as far removed from the investigation of the two missing teenagers as one could get. But everyone’s cleverer with hindsight.

CHAPTER THREE

Craig heard Luke's voice shrieking with excitement as he greeted Jinks. The whoops of glee were accompanied by the dog's equally excited barks and yelps. It was Friday night, around seven o'clock, and they had only just returned from their evening walk. Knowing that Luke was coming, Craig had deposited Jinks in Todd's house, for which he had a set of keys.

Craig was invited for dinner – though he had no idea of the sort of fare he was likely to get, since Todd wasn't the best of cooks – but he wasn't going round till 7:30. This would give them a little time to be alone together. Craig hadn't wanted to intrude at all, as it had been three weeks since Luke's last visit. But Todd insisted and Craig had given in without too much resistance. He didn't mind admitting that the nights could get quite lonely at times, especially during the long winter months, and he had come to rely on the friendship of both man and boy.

Craig had already checked his medicine cabinet for indigestion tablets – just in case! But as it turned out he didn't need any. Todd had bought himself a slow cooker. Before leaving for morning surgery he had peeled and slung in a variety of vegetables along with chicken breasts and one of those ready-made sauces. In the late afternoon he had nipped home and thrown into the oven three large jacket potatoes. It wasn't exactly a gourmet meal and Elliott Dandridge might have

given it a supercilious sniff, but Luke and Craig didn't think it was half bad. And for afters there was a shop bought apple pie and a choice between ice cream and fresh cream. So all in all it wasn't too bad and Craig congratulated Todd on his efforts.

They were all still sitting at the large pine kitchen table, feeling full and satisfied. Todd and Craig were drinking coffee and Luke had been persuaded to have a milky chocolate drink – with bedtime in mind – when the telephone rang and Todd's face fell to his chest, since he was on call this particular night. He let it ring three times before he finally dragged himself into the hall to answer it. When he came back his expression meant he had to go out. Surprisingly, it was to visit Meg Porter who had suffered a fall at home and wanted her ankle checked out before she went to the trouble of travelling to the City General's emergency department in Easthampton.

'Jeez. Let's hope she hasn't broken it,' Craig blurted, selfishly thinking of the threat to the post office.

Todd sniggered knowingly and shrugged on his coat. He paused by the door, his grin shifting to a frown. 'You know, there's those stairs of hers to contend with. Well, let's not speculate on the worst scenario. Better get there first and find out what's what.'

As the sound of Todd's car disappeared down the lane, Luke said, 'Craig, you know those two kids who've disappeared, what d'you think's happened to them? Dad won't talk about it except to warn me against strangers and, well, you know, all the usual stuff.'

‘That’s probably because there’s very little to say. No one knows why they’ve vanished. There’re no witnesses, no clues, and no sightings of them since they disappeared. There haven’t even been many crank calls saying either of them have been spotted somewhere.’

‘D’you think they’re dead then? I mean, d’you think a baddie got them?’

‘I hope not.’

Then, to change the subject and keep him entertained until Todd returned, Craig began to regale him with stories from his childhood.

Ah, there’s nothing like a captive audience.

By the time Todd returned, Luke, after a bit of friendly persuasion from Craig, had washed behind his ears and brushed his teeth, and was sitting in his pyjamas and dressing gown, ready for bed. But he was allowed to stay up until 10:30 for Todd and he to make the most of their time together. They had the playing-cards shuffled and Luke had optimistically dealt out three hands. Todd and Craig were teaching him poker, but with his ex-wife’s disapproval in mind they played with monopoly money or matchsticks, and once chocolates, which had resulted in a near quarrel when Luke lost his favourite soft centre, the strawberry cup.

It was a relief to learn that Meg had suffered only a nasty sprain rather than a serious break, and that she would probably make a full recovery in a few days.

That night Luke came out on top and carefully put away his hoard of matchsticks before going up to bed with a triumphant smile on his face. For Craig it was one of the happiest times in recent months, notwithstanding the current blight on his little hamlet.

* * *

27 April 2006

Drayford Hall was built around the same time as the Drayford Arms but, unlike the pub, had kept much of its original appearance with only a few additions over the centuries. The owners, the Palmston-Fellows, had been there since 1598.

The present owner, Andrew Palmston-Fellows, was outside preparing his garden borders for spring bedding when he became aware that something seemed to be amiss over at David Arnold's farm, which bordered his land at the back of the hall. Amidst the usual tranquillity, the loud, collective mooing of an entire herd of cows in distress must have been going on for quite a while, he realised, before the terrible keening had finally broken his concentration.

After standing for a while just listening and speculating on the noise as it carried over the quiet of the countryside, he went inside to give David a call. He let the phone ring for quite a while. But he wasn't unduly alarmed at the lack of response. He knew that David was alone at the farm, except for his eighty-four year old father, James, who by all reports was deteriorating rapidly into senility and wasn't expected to answer the phone.

Andrew wandered outside again and glanced up at the clear sky, resenting the interruption to his planned morning in the garden. Dry days were few and far between so far this month. There was still very little let up in the biting temperatures. His wife Beatrice had gone out earlier in the morning to beat the crowd at the Cresemorton supermarket, and he was alone on the property.

The days when a full complement of servants and a team of gardeners roamed around the place were long gone. There was only Kitty Bunyon, from Thisleberry Lane, who came and helped Beatrice three mornings a week with the cleaning and this wasn't one of her days. Having acquired the lucrative Seetons' Brewery, there was still plenty of money but Andrew wasn't in the business of wasting it by paying exorbitant fees for unnecessary staff. Like many of the wealthy, Andrew always thought he was being ripped off and had given up trying to keep *servants*, as he still insisted on calling them, after the last gardener told him to 'shovel his own shit in future' when Andrew caught him making off with a couple of cabbages.

Andrew cocked an ear, listening to the baying cattle once more before stomping back indoors. After scrubbing his hands, he scribbled a brief note for his wife, knowing she would be worried if she returned and found him missing. Then he grabbed his car keys and rushed back outside, the sound of those distressed cows accompanying his every movement. Hurrying now, he jumped into his car and accelerated down the drive, tyres churning up the gravel. Making directly for Crossways Lane and David Arnold's farm, he glanced at the clock on his dashboard and noted the time at 10:20 am.

Halfway down the lane he spotted old James Arnold tottering along the grass verge in his pyjamas and dressing gown, which was open and flapping in the cold wind. The legs on his pyjamas didn't quite reach his bony ankles. Andrew briefly wondered how he managed to walk at all on legs so thin. As he drew alongside he halted the car, jumped out and took a firm hold on the frail old gent to prevent him from walking any further. At first he thought the old man was crying, since his

face was wet with tears, but then he realised it was due to the cold wind. The old man's grey hair was sticking up in all directions, his chin was showing what looked to be at least a day's fuzzy growth, and he was clearly unwashed. After trying for several minutes to get some sense out of James, Andrew gave up and bundled him in the back of the car, thrusting aside the thought that the back seats would need an intensive clean afterwards, since the poor old chap was soaked in urine. As Andrew drove off again the old man started babbling something about there being no porridge, but Andrew was barely listening as he turned into the drive leading up to the old farm house.

All the farm buildings were built higgledy-piggledy around the house, but Andrew picked out the milking shed immediately on seeing the entire herd congregating in the yard at the front of it. They seemed to be pushing and shoving and wailing in unison, their swollen udders swinging as they swayed to and fro with a glazed look in their eyes. He glanced at the old man sitting in the back of his car. James was gripping the headrest in front of him with his claw-like fingers, still moaning about 'no porridge'. Andrew hesitated only long enough to ensure that the back doors were locked before alighting from the car.

Not having any experience with cattle, Andrew wisely kept his distance from the herd. He shouted David's name as loudly as he could, directing his voice towards the closed doors of the milking shed. There was no response. He walked quickly around the perimeter of the fence, scanning the surrounding fields. He spotted David's tractor in the first meadow by the side of the milking shed, but no sign of the man himself. He then approached the house and walked around the back where he found the door swinging on squeaking hinges. Tentatively, he

ventured into the kitchen and took himself on a tour of the house, shouting David's name over and over again. The house was silent and empty. On returning to the kitchen Andrew noticed a teapot and the remains of two meals on the pine block table. The teapot was stone cold. The half-eaten sausages and eggs on the two plates had solidified. He calculated that the leftovers were probably from the previous day and realised that something was drastically wrong. David would never have left his father unattended.

Moving quickly now, he dashed back outside to check on James. He was asleep, sitting with his head resting back and his mouth gaping open, snoring loud enough to be heard above the awful moaning of the cows. Andrew felt a moment's distaste at the sight of James's drooling chin. Guiltily setting aside such thoughts, he turned away and looked about him one more time. Then, using his mobile, he put in an urgent call to Roy Shoreson at the police station.

* * *

Since David Arnold worked alone at the farm, except for Warren Leadbetter's help in the evenings before the first abduction, it was difficult to pin down the last relevant sighting of him. But Andrew's assumption of that sausage and egg meal being twenty-four hours old was confirmed as roughly correct. The cows had probably missed two milking sessions, putting the estimated time of David's disappearance at around 7:00 pm the previous evening.

Only hours into investigating his whereabouts, David Arnold was officially declared missing. His father James was packed off to a nursing home in the city,

and the herd, after clearance from a vet, was temporarily split between the surrounding farms, given the urgency of the situation. It was a foregone conclusion that some of the herd would contract mastitis. The police secured the farmhouse and its outbuildings, and they padlocked the external farm gates for good measure. And that is how the property was destined to remain for several years, whilst a government appointed executor sorted out the estate.

* * *

A spot on the side of Trace Spalden's forehead was becoming sore as he sat hunched over his desk studying the case notes of the three missing residents of Drayford Village. Unconsciously, he kept rubbing it from time to time while deep in thought. He now felt reasonably certain that the three cases were linked. The idea that three separate abductions in the space of three months in such a small village like Drayford, where serious crime was previously unheard of, now seemed inconceivable. What he couldn't figure out was the link.

He scratched his head yet again, suddenly shaking it as he felt the tenderness. Three abductions, two of them male and of vastly different ages, fifteen and forty-two respectively; and apart from the fact that Warren Leadbetter odd-jobbed for David Arnold on weekday evenings, there wasn't any apparent connection. And one female, aged seventeen, who knew the other two victims only as neighbours. What, Trace asked himself over and over again, could possibly connect these three people as victims of one abductor?

In the case of Warren Leadbetter, after it had been reasonably established he hadn't run away, it had been widely assumed that he had fallen victim to a paedophile. Privately, the police accepted that in all probability Warren was dead. Consequentially, they were currently checking the register of all known convicted paedophiles, plus their unregistered list. Since Kate Beecham was of the opposite sex and two years older, assumptions were a little trickier. She, too, had no apparent reason to abscond without a word to anyone. She had no steady boyfriend – of this they were certain, having read her diary. Her studies were not causing her any undue stress and, apart from feeling ill on the night of her disappearance, she appeared a perfectly happy, well-adjusted teenager. Trace was a little more cautious in agreeing with the rest of his team that she, too, was probably dead. But they had now widened their systematic search to include *all* sex offenders.

David Arnold's case was even more difficult to relate to the disappearance of the two teenagers. Nevertheless, it was the only conclusion Trace could arrive at, given the history of crime in Drayford Village – or rather lack of it.

Give me a fighting chance here.

Trace shivered. He had wanted this case. God, how he had wanted it. And now he had to run with it. Never far from his mind was the thought that if only the investigation could end with a prosecution, further promotion might be in the offering. He returned his concentration to the matter in hand. Someone was treading an evil path through Drayford Village. Why Drayford? And who was this maniac, so clever as to leave not a single footprint? Was it just luck? Kate Beecham's abduction couldn't have been planned, since she had left the cinema

unexpectedly early. And even if she hadn't, she would still have been with her sisters all evening – if it hadn't been for that stomach bug. So it couldn't have been planned, could it?

The three girls had called in at the Coffee & Cream before going on to the cinema. They had spent about twenty minutes there, during which they had each had a drink. Was it possible that someone had slipped Kate a strong laxative without her knowing? He needed to speak to Adele Turner. If a stranger or passing tourist had been in her place that night, she would be able to furnish them with an unlimited account, right down to the length of his fingernails. But what if it were not a stranger? What if this pervert was already living amongst them? His skin prickled again, competing with the sweat on his brow. There had to be a link between these three people, damn it! It was there if only he could just find it. Well, he had better damn well find it. Shuffling his papers, he went back to the beginning again.

* * *

Trace was embarrassed by the lack of progress and frustrated at the bizarre disparity of the crimes in relation to the victims. There were no precedents to work with. On the day he had been assigned this case his confidence was high, but had gradually diminished over weeks. Try as he might, he could find no pattern to the crimes.

With his confidence at rock bottom he reluctantly suggested Roy Shoreson appoint someone else to head the investigation. Roy talked him out of it, buoying

him up with a fatherly talk. If this perverse bastard was destined to be caught, Roy told him, then he had every confidence that Trace would be the man to do it.

As the heat intensified, Roy himself was clearly beginning to worry as well. He was constantly bombarded with disgruntled phone calls on the lack of progress. The team was not lacking in enthusiasm, however, and Trace, his confidence bolstered by Roy's words of encouragement, played on this to order another closer look at all family members of the victims.

And then on a beautiful sunny day in late May, twenty-four-year old Jason Cummings, the son of Stanley Cummings, vanished in the space of three minutes and before a crowd of onlookers in the car park of the Drayford Arms. Not one single witness could furnish an explanation as to what had become of him.

