

Last to Die

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(Also by this Author)

Murder in SW19
Utopia's Children
The Woodman's Son
Hiram and the River of Blood
Heart of Lies
Four Blind Mice

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2025

To my friend, Ivan

Hell hath no limits, nor is it circumscribed
 In one self place, for where we are is Hell,
 And where Hell is there must we ever be.

Christopher Marlowe

He stood alone on Dead Man's Hill. Beside him was a solitary oak, autumn bare, its thousand-year-old body thick and gnarled. He studied the naked twisted branches – how the multitudinous upper branches were like crooked fingers pointing to the heavens, while the lower branches swept out, their furthest points striving towards the earth again.

Much blood had soaked into the earth here, surely reaching the roots of the tree. 480 years ago, to the day, a small procession had made its way to the summit, a team of men dragging behind them an elderly white-haired man tied to sledge-like wooden frame. Beneath the oak had stood a newly constructed gallows and adjacent to this was a fire, knives and a cauldron. The old white-haired man was Richard Tilley, the monastery's last abbot, a humanist scholar and respected administrator, condemned to death on the orders of the Tudor regime determined to appropriate the wealth of the abbey of which Tilley had been custodian. The noose had been attached, the old man had taken a final look at the lands spread out beneath him, and then he had uttered a prayer to his Creator before the cart beneath him jerked and he dangled from the gallows. Minutes later, he was cut down, alive and conscious. His chest was sliced open, his bowels removed and tossed into the cauldron, his still-beating heart torn out and held aloft by the executioner who proclaimed it 'The heart of a traitor!' Finally, Tilley's body was dismembered and boiled, the head fastened up over the gate of the deserted abbey and the quartered limbs exposed in the nearby villages and towns, a terrible warning to all and sundry of the price of resistance to the King's greed and ambition. Meanwhile, the monastery went the way of nearly all the other religious houses in England: the monks were evicted, their sacred and worldly possessions auctioned, their lands, treasures and buildings seized by the Crown, which sold them off to the highest bidder. The Compton Tumor abbey itself was dismantled and used for building stone. To the gathered locals it must have seemed that Satan had come to earth. Maybe the Bard was thinking of the execution when he wrote his description of the death of Duncan in *Macbeth*: 'sacriligious murder' has broken open 'the Lord's anointed temple' and stolen thence 'the life of the building.'

The curse unleashed that day – according to many – never went away. With each generation, Compton Tumor shrivelled. People moved elsewhere, the bustling market town became a rural backwater; now there were only a few major landholders who meagrely farmed the land; the high street offered little more than a few rundown shops and cottages, there was no post office, and Compton Manor only kept the name 'village' because it had a place of worship, St Margaret's – otherwise it would have been a mere hamlet, and a small one at that.

The man looked again at the solitary, ancient oak, which had borne witness to centuries of decay and spilled blood. Marian martyrs had been burned to death nearby, a local Edwardian painter had been hung from one of its branches, several had suicided, and there were rumours that sacrifices had taken place here as well. Compton Tumor was full of dark rumours.

It was yet another day without rain, and he could feel a layer of perspiration on his face, and on his chest and back under his dark clothes. It had been a brutal summer, following on from a dry spring, and now, in the first week of October, the sky remained for the most part an almost burned out dusty white. He was sure that he could feel residual heat rising up through the earth. For weeks that year, Kent had been warmer than Athens. The summer heatwave had scorched the earth, killing trees and bushes, burning leaves brittle and brown out of season. Rivers dried to a trickle. Up and down the realm, religious men gave sermons about Revelations. But the weathermen insisted that rain was coming: the heavens were about to burst. Any moment now, they said.

Dead Man's Hill was the highest point in the region and an ideal vantage post. North by north-east was Haxley Wood: the forest was nothing like it was in Richard Tilley's day, but the ex-royal hunting forest still covered more than a thousand acres. These days, what remained of the forest was protected by national and international charters and was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest due to its unique ecology.

Continuing in a clockwise fashion, beyond the tiny Junkaris farm not visible given the lie of the land, the man could see the top of the spire of St Margaret's, and beyond that the high street, with the red roof of Mike Style's shop standing out like a sore thumb. From the roundabout at the end of high street, the Little Compton Road headed north to Collingwood, or one could take a winding lane south to the villages of Harrington and Totham D'Arcy. Looking south, beyond the Little Compton Road, was rolling countryside, a patchwork of green fields, separated by hedge and uneven stone walls. To the east, out of view, was Top Farm, owned by the Claxtons, and a little further along, the tiny cottage rented by Arthur Clegg, postman.

The only property where the man could hope to see any sign of human life was the farm owned by the Abbots: the 350-acre Grange Farm, directly beneath him. He knew the Abbots well: Sidney, the ex-soldier whose life-long dream had been to work the land, his devoutly religious-wife Mary, their two children, Peter and Hannah, and Hannah's eight-year-old son, Nicholas. Mary's family had owned Grange Farm for five generations and the Abbots were stalwarts of the community: they were respected, well-liked, decent people. Not an enemy in the world, everyone said.

The man smiled to himself, wiped the sweat from his brow, and set off down the hill towards the farm.

The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

The servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows.

But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wished it were already kindled!

But I have a baptism to undergo: and how distressed I am until it is completed!

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law...

Here lies the Devil – ask no other name.
Well – but you mean Lord? – Hush! we mean the same.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

It's all so sad. So very, terribly sad.

I knew Mary before she married Sidney, and I knew both Peter and Hannah when they were babes in arms. As for young Nicholas – well, he was an angel. I mean, literally, he was an Adonis, the most beautiful little boy you'd ever want to meet. To think... that someone did *that* to him while he slept in his bed!

I just... I can't wrap my head around what has happened.

My name is Barbara Handsworth. I've worked as farm secretary for Sidney and Mary Abbot for seventeen years. As you might expect, neither of them was particularly bookish or into technology, and I was IT-trained. I live in Thorpe Malsor and until this happened, I worked at Grange Farm three days a week: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

The Abbots were a very insular family. No reason for that: they just enjoyed keeping to themselves as most folks in Compton Tamor do. Everyone in the village liked them, except for their distant neighbour, Gary Junkaris (but he likes no one, and no one likes him or his two troublesome sons for that matter), and you know about the inter-family spat with the Claxtons long ago, but really, no one in the village had any *malice* towards them. They were *good* people. God-fearing – Mary especially. She gave up much of her free time visiting the sick and elderly in the village, and every week she would fall down on her hands and knees and scrub the church clean.

No, I don't really want to talk about Oriel and Ann Claxton. Top Farm is on the outer western edge of the village and people don't go out there much. Oriel is an intemperate man; Ann was Mary's sister, you see, and Oriel married her to get his hands on the property, which is about a third the size of the Abbot's farm, and not nearly as good. Claxton was always wanting to go into partnership with Sidney because Sidney was a better farmer. About twenty years ago, there was a family dispute over some land: Oriel wanted to buy it with Sidney coming on board, but Sidney wasn't interested. It got ugly, and it wasn't helped when the townie who eventually bought the land built a big ugly house there which directly overlooked Top Farm. The townie hasn't lived in the house for years – spends most of his time over in Spain, which rubs salt into the wound. Oriel never forgave Sidney, and the two men haven't really spoken to each other since then. I sometimes feel very sorry for Ann Claxton. Not only did she lose access to her sister Mary, but also to her niece and nephew, Peter and Hannah – the latter would be especially painful to her because she and Oriel never had children of their own.

Mary and Sidney were a perfect match in many ways. Mary was rather small and reticent, whereas Sidney was a broad, strong fellow, well over six foot tall, and though he was always unfailingly polite, he rather stomped about the place – lots of energy. He could be imposing, I suppose, but he carried with him an air of strength, and depth of understanding – hardly surprising considering the experiences he'd endured first-hand in the Middle East when he served on Tour. Peter wasn't a bit like his father, but Hannah adored her Dad.

Mary's family had farmed Grange Farm for nearly 130 years. Sidney, like I said, served in the Gulf, being part of the Colingwood Garrison, but he got out young to

fulfil his dream of becoming a farmer. They married in 1984. Peter was the first-born, 1987. Hannah was 1991.

Right from the get-go, Sidney was a wonderful farmer. He was innovative too: in the 1980s he sensed a decline in the market for traditional cereals because of over-production and was the first in the Blackwater area to see the potential of experimental crops such as borage, evening-primrose, fenugreek, and even opium poppies for use in alternative medicine preparations. In the 21st-century, he saw a reversal of British farming production of traditional crops, so he switched back. He had a great work ethic and fulfilled his role superbly, quickly gaining and holding the respect of his peers. He did well enough financially to keep the business going but never enjoyed his money. He treated his summer farm helpers well but without intimacy and those who knew him spoke of him as a fair man. He also served as warden at the local church, but he was not overtly religious like Mary. However, I have to say, Sidney was not... *affectionate*. Very duty-bound, very decent and hard-working and all that, but... *unemotional*. I never saw either parent hug their kids when Hannah and Peter were growing up. I never saw either one pat Crispy, the family dog. Oh, Crispy was never mistreated, but he was never really part of the family: he was a farm dog, with a job to do, and that was that.

I always knew that under the surface, things weren't quite as rosy as they appeared. Maybe that's true for every family. The whole village, some say, has been under a curse since they killed Richard Tilley. I think Mary found the physical act of sex disturbing. I really think she could only reconcile having sex with producing babies. Sidney had wanted to have a big family, lots of kids – he wanted to build a kind of dynasty, I think. But Hannah's birth was difficult, and the doctors told Mary afterwards that she could never conceive again. So... Sidney never got all the sons he wanted: he only got Peter, and Peter, well, he wasn't much of a man's man, if you know what I mean. Mary took the news badly; she went into a kind of post-natal depression and spent some time in a private psychiatric clinic. I think that, for Mary, the inability to get pregnant again was more than an emotional or psychological matter – it was religious judgement. It was in the years after Hannah's birth that she really became fanatical about Jesus and the Bible. People in these parts don't look for explanations from science as to why there are droughts, or why crops fail or why people got cancer: curses and witchcraft are real things round here. Perhaps Mary really thought the difficult birth of Hannah and becoming infertile was some kind of punishment from God. I also think a part of her suspected Hannah was to blame – that Hannah was something of a devil-child. More than once, Mary alluded to Hannah as a child of the devil. Mary was also wary of Hannah's son, Nicholas, which was quite strange. Whereas everyone adored Nicholas, his grandmother kept him at arms-length. More than once I found her just watching him, when he was out in the yard, or sitting at the kitchen table doing his homework. Mary would study him, and then she would give this heartfelt sigh and quietly shake her head.

And much of Madness, and more of Sin
 And Horror the soul of the plot.
Edgar Allen Poe

DCI John Murdoch consciously put a detached mask over his face, even though he was the only one inside the farmhouse. A constable stood by Little Compton Road, ensuring no unauthorised person trespassed, and another PC was positioned at the gate where the half-mile long private road reached the first outbuildings of the farm itself. The two clean-shaven young officers could not blink the revulsion from their eyes. Murdoch couldn't remember what it was like to be young, to retain the capacity of being shocked by human evil. Elsewhere, SOC continued to conduct further searches of the extensive farm, going through barns and vehicles, fingertipping along paths and in fields.

What the hell happened here? Murdoch had once dated a girl, long ago, named Joanne, who'd been a fan of crime books. 'The Four L's, that's what they say is behind every motive to kill,' she'd told him. Superintendent Sol Butcher told him the same thing. So did his unwanted sidekick, DI Erin Fox. *Love, lust, lucre and loathing.* The Homicide Manual got in on the act, while reminding detectives that 'motive' never needed proving in a court of law. But every detective wanted to *know* – to step inside the killer's mind and know what drove them to break the Sixth and most holy of commandments. Especially if the crime was planned: and Murdoch had little doubt that this crime, this obscenity, had been planned. Normally, other people nearby wanted to know, too: was it a domestic explosion, a psychopath in transit, a drug-head needing money for his next fix? But, so far, Compton Tamor was proving itself to be an exception to the rule: the isolated rural community seemed to have shut up shop, as if fearful that speaking out might invite such evil into their own homes. With a population of a hundred or so people within a three-mile radius, Murdoch had hoped his house-to-house teams would compile mega-bites of personal information, but so far, no one was talking.

Murdoch believed that buildings could speak to us, if only we knew how to listen. Buildings whispered secrets within their plastered walls and creaking floorboards. Just like that mighty skeletal oak on the top of Dead Man's Hill, which Murdoch could see from the kitchen window, this house had stood silent witness to whatever evils had been perpetrated here.

It was mid-afternoon, and the October sun only a few inches above the rolling horizon, dipping beneath scudding clouds, casting into shadow the ominous dullness of a farm that no longer had any living human inhabitants. In the diffused light, the stone walls were grey rather than golden, the dark paint on the windowsills and doors flaking and peeling. The flagstone floor in the kitchen was uneven, the red-painted Aga looked older than him; there were pots and pans hanging from hooks above the Aga, and all the usual knick-knacks and appliances you'd expect in a large country kitchen; the fridge and closet full of simple, wholesome foods, with lots of produce from the farm itself, and products bartered with other farmers in the region. (Murdoch had made a list of every item in the fridge and the waste bin, in case anything useful had been discarded.) It didn't take a great deal of imagination to feel transported back

in time, when self-sufficiency was not a preference, but the only option. The 21st century was apparent because of the stereo and nifty DVD player in the living room, and Peter's room, a sort of annex tacked onto the east wing of the farmhouse, was filled with the latest gadgets and toys. A crate of alcohol had been found in the elder son's room, and the dogs smelt out a cache of marijuana; meanwhile forensics were examining the hard-drive of his computer, but preliminary results showed him to be only mildly pornoholic.

There was no Bible in the kitchen, though Mary had strategically placed Bibles in many rooms throughout the house, along with moralising scripture and picture frames containing quotes from the New Testament. But there was nothing light-hearted about the kitchen either: no family photographs stuck on the door of the fridge, no animal-shaped magnets, no calendar with social reminders, no jokey mugs.

Murdoch had tried most of the light switches in the house, and wasn't surprised that most of the rooms were lit with low-watt bulbs. Farmers were notoriously tight-fisted, but Murdoch imagined that Sidney Abbot's relative meanness would not have sprung from pecuniary greed as much as a disregard of cheap and trivial entertainments. Fine clothes, shiny jewellery, nifty I-pods: Sidney would likely have been contemptuous of all of it. The only things Sidney Abbot ever bought were things he couldn't do without.

On the kitchen table they'd found a wicker basket filled with goods bought that morning at Mike Styles corner shop; beside the basket was that morning's edition of the *Essex Post*. The goods inside the basket matched the receipt found in the pocket of Amy's plum coat, and the exact change.

In one corner some salt had been spilled. Murdoch had asked if any of the SOC officers had spilled it, and they shook their heads. Perhaps one of them had and didn't want to admit to their clumsiness; perhaps it wasn't remotely important: one of the people in the house may have accidentally spilled some salt and never got round to cleaning it up. Maybe not. Judeo-Christians believed that salt was a purifier, and Murdoch knew it was often used in folklore to ward off evil spirits and demons.

On his first walkaround the farmhouse, Murdoch had asked the SOC team leader, 'Has any fire been lit in the farmhouse recently?' He'd been met with a strange stare. *Fire? In this weather?* 'Check,' ordered Murdoch. Some religious freak, spurred by the raging of prophets like Ezekiel, might be inclined to light a fire, as Jack the Ripper had in the room of his last victim, Mary Kelly. But not here. 'No fire, Guv.' Every hearth was cold, the grates clean of ashes.

Murdoch had asked the farm secretary, Barbara Handsworth, to walk through the property with him, to see if anything obvious was moved about, or missing. Murdoch was particularly interested in knowing whether the Bibles and religious paraphernalia throughout the house had always been as he had found it. Yes, said Barbara; it'd been that way for years. As far as she could make out, nothing had been touched or rearranged.

'You're thinking the killer staged the house?' muttered DI Erin Fox, 'trying to make us think this is all about religion?'

He hadn't replied, because he didn't have an answer.

The living room was a dreary place though spotlessly clean. Tan gorse carpet, off-white walls, a faded Persian rug under the glass coffee table around which a settee and two armchairs were arranged. No dog hairs in the chairs, Murdoch noted. This was the room where the family gathered in the evenings, where Abbot men and women had gathered for generations. It was hardly a merry setting. There were country prints on the walls, and one strange painting, rather dark and macabre, that wasn't hanging

quite right. There was a large sagging bookcase – Murdoch’s eyebrows lifted as he read several of the titles – and two narrow windows looking out to the front drive. The furniture was solid, dark and reliable, neither modern nor antique. There were no cut flowers anywhere in the house, and very few flowers anywhere near the house, except for that red rose tree near the back door which someone had taken care to recently prune, with noticeable fresh cuts on the stems. One corner of the room was still sealed off with blue and white tape.

Searches of the house had thus far failed to provide anything meaningful. How many times during a tough case Murdoch had looked back to those opening moments, with the annoying sensation that there existed a critical clue that could have smashed the investigation wide open? It had been there, under their noses, waiting, asking to be found. And they’d missed it. That was the reason why he’d left the crime scene tape up.

On the sideboard were several framed photographs, more knick-knacks, and a worn St James Bible, with a bookmark stuck in the Book of Luke. The air in the room felt heavy, trapped, like the way blood thickened in a body that seldom moved. Murdoch thought he could pick up a faint odour, mildly unpleasant: perhaps it was the faint mustiness of those old books, or a patch of damp somewhere, or even the residue of decades of cigar and cigarette smoking when such things were commonplace. Whatever the smell, it lingered and offended. Even the silence of the house seemed fraught with a waiting kind of menace. Maybe the house *was* trying to talk to him, after all.

There were multiple staircases in the property. One led down to a cellar-type room, carpeted, which Sidney had once used as a study, but which was now an empty space. It was here that the gun cupboard was located. The cupboard was large, perhaps 3 x 3 metres; it had a deadbolt locking system which was rarely activated according to men who’d worked on the farm during the annual summer harvests and knew the workings of the farm. The front door of the farmhouse itself was never locked either; only the sheds containing valuable farming equipment or produce were ever properly and consistently secured. Sidney was rarely away from the farm for an extended period, and both Peter and Hannah were crack shots. The guns – all with permits – were always loaded, and there was ammunition aplenty. The large gun cupboard had been an accessible treasure trove of weapons: there were hunting and killing knives, various chemicals and poisons, a nasty fire poker, and guns: a .22 Rifle semi auto; three Double Barrel Shotguns, a .22 Rifle Bolt Action; a 410 Single Barrel Shotgun; a .22 Air Rifle and an Anschutz rifle with a silencer attached. All those weapons were now at the forensic lab.

‘I cannot believe they had that loaded armoury in a cupboard like that,’ said Erin, when she got to read the list.

‘That’s because you’ve never lived on a farm.’

‘Rabbits?’

‘Rabbits, foxes, you name it. Guns and shooting are a way of life for these people.’

‘A way of death for them, too. None of those guns helped them, did they?’

Up the main stairwell Murdoch went. This led from the entrance hall to a sizeable landing and three bedrooms: Hannah’s, Nicholas’s, and the master bedroom which had belonged to Mary and Sidney. He moved slowly, noting every time the stairs creaked, resisting the urge to look behind him. He’d already spent hours inside the three bedrooms, and hours more studying crime scene pics of the rooms. He knew all about Nicholas’s trainset, the Wiggles poster, and the sweet wrappers he’d stuffed in one corner of his closet. Nicholas’s room had the best view in the house, overlooking

the front and western sides of the property, the hundreds of acres which in summer would have been yellow with rape; maybe the boy had watched each season as the local men, and interlopers too, came out to help harvest the crop.

Mary and Sidney's master bedroom was the only one with an ensuite. The bedroom itself was half the size of Murdoch's bungalow; there was a huge chest of drawers and mirror pushed against one wall; against another was an ornate long-chair, which the secretary, Barbara Handsworth, said had been removed from one of the old steam trains which used to run the Thorpe Malsor line. On the corner table were a handful of photos offering a pictorial history of Mary and Sidney's life together: their wedding day, then, years later, in middle age standing outside the front of the farm, another later pic of them at St Margaret's, presumably taken on Hannah's wedding day, another of them, older still, on a beach somewhere, perhaps Brighton, on a rare day away from the farm. In the earlier pics, Mary had dark hair, good features and lovely blue eyes; she was a handsome enough woman, perhaps with a face that was 'strong' rather than 'pretty'. As time went on, her face became sallowish, and almost aggressively destitute of makeup; she seemed to sag a little. Sidney seemed to age more naturally, though in the later pics, his eyes looked old. He was an impressive man, as the farm secretary said: so tall and broad he seemed to be making a conscious effort to stoop a little and narrow his shoulders in the photographs to soften the physical difference between himself and his wife. He had a well-shaped forehead, fair-brown hair streaked with grey. He looked a decent sort, if perhaps a little humourless.

Murdoch thought it odd that there were no solo images: in every picture husband and wife were together, and always pressed close together, no space between them. It was also strange that Mary – surely it was Mary who arranged the photos? – would not put on display any pictures of her children, or even her angelic grandchild. He inhaled through his nose and was sure he could pick the distinct iron smell of blood. Parts of the carpet and walls were stained. 'Nothing gets cleaned,' he'd ordered. Not while they remained so utterly clueless.

Rather like a deceptive work of art, the bedroom at first did not seem overtly religious, but the more Murdoch looked, the more he saw: the gold crucifix hanging from the wall between the two windows looking east to St Margaret's, the primary school and the high street; the hope beads on the dressing table beside the framed Bible verse; another wooden crucifix; even the scarf overhanging the back of a chair, was handmade by Ethiopian Christians using locally cultivated silk thread. And of course, there were Bibles. Plural. One on Mary's bedside table, presumably the last thing she was reading, for it had been flecked in blood; one which had lain on the dressing room table, and one which had been found on the ornate chair, squashed up against a pillow, as if it deserved the best seat in the room.

Hannah's room on the other hand was curiously bare. She was a good-looking young woman, a mildly rebellious sort, yet the walls were blank and the furniture bleak and tacky. Hannah's bedroom was the only room in the house which didn't look conspicuously clean. There had been whispers in the town that she may have been interested in someone local, but no one could put a name to this presumed lover, if he existed, and there was nothing in her phone records or limited social media networks to support the claim. Perhaps what was most telling was what *wasn't* there: no photograph of her husband, and the father of her child, the dead soldier, Daniel Tapper. Like her own Dad a generation previously, Tapper had gone off to fight in the Middle East when Hannah was pregnant; no one could say whether Tapper even knew he had a son on the way. Murdoch would have forgiven Hannah if she had wanted to

portray Nicholas's father as a hero to the boy, but there were no photographs of the soldier in the son's room either. She'd also reverted back to using her maiden name for herself and her son. The search teams had been unable to find any letters sent back from the front by Hannah's soldier-husband, nor the service medals he'd won and which became her property at his demise. Maybe Hannah had inherited her father's lack of sentimentality; maybe the memory of his death was too painful.

One of the brighter SOCs had noticed a scratched message on the inside of Hannah's walk-in-robe; in one darkened corner, about waist-high, someone had long ago used a sharp tool to scrape out the words 'I hate this place'. Maybe Hannah had chiselled the message when she was only a hormone-filled young girl. Hannah's single window looked out directly at Haxley Wood.

Murdoch shivered and didn't know why. Despite the recent downpour, there was no sign the warm weather was abating in the usual seasonal way. England had gone a record 158 days without any meaningful rainfall that year, and then it had bucketed down – on the very day the bodies were found. That alone was enough to get the superstitious locals extra convinced that the Devil was truly at work. As brutal as the stretch of hot barren weather had been, the deluge which followed was Biblical: over twenty inches in 36 hours, a mini-Flood as if God once again felt the need to flood the earth in order to expiate its sins.

Murdoch realised he'd been holding his breath, staring out at those darkened woods, as Hannah must have done a thousand times. He exhaled deeply. At the start of any major investigation, there was always an apprehension deep within his being, that *this* time he wasn't going to come out the other end. Not just with a result, but as a human being. He could feel a wave of dark misery washing over him. Murder detectives adapt to a regular diet of soul obliteration, but Murdoch made a habit of gauging on it. Each murder case stripped him of something, and after more than twenty years in the Job, he didn't know if there were any reserves left to draw upon, any more water in the well.

He walked back down the stairs, across the stone entrance hall and out the front door. He marched about twenty paces, then slowly turned in a circular fashion, taking in the scene. The 350 acres of Grange Farm was set in a shallow valley, not visible by any other property – only, in fact, from the lofty vantage point on Dead Man's Hill. You couldn't see the farmhouse or any of the outbuildings from Little Compton Road. You couldn't see the neighbours.

The wind sent a few dry leaves skittering across the gravel drive. A moment later, a few more yellow leaves dropped. Some of the deciduous trees were still quite full in leaf; others were already autumn bare. He pulled out his mobile and called Erin Fox.

'Guv.' That robotic voice, so precisely planed of all human emotion. By the sound of the background noise, she was in the incident room. 'You've got something?'

'Nothing,' he admitted. 'I wanted to ask you about the dog.'

'The Abbot farm dog?'

'Yeah, Crispy. Who found him?'

'That boy, Adam O'Donnell. Tuesday afternoon, when he rode over. Remember, it was Ted Butler who first entered the farmhouse, apparently a few minutes before the kid showed up. The dog supposedly got out the house then.'

'Whose got the dog now?'

There was a lengthy pause, either because she was annoyed by the seemingly pointless questions, or she needed to check her notes. 'The O'Donnells have taken the poor thing on. The vet checked him out first, and he's in okay shape: just unsettled. Why?'

‘No dog shit,’ Murdoch said. ‘Anywhere. Inside the house or outside. And the dog was well fed.’

Silence from the other end.

‘Like that rose tree by the back door, Erin, which has been recently pruned. On top of that, the farm animals were well fed and tended for. You didn’t notice?’

‘Well – ’

‘It seems we’re dealing with a very conscientious sociopath.’

‘Creepy,’ said Fox.

Murdoch looked back to where those yellow leaves had fallen, but they’d already been swept away by the wind when he wasn’t watching. ‘No one ever heard the dog barking, did they?’

‘I know my Sherlock Holmes, Guv. It was the first thing everyone thought: the dog didn’t bark, therefore the killer had to be local. But we don’t know that. That farm is so bloody big; Crispy could have been yapping 24/7 and no one heard him. Besides: he’s a homely Irish Terrier, not a ferocious guard dog.’

‘You’re missing the point,’ said Murdoch, and ended the call.

‘Could you keep a secret, if I told you one? It’s a great secret, I don’t know what I should do if anyone found it out. I believe I should die!’

Frances Hodgson Burnett

We often went out riding our bikes together, Nick and me. My bike isn’t as good as his: Nick’s uncle Peter bought him a Prevelo Alpha 4 for Christmas. It has 24-inch wheels and 21 gears, and it’s lighter than mine. Mine is a rusty old Spawn bike which my Dad picked up at a garage sale in Harrington years back.

My Dad works on the Abbot farm for extra money over the summer; Peter looked after him. During the week Dad normally worked at a factory in Yalow, but he saved up his holidays so he could also work for Sidney Abbot during the harvest – weekends too. It was hard work, Dad said – harvesting all that rape. Me and Nick would sometimes ride around the farm lanes while the men worked. I remember Peter always used to sit in his green-and-yellow combine – like it was a warhorse. I said to Nick that his uncle was a slacker, but Nick said that while it looked easy, it was actually hot and heavy work. And the summer was hot this year. *Hot*.

So hot that people were worried about the harvest. The rape normally ripens to the colour of parchment my Dad says, but it was earlier than usual, and it looked almost white when the men were out in the fields. Most of them were local men, but there were one or two strangers there. Migrants and gypsies sometimes showed up. You don’t see as many rape fields around the place as you used to; Peter told my Dad that UK rape-seed harvest was shrinking year after year; we’re talking 1 million tons as opposed to 2 million tons only a few years ago. That’s why Sidney was back at it in such a big way. Nick told me that rapeseed was the third largest source of vegetable oil and the second-largest source of protein meal in the world. He told me that England was now importing more proteins, and there was another country – Ukraine, I think – which still used something called ‘neonicotinoids’, which makes things cheaper for them, so they can undercut the English and European farmers. Which doesn’t seem fair: ‘It’s not what my Dad died fighting for!’ Nick once said to me. I didn’t reply. I didn’t really know why his Dad had gone off to war.

That summer we spent a lot of time hiking through, Haxley Wood. It was fun: looking out for robins, badgers and foxes. We never hunted them because of the curse. And we never went anywhere near the witch’s house, but we wandered about, trying to find the Black Lady. Nick said he saw her a few times, but I thinking he was goosing around. Besides, they say the Black Lady can transform into animals, a cat, a rabbit, a bird. Even into trees and stones. So maybe he did see her.

‘Let’s go see Flora,’ Nick said once. He spoke as if he knew her.

‘No way,’ I replied.

‘You’re scared of witches?’

It wasn’t that, I told him. It was my Mum. She liked the witch but made me promise to stay away from her.

The forest was nice, though. It was the only place where you could get away from the heat. The only place still colourful. Back on the Abbot farm, with all those men working away, the heat seemed to come not only from the sun, but the earth as well. Yet the forest floor, thousands and thousands of years old, was still cool and moist.

We refilled our water bottles in the little stream near Wistman's Cave. It was cool, sitting there by the stream. You could hear the combine and tractors chugging away from the farm.

'I wonder what really happened to Sven Jasper?' I asked Nick.

Sven was something of a legend in these parts. Something of a hermit, he'd disappeared long ago, decades before I was born. People kept expecting him to suddenly reappear, unaged, like a modern Rip van Winkle. Like he'd just walk out the forest one day, and pick up his life again! I honestly don't even know if there ever was a man called Sven Jasper: it sounds like a make-believe name, doesn't it?

'Oh, he was real,' said Nick.

'Yeah?'

'Uh-huh. No one knows what happened to him.'

I took Nick at his word. He was a smart kid – the smartest kid at school. Mr Hodgson, our teacher, *adored* him. And Nick loved England; I think because of what happened to his Dad, he thought he had to stand up for things. So he read books like a patriot; he was always reading books, and he could take so much in. Mr Hodgson got him a book on the War of the Roses. Nick could talk for hours about all the characters – the different kings and treasonous plots. He told me that Haxley Wood used to be part of a great forest which covered nearly 4000 square miles, stretching from Kent to Hampshire. Can you imagine that! There were thousands of deer and wild swine. Nick could name all the different trees, too: Scots pine, oak, ash, larch, Norway spruce, horse chestnut, birch; you name it.

My mum was going to take me and Nick that autumn to Donna Nook in Lincolnshire to see the colonies of the newborn grey seal pups, but it never happened. I think Mum called Hannah once, or bumped into her in the street, and Hannah was a bit off-hand with her. Hannah could be moody, but Nick said it wasn't her fault. Something to do with the medication she was taking. So my Mum didn't want to push the matter. I think she sensed that something wasn't quite right at the Abbot farm, but she wasn't a nosey woman, so maybe it was best left alone. I sometimes think if Mum had pushed, then we might have gone to Donna Nook that weekend after all, and Nick would still be alive.

IN GOD WE TRUST

The vicar of Compton Tamor has issued a public appeal for the killer of six local people in the recent Abbot Farm massacre to give himself up. Vicar Ben Ridley had this message for the murderer:

‘You have committed a series of dreadful crimes and you should give yourself up now and beg the forgiveness of the everyone personally devastated by your deeds, as well as the whole community.’

The vicar added: ‘You should come forward and ease your conscience because at some time in the future you will have to face your Creator and account for the terrible things you have done...’

You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute,
And now and then stab, as occasion serves.
Christopher Marlowe

The post-mortems, which took place in Thorpe Malsor, had left John Murdoch in an even worse mood than usual. It wasn't the gore, the smells, or that he felt like a soulless voyeur, but the simple fact that he gained no useful knowledge from the experience. After an afternoon of macabre desecration, he was left with the remains of a once healthy group of human beings, and no fresh data which could help him figure out who had killed them, or why. There was still no clear explanation for how the killer had gone about his business, the sequence of events which led up to each killing. 'I want the order of deaths confirmed,' he had stressed to the pathologist.

'We've already done that.'

'Beyond all doubt,' added Murdoch.

'Beyond reasonable doubt perhaps,' came the unperturbed reply.

Murdoch could tell that the pathologist didn't think the order of deaths mattered particularly, nor did Erin Fox and most members of the murder team, but Murdoch wasn't so sure. The consensus was that the killer just picked them off, one by one, as the opportunity arose. The two men on the farm – Peter and Sidney, were the killer's main threats, and so they were the first to die. The women and child could then be taken out at the killer's discretion. Hannah was the last family member to be killed. She was also the only victim to be doped and bound. The final victim was the maid, Amy, who had the misfortune to turn up to work that Monday morning, thinking all was normal.

It seemed that the killer had spent most of his time and attention on Hannah. It was possible that she was the source of the killer's angst; it was possible that her youth and looks were the reason the killer enjoyed tormenting her the most. 'No sex?' Murdoch muttered, knowing the answer, but wanting it rubber stamped.

'No sex,' said the pathologist.

Both Murdoch and the pathologist had been around long enough to have expected otherwise. There was no doubt the killer had ample opportunity to sexually attack Hannah. Psychopathic murders of beautiful young women are often a form of revenge or punishment against the women, for they are seen as a sexual threat or as responsible for the killer's inadequacy; in those cases you see terrible aggression directed at the breasts and genitals. That wasn't the case here. Whatever these killings were about, it wasn't sex.

'And no sadism,' said Murdoch.

'We-ll...' The pathologist drew the word out.

'I mean: there isn't a single wound on any of the six victims that suggests the killer enjoyed hurting them: no obvious overkill. He did what he needed to do, to kill. No more, no less.'

'That is your take, Chief-Inspector. But yes, it does seem strange that a man would commit such a massacre in such an apparently *clinical* way.'

On the way back to Compton Tamor, Murdoch pulled into the White Hart pub, which, some four miles from the village, was the nearest drinking hole available. It was approaching evening peak time and Murdoch was able to secure the last parking space out back. He had been told that Peter was the only Abbot who ever drank there, (a fact

the young man kept from his mother). The landlord picked out Murdoch straightaway and left his two smiling girls to handle the other patrons while personally handing Murdoch his large orange juice, and tentatively agreeing with the DCI's suggestion that there might have been one or two local characters Peter may not have been on the best of terms with.

'The Junkaris clan?' pushed Murdoch.

The landlord looked surprised by Murdoch's knowledge, and relieved too, because he didn't have to be the one to name them.

'They're not being helpful at the moment,' admitted Murdoch. 'I can't find anyone to say a good word about them.'

'Old man Gary ain't too bad – all bark and no bite,' said the landlord. 'But the two boys are strange. Still, we're talking *petty* stuff with Damon and Theo. Nothing like... what happened at the Abbot farm.'

'I have questions,' said Murdoch.

'I feared you might. About the curse?'

'No. I wanted to ask about Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper.'

The landlord blinked. It was difficult to know if he recognised the name or not.

Murdoch said, 'This pub is halfway between the Abbot Farm and the Collingwood barracks. I assume Daniel Tapper used to drink here.'

The landlord sighed. 'Yeah. He did. But that was long ago. Tragic... what happened to him. Killed in action.'

'Missing in action,' pointed out Murdoch, who'd spent a frustrating amount of time talking to unhelpful bureaucrats at MoD.

'Same thing,' said the landlord. 'You know that he was the last to die.'

Murdoch blinked. 'What's that?'

'The withdrawal from Basra. That last night we had forces on the ground there: his patrol went out one final time; an IED went off, there was a firefight, and he never came out alive. He must have been taken capture, because our lads went in hard to find him; they wanted his corpse to bring back home if they could find it. I don't even want to think what those Arab bastards did to him.'

'Is there anyone here who knew him?'

The landlord didn't like the question.

'Look; I'll give you my card, and I'll take my drink over there. If you know anyone here who might chat to me about Daniel Tapper, have a quiet word in their ear and leave it up to them to decide whether to help me or not. It was his wife and kid who were killed, remember?'

'Okay.'

Murdoch took a seat in the far corner. He felt every pair of eyes in the pub turn his way. Whatever kindly ambience the White Hart enjoyed before his arrival had drastically changed. They all knew who he was, and perhaps they guessed where he'd just come from.

Murdoch placed the case file on the table next to his orange juice, tossed his wallet and mobile phone on top of it, then let his gaze roam around the interior, as if he was genuinely interested in the fact that the wood-panelled décor was unchanged since Hitler marched into the Sudetenland. Bar stools were lined up along one side of the L-shaped bar; the other side provided a brass rail for customers to rest one foot on as they drank at the counter. It was the kind of remote country pub where everyone knew each other and knew their place. Murdoch half-expected one leery sod to meander over and tell him that he wasn't welcome here. On a pin-up board, there was an advertisement for the annual autumn festival at nearby Newton Abbot, where visitors

were promised giant pumpkins and apple bobbing galore. This was the time of squash, wild mushrooms, chestnuts, apples, blackberries and quince, which equated to as much apple crumble, quince jelly, mushroom risotto, roast chestnuts and root vegetable soups as a sane man or woman could take.

Compton Tamor held no such festivals, and barely figured on any maps. Murdoch was yet to find a street sign that advertised its existence. The two main roads through this part of the country ran north and south of the village. Unless you turned off at Little Compton Road, you'd never find the village itself. And while most of the thirty or so properties which made up the village had names, the titles were a verbal tradition: there were no signs advertising their existence. It all added – along with the fact that there wasn't a building in Compton Tamor less than two hundred years old – to a medieval feeling, a time when superstitions and curses were not mocked, a time when social expectations and laws were different to today, and when people lived closer to the land and its mysterious ways. Back then, security relied on self-policing, including the famous 'hue and cry', which called everybody out by shouts and trumpets to hunt down wrongdoers. Popular justice was harsh, because order was fragile. Disorder and violence could suddenly and easily erupt.

Murdoch had almost finished his orange juice when a dark-clothed, rather emaciated man, maybe forty-five years old, walked over to his table. He had poky features, the bones of his brow, forehead and jaw all pressing outward, as if they wanted to escape the skin which encapsulated them. But it was the man's eyes that held Murdoch and informed the DCI that he was face-to-face with a genuine hard nut. Murdoch guessed he was ex-army, a man who'd never adapted to civvy life, never softened. 'You're the detective?'

The 'Estuary English' voice marked him out as a pure Esser boy. Murdoch introduced himself, waving his warrant card.

The man ignored the warrant card. 'Not drinking on duty, then?'

'Not because I obey the rules,' said Murdoch, 'but I want a clear head. Every bit of piss I consume gives my enemy the edge.'

'Your 'enemy'?'

'My bosses who want to get rid of me, and the sick bastard who killed all those people on the Abbot Farm. Do you want to sit down?'

He did so in his own time, placing his half-pint of bitter on the table. He spent a minute or two looking at Murdoch. Perhaps finding something he recognised in the other man's eyes, he said, 'You know what the number one technique is, for breaking down a prisoner of war?'

Murdoch did, but he shook his head.

'Lack of sleep. Nothing destroys the quality of life, health and thinking like no sleep. It usually only takes a few days or weeks to break the most resilient man down – just by denying him sleep.'

'Well, I have slept properly in twenty years.'

'I figured that.' He sipped slowly on his beer, then looked down at the blank table-top between them. 'I have a hard time trusting anyone to do with authority,' he said at last. 'If you knew what shit they injected into us before we headed out, and how they sent us to war on lies and then sold us out, you'd understand. But you're not interested in any of that. What do you want to know about Daniel Tapper? He's been dead eight years.'

Murdoch didn't answer the question directly. 'In a premeditated crime I need to understand the victims.'

‘Who says *this* was a planned crime? It smacks of a psycho passing through. That’s what everyone is saying.’

‘Maybe it was,’ Murdoch conceded. ‘But I think the killer knew his victims, so I’m trying to get to know them. No one is helping me, least of all the MoD.’

‘Maybe because they can’t. I knew Dan Tapper; I’m not going to tell you who I am, only that I trained and served with him – though I wasn’t out the night we lost him. All the people in that village are a little strange. They live cloistered lives. A lot of them people live on big acreages; their farms are their kingdoms. Remember it *is* Compton Tamor.’

‘Sorry?’

‘“Tamor” comes from the Celtic for “dark. Maybe the old folks felt a dark energy coming out the ground: they used to build things like cathedrals and perform ritual sacrifices on certain energy points in the earth, didn’t they?’ He sipped on his drink. ‘Dan told me that when he was courting Hannah, a couple of the villagers who’d left the village in the early 17th century ended up in Salem, Massachusetts. And you know what happened there, right?’

Murdoch grinned despite himself.

‘A lot of people don’t know that there are actually two Salems: the most famous one being in Essex, Massachusetts, America, where those witch-trials took place: the other is here in Compton Tamor, which borders Essex. In other words: we are the original Salem, right here.’

Great, thought Murdoch. He’d barely slept for three nights, tossing and turning over the case, feeling like he was half-drowning in the innocent blood spilled. Now this: *a second Salem*. How deep-rooted was the witchiness in these parts? Some images don’t cleanse easily, and the one he kept coming back to was Hannah, bound and gagged, and shot at close range through the side of the head with a shotgun blast. She’d been looking away when the trigger was pulled, but she must have known what was coming.

Murdoch wanted to get to know Hannah Abbot. The last time the 31-year-old single mum had been seen alive was on the afternoon of Thursday, October 4. Later that evening, the killings started. That afternoon she’d visited a shop on the high street. The proprietor, Mike Styles, said that she’d looked strange and vacant. She was seen by another local, a man called Ted Butler, walking home along the Little Compton Road about an hour later: Butler said she looked happy enough and gave him a friendly wave. Later that evening, she took a brief phone call from a guy who lived in London named Freddie, a wannabee boyfriend in the shadows of her life, and he said that she was ‘quiet and remote.’ Maybe all these accounts were the different witnesses projecting their own states of being, or perhaps her mood swings were a sign that her medication was wearing off. For several years, Hannah had been taking regular doses of anti-depressants, and particularly the anti-psychosis medication Haloperidol. The latter was via injection, not in oral form, allowing the drug to have a longer-lasting effect, but a significant amount of the drug was excreted from the body within one week of the injection – around half – and then reducing further as time elapsed. Hannah was due her next shot on Monday, October 8, but never showed for the appointment.

Murdoch wondered just how much of Hannah’s problems were caused by her mother’s obsession with Christianity and Hannah’s failings in that regard. As Mary Abbot failed to find a religious link with Hannah, so she failed with Peter, but it was clear that while Peter nonchalantly brushed the Bible-talk away, Hannah could not do so. Perhaps Mary really did believe that Hannah was a child of the devil, whose

complicated birth caused her to become sterile. Maybe Hannah thought the same. Mary and Sidney always sought to keep any dirty linen private: was Hannah's decision to go out with a handsome young soldier a rebellious act aimed at hurting her parents, or had she genuinely loved him? Perhaps his premature and tragic death was what tipped Hannah over the edge, and the medication began. Maybe she thought she had cursed her young husband and that was the reason, rather than indifference, why there was no photo of him anywhere inside the farmhouse.

'Did you know Hannah?' Murdoch asked. He'd watched the ex-soldier over the last couple of minutes, thinking he might get mildly agitated at the extended silence, at what line of questioning Murdoch may take, but the man stayed expressionless and still, his stare rarely leaving Murdoch's face. Friedrich Schiller said that only a soldier is a free man, because he can look death in the face, but Murdoch didn't think the man opposite him was free at all.

'She was a bit of a nutter,' he said at last. 'I mean, you could write a book about her state of mind. Up and down like a yo-yo, all the time. Some counsellor geek would call her depressive compulsive, another would call her a victim of optimism mania. She was just messed up. I know that she saw some shrinks, because Dan thought they made the problem worse, and he didn't like the medication they kept shooting into her veins. We both knew that some of the lads who came back from Tour were given injections of Risperidone, an anti-psychotic, which didn't make sense because they weren't psychotic in the first place. Well, guess how those lads ended up? When Hannah was happy, she was beautiful and good fun to be around; when she was down, she was *shit*. I don't know if she ever had a full-blown mental breakdown, though I remember Dan saying something about 'schizophrenia' – but I don't know if he was talking about Hannah or someone else in the household.'

'Did he talk about the other members of the household then?'

A shrug. 'He said the old man was a good sort – he served in the First Gulf War with distinction, but he was tight with his money and never cracked a joke. Hannah's brother was a bit of a waster. That's about it.'

'The mother, Mary?'

'Oh yeah. Dan said she was a fanatic, but thankfully one of our own.'

'Meaning Christian C of E?'

'Right.'

Murdoch paused, knowing he was treading on eggshells and that every question could be his last. 'Are you sure you don't want to tell me your name?'

'Quite sure.'

'You know that they had a son, don't you? Daniel and Hannah.'

The man's Adam's Apple slowly bobbed in his throat, then he nodded. For some reason, it seemed a sensitive question.

Murdoch said, 'She gave birth to Nicholas six or seven months after Daniel went on Tour. Did he know?'

The Adam's Apple bobbed again. Nothing else moved.

'He never spoke about it?'

'Not to me.'

Murdoch frowned. A young man on the front line would want to tell his mates that his wife had just given birth to his first child. It would have filled him with joy that he had a healthy son, and with determination to get back in one piece. Staying mums on the matter implied Daniel Tapper had *not* known. Or, perhaps, he'd sensed that the kid wasn't his. Murdoch made a mental note to run full DNA checks on the boy and

to keep pushing his own foot soldiers to find a living relative of Tapper, who'd been fostered out as a young teen. 'What was their relationship like?'

'Rocky. Both of them were volatile characters. I reckon they broke up and reconciled every second day during the first few months they were courting. But it settled down after they were married. Would they have made it together? Who can say? But I know he loved her.'

'And she loved him?'

'I think she needed him. At least, she needed him at that time.'

Murdoch finished his orange juice. He removed an A4 print in a plastic sheet and slid it across the tabletop. 'Does that mean anything to you?'

The man looked down at the strange colours and symbology with a narrow stare. 'What is it?'

'A tattoo Hannah had on her lower back.'

'Looks like trash to me. I don't like women with tattoos.'

'Me neither. Perhaps that's why we're such sad, lonely bastards.' Murdoch put the image back in the file. He wanted another orange juice but didn't want to give the man reason to move away. 'Have you seen Hannah in recent times?'

'Not since I got back from Tour. Not once. I haven't seen any of them, not even the kid. Honestly,' he paused, and his eyes glazed a little. 'I've actually thought of just heading back by that farm, bit of a trip down memory lane, perhaps for Dan's sake; I've even got in the car a couple of times meaning to go, but I couldn't do it...' His eyes glazed over some more, and Murdoch wondered what the painfully thin man was seeing. 'There's something about that village. I turned around and went home.'

He looked momentarily befuddled, like a botanist who'd come across a species of plant which didn't fit the environment. For a warrior who'd faced death unblinkingly, his apparent fear of the village was disconcerting. Maybe he thought Hannah, or one of them, might have sought him out, wanting to talk to someone who'd known Daniel Tapper, known him in the last months of his life in the dessert, maybe even introduce Nicholas to someone who'd liked and served with his Dad, and known that he had died a hero. But no one had bothered to make the effort.

'Do you have a photograph of Daniel?' Murdoch asked.

The man reached for his mobile, clicked in his code, then held up the screen for Murdoch to goggle. And he did goggle. He had expected a rather nondescript character, a bit of a ferret-faced lad perhaps, but Tapper was very handsome, standing around six feet tall, with angelic features Botticelli would have adored, and which seemed to be reflected in the boy Nicholas. He stood out from the other four men in the photograph in his looks and physical presence. Minus the army uniform, Murdoch thought he would have passed as a model, or a City financier. He seemed an intelligent, likeable sort, and Murdoch could easily imagine why Hannah fell for him, and why those boys turned Basra upside down looking for him.

'He looks a good lad,' said Murdoch.

'He was.'

Past tense. 'What happened that night he got lost? I only know the outlines.'

The other man shrugged reflexively – not from indifference, but to release the sudden bolt of tension that went through his body like an electric current. 'We were readying to leave that hell-hole, but if you know the army, you know they're suckers for routine. Evening patrols had to go on, even if it was our last fucking night on enemy territory. I wasn't on duty that night, but I was told the story by a couple of lads. A standard patrol through a suburb where Shia militants were said to be planning attacks on Sunni sympathisers became complete confusion when an IED was thrown at our

armoured vehicle. It was a direct hit – except the device failed to explode. It was an old artillery shell which had been rejigged with commercially sourced explosives but the detonation mechanism failed. It took the lads a few seconds to realise what had happened, that they were actually still alive, then they were running after the robe-wearing thrower as he headed down a side street. It was around 9 p.m., still light in the desert, though all the streets and alleyways were in shadow. Bullets were firing and if you know anything about a firefight then you know this: it's chaos. Fucking chaos. Several people died, a dozen more were wounded. And Daniel Tapper disappeared. When the other soldiers got back to their vehicle to call for back-up, they realised he was missing. His communication headset was unresponsive. Within an hour we had sixty men turning over every property looking for him, but we couldn't find him. No corpse, no uniform, no gun, no blood.'

Murdoch let all that sink in.

'For the next forty-eight hours that little suburb was given Nazi-like treatment, I swear to God. The assumption was that he had been taken prisoner and we rounded up any and all suspected resistance fighters. Any moment now we expected to see Dan in the hands of a terrorist group, threatening to behead him if some ransom or other deal wasn't agreed to. But that never happened. He had simply vanished off the face of the earth. A week went by with no sign of him. Then the regiment commander had the duty to pass on the news to his pregnant wife.'

Murdoch studied the image on the phone for a few more seconds. He could tell the other men in the photo had been close to Daniel Tapper. To keep that picture on his mobile for eight years said a lot. 'The other guys in the photo – they all made it back okay?'

'They made it back,' he said, sticking his phone back in his pocket. 'But you know what they say: there's no such thing as an unwounded soldier.'

Murdoch ordered another round for both of them, and they chatted for another twenty minutes. Daniel Tapper had always been a soldier boy. The fact he made Lance Corporal in two years and full corporal in less than five told you he was good at what he did. Unlike Sidney Abbot, serving in the army wasn't a launching pad for Tapper, but a way of life. Young women like dating professional footballers and reality TV stars, but there was something magnificent and frightening about bearing arms for one's country, thought Murdoch. Maybe Hannah had been drawn to Tapper's preparedness to self-sacrifice. Maybe she thought he was a better version of her own father.

Murdoch tried to turn all the fragments of information into a cohesive whole. It seemed that Hannah had never been able to outrun her mother's religious fanaticism; one witness had told the murder team that the concept of being the Devil's offspring lingered with her. There seemed little doubt that Mary Abbot was unable to deal with her daughter's sexual exploits. Mary's estranged sister, Ann Claxton, maintained that Mary believed Hannah had deliberately initiated an abortion knowing the effect it would have on Mary, who hadn't been able to reproduce after Hannah's birth. Ann Claxton, who kept in touch with the women at the Abbot farm without her husband knowing, also said that Hannah, when she was sixteen, allowed herself to be found by Mary having sex with a local lad in one of the barns. Just as troubling, was the chatter about social services becoming involved in taking care of Nicholas, that Sidney and Mary were increasingly worried about Hannah's capacity to properly mother the child. To others Hannah expressed 'morbid thoughts about killing herself or the boys.' Talk about messy. Murdoch had discovered that Social Services had not been

contacted about the matter, but more than one witness said that such things were discussed at the Abbot farm.

Hannah wanted to stop taking her medication; she was sick of being a pin cushion; she wanted a new life. Freddie Armani, a rather oily character Hannah met at some club on a visit to London the best part of a year ago, said that Hannah went through some low times, times when she withdrew so much within herself that she could hardly function, when you couldn't even talk to her. There was one occasion when Nicholas fell out of a taxi on the way home from a visit to Grange Farm. The boy wasn't seriously hurt but Hannah was devastated. She told Freddie that rather than looking after her son she'd been preoccupied with her mother's religious ravings. Hannah was constantly slipping back into that twilight world of nervous tension and paranoia. Her temper was erratic, said Freddie, and she had violent outbursts, often screaming so loudly that other people in the house were woken up by the noise. These terror attacks struck Hannah again and again, usually in the early hours of the morning. However, in the last several months, according to Freddie, 'something had changed.' Freddie said the two of them had never slept together and hoped that one day they could get serious. That last summer, Freddie started to suspect that someone else might be on the scene: Hannah became distant, she rarely communicated, and then she started to look a little happier, and then a great deal happier. Neither Freddie nor anyone else had any idea who this secret lover – if he existed – might be. Freddie reported that Hannah disliked Mary deeply for routinely preaching to her about her immoral life: Hannah should always remember her vows to God, Mary told her, but it wasn't 'God' that was making Hannah smile again. Maybe there was no secret boyfriend on the scene. Was it possible, pondered Murdoch, *could it be possible*, that Hannah had got word her husband, Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper, was still alive?

Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them,
To men's eyes
Shakespeare

He heated up the Aga, placing a pot of oats on the burner, covering the oats with two inches of hot water. He would let them slow boil for half an hour, adding dates and sultanas in the last few minutes, and finally a half-cup of milk. That's how his mum told him to do it, and he'd been doing it like that ever since. Getting good calories and carbohydrates into the body at the start of the day was sound practice. He would then let the steaming oats sit in the bowl for up to an hour, after adding another half-cup of cold milk.

Dawn was approaching. It wasn't just the lighter shades, the slightly rising temperature: you *felt* the new day in a place like this. You felt the rhythms and ways of the land, in the same way that a sailor knew the ways and rhythms of the ocean.

Soon the roosters would start their racket; the farm animals would start rustling about, keen to get out of the stables into the pasture. He'd had a puppy when he was a boy and he loved taking it for walks: he loved the moment he took off the lead and the dog, with all its suppressed energy, went racing off, glorifying in its freedom. Freedom, to any living thing, he knew, was the *ne plus ultra*, the most important thing. He looked forward to unbolting the barn door, talking to the animals in a soothing way as he did so, and knowing he was offering them a taste of freedom.

He'd then clean up the stables, check the property – check that no one had come poking about overnight. There was some weeding to do, and the rose by the back door needed a prune: too early to give it a harsh prune, but there were plenty of dead-heads and ingrowing stems, so he could help it out. It was too bad that no one had tended to that rose over the years.

There had also been a recent delivery of hay beside the combine shed, next to which Peter's car was parked. Along with feed for the animals, there were more than a dozen bundles of coarse pine sawdust: Sidney preferred this sort for the stable floors, because it was 'heavier and holds its place' – not to mention he got a free delivery in exchange for a pellet or two of fresh produce. Yes, that's what he would do: move the hay into storage and spread the coarse pine sawdust. The weathermen kept insisting that rain was coming – and soon. If not today, then tomorrow at the latest. There was going to be a deluge.

He moved into the living room, looking at the bookshelf, with all those books on crime: the Borden trial, the Bain atrocity, the Jeffrey MacDonald case, the Bamber massacre. He wondered if any detective, when they came to the farm, would ever realise the significance of those books. He looked at the van Dorn print; it looked slightly off centre, so he tried straightening it, stepping back a couple of times, but no matter how he tried, he was unable to get it to align it perfectly. Everyone in Compton Tamor knew the tale of Eric Van Dorn – the talented Dutch immigrant who'd settled in these parts in the late nineteenth century. Villagers honoured him now; back then he'd been persecuted. The print on the wall was quite small, maybe ten inches by ten. The petite dimensions and washed colours depicted no great truth on immediate inspection; the painting merely seemed to display a forest stream by which a father and son fished. But the more he stared, the more he sensed something else was at

play: he saw how the separation between father and son, the black shadows, meant more than the forms they represented. The dark lifeless stream was fashioned in the shape of a cruel turquoise grin. And then he saw, or thought he saw, myriad eyes and faces peering out at him. It only happened for a moment, and when he tried to focus on one particular face, they all melted back into the forest landscape. Traditional had it that Van Dorn did much of his painting in Haxley Wood. He went mad there, people said.

‘Hello Crispy,’ he said to the dog, which sat in one corner of the room. The Irish Terrier was watching him dubiously. Once or twice he whimpered. The poor old boy had been hiding in the laundry when he came to the farm early that morning. Too scared to come out; too scared to bark. ‘I’ve got you some fresh meat, for breakfast,’ he said to the dog. ‘You can have it after you’ve helped me tend to the animals.’

He stepped outside the back door of the farmhouse as the sun breached the eastern horizon, even though it was delayed here, as Grange farm was in a shallow valley. The sky was streaked with black clouds, and the air was still and humid, but sun was peeking through the cloud cover, for the old oak on Dead Man’s Hill, that centuries old guardian, was streaked with sunlight. The heavens wanted to break. There was electricity in the air.

For a moment he thought he heard a car passing by on the Old Compton Road. He stayed very still, holding his breath, wondering if the car – if it was a car – was turning onto the private road which led to farmhouse. That was why cops liked people to have gravel drives: they gave away intruders. A minute passed, but no one came.

He looked back to the half-open door, where the nervous dog stood, its nose to the wind. ‘Come on boy. There’s work to be done.’

He headed off to the stables, his footsteps crunching on the gravel. He knew the animals inside would hear his approach. He started talking to them in a soft voice. The cows seemed more unsettled today than usual; even the pigs in their pens were squealing a little and looking boisterous. He pushed open the stable door as wide as it would go, but as he opened up the individual pens, the animals remained pensive. More so than yesterday. ‘Can you feel the storm coming?’ he asked.

He hesitated for a moment. Perhaps he should keep them locked up. If a savage storm broke, they might be better off inside. And... he might not be around to let them back in at night, especially if it was bucketing down. Decision made, he closed the pens. ‘I’ll leave the door open a little, so you get some fresh air,’ he said apologetically. ‘You can watch me move all that hay and coarse pine, instead.’

And that is what he did. Crispy watched him work, too, and slowly seemed to feel more comfortable with his routine, and the way he kept talking softly and calmly, to the farm animals, to the rose bush by the back door, to whatever and whoever might want to listen.

His first morning job complete, he wiped his brow, noted that the sky was even blacker and more threatening than before, and whistling to Crispy, headed back to the farmhouse, thinking that his oats should be ready by now.

Psalm 51

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.

Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation...

Red blood out and black blood in,
 My Nannie says I'm a child of sin.
 How did I choose me my witchcraft kin?
 Know I as soon as dark's dreams begin
 Snared is my heart in a nightmare's gin;
 Never from terror I out may win...
Walter de la Mare

'Cockroaches Theo.'

'What about them?'

Damon pointed to the jar in which a little black insect was trapped. 'They're one of the most resilient animals on the planet.'

'Is that right?'

'Sure is, bro'. Cockroaches have lived on this planet 250 times longer than mankind. They make good pets.'

Theo blinked. Sometimes he couldn't be sure when his older brother was cracking a joke, or being philosophical. Damon was *so* damn smart; Theo sometimes thought he must be one of the smartest humans alive. Not academically smart – but smart in other ways.

'Yeah, Theo. Insects are a lot easier to control than other animals. You want a docile cockroach, just put him in a fridge for four hours. You want an aggressive cockroach, put him in a frying pan on low heat for a few minutes. They don't suffer, you see; they don't feel pain the same way we do.'

'What are you going to do with him. Let him go?'

'No Theo. I'm gonna leave him in this jar and watch his starve. I want to see how long he lasts.'

It's no use going back to yesterday because I was a different person then.

Lewis Carroll

Twice the witness walked past the Abbot farm. An elderly woman: sprightly for her age, but eyesight not so good. The first time was on the Friday morning. At that point, one of the victims was already dead, and no one other than the immediate family, the maid, and the secretary were at the farm. The next time was Sunday afternoon, when she walked across Dead Man's Hill after morning mass at St Margaret's. On the Friday, she'd seen nothing of interest, no sign of life; on the Sunday, pausing for breath near the summit, she did see something.

A man.

The witness first told this to a uniformed officer who looked young enough to be her grandson, when he knocked on the door a couple of days after the bodies were found. Then she told it to a shaggy, miserable-looking man with a laser-like stare who subsequently knocked on her door, a classy young female detective in a smart two-piece suit beside him. The man with the angry eyes waved away any offers of a drink and wanted to know about the man she saw. Could she describe him?

He was too far away, she said. And her eyes weren't –

Was he young or old?

She shook her head.

Tall, or short?

He could have been either of those things. He was blurry, indistinct – just a shape really.

By himself?

'I didn't see anyone else...'

DCI John Murdoch sighed. He was already sick of chasing ghosts: a strange pedestrian seen walking along Little Compton Road late one night; a road cyclist dressed all in black; a delivery van parked near the front gates of Grange Farm that no one could track, a handful of foreign cars spotted in nearby country lanes with only partial registration plates at best which they couldn't account for. Ghosts, all of them!

Notice anything else?

Yes. It was a very still day. Even at the top of Dead Man's Hill you couldn't catch a draught.

I meant: did you notice anything else about the man. What was he wearing?

Dark clothes. But there was no way of being any more specific than that. You see, my eyes –

What was he doing?

Just standing outside the rear door.

And?

That was all. 'I was there for about five minutes, maybe a little more. I had the feeling he'd spotted me. He was just standing there, looking at me, perhaps. It was a strange feeling. Like he knew who I was and was just waiting for me to make a move.'

'You recognised *nothing* about him?' Murdoch's voice was incredulous and irritated.

The witness shrugged. 'Just a feeling. That I knew him somehow, and he knew me. It could have been Sidney or Peter for all I know.'

'No it couldn't,' said the detective. 'They were both dead at that point.'

The elderly witness drew a ragged breath and watched as the female detective smacked the angry man in the side of the head with a fierce glare.

‘Did you notice the dog, Crispy?’ Murdoch asked.

‘No.’

‘A vehicle, perhaps?’

‘I don’t think so.’

*

Murdoch leant back in his swivel chair. He needed five minutes alone in his office. A few deep breaths. He was still bloated from that morning’s breakfast of bacon and eggs. He’d woken to the smell, the sheets wrapped round his legs. Some notes lay scattered on the empty half of the bed beside him. The blond girl in her black nightgown was busy in the kitchen, cooking him breakfast; he’d shamelessly spied on her through the door crack, her rapt attention on the food, while simultaneously laying the table. He’d felt both touched and fearful.

The plate barely contained all the food and she’d watched him eat with anxious eyes, not relaxing until he’d assured her how perfect it all was. Then she’d started cooking again – dinner, for that night: one of those all-inclusive casserole dishes which, unlike airline food, only gets better the longer it stays in the oven. More than that, it spoke of another evening together, and his silence was surely affirmation that he wanted it no other way.

‘You’re up early,’ he’d commented in a neutral tone.

‘I’m an early riser. I hate letting dawn sneak up on me. Waking with the sun in my eyes makes me think I’ve missed half the day.’

She was intelligent, no doubt. Deep, too. And of course, she was lovely to the eye.

All through breakfast he’d wanted to give her all the reasons why she had already overstayed her welcome. He’d been more that reasonable, more than decent. She needed to get together her few belongings and fuck off. Murdoch didn’t want to say any of that, even though he knew that The Real World was Out There, like a distant train, hurtling through the darkness towards the little fantasy world she was trying to create. It might seem a little way off, but it was coming.

*

The incident room at Darborough Police Station was divided by three principal workstations, each comprising a long, curved desk with space for up to eight people. Unlike the workstations in the rest of the building, there was no sign at all of anything personal on the desks or on the walls: every single object, apart from the furniture and the business hardware, related to the matters under investigation; in this case, the massacre at the Abbot farm.

There was an unusual reverential hush in the incident room. They all knew what had happened on that farm. The clinical brutality of it made the knees go soft. Some things aren’t expected: even if you call yourself professional and think you’ve seen everything. Even if you’re made of stone.

With rather astonishing speed, however, a milieu settled over the team. Normally Murdoch wouldn’t countenance anyone going through the motions – he expected them to approach every case with the same obsessive zeal and personal involvement he did. Murdoch inwardly felt that the whole physical and bureaucratic structure of

the investigation – the search parties, the incident room, the house-to-house, the foundations of an ordinary murder inquiry, were not going to help them here.

Everyone on the team knew John Murdoch, they knew him as a person, and they knew his reputation as an investigator. But no one liked him. Not even close. Murdoch expected them to get results and didn't care about their personal feelings; unlike most Guvnors these days, he didn't understand the value of small gestures when it came to bonding and team loyalty. That was because the result would not truly be a team victory: it would be *his* victory. The team were there to get all the puzzle pieces: it was *his* job to put the pieces together. His arse on the line if he didn't.

Given the high-profile nature of the case, Murdoch had a full crew on deck. He'd seen the newspapers spread out on Superintendent Sol Butcher's desk: the screaming bold headline was simply *MASSACRE: Police Hunting Killer of Six*, and beneath this a photo a smiling Hannah and the young boy, Nicholas. The leading voice on the case, a journalist called Jaffa Cruz, loathed the police and was surely preparing his poison pen to turn on the boys in blue if they didn't get an answer soon. Murdoch, for once, could not complain about a lack of resources, simply a lack of clues. Whoever had killed these six people, had seemingly done so without leaving a scrap of evidence behind.

No one knew how many people were involved in the crime: it could have been a gang, there could have been an accomplice, but Murdoch was strongly of the view that only one killer was involved. What most intrigued him at this point was the length of time the killer spent at the farm. Peter Abbot, the first to die, had been killed on the Thursday evening. It wasn't unusual for Peter to head off on the Thursday evening before the 'curse weekend' began at Compton Tamor. Friday, October 5, was the anniversary of the slaying of Richard Tilley in 1542 by the henchman of Henry VIII. These days, the rural community, remote and quiet at the best of times, turned into a veritable ghost town, and most people stayed indoors until the Monday. Some even drew their curtains and locked their doors as they waited out the curse. Peter Abbot routinely mocked the locals for their ways, and most years buggered off to have some fun – sometimes in London, or Manchester, or over to the Continent – Amsterdam being a favourite stopover. There were whisperings that Peter was into drugs. Small scale deals. Grass and pills. A few crooked fingers had pointed to the Junkaris boys, Damon and Theo, as co-dealers in the region, or even competitors. A small amount of cannabis had been found in his room, though toxicology tests on Peter himself came back negative.

'The point being Erin,' said Murdoch, standing in front of the crime board, 'is that Peter signalled his intent to have his usual three-day break away from the farm. He was 34 years old, even if he didn't act it at times, so no one asked for details as to where he was going. Sometimes he took his car; sometimes he got picked up. He always returned by the Sunday evening, one way or another. So no one was worried when they saw his car still parked beside the green hay-shed on Friday morning. Even if someone had gone into the hay shed – which was a hundred yards from the farmhouse, they would've been unlikely to find him; his body was hidden under bales of straw and feed. Everyone assumed he'd just gone away.'

'You're insinuating...?'

'I'm saying that the killer is there, on the farm, around 8 p.m. that evening when Peter left the main house. The killer is there on the Saturday late afternoon when Sidney is killed. He is there Saturday night, when Nicholas and Mary are killed, and Hannah is bound and gagged. Surely he stayed overnight to guard Hannah, and he was with

Hannah all day Sunday, killing her late that night. He was still there Monday morning, when the maid showed up to work. Five days,' said Murdoch. *'What killer stays around the crime scene for five fucking days?'*

'Someone who doesn't care about getting caught,' said Fox.

'No,' said Murdoch. 'This killer was there for all that time, creating all that bloodshed, yet didn't leave anything behind. As far as we can make out, he didn't take anything from the scene, no trophy from any victim. All that tells me that he did *not* want to get caught. But I've never trusted coincidence.'

'Coincidence?'

'Was it chance the killer just happened to be there on the Thursday evening as Peter headed out to his car? That the killings took place over a weekend where the village went down into lockdown mode and the likelihood of anyone coming to the farm were basically zero?'

'Might be Devil's luck, Guv.'

Murdoch glared at her. As if she were baiting him. 'Not for the first time, we disagree.'

Erin looked at the colour images of the farm and shivered.

'What's up?' asked Murdoch.

'A ghost just walked over my grave, that's all. But it's that farm... well, any farm really. What they do to the animals. I've never liked them.'

Murdoch's mobile beeped. He surreptitiously looked at the incoming message, then stuck his mobile back in his trouser pocket. Erin watched him without comment.

It was Friday, October 12. Seventy-two hours had come and gone since the bodies had been found. With every hour that passed, the paper trail and paraphernalia grew. All of it was essential but none of it revealing. Maps and photographs lined the walls, including a layout of all three floors of the farmhouse with every room marked; there was an aerial of the 350-acre Grange Farm, every outbuilding identified; there was a satellite image of the entire community, with the Little Compton Road running like a main artery through the body of Compton Tamor, and every property identified, its inhabitants listed. The village itself which comprised of a High Street with a handful of shops and bungalow, a church, a small school, several farms and stone cottages; Murdoch had included in his scope the surrounding hamlets within walking distance – those east of the Claxton's Top Farm, those northeast of Haxley Wood towards Collingwood, and those south-east as the road veered toward the town of Harrington. Even including those outlying hamlets, the total population was less than 200, with around 70 males between the ages of 16–80. While some investigators found their brains frying at the seemingly enormous jumble of possibilities, Murdoch thought otherwise: in fact, he believed he had an extremely contained suspect list. At this time, every male in the area was being rounded up and questioned, their alibis checked.

Every person in Compton Tamor had been questioned. Murdoch had designed the questionnaire himself, before sending out a coterie of officers to retrieve answers. Now they had the task of cross-referencing everyone's claimed whereabouts as best they could. Apart from the old lady who'd walked Dead Man's Hill, no one had got anywhere near the farm during the killing times, though several villagers had offered similarly wispy visions of a man walking across the fields, or of a man entering Haxley Wood, or a stranger driving through the High Street in a SUV.

The crime board listed the six victims with a photograph of each person taken from life, alongside a crime scene pic showing what the killer had done to them. Murdoch didn't want anyone working the case to forget the reality of what they were dealing

with. Members of the team would regularly glance up at the gruesome pictures, looking like they couldn't quite believe their eyes. Each victim also had a small biog attached, with a description of their last known movements. Murdoch had allocated two officers to work together on every victim: 'Pretend you're writing a book on this person: I want to know everything about their character: antecedents, school friends, first fucks and last fucks; favourite restaurants, preferred porn; religious views, political beliefs, nasty little secrets, you name it. These people are dead, and you need to make them talk.'

Fox gestured to the A3 sized print that Murdoch had purchased from a local art shop and which he had stuck to a nearby wall, so it was not part of the crime information, but not separate from it either. 'What is that?'

'The Abbots had one of his paintings in their house. Many people in these parts also own his work.'

'Who is it? It looks amateur and ghoulish.'

Murdoch stared at the painting which had been simply titled *Forest*, circa 1879, and which locals said was a depiction of Haxley Wood. 'Eric Van Dorn,' he said. 'He came from Holland and lived in Compton Tamor for ten years.'

Fox studied the darkened swirls and smudges, the gnarled and twisted tree trunks; in the painting the forest looked so dense, so ancient, that it was hard to believe sunlight ever penetrated its depth. She imagined what it would be like to get lost in that forest – cracking twigs, spindly branches catching her hair, creeping tendrils of mist swirling around her ankles, a black bird suddenly taking flight. The more she looked at the painting, the more uncomfortable she became, as though it was casting a spell on her somehow. Maybe that was what was happening in the village: some collective breakdown of reality. Curses are real if people believe in them.

'What do you think' asked Murdoch.

'No wonder the Brothers Grimm set so many of their dark fairy tales in The Black Forest. I'm not sure why, but the more I look at that painting, the more it unnerves me.'

Murdoch nodded. He waved his hand in certain circles a few inches from the canvass. 'Sherlock warned us that what is directly in front of our nose is what we see last. Can you see them now?'

Erin stared harder. Though dark and haunting, the painting seemed devoid of noteworthy drama. It took another two minutes, and then, at last, she saw. Mild admiration for the artist's work changed to... something else.

Murdoch traced his hand across the painting one final time. 'You see? The bushes, the trees, the branches.'

'Yes. Oh God, yes! Why didn't I – ?'

'Notice before? Because the effect is so deep, you have to study them – '

'Forever.'

'It seems that way.'

Tiny faces – right throughout the painting, everywhere. Most were smaller than a quarter of an inch, hints and suggestions, dots and curves, all blending perfectly with the forest backdrop. They weren't exactly human, although they did have mouths, noses, and eyes. Each mouth was a black, gaping maw, each nose a jagged gash, the eyes dark sinkholes of despair. The twisted faces seemed to be screaming in total agony. Erin could almost hear their anguished shrieks, their tortured wails. She thought of hell.

Now that she knew what to look for, he saw small, tortured faces in every branch and rock. The canvas swarmed with them. No simple beauty here. What message was the

painter trying to send? She said, 'It makes you wonder what state of mind the man who painted it must have been in. Insane torment, I imagine.'

'Or perfect sanity.'

Erin looked bemused. She looked again at the image: it was just a forest again. 'What happened to him?'

Murdoch shook his head. 'You don't want to know. Let's refocus on the case.'

The consensus in the village was that a psychopath had committed the massacre – presuming that the killer was a life-and-flesh human being. He had stumbled upon the isolated farmhouse, and he had killed Peter, and enjoyed the event. He'd hung around and kept on killing until there was no one left to kill. Then he'd returned to the ether. Murdoch wasn't surprised that locals wished to push the blame onto an outsider, but what troubled him was the large portion of the populace who were convinced the local curse was the root cause of the atrocity. Many of them did not want to talk to the police because of this fear. The dispatched officers reported that the silence they encountered was widespread and oppressive.

'Same thing famously happened in the 1940s at Lower Quinton,' said Murdoch, his gaze moving from one bloody crime scene pic to another. 'Charles Walton was killed in a way that recalled an ancient practice; the Anglo-Saxons used to pin witches to the ground in the belief that by impaling them, any magic power would be destroyed. Walton's body was laid out by a willow tree; he had been pinned to the ground with his own two-pronged pitchfork: the prongs had passed through his neck and penetrated a full six inches into the ground; it needed two policemen to pull it clear. In addition, the sign of the cross had been sliced into the victim's chest with the blade of the victim's billhook, before the billhook had been lodged in a deep wound in the victim's throat. It should have been easy to solve: Lower Quinton only had 500 or so inhabitants; everyone knew everyone else; there could be no secrets in a place like that. But the police never imagined half the village would be too scared to talk to them because of the local curse.'

'Did they catch the killer?'

'No.'

Erin shrugged. 'It's likely the killer in this case didn't even know about the local curse, John. If he had, he might have played on it a bit – like the killer of Lower Quinton. His overriding theme was simply to kill, and kill again, and he did it in such a clinical way that we can't begin to bracket him.'

She spoke with some amount of disdain, which didn't surprise Murdoch. He knew that Erin Fox put her faith in science. She looked down her nose at local villagers who believed that witches and curses and pagan gods were things to respect.

Murdoch looked over at one workstation where two uniforms were trawling through the HOLMES system: looking to see if anyone in the region had a record for violence, armed burglary; whether there were any offences on record with any possible overlaps to the crimes perpetrated at the Grange Farm. Other detectives were looking through the hard drives, phone records, financial records of all the victims; so far they hadn't found anything suggestive. Numerous exhibits from the crime scene had been analysed for DNA or fingerprints, Murdoch wasn't holding his breath: dozens of local males could easily explain away their prints or DNA or fibre particles left at Grange Farm.

'What price motive, hey?' asked Murdoch, to no one in particular.

'There's no 'motive' here, just an evil act.'

Murdoch exhaled. Yep, in our 'post-enlightened' age, most ordinary people did not believe in evil anymore, only evil acts, which could be explained away by the science

of the mind. There was no evil, the likes of Erin insisted, and to believe in it is to fall prey to superstition, like checking beneath the bed at night or being afraid of the dark. Murdoch believed in Evil because he had touched it directly, and it had touched him. 'Even so, Erin, something motivated him to kill. I want to know why, even if it is the most obtuse, insane reason imaginable. *Something* drove him. We need to go down that rabbit hole.'

'All I see is madness. You think our killer is local, I think he isn't. No way in such a tight-knit community could such hatred and sickness go unnoticed; people would have sussed him out. As would the victims themselves: they would have known something bad was coming their way.'

Madness, thought Murdoch. Five days hovering around the crime scene, killing six innocent people one by one in cold blood, while taking care to tend to and feed the farm animals? Murdoch knew that psychopaths were stodgy creatures of routine, but stacking hay barrels, keeping the kitchen spic and span, and pruning a wild red rose? 'We need a proper chronology,' he said, wheeling yet another white crime board beside the others.

'I don't think looking back is going to help us,' said Fox.

'I don't intend to 'look back', Erin. We need to try and find a starting point for this story, and then work our way forwards in a natural sequence. Where did this story start? When Mary gave birth to Hannah, her 'devil child'? When the Abbots fell out with the Claxtons? When Daniel Tapper headed off to the Middle East? Did something start with Peter doing a few shady drug deals with the Junkaris boys? Did Nicholas and his mate Adam O'Donnell stumble across a secret?'

'Maybe it started in 1542,' muttered Fox sarcastically, 'with Richard Tilley, as some of the locals think.'

Murdoch said, 'Maybe it did.' He added, 'I'm thinking of the tombstone.'

'What tombstone?'

'The one in St Margaret's cemetery that was maliciously defaced six weeks ago.'

Erin shook her head. She didn't know what he was talking about, and was annoyed that he hadn't bothered to share the information with her.

Murdoch started writing down thoughts on the board, speaking out loud while he did so. 'The last time anyone saw Hannah was in the High Street on Thursday, October 4; different witnesses give different reports: she was alternately morose or happy. No one outside the farm spoke to Peter in the last week of his life, though in the week prior to that he said to a barmaid at the White Hart pub that he felt he'd been watched for the last couple of weeks; just a strange sensation he'd had. Sidney expressed concerns for his safety to his secretary Barbara Handsworth shortly before the murders. Mary was last seen on the Tuesday evening, October 2, at an evening church group; she was described by some as normal, by others as distracted.'

Murdoch imagined that curious cast of characters, spending their days in the stifled atmosphere of the farmhouse, the long brutal summer, the rain that never came. Poor Sidney, disillusioned with how ungrateful his children had turned out; both children feeling spiteful and suppressed; the family dog allowed in the house but never onto the sofa; Mary sitting by herself, reading the Bible, which she crammed with little notes and religious quotes, taking time to underline her favourite passages. *Thou knowest Lord, the secrets of our hearts.*

Murdoch had positioned himself at the farm at the estimated time each murder took place. There had been times in the past when he'd visited a crime scene at the same time and on the same day of the week as the incident and had gained remarkable insights from doing so. People are by and large creatures of habit, and those habits

extend to doing the same thing at the same time and often routinely on the same day. So Murdoch had positioned himself for just such an occurrence... but nothing happened. How could it, when you were in the middle of a private 350 acres, with no other property and no public road in sight?

Murdoch had played 'Peter', marching out to his car that Thursday evening, presumably to head off for a few days away. Peter had a small amount of alcohol in bloodstream, but below the legal limit for driving. No one knew where he'd been heading off to, but he never got into his car. He was bludgeoned from behind, before having his throat cut in the barn like a pig; his body was then covered over with hay and straw, unlike the later victims. That suggested to Murdoch that the killer, having dispatched Peter, planned to kill again and did not want his body found by the other householders. There were no 'hesitation' cuts to Peter's throat. The killer never needed to build up nerve – just one deep, thorough slash. The killer didn't drive Peter's car away to suggest he'd gone on his trip, even though the keys were in Peter's pocket; it was another subtle suggestion that the killer knew the workings of the household so well that he knew Peter sometimes headed off while leaving his car at the farm. The killer had known that no one would go looking for him.

Friday passed without occurrence, but early Saturday evening, Sidney was shot dead in the main animal stable. More than one shot was used, and Sidney was also repeatedly struck in the face and shoulder with the butt of the gun; not, perhaps, out of malice, but because the tough old farmer had tried manfully to put up a fight. The first shot, hitting the right side of his upper torso, had not killed him; there had been a brief one-sided melee. A debilitated Sidney Abbot ended up with two black eyes, a fractured jaw, damaged teeth, broken nose, and his whole face and head were cut and bruised. Then a second shot to the temple had killed the farmer instantly. Given the burn marks on his flesh, the final head shot was fired when the rifle was within a few inches of the skin.

The two nearest neighbours – the Junkaris clan, and Gilbert Gleeson, the father of Amy the maid, both told police they heard shots ring out early that night, but guns going off on the nearby farms was hardly unusual. Murdoch imagined the killer would have recouped himself in the shed, before reloading and heading into the farm. Now the most dangerous part of his plan – if there was a plan – was about to unfold.

Sidney had been to a market-farmers meeting that afternoon; this monthly event took place on the first Saturday afternoon of each month; sometimes Sidney would get back quite late, but tonight he'd returned back at the farm around 6 p.m. A witness, Ted Butler, saw Sidney returning in his car from Harrington at around that time. Mary, perhaps expecting her husband to return home late, seemed to have settled in bed to read. Nicholas was put to bed, presumably sometime around 8 p.m.. None of them knew that Sidney was already dead.

Hannah was alone downstairs. The most probable sequence of events was that the killer overpowered Hannah without her raising the alarm. Toxicology reports were unclear, but Murdoch fancied the killer had used something like chloroform on a rag to help knock her out, and the amount was so minute that no trace was left behind. She had also received a knock on the head while still alive (as the bruise was fully developed), so maybe she was concussed, before being gagged and tied up. Hannah displayed no defence wounds on her hands, wrists or arms, and nothing was found under her fingernails. There was no evidence to show whether the killer socially engaged Hannah before he attacked her, or whether he took her by complete surprise. It was very possible that she was fully conscious and saw and heard the killer heading towards the staircase, gun in hand. Minutes later, three quick shots in succession

would have rung out, killing her son: three point blank shots to the back of the head while Nicholas slept on his left side. Half a minute passed. Then came several more shots as the killer entered the master bedroom. Mary Abbot had not died easily; she had got out of bed and almost made it to the front door while a reign of bullets fell upon her.

The peripheral scene in the child's bedroom was perfectly undisturbed. Nicholas was found lying on his side, almost curled into a foetal position. Two bullets were found at the base of the little boy's skull; a third had been blasted into his head above the ear. All three wounds were contact or close proximity shots.

Murdoch studied the crime scene pic of Mary Abbot. She'd been found partly on her back, partly on her side, near the open door of the main bedroom. She'd been shot seven times, in the ear, neck, arm, twice in the chest, the right knee, the head and, point blank, between the eyes. Her blue nightdress had been ripped apart by the force of the bullets tearing through the thin material and was covered in blood. Blood evidence suggested that she had been initially shot while she was sitting up in bed. The bedclothes on the large double bed had been pulled back, revealing blood-spattered sheets and pillow. There was also blood on the floor where she'd dragged herself out of bed and towards the door, and the marks and smears on her nightdress illustrated the manner in which she'd dragged her wounded body across the bloody carpet. Mary Abbot had not wanted to die. She had used her arms and legs instinctively in an attempt to ward off the shots fired at her, and a stream of blood which had run down her body showed that she had been standing or was at least partially upright during some stage of the attack. The last two bullets appear to have come when Mary had propped herself against the bedroom door which was in the open position. Bloodstain evidence suggests her body basically slipped downwards while resting up against the door. Clearly the God Mary so fervently believed in hadn't shown her mercy in those last moments: she had not been shot in the head while she slept, never to know what hit her; she had heard the shots ring out from Nicholas's room and had been initially too shocked or frightened to instantly react; then she had seen her attacker enter her fully lit bedroom.

Downstairs, the bound Hannah would have heard all this. She would have heard Mary screaming and pleading. She would have known her child and mother had just been murdered. She would have heard the killer coming back down the stairs. But something strange happened, which Murdoch could not understand: the murderer had not shot Hannah. He had kept her alive, all that night, and all the next day. Whether he needed to talk to her, or was simply tormenting her, no one could say. She was like one of the farm animals, Murdoch thought, about to be slaughtered without understanding why: nowhere to go, no way of escape, no empathy from the attacker. Hannah knew, that even if she was able to scream, no one would hear her out there. She would have realised that everything she was and everything she knew was about to end forever. It was likely that late on the Sunday night he marched Hannah into the same outbuilding where Sidney's corpse rotted away. It seems that she had been walked out to the shed; there were no signs of physical force on her body, no drag marks, no soil marks on the back of the victim's feet suggesting her body had been dragged by the upper half. It also appeared the killer finally forced her onto her knees before executing her with a blast to the back of her head.

The killer then went into the house and calmly tidied up. It was possible he stayed overnight, for he was inside the farmhouse the following morning when the maid, Amy, showed up to begin her workday. Amy entered through the backdoor, laid down some things in the kitchen table, perhaps calling out, wondering where everyone was.

Then she stepped into the living room and came face to face with a man holding a gun.

A man on a mission. A man who never panicked or lost control of the crime scene, who was forensically aware and comfortable with death. A killer who, over the course of five long days at or around the Abbot farm, never gave anything of himself away. Judging by the way he left the bodies, he was a man who felt no remorse or guilt for his crimes: the six people had to die, and that was that. The eminent FBI guru Robert Ressler often characterised the mindset of a serial killer's psyche as 'walking with God,' illustrating his blameless and superior state, and the fact that what fault there was, belonged to the victims.

'What do you want me to focus on now?' said Erin, still standing to attention beside him.

Murdoch pulled his attention away from the horrific crime scene images. He looked at the blond, ever-cool DI, with her asexual dark blue outfit, perfect grooming and minimalist approach to make-up. He could feel the eagerness and ambition kicking out in her pheromones, lighting up those grey-green eyes which peered unblinkingly into his, and he could feel her trepidation too, because failure in this case would be enormous. 'I want you, Erin, to focus on that strange anonymous phone call we received on the Tuesday the bodies were found.'

Erin stared at him. She asked, 'What anonymous phone call?'

In all desire to know there is already a drop of cruelty.
Nietzsche

Amy passed Hannah the mug of steaming liquorice tea. Hannah had been trying to get off the coffee for months. Trying... to get off everything that wasn't good for her. Trying to turn things round.

It was late Friday afternoon; Amy had just finished her shift and was about to head home. 'Just watch out for those Junkaris boys,' Hannah mocked.

The Junkaris farm was situated on the Little Compton Road, but in the opposite direction of Amy's cottage, which she shared with her father. 'Theo and Damon have no hope,' said Amy, zipping up her shoulder bag.

'Everyone knows that. Which is why I'm warning you.'

The tone was playful, but not completely playful. While Amy got her things together on the kitchen table, Hannah was leaning back against the Aga, watching her. Amy didn't need to look up to know she was being watched; she had always been a little overwhelmed by Hannah, with her Medusa hair, black and tangled, her green-blue eyes – so like her father's, only more intense and searching, her scents and jangling bracelets. There wasn't anything elegantly classical about her face, and she usually wore a tad too much makeup, like someone who needs to put on a mask to hide some central truth.

'It's still light for another hour, Hannah. Do you know where Peter was going this weekend, by the way? Brighton?'

'He said Brighton the other week, but God knows.'

'His car is still by the shed.'

'Yeah, he was probably picked up by some horny divorcee. He's never had any problem with the ladies, has he?'

'Well, he never introduces them to anyone here.'

'Can you blame him?'

Amy made no reply. Hannah was due for her next injection of Haloperidol, and sometimes little things could twig her off. Amy loved Hannah and wanted her to get better, and get off all those poisonous, circular medications. Kicking the caffeine habit once and for all was a start. It was important for all of them, especially Nicholas, who was upstairs right now, playing computer games. Motherhood hadn't come naturally to Hannah; from the moment Nicholas was born, she had regularly employed nannies from neighbouring villages to help out, until Amy came along.

'Frankly, I couldn't really blame Peter if he just ran away with some woman and never came back,' said Hannah. She held the other woman's stare. 'I sometimes dream of doing that myself.'

Amy felt her heart fluttering. Hannah had been talking like that, privately, for more than a year now, but the conversations were getting more frequent, and intense. At first, Amy thought it was just girly talk: Hannah had always been something of a romantic loose-cannon. But Hannah could easily find herself a man, and never did. The few 'boyfriends' she'd entertained took the aura of props on a stage set. Months ago, she'd taken to touching Amy more and more – nothing personal, perhaps, just a touch on the back of the hand, the tip of the finger, once whispering in her ear, another time putting an arm around her when she'd cracked a joke. Amy wondered at

the time whether the older Hannah had any idea of the electrical current that ran through her body every time she did things like that.

‘We all have dreams.’

‘Maybe I could talk you into coming with me, Amy. You, me and Nicholas.’

‘Hannah...’

‘You know I’m serious, don’t you?’

There was a brief silence, so complete, so sudden that the striking of the century-old carriage clock drew both their eyes towards it, as if it were chiming the hour of execution.

Then a shadow passed by the kitchen window, though Amy didn’t see who it was. Somewhere in the background she heard Sidney’s voice but couldn’t tell if he was talking to someone in person or over the phone. The gruff old farmer had been especially introverted in recent weeks, as though something was bothering him, something more acute than the day-to-day challenges of running the farm or dealing with a fairly unsuccessful summer harvest. But Sidney, like his kind, wasn’t the sort to complain about his lot unless he couldn’t help it. Maybe he was talking out loud to the weather Gods, for the weathermen kept insisting the longed-for rain was coming.

Upstairs came the faint peel of Mary’s mobile telephone, which was answered on the third ring. It might have been Mary’s estranged sister, Ann Claxton, who occasionally made secretive calls to Grange Farm when her husband Oriel was away from the house. Ann was a strange woman – you’d have to be strange to be married to a pig like Oriel Claxton, thought Amy, and increasingly unhappy in her situation, which had little hope of ever improving. Everyone in the village pitied Ann Claxton, but no one particularly liked her.

If it wasn’t Ann who made the call, then it was probably the vicar. Mary had been forgetful of late; maybe she’d left something behind on Tuesday night when she attended the weekly meeting. Mary was a stalwart of St Margaret’s; she’d served as a dedicated warden at the 13th-century church. Ben Ridley, who’d been the vicar of Compton Tamor for six years now, was a conscientious soul. He was also a sensitive man, who was unnerved by the collective energy he felt in the village. He’d once admitted to Amy, that while at Theological College, he’d wondered what sort of atmosphere was needed for an otherwise peaceful village to consent to burning innocent women alive as witches, or for ordinary citizens to flock into a colosseum to see people torn apart by lions, or for otherwise decent Germans to march women and children to gas chambers. Well, *this* was it, Ridley had said to Amy, looking her in the eye. There was such an undercurrent of energy about Compton Tamor, said the vicar, that striking a match might send the whole village up in flames.

‘It’s weird, isn’t it?’ Hannah asked, breaking the silence which had seemed to gather its own momentum in that spartan kitchen.

‘What?’

‘The fear... in the air. It feels like it’s been hanging over all of us for years. Maybe it’s growing up in a village with a tragic past; the fear subconsciously filters into everyone’s nervous system. The past is always watching you here, isn’t it?’

‘It’s the curse weekend, sweetheart. Everyone’s nerves get extra frayed.’

‘Yeah, ‘extra frayed’. Let’s hope nothing snaps then.’

Amy threw her bag over her shoulder, grabbed her wicker basket, and looked at the other woman. ‘I’ll see you Monday, then.’

Hannah held her stare, smiling with eyes and lips. ‘I can’t wait.’

The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away
The 23rd Psalm

My name is Trevor Hodgson. I'm a teacher by profession. Unfortunately, I don't think I can help you much. I don't actually live here, you see; I'm six miles away in Ecton. And the school is a little one; I only have eight or nine students. We don't even have a proper cleaner: just one of the ladies from Bugbrooke comes in with a vacuum and she does the toilets every night; that's about it. The school is part of the church in a way, a community affair – so its local sweat that keeps it going, and I'm proud of that. But it's a challenge. Point is, I'm in a limited bubble: I only get to deal with the parents of the kids I teach, so, like I said, I can't help you much. Of the Abbot family, the only two I ever dealt with were Hannah and her dad, Sidney. Oh, and the maid a few times, when she came to collect Nicholas. When it came to parent-teacher interviews, things like that, it was always Hannah and Sidney. Hannah seemed very attached to her dad; she seemed to lean on him a lot. I never met Nick's father; I was told he died in the war. Terrible!

I spoke to Hannah on perhaps eight or nine occasions over the last few years. It was hard to judge her personality: she was an enigma, Sphinx-like. She was like one of those Russian dolls, one inside the other, inside the other... I guess there had to be a final box somewhere, but I never found it. Wasn't my job to do that, right?

Like I said, I kept to myself. I've never been to the Abbot farm. And I'm not religious, so I never attended a service at St Margaret's either. Frankly, I find the St Margaret's church quite a creepy place; it's so dark and old and, well, hellish! It always gives the appearance of having fought with itself through time; plain fifteenth-century Tudor windows set into a faded red brick, the Norman Chancel, the Gothic tower. On a wintry dark day, with the forest as a backdrop, it looks like it's been ripped from a Stephen King novel. Have you taken a look at the gargoyles on the ramparts? Ugly and disfigured they are: such ghastly things! Makes you wonder what sort of mind created them, and why. They must have been mad – to sculpt them like that: or maybe the gargoyles were meant to keep the evil spirits at bay. They were so ignorant and superstitious in those days, weren't they? Killing witches, burning innocent people alive; things like that.

I've heard lots of local gossip of course – kids talk more freely than adults sometimes: about this family liking that one, or this person disliking someone else – sometimes for things that happened generations ago. That's the thing with these insular communities: there are blood ties and blood feuds between folks here that go back generations. Unbreakable ties to the land. It all looks idyllic and pastoral but I know better!

Nicholas? Oh, he was a smashing kid. A teacher isn't meant to have favourites, but he was the best apple in the orchard. Always polite, very clever, lovely blue-green eyes, curious, always curious; a beautiful boy. He was like a sponge, too – always taking things in. He never talked about his dad, which seemed a little strange; you'd think a boy would want to boast, or honour his fallen father, especially as he loved reading books about history, about the old wars, but he never did, and I never asked. You have to be careful these days, right?

Nicholas spent a lot of time with Adam O'Donnell; they'd ride their bikes all over the place. That's the thing with this region: the underlying geology is so complex that it

seems like it changes every dozen miles or so. That's why neighbouring villages can look so different sometimes. They're built of whatever material was close at hand, what?

Adam O'Donnell's a bit of a terrier, but while they were the same age, Nick was the leader. You wouldn't think they were the same age, mind you. Nick was taller, so much more developed in mind and body. You know, he was graceful, a natural athlete, whereas Adam was all gangly legs and arms.

No, I never met the Claxtons. I've seen them about the place from time to time, I know who they are, but they don't have kids, so they never visit the school. I sometimes see him, Oriel, driving about in his Ute, or Ann picking up supplies in the High Street, but I've never actually seen them together. I know there was some sort of dispute long ago between Sidney and Oriel; I think it was about a parcel of land which adjoined the Claxton's farm (which I'm told isn't a very successful farm.) I think the two sisters, Mary and Ann, inherited this land; Oriel wanted to buy it to extend his property – maybe even to go into business with Sidney, but Sidney didn't want that: he wanted to sell his and Mary's share; he needed to raise funds at the time, he said. It got pretty ugly, and Oriel had no choice but to concede. I think there may have even been a physical confrontation. I'm not sure. Some townie bought the place and built a right ugly brick home on the site instead – these days the monstrosity directly overlooks the Claxton's home, just to rub salt into the wound. The monstrosity is so damn ugly the townie doesn't even live there, and doesn't even visit the place in summer: it has basically sat empty for ten years. As far as I know, Sidney and Oriel haven't spoken since. That's about all I can tell you.

‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.

The devil told you that! The devil told you that,' shrieked the little man, and in his fury he stamped his right foot into the ground, right up to his waist, then, foaming at the mouth, he grabbed his left foot in both hands and tore himself apart right down the middle.

The Brothers Grimm

Murdoch told Erin Fox that the two killers came from 400 miles away to perpetrate the massacre. They'd been in prison when they'd heard from another prisoner that Herb Clutter was a prosperous farmer and had money stashed in a safe in his house. Clutter did not own any such safe and conducted most of his business affairs via cheque book. After being released from prison, Hickock and Smith headed to the Clutter home outside of Holcomb, Kansas when four of the six family members happened to be home. Once entering the home, they were unable to find the cash-filled safe and so they awoke Herb Clutter. Clutter gave them the little cash he had and said there was no more. They aroused the remainder of the family and again searched the house, confirming Clutter's story for themselves. They ransacked the entire house getting no more than fifty dollars, a pair of binoculars and a transistor radio. Once they had all they could find, the two killers executed in cold blood all four family members. When officers arrived, Herb Clutter, 48, lay sprawled on a mattress in the basement, stabbed, his throat slashed and a shotgun charge fired to his head. His hands were bound and his mouth was taped shut. On a couch in an adjoining room was 15-year-old Kenyon, bound, gagged, and shot in the head. In separate upstairs bedrooms were the bodies of Mrs. Bonnie Clutter, 45, and Nancy, 16. Mrs. Clutter was bound and gagged, Nancy only bound. Each had been shot in the head. That was in 1959. Truman Capote wrote his classic book *In Cold Blood* on the case.

'Which you've read, I take it?' asked Fox.

'I finished re-reading it last night.'

A lengthy silence. 'Why?'

'I've also re-read Vincent Bugliosi's book *Helter Skelter* on the 1974 Charles Manson murders in California, Roger Wilkes' book on the Bamber family killings in Essex in 1985, Jonathan Blake's book on the Bain family massacre in New Zealand in 1996, and Joe McGuinness's book on the Jeffrey MacDonald killings in the 1970s.'

'Well, I would like to read a menu somewhere because I'm starving. We've been here since first light John and it's been a waste of time.'

'And,' said Murdoch, ignoring her, 'I've read Daphne Clarke's book on the Lizzie Borden case. You know the verse, right?'

'You mean - ? *Lizzie Borden took an axe*

And gave her mother forty whacks;

When she saw what she had done

She gave her father forty one.'

'Very good, Erin, but the ditty isn't accurate. The stepmother was actually dispatched with nineteen whacks, and ninety minutes or so after that deed was done, the father got eleven whacks. Either way, it was highly violent. One of the most teasing questions at the time was what the killer did during those ninety minutes between the murders? Part of the reason the police focussed on the daughter Lizzie was because no outsider would ever hang around the crime scene for that length of time. *Ninety minutes*. Any killer, sane or insane, would get the hell out of there having committed

the first bloody murder. Yet *we* have a killer calmly hanging around for five days. He could have finished all the Abbots that Thursday night when he killed Peter, yet by the Sunday night, he was still killing them off.'

They were leaning against Murdoch's car in the circular gravel drive at the front of the Abbot farmhouse.

'Perhaps he was just enjoying himself, John. Perhaps he wanted to let time drag to make our job all the harder; he may have wanted to hold out until at least Monday when the deluge was promised to come, which is exactly what happened. Besides, our guy may have come and gone from the property several times. If he's local, he would have been able to do that without too much difficulty.'

Erin sucked in a deep breath. Late the previous evening, after finishing her work shift, she'd taken a slow drive around the village, and then she'd gotten out her car and walked from the High Street to the Abbot farm and back again. The rural emptiness of the place had quickly got to her; there were no fancy boutique stores here; no charmless modern developments either; the whole place felt out of time. The night had pressed close around her, and she'd breathed in the darkness like it was a physical thing, almost gulping on it.

Unless you drove along the Little Compton Road, you wouldn't even know the isolated rural village existed; there were probably thousands of people who lived in the region and didn't know it even existed, who never crossed the low ancient hills, forest and stone boundaries which seemed to separate the place from the rest of England. As she'd neared St Margaret's on her return trip, Erin thought she glimpsed something moving along the back of the old church, heading towards Haxley Wood. The wind rustled through the forest and sounded like the sighs of a thousand living things. For a moment the countless leaves and shadows seemed to form myriad tiny faces, all staring back at her – like that Van Dorn painting. Erin peered closer at whatever it was had caught her attention, and unless it was her imagination running wild, she thought it was a withered old lady, dressed in black. Like a witch from *Macbeth*! She was carrying something, a basket perhaps, and just at that moment she turned and looked Erin's way briefly, before disappearing into the forest.

Erin said, 'This cursed village was in semi-shut down that weekend and the killer could have come and gone after dark and before dawn. Have you seen how dark it gets around here, even when the moon's out? There are no streetlights anywhere, and no houses within a hundred yards of the road until you reached the high street. It's as though the villagers don't realise that the Blackout regulations are no longer in force.'

'You think he'd be prepared to leave dead bodies in the house and outbuildings?'

'Yes, because he knew no one was likely to visit that weekend. Perhaps he just didn't give a damn. Or maybe he just stayed at the farm and got lucky.'

Murdoch was silent for a long time, then said, 'We don't solve this case until we know why he spent so long at the scene. Why did he torment Hannah for more than 24 hours, keeping her bound like that? He didn't rape her, didn't torture her, didn't mark her face.'

They'd trawled the farm once again, Murdoch trying to put himself in the shoes of the killer, as if by walking in his footsteps over and over, re-enacting his movements, the choices he made, he might somehow get to step into his mind. Erin had watched her Guvnor's performance with bewilderment and growing despair. 'Maybe the killer wanted to talk to Hannah – to get her to admit something to him or agree to something, or maybe even to understand why he was doing what he was. And then... he killed her too.'

'That means Daniel Tapper. No stranger would do that.'

Fox exhaled.

Murdoch said, 'You know, Lizzie Borden was so obviously the killer it's amazing how anyone turned the case into a mystery at all.'

'This is relevant.'

He swept on, 'People struggled to comprehend how the church-going, Sunday-school-teaching, respectable, spinster-daughter could commit such bloody murders, but she did. And there's one more case: Hinterflaik, 1920. A woman called Gertrude Steiner once wrote about the case: six people, on a farm, killed off one by one.'

Erin looked at the Abbot home, then gazed left to the outbuildings scattered across the property: in one of those outbuildings they'd found Peter, in another, they'd found Sidney and Hannah. Everything looked grey and dreary; there was no autumn colour to be seen, no yellow, red or orange, no fire; instead, everything was a mix of shades and hues. 'Where did you get your hands on all those 'massacre' books in such short time?' she asked.

Murdoch nodded towards the farmhouse. 'They were all there: on the bookcase in the Abbot living room.'

Erin blushed.

Murdoch studied her for a moment, then shook his head. 'You didn't notice? Quite a little library the Abbots had accrued. Apart from all the books on farming and agricultural and cookery, and folklore, psychology, witchcraft, the supernatural, religion. It wasn't just all those Bibles either; someone in the house was interested in paganism and ancient Eastern spiritual practices. But it was the 'crime section' that interested me. Fiction and non-fiction... with a particular interest in instances of family massacre.'

'And what exactly,' said Erin, 'are you reading into that?'

'I'm not reading anything into it. We British come out of the womb with a Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie tied to our umbilical cords. I'm just noting that inside a farmhouse where six people were massacred was a collection of books dedicated to that very topic.'

'You're implying the killer may have read those books and been inspired by them?'

'The idea for this crime came from somewhere, Erin. Where better than the scene of the crime?'

'Maybe the killings just happened.'

Murdoch gave a rather contemptuous shake of his head.

'Okay, Guv. Name me one thing about this case that proves it was *planned*, because no one else thinks it was.'

'Overkill,' said Murdoch.

'There was no overkill here.'

'Exactly, Erin. Every other one of those cases I just mentioned showed clear and awful signs of rage and overkill. *Not here*. However ugly it was, this killer only did what he needed to do and never displayed uncontrolled rage. There's no unnecessary brutality. Except for Hannah, everyone died a relatively quick death, and the killer never followed up with overkill. Even Hannah, bound and in complete control of the killer, was not mistreated – not physically anyhow; it was more a psychological torment. This was planned Erin. It's too clean, too neat, too organised. Five days of killing, and not a single mistake was made. Perhaps our killer read those crime books and was not only inspired by them, but learned from them as well, because it was only the Hinterflaik massacre which went unsolved. And the Abbot-farm crimes mimic that one more closely than any of the others, because all the other massacres took place in a short time frame, unlike Hinterflaik; the killer in that case also stayed at the

farm for a number of days, just like here. He killed the victims one by one, spaced out over a number of days, and also took care to feed the farm animals, just like here.'

'Fiction turning into fact, life imitating art?' said Erin, deadpan. 'I think you're reading way too much into it, because we don't have any real clues to work with.'

Murdoch shrugged. 'There's another thing that stretches the concept of coincidence. It was in 1922 that a family was butchered on a small farm in Hinterflaik, Bavaria. Apparently there were some warning signs in the days before the murders; farmer Andreas Gruber told neighbours he had found strange footprints in the snow leading from the woods toward his house, but no footsteps leading away. He heard footsteps in the attic. He found an unfamiliar newspaper. The house keys went missing. In this case we have Sidney telling the secretary he is fearful of his life, a family headstone at the local cemetery is defaced, Peter suspected he was being watched. The farm in Hinterflaik had six victims, and the killer fed himself in the kitchen, lighting a fire in the house to keep himself warm. The bodies were discovered a number of days after the murders. The first four victims were lured separately into the barn and brutally murdered, one by one. The murder weapon was a pick-axe. There were the grandparents, Andreas and Cazilia, their widowed daughter Viktoria, and her 7-year-old daughter. The other two victims, killed in the house, were two-year-old Josef and the maid Maria.'

Erin felt a shiver run down her spine. The parallels were too close to discard out of hand, but she didn't see how the correlation helped their cause. Moreover, she was annoyed that once again Murdoch seemed to have found something others had not, and then chose to keep back his ideas until he saw fit to broadcast them.

'The police were utterly clueless, Erin. No witness, no decent clues, no motive. They were so desperate they removed the heads of the victims and sent them to a clairvoyant in Munich, but with no results. More than 100 suspects were questioned; they were still questioning suspects 64 years later in 1986, but no one was ever arrested. In 2007, investigators re-examined the scene with modern equipment, but, again, turned up nothing.'

'Thanks for cheering me up.'

'Apparently there's a memorial to the six victims in the graveyard where they are buried, still without their heads. The skulls which were sent to Munich were lost in the chaos of World War Two. For decades though, most people thought they knew who the killer was. You see, Viktoria was married to a soldier –'

'No,' said Erin.

'Oh yes, and just like Daniel Tapper, this husband went missing in the last days of the war.'

'He came back and killed his entire family? Is that what you're saying?'

'That was the theory accepted by most people, especially as Viktoria was suspected of having an affair with someone local – just like Hannah. It seemed to be the only solution which made sense, and while it could never be proved, most villagers went to bed at night thinking the mystery had been solved. But then it was discovered that the husband-soldier had in fact died in the First World War after all.'

'Christ.'

'The bottom line is that we know no more a hundred years later than the German cops knew that very first day.'

'And a book on that case was in the Abbot living room, next to all those other books on family massacres?'

'Yes, DI Fox. So, do you still think this was a random crime committed by a passing stranger?' He gestured for her to get into the car.

‘Where we going?’

‘A very short drive. To the neighbour’s house.’

‘Okay.’ But she didn’t move straightaway. ‘I have a question of my own, first.’

‘Go on.’ Murdoch kept his stare on the farmhouse.

‘What’s going on in your life John? I know something is.’

‘Nothing you need to know about.’

She pondered his choice of words. Her lips twisted into a sly half-smile. ‘Something *is* going on, then?’ Murdoch seldom talked about his private life, his personal history. Everyone assumed something bad must have happened to him – to turn him into the unhappy sod he was, but nobody knew what that catalyst was. Most people at the nick stereotyped him: the jaded, screwed up DCI, but Erin knew there was more to it. Murdoch never drunk alcohol for example, and he tried to get a good night’s sleep even if he rarely achieved it. He was also an unusual kind of bibliophile, with a preference for non-fiction tales of misery and despair – the sort of books you felt the author who wrote them would never get over. Murdoch devoured Misery. He was addicted to the sour milk of human suffering. Erin purred, ‘You can trust me.’

Murdoch quietly replied, ‘I’d trust a hungry snake before I trusted you, Erin.’

‘Right.’

‘That’s another way of telling you to focus on the case, DI Fox.’

*

Gary Junkaris was an unlikeable sort. Mid-fifties, stocky around the shoulders and fat round the guts, he had a trimmed dark beard, small devious eyes that resembled a pair of black polished marbles, and a mouth that couldn’t form a smile, only a sneer. His bad attitude was there in the way he eyeballed the two detectives standing on his front doorstep, the way he planted his feet wide, crossed his arms, his head thrust forward as if his instinct was one of attack. He was wearing an old coat over the top of his chequered shirt, but Murdoch figured that the man hadn’t been able to button up that tight-fitting coat for years. Junkaris also had a nose that looked badly broken, and there was an old scar, barely visible in the natural light, which began at the very top of his forehead and etched a thin line beneath his hair. Murdoch wondered how he got it. A pub fight, perhaps? Junkaris had never served in the military and had no criminal record.

‘I’ve no interest in talking to you people,’ he said, even before Murdoch could complete the introductions.

‘We’re investigating the murder of your neighbours – ’ began Murdoch, but Junkaris was too jazzed up to even let him finish.

‘I’ve already spoken to a young lad in a uniform; looked like he’d just got out of high school. He read out some questions; I answered them. That’s enough.’

There was nothing subtle about the man’s hostility. For a moment he feigned to close the door, but he didn’t.

Murdoch waved a sheet of photocopied paper. ‘These are your ‘answers’ Mr Junkaris, which aren’t answers at all. For starters, you didn’t clarify where you were at the key times as requested.’

‘I don’t need an alibi.’

‘You didn’t explain why you had such a beef with the Abbot family, which several villagers have told us about.’

Those black eyes darted left then right. For a moment he looked extra menacing. ‘You tell me who said that, and I will reply.’

‘That isn’t how it works,’ said Erin Fox. She jumped in because she could sense her Guvnor starting to wind himself up, and the last thing any of them needed was a physical confrontation. Junkaris was the sort who would make trouble for anyone if he could. The case was already generating a lot of heat as it was, and Murdoch had been walking a tightrope with the higher ranks for years.

‘Who pulled your chain?’ asked Junkaris. He looked like he wanted to spit on her, and indeed, a small amount of spittle had gathered at the edges of his mouth.

‘Your two boys haven’t been questioned yet,’ pointed out Murdoch. The question, or the way they were tag-teaming against him, seemed to throw the farmer off balance.

‘They don’t know anything about what happened.’

‘They can tell us that themselves, can’t they?’

He eyeballed the other man. ‘They don’t have to say a fucking word to any of your lot.’

‘That isn’t a good enough answer for me.’

‘Who the fuck are you?’

‘A Guvnor looking for a person to arrest.’

Junkaris kept staring at Murdoch, and seemed to find whatever he was looking for.

‘Hard man, hey? My boys don’t have to speak to the police. You can’t make them.’

‘Best they do, Gary. Otherwise the Drug Squad will be all over your place. Your two boys are known to deal. And I’m pretty confident they’ll find something on your property, right? You don’t think all those rats and junkies won’t cough them up – when a massacre is on our hands?’ Murdoch let that sink in and took a step closer.

‘I’m happy to make this as *fucking* hard for you and your loser sons as I can.’

Gary Junkaris didn’t expect to hear that. He looked really pissed. He was trying to calculate everything Murdoch had just said, what it meant, how he should respond, but he was too wired up to make sense of the moment. His fingers twitched. The spittle at the edge of his mouth increased. He looked long and hard into each of their faces, then his eyes seemed to cloud over. He hissed, ‘Go on, ask your stupid questions then.’

Murdoch nodded for Erin to take out her notebook and pen. ‘Where were you Thursday evening, October 4?’

‘Here, at home.’

‘Any witnesses?’

‘Only my two boys.’

‘Right. And Friday evening, October 5?’

‘Same answer.’

‘No phone calls, no visitors?’

‘I don’t have need for those things.’

‘Your boys never went out?’

‘Nope.’

Murdoch waited until Erin, her face expressionless, had scribbled down the answers for what little they were worth, then asked, ‘What about that weekend?’

‘We stayed here, on the farm. Damon and Theo may have run some errands, but nothing special worth mentioning.’

‘Better if you did.’

‘I’d prefer not to.’

‘None of you saw or heard anything suspicious that could help our inquiry?’

Those black eyes were glittering a little. Junkaris could see Murdoch was annoyed, which gave him a sense of regaining command of the situation. ‘Not a thing,’ he said drawing each word out.

‘Gunshots?’

‘Oh, several of them. But guns are always going off around here. I didn’t pay any attention to them.’

‘And you never set foot on the Abbot farm?’

‘No.’

Murdoch paused. As the seconds dragged by, the beefy farmer’s agitation seemed to increase, but not too much. Junkaris had convinced himself he was holding his own again. ‘How long since you set foot on the farm, Mr Junkaris?’

‘Years,’ came the reply.

‘Really? Have you ever been in the farmhouse?’

He seemed to think hard for a moment, then said, ‘No, never. Are you thinking of planting something in the farmhouse to say that I have?’

‘Notice anything unusual in the weeks leading up to the killings?’

‘No.’

‘What happened to your wife?’ Murdoch asked.

Junkaris looked like he’d been punched in the guts. A nerve started beating in his temple ‘What the fuck... has that got to do with anything?’

Murdoch smiled. ‘I’m just trying to figure out why you hated Sidney Abbot so much. I know he was wealthier than you, smarter, better looking, more successful. Did your wife think that?’

‘Is that what people are saying?’ The words came out in a kind of hiss.

Murdoch took a step back, craning his neck to look at the farmhouse, which was a small, ramshackle affair by anyone’s standards, and positively insignificant compared to Grange Farm. ‘What do you farm here, anyway?’

‘Vegetables, sell some eggs. I sometimes help out fixing things around the village. I get by.’

‘Along with some welfare cheques and your boys doing drugs, yeah. When was the last time you saw any of the Abbots?’

‘I saw them all the time. As far as speaking to any of them? Months.’

‘You can’t see Dead Man’s Hill from your property, can you?’

Junkaris’s eyes narrowed to two dark slits and he stayed mute. Either he didn’t like answering questions he didn’t understand, or the question struck home for some reason.

‘The oak tree; the place where they executed Richard Tilley; you can’t see that from this shallow valley, right?’

‘That’s right.’ The stocky man shifted his weight a little, like a nervous boxer pre-fight. ‘Is there anything else? I’ve got work to do.’

‘Couple more questions, that’s all. What did you think of the Abbot kids, Hannah and Peter?’

Junkaris shrugged. ‘They were both a bit fucked up. Everyone round here put Sidney on a pedestal, but I didn’t. He swaggered round, you know – ex-soldier boy, biggest land-holding in the area, thought himself a bit of a local hero. Every summer a dozen men folk would flock to his land to work his harvests. But he had his own secrets, don’t you worry.’

‘Such as?’, asked Murdoch, noting the tone, and thinking about how the killer had smashed Sidney’s face with a rifle butt after shooting him, before finishing the injured man with a final point-blank shot to the head.

‘I’m saying nothing. And Mary – well she was a right fruit-and-nut. Always trying to save everyone’s soul from damnation.’

‘Quite a task in a place like this, I imagine. You’re not religious yourself?’

‘Fuck no.’

At least, thought Murdoch, the man had answered one question honestly. ‘What about the curse?’

Murdoch had expected the other guy to laugh in his face. But Junkaris instinctively took a half step back, and that blasted nerve in his temple started beating again. ‘I don’t make jokes about that.’

‘You believe this village is cursed, do you?’

Junkaris didn’t like the question, nor Murdoch’s light-hearted, slightly mocking tone. ‘I’ve seen things,’ he said. ‘On the moors, in Haxley Wood. I’ve seen things that I will never tell another soul about. Listen to me: you don’t come from these parts; you don’t know this land. If you did, you would understand why something like what happened to the Abbots could happen here. There are witches round here, you know.’

‘Flora Tranter?’

‘Not just her. There are witches and Black Ladies and all sorts. Sven Jasper said he was going to sort the curse out and headed into Haxley Wood all those years ago: never seen again.’

‘The curse got him?’

‘Maybe he just fled in fear. Maybe Sven was just an incarnation the Black Lady used, so he never really existed. I mean, he just showed up one day to work the farm, and stayed for years, and then disappeared. I’m telling you: there’s something in the air, here, something living in the eco-system. The same thing which made that painter go mad.’

‘Eric Van Dorn?’

Junkaris nodded. ‘Yeah, him. Came from Holland with a young wife; ended up killing her, though he said he was innocent. They lynched him.’

‘On Dead Man’s Hill.’

‘That’s right. Right where they executed Richard Tilley. There’s a patch of land there where the grass never grows.’ Junkaris eyed the two detectives. ‘Okay, so you townies like to take the piss out of us dumb country folk. You’ve got it all figured out, haven’t you?’

Murdoch didn’t want to admit how far off the mark that last statement was. ‘Are Damon and Theo home?’

Junkaris didn’t look happy, but his aggression had ebbed. In fact, he looked rather tired all of a sudden, and was leaning against the doorframe as though from weariness rather than actively blocking them entry.

Murdoch said, ‘I’m told that Theo, your younger son, idolises his older sibling, Damon.’

‘You seem to have been told lots of things.’

‘I’m told that Theo was the runt of the village litter. Is that so?’

For a moment it looked like Junkaris might react. For a moment he seemed to realise the insult which had just flown his way, he straightened, his fists clenched, then he almost sagged back against the doorframe. ‘You a cop. You know Theo has a minor record.’

‘Yeah; theft, caught in possession, drug-dealing in Collingwood, stole a car once. Right little ball of energy isn’t he? Damon’s never been nicked though, has he?’

‘Damon’s a good boy. He’s trying to straighten Theo out. That’s why I’m keeping them away from arseholes like you; I know how you like to fuck with the heads of vulnerable people.’

‘You’re protecting them, yeah?’

‘Call it that, if you want.’

Murdoch once again checked that Erin was keeping pace. They both knew that there was a more to the two brothers than the father was saying, Theo in particular. Ever since he was fourteen, the lad had been reported by several villagers as being a 'nuisance.' He'd been suspected of nicking women's underwear from clothes lines; making nuisance calls, stalking women in the dark. Once he'd been caught perverting on a couple having it off in Haxley Woods. Social workers stuck labels on Theo Junkaris; they said he was 'ESN' – Educationally Sub-Normal. He had 'learning difficulties', he was 'slow', potentially 'unstable'. To DCI John Murdoch, who never gave anyone the benefit of the doubt, he was downright fucking loopy between the ears, a loose cannon, a rabid dog. Give him a sharp knife and he could do untold damage. Given him a gun...

Maybe Theo was the reason Mrs Junkaris had got away. And so the three males lived on the farm in their own little world. No other family existed, they had no lovers, no friends; their only social venture the occasional drinking session at the White Hart pub, where locals said Damon started to go bad after two pints. Were the two brothers trapped in a kind of foie a deux – a madness of two? Like the Moors Murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley? Two people egging each other on to excesses of evil they wouldn't have considered one their lonesome?

Murdoch had looked Theo up on the PNC. The mugshot showed a ferret-faced kid, with a lowlife stare Murdoch knew well. It was the stare of worst kind of British Underclass: low-life souls, entrenched mostly in rough estates, who share the firm belief in the primacy of their own rights at the expense of everyone else's.

Peter Abbot was suspected of mixing with the two brothers in some capacity; Peter liked easy money if he could find it, he also had a car and a small network of boys and girls in faraway towns who liked to party. But could a little operation like that have exploded into the orgy of violence perpetrated on the Abbot farm? Could the Junkaris boys have pulled off such a clinical display of criminality? Murdoch didn't think so, but right now, after a week of investigating, and nearly two weeks after Peter Abbot had been killed, he didn't have any better suspects to work with.

He passed Junkaris his card. 'Just remember which bin you throw it in, because it *is* advisable that your boys stop hiding and contact us. The sooner the better. I mean that.' He didn't look into the other man's face, but signalling to Fox, turned on his heel and headed back to where he'd parked his car on the Little Compton Road. From behind him, he heard Junkaris say, 'Yeah, no problem.'

There is a great deal of wickedness in village life.

Agatha Christie

I always wear red at work. I believe in tradition, you see, and it's tradition for postman of the realm to wear red. Hasn't always been that way. Not so long ago, we had to wear long hats and coat tails. Delivering mail was a special duty, right. It still is, even if people don't see it that way.

I've been servicing Compton and the surrounding environs for fifteen years – ever since poor old Graham Gilly had his stroke. Left him paralysed on one side of his body, and with a slurry speech. Collapsed one day near Haxley Wood. I always think of him when I ride my bike down that part of the Old Compton Road. Especially in Autumn – it happened in autumn, you see. Season of death, right!

I'm a man of routine. I wake up every morning at 4.15. I go to the loo, wash, get dressed in my red uniform. I eat oats for breakfast, a strong mug of coffee, clean my teeth. Pick up by bait bag. I leave home at exactly 5 a.m. on my pushbike. In the towns or really remote villages the posties have their vans and motorcycles, and in some rural parts we have electric-bikes, but I like doing it the old-fashioned way. Keeps me honest.

The collection depot is in Yarlow, about four miles west of Compton Tamor. It's all basically flat between the two places. I sign in at 5.30 and start sorting mail into rounds. Not a lot of mail goes out to Compton. When I'm sorted and ready to go I have a team brief with my manager (and another strong cup of coffee), and usually leave the yard at 7 a.m.

I usually reach Compton by about 8.30. Some posties listen to Radio 2 or whatever between calls, but I don't do that. I like to be alert. Sometimes I come across a pedestrian or a passing motorist and we occasionally chat. I like to catch up on local gossip, and everyone knows me around here. (Not that I'm a gossip monger like Mike Styles, but I like to know what's going on.) Early morning is the best time of the day. People out and about, starting their new day. Farmers and gardeners are working away. It's been such a long hot summer and autumn, hasn't it?

The first property I pass in the village belongs to the Claxtons. They don't get much mail, and what they get is always addressed to him, Oriel. They used to have a mad dog that used to hassle me – a West Highland Terrier, but I don't know what happened to it. The dog would often be waiting for me, and would give me a hard time. He was a real nipper.

Further along was the Gleeson cottage; young Amy often got mail – you know what young lasses are like today. Companies like Amazon love them. All my deliveries are on the left-hand side of the Little Compton Road as I head through the village: on the right-hand side there's now't but countryside. Next come the Abbots, and then the Junkaris farm, then St Margaret's and the school, and then the high street. Most of the mail is deposited there. At the roundabout I head south, past the O'Donnell residence. I go as far as Totham D'Arcy but not into the village itself; someone else deals with that. I then follow the same route back to base. I usually get home around 2.30 p.m.

On those fateful workdays – Thursday October 4 through to Tuesday October 9, I followed this same routine and did not notice anything unusual. Not that I would: at this time of year, people tend to hibernate a bit and the Abbots weren't particularly social, and there's always plenty of work for them to do on the farm. You're never out

of work if you live on 350 acres, I'm sure. And you must remember: you cannot see the Abbot farmhouse from the road itself: I drop the post in his stone letterbox, halfway up the private drive. The family also received a morning edition of the *Daily News* and on Fridays an edition of the local *Gazette*. In summer, at harvest time, I might sometimes see young men folk trudging to the farm, but not in the cooler months. On that patch of road I rarely saw a soul. I *did* see young Adam O'Donnell cycling out towards the Abbot farm on the Tuesday afternoon: he must have been on the school lunchbreak and was being naughty riding out to his friend's farm, because young Nicholas hadn't shown up for school again. I was told by his mother that the teacher, Trevor Hodgson, was going to make inquiries – that very afternoon – as to why Nicholas Abbot hadn't turned up at school that Monday and Tuesday, but as things turned out, when young Adam got to the farm, the bodies had just been found. Teddy Butler found them; I deliver mail to him, too: he lives halfway between Compton Tamor and Totham D'Arcy. I've been told – by Mike Styles – that Hodgson didn't call the Abbot farm straight away regarding Nicholas's absence, because he knew Hannah was going through a bit of a tough patch and some people were criticising her parenting of Nicholas, so he didn't want to make any waves. He had no reason to suspect anything bad had happened.

Did I hear or see the dog Crispy? Now that's a question? There were times in the past when I did see him sniffing about; he was well trained; he sometimes came to the front of the drive, but never left the property itself. But no, I don't think I saw him on those days. I have a feeling I heard him barking – on the Friday I think it was. He was really Peter's dog; Crispy would follow Peter around the most; Peter was the only one who used to talk to him, except for Nicholas of course. But yes, I'm sure I heard him barking that Friday morning. Not in a panicked way. Just a steady sort of bark; like he'd seen something he wasn't sure about.

Yes, sure, I've been inside the house. A couple of times I delivered parcels which looked important and which I didn't want to leave in the letterbox. A couple of times Mary invited me into the kitchen and made me a coffee: she was always friendly enough, but never warm, if you know what I mean? They were a private family, but they weren't precious; they didn't mind people traipsing in and out if there was a reason for it, and they made sure that visitors were refreshed. But the farm always felt tense, suspicious, as though they were worried something bad might happen. The atmosphere felt strained. Like they were a group of strangers forced to share the same space, rather than a family. Like they were cursed! Maybe that is what a nightmare is... walking about around people you know, looking in their faces, and suddenly the faces change, and it's not someone you know any longer!

Perhaps it didn't help – those four adults still under the same roofline after all them years. Not quite normal, is it? I'd heard – Mike Styles again – that Sidney had been having a hard time lately, but you never know if Mike Styles is just making things up. I know that Mary cared a lot for the community. She would ask me questions about religion and was happy that I went to church. I once told her I didn't particularly like Ben Ridley, the vicar, and she didn't like that, so I never mentioned it again.

I only saw Hannah once when I was there. It was actually a little frightening. It was at the end of summer, a really hot day, and they'd received something from a farmer's centre; I didn't know what was in the box – maybe seed, or something which needed to be kept cool, or something expensive, so I planned to just pop it under the front porch, where it would be safe and cool. I was about twenty yards from the front door when one of the upstairs windows flew open and Hannah put her head out and started yelling abuse at me. She had this horrid, hissing voice, her hair was all tangled and

her eyes were wild. 'it's just me Hannah,' I replied, 'Arthur the postman.' I'd met her a couple of times before: she's quite a looker, but a bit scary too. Something not quite right about her. I'd been told Hannah had never been the same since she lost her husband in the Middle East; it couldn't help that her mother had once accused her of being a child of evil, or something like that. She looked momentarily confused, then started yelling at me again. Something about the devil, about trying to hurt Nicholas or something. About twenty seconds later, another woman got to her and started soothing her and quieting her down. I think that was Amy, the maid. A moment later Hannah disappeared from view and the window closed. It shook me up. I dropped off the package and quickly left.

That was the last time I saw her. The last time I saw any of them. It's so terrible what has happened, so shocking. When I rode past the Claxton farm the morning after the news broke, I saw Oriel standing on the road, looking in the direction of the Abbot farm. Oriel wasn't an impressive sight: he looked grey and washed out, and his head seemed over-sized for his body; he had thinning hair, a jutting aggressive chin, a curved nose and a large mouth with a natural quirk at the corners that made it look like he was on the edge of a perpetual grimace. Yeah, I watch people closely like that. He was always in a hostile mood, too. I'd heard that some gypsies had once set up camp on the edge of his property and that he had pointed a loaded shotgun at them, threatening to shoot them dead if they didn't move on. He called them 'vermin' and God knows what would have happened if Sidney Abbot hadn't come along and saved the day.

'It's awful,' I said to him. 'Please pass on my regards to your wife.'

He fixed me with a strange gaze. No one around here particularly likes Oriel, but I was amazed at his attitude. 'Why would I do that?' he snapped.

'Well... Mary was Ann's sister, wasn't she?'

'Not anymore,' he said. The way he spoke reminded me of the sudden snapping of a dry twig.

Perhaps he was in a state of shock. Maybe that was why he was acting so coldly. Everyone knows that the two families had fallen out, long ago – something to do with land. But at a time like this, you'd expect him to let it go. 'See all that?' he asked me, pointing vaguely towards the Abbot farm, which you couldn't actually see because of the lie of the land. I realised he was pointing to the house which that town-developer had built about twenty years ago, which usually sat empty, and directly overlooked Oriel's farm. 'That should have been my land. Sidney screwed me over. You don't think I'm going to mourn for him, do you?'

I didn't know what to say. I know how these kind of family feuds can be nasty and long-lasting, but I felt revulsed by his attitude. First Hannah acting like a madwoman, now this guy. I thought: surely you could have some compassion and sadness for the poor boy who'd been shot in his bed?

I'd never spoke to Ann Claxton, but I'd seen her around the traps: she looked very unhappy. She never wore make-up or dressed in a nice way. She shuffled about, head down, features pinched, face pasty, avoiding people where possible. Poor woman didn't even go to the weekly church meetings anymore: Oriel had put a stop to it. He pretty much kept her prisoner in that ugly, strange house of theirs.

The Junkaris clan? Yeah; they're nasty, hate-filled souls. When Junkaris's wife ran out on him – everyone presumed *that* is what happened, because she just disappeared one day – he didn't blink an eye; not him or the kids. They just discarded the woman and her memory. And Oriel Claxton assaulted Sidney just because he didn't get his own way – like a schoolyard bully. Some villagers whispered that Sidney lived in fear

of Claxton, but I never believed that: Sidney was a strong man, a brave man; I've not doubt that he could have beaten Oriel into a bloody pulp, but he didn't. Sidney served in the Army – like Daniel Tapper. How ironic: that the Abbots were surrounded by two arsehole neighbours, the Junkaris and Claxton families – and yet it was the good folk in the middle who got killed! Only the good die young, right?

Mike Styles told me that it was Ann Claxton who went to the morgue to formally identify all those dead bodies. Apparently she did so without battering an eyelid. The only question she asked was why their heads had been shaved. No idea how Mike Styles could have been privy to such information, but that's what he was saying. Teddy Butler reckons that Styles is trading information with that ambitious journalist from Collingwood, Jaffa Cruz. Styles also said that Oriel Claxton had called the police, wanting to know if he could go through the property – apparently there was some farm equipment he reckoned he was entitled to. Maybe that was why there were a couple of uniformed officers staying at the farm, to keep Oriel from pilfering stuff. Unbelievable! I have no idea what happens to Grange Farm now because everyone is dead. Maybe it will go to the local government, and they will sell it.

'Was it a murder-suicide pact?' I asked Oriel. I don't know why I asked that. When you hear of several people dying inside the same household, that's where the mind goes, I suppose. I couldn't think of what else to say, and I couldn't just ride off in silence.

He shook his head. 'No.' He didn't say anything else. Didn't ask a question of his own. I had the unsettling feeling that he knew exactly what had happened to his estranged relatives. That perhaps everyone in the village already knew, and no outsider could ever hope to understand the truth of the matter.

'Do the police know... who did it?' I asked. 'Have they arrested anyone?'

He stared at me. 'No,' he said again. He kept staring at me.

I instinctively looked down at his hands. He had big, powerful hands. I noticed that there was the scratch on the back of his right hand. I was too scared to ask him what had caused it.

And utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them.
1 Samuel

Mary had secretly felt sorry for Ben Ridley ever since he took up his post at St Margaret's. He'd come from Surrey, where he'd served as an understudy for two years in a very orthodox parish, and before that, he was at London Theological College. The previous born and bred vicar of Compton Tabor was the indomitable Reginald Halifax, who'd served for over fifty years. They were big boots to fill. Old Reg knew the ins-and-outs, not just of his parishioners, but of the folklore and superstitions of the village. Reg pointed out to the orthodox that paganism existed long before any of the major religions had been invented, which won him few friends above the rank of bishop, but a loyal following on his home turf. There was a reason why paganism remained in the top six followed religions in Britain.

Ben Ridley, a servant of the C of E, struggled to get bums on seats, though his outreach to neighbouring zones had been reasonably successful. He preaches as if by rote, with little conviction in his tone. His age didn't help with the local faithful; he'd been at the village for nearly a decade and was still yet to reach forty; moreover, he had boyish good looks, which Mary knew had interested the likes of Hannah and Emily Junkaris – before the latter fled the area – but which equally didn't do anything to make him a serious proposition to locals who were naturally cynical of 'the Church' in the first place. And *then* there was his manner; he would listen to all the stories about witches and the curse and the Black Lady with a good-natured and slightly condescending smile that got under the skin of the local speaker.

I once asked Ben when he expected the Second Coming. He never really answered my question, as though he was scared of getting it wrong. He spoke about how it was predicted in each of the four Gospels, in the book of Acts and in the epistles of Paul, James, Peter and John. Jesus's return was also the focal point of the entire book of Revelation. If you believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, then you must believe in the Second Coming of Christ, but Ben Ridley was hesitant. I told him that the Gospel of Matthew contained Jesus' prophecy to His disciples about the state of the world just prior to His Second Coming. 'And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.' Anyone capable of reading a newspaper or turning on a TV knew about the outbreaks of violence in society – random shootings, murders and mass killings. 'And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.'

'Yes, Mary; it seems to sum up where we are at...' He was happy to leave it there.

Sometimes I think that Ben looks tormented. Maybe that was why he walked with a little stoop. Some parishioners thought the poor posture came from practised piteous humility, or even that he might be trying to take attention from his obvious youth and looks to be a rightful vicar of the Church, but maybe it came from a dark weight, the *knowing* of all the evil there was in the world and throughout man's time on earth: the martyrs, the torture and punishment of sinners, the forced conversions, as though he felt the agony of all those hundreds of millions who'd suffered in the name of 'God'.

Churches like St Margaret's weren't built at a time when religion was obsessed by things clean and comforting. Back then, 'God' was often sought for *on the edge*. Judaism, after all, was born in the wilderness of the desert, at the foot of a mountain, as a people cringed in terror; Christianity traced its origins to a man dying on the

cross, crying out in doubt and despair. Avoiding the darker dimension of the human soul meant a pilgrim only scratched the outer crust of one's inner world. Ben knew there was a kabbalistic concept called *yeridah lifney ha-aliyah*, 'descent before ascent'. For the mystics, a journey into the abyss is a sacred rite of passage, the furnace through which our destinies are forged. Back then, Christian and Islamic religion was more about pain, torment and torture, than holy lights and good wishes; religious persons were measured not by their achievements but for their suffering, and saints were honoured for the brutality of their exits.

Though a naturally private man, Ben had shown himself keen to muck in with village life. He could hold conversations with the men at the local about cricket, rugby or football; he proved to the farmers that he had learned a great deal about agriculture and took an active interest in keeping the school going. He wasn't married and never talked about his personal life. A few years ago a rumour went out that he might be gay, and that he and Trevor Hodgson were more than just friends, but Hodgson was married with three kids so the rumour died in the same summer it was birthed.

Mary knew that her husband Sidney had a soft spot for Ben Ridley, but it took Mary years to find out why. Apparently, Ridley's old man had served in the 7th Armoured Division, so had his grandfather, the latter in in the Desert Rats campaign. 'What a small world it is,' Mary said to her husband, when he imparted the news.

Ridley had taken to researching the history of Compton Tamor in his spare time so that he could better understand its inhabitants, and Mary had walked him around the cemetery, pointing out the grave cover found in the garden which dated from the eighth century, proving that the village and a place of worship was there long before the Norman conqueror set foot on English soil. Mary also pointed out that many of the graves had markers – symbolic designs indicating all kinds of things: family associations, superstitions, religion, social and economic status. In that way, the gravestones were history books with their own language: you just had to know how to read them. The vicar smiled at all that, but suddenly the smile was wiped off his face, for they suddenly came across the desecrated tombstone.

Ben Ridley had been at Grange Farm when Hannah had one of her 'episodes.' It had been twigged by the littlest of things, as was often the case. An Electric Board official came to read the electric metre. We had an arrangement with the man, where he could get the key and let himself in to read the meter. On this particular occasion, the official was confronted by Hannah inside the farmhouse; she screamed and shouted abuse at him, calling him the devil and Satan. The man was terrified and was grateful when Mary appeared, calmed Hannah down and took her away. Ridley had been in the kitchen with Mary when Hannah started screaming.

'I'm glad she didn't have a gun in her hand,' he remarked, when Mary returned downstairs.

'So am I,' said Mary. 'She's a crack shot.'

'Maybe if she started coming to church again Mary...?'

Mary smiled at the slightly red-faced man. 'I'm afraid that might have the reverse effect.'

'God has infinite patience.'

'It's not God who is the problem here, vicar. The same thing happened not long ago with the poor postman, Arthur Clegg. At least she settled down quite quickly; sometimes she only calms down when Sidney is around.'

'Not Peter?'

Mary snorted. 'Peter isn't able to look after Peter right now. Honestly, I don't know which one I should worry about most. Sidney is very depressed about Peter: he keeps promising to lift his act, to turn a new leaf, but he never does.'

The vicar looked like he could say a lot about the matter. His red lips twittered, but he consciously pressed them tightly together. 'I guess we all develop at different paces.'

'Sidney was saying that about Peter twenty years ago. *Work as if everything depends on you, and pray as if everything depends on God.*'

'St Augustine,' intoned the vicar.

'Peter does neither,' said Mary. 'Do you know what he said to me the other day, Ben? 'The family that prays together... is brainwashing their children!' I told him that he had just blasphemed; he replied that he had just quoted Albert Einstein.'

Mary looked out the window. From here she could see the rear of the farm, the fields that only months ago had been yellow-white with the ripened rape. She always loved that sight, when the rape was ripened to the colour of parchment, when the farm became a place of action and hard work; yet she was also aware that there was a constant fight going on beneath the beauty – a fight of nature, involving pests, pollen beetles, slugs, and the weapons employed by farmers to combat them, a never-ending war in those beautiful yellow fields, where one side won only if the other side lost. Her gaze moved to the various outbuildings, including the green shed next to which Peter always parked his car. Autumn had come in earnest this week; dead leaves crinkling underfoot, plucked by the swirling wind from the trees in the yard. Everything looked impossibly dry and fragile and desperate for rain. Back in the times of Tilley, they would have contemplated sacrifices to appease those sadistic weather gods. This summer's drought had been worse than 1976 and 2006 put together. One of the kitchen windows was open, and the familiar smell of the farm filled the room: animals, manure, compost, grain by-products, the smell of diesel too from the machinery which Peter routinely used. Beyond the farm, Dead Man's Hill rose in the distant countryside. Her eyes narrowed. There was a man up there. Her eyes narrowed further. 'Who is that?'

Ben Ridley peered over her shoulder. 'Too far away for me to say, I'm afraid. I can barely make out the oak.'

'He looks familiar, somehow.'

'Sorry,' said the vicar. 'Years of late-night sermon writing has taken its toll. I can't recognise him without my glasses.'

'He's just standing there,' insisted Mary, 'looking down at us. I wonder how long he's been there.'

'Could be a day-tripper. Heard about the Tilley execution, perhaps. I imagine it still draws the odd morbid pilgrim.'

That final Tuesday evening, at the weekly meeting at the vicarage, Mary found the vicar in a distracted mood. He rather skipped through affairs, eager not to get bogged down, and Mary noticed that he drank all the water in his bottle and had to refill it. Congregation numbers had been steady, and Ben had been working with some of the big businesses in nearby towns to raise funds for the repair and upkeep of St Margaret's and the school; he had even given an interview with a local journalist making the broader community asking for support. But Mary didn't think any of that was the reason Ben Ridley looked uncomfortable.

It was the curse. The curse weekend was only days away. Five centuries ago there had once been an abbey only a stone's throw away – one of the most beautiful abbeys in

England... so beautiful that Henry VIII was jealous of it and wanted to appropriate its treasures and wealth, even the stones itself. Richard Tilley, the abbot, had stood up for his faith, and died horribly. And all these years later, his memory seemed to weigh over Compton Tabor, and Mary was sure it always would.

When the meeting ended, Mary collected her belongings, said goodbye to the other ladies in the car park, but didn't hurry home. She wanted to check the vicar was okay. She headed back into the church, which seemed unusually dark, the centuries-old oak beams and pews almost black in colour. She found him kneeling before the statue of the Madonna by the altar. Ben had once told her that the image brought peace to his soul, and it also brought gratitude; and when one was genuinely thankful, fear could not exist.

Some people in the village didn't like the statue very much: the blank stone eyes were disturbing because they were blind, and the stone lips bore the slightest trace of a benevolent smile, which Sidney sometimes whispered in her ear was almost a smirk. Meanwhile, the sculptured hands stretched downwards, palms outwards, symbolic of the Madonna's acceptance of all who stood before her. Mary noticed now – or perhaps it was a trick of the light – that the statue appeared mildly discoloured. She looked again at the Madonna's blank eyes and strange smile and was suddenly reminded of the faces that mad painter, Eric Van Dorn, would hide in his paintings.

'Are you alright Ben?' she asked.

The kneeling vicar did not seem to hear her, but then he gave a brief, horse-like shake of his head, and gazed up at her with troubled sea-blue eyes. 'Mary? Yes, I'm – alright.'

'You don't look it.'

He tried to smile. 'It's just - ... There's a feeling in the air. I can't explain it.' He blinked, and now a weak smile indeed appeared on his handsome face. 'Go home and be safe, Mary. And God bless you.'

'God bless you, Ben.'

Early that Saturday evening, Mary had only just crawled into bed in her nightgown when the shot rang out. Though it sounded quite close, it didn't frighten her, because Peter, like many in the area, would always reach for a gun if a rabbit was spotted. Then Mary remembered that Peter had gone away for the weekend. Maybe Hannah had gone out and shot at something. Mary reached for her Bible and turned to the Book of Luke. It was her favourite Book in the New Testament. Chapter 14 was her favourite chapter. *And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees –*

Another shot rang out. As loud, and as close, as the earlier shot.

This second shot was definitely from somewhere nearby on the farm, thought Mary. Perhaps it was Hannah, or maybe Sidney had come home from his farmer's meeting earlier than she'd anticipated. Maybe he'd pulled up on the drive and seen something. She hoped it was Sidney. This was the curse weekend, and she wanted him safe and sound with her. Soon, she told herself, soon he would come bounding up the stairs – *He that has ears to hear, let him hear.*

Mary snuggled down into her puffy pillow, pulling the sheet slightly higher over her breasts, and turned the page. She thought she heard the kitchen door opening downstairs. *Must be Sidney, safe and sound.* Mary said a silent thankful prayer and smiled to herself.

Just as demagogues lead their well-intentioned followers
into tragedy, so the jungle inevitable reclaims its own.
Jeff Gunn

I'm no conspiracy theorist, but it was the Chinese Government that caused me to find the bodies! I work for Pinnington's in Harrington; we sell mostly agricultural equipment – from combines to tractors to rid-on mowers. Sidney Abbot has been coming to our shop for thirty years. Now and then, other members of his family popped in to pick something up, but it was mostly Sidney. I knew all the Abbots. They were good people. I worked on the farm this summer, though it was a difficult harvest, given the freakish weather.

Well, Thomas Pinnington is still struggling. Supply-chain shortages; businesses going under and unable to pay their accounts – all thanks to that 'China Virus'. Yeah, remember all that: the whole world under assault supposedly because of a Chinaman eating an infected bat! Yeah, sure, I believe it. I was due to get married this summer but we put it off; Lucy didn't want the occasion to be ruined because she heard rumours of another outbreak, and she thought the government might suddenly impose restrictions again, and only allowed a handful of guests to be present. So we put it off. Plus Lucy lost her own job at the café and restaurant, which didn't help. She's thinking of doing child-care at one of the places in Harrington, or further afield. Well, because of all that, I headed to the farm that Tuesday afternoon. Yeah, October 9. I don't know the exact time; you tell me that the boy, Adam O'Donnell showed up around 3 p.m., having raced over to the farm from the school. I didn't see anybody on the drive over; it was no longer pissing down, but there was water everywhere after that sudden deluge – I've never seen anything like it; I didn't even know if my Escort would make it through those dips in the Little Compton Road, but I managed to, somehow. I was actually thinking through what I was going to say to Sidney. I wanted, firstly, to see if I could pick up work; I didn't like my chances; men around here are really struggling and the harvest has come and gone, so I didn't think he'd have any work for me. If that failed I was thinking of asking him for a loan – maybe next year's harvest income in advance. That's what I was thinking about.

I didn't drive into the farm itself. I parked on Little Compton Road and walked to the farmhouse. It had bucketed down for a day and a half, but there was a break in the weather, though the sky looked black as a dog's guts. There were puddles everywhere, lots of leaves all over the place, one tree had come down in a field and several branches had fallen. I can see it all in my head now.

I knew that some of the outbuildings were poorly guttered. They'd be lots of work I could do at the farm and Sidney was getting on now; Peter was too lazy to help. I just hoped Sidney was in a good mood; I know he's pretty tight with his pounds and pence. Don't get me wrong: he looked after his workers, always did the right thing by people, but he was a farmer at heart: he hated parting with money.

The farmhouse was dark and looked eerie. I mean that. Only in a country this old, could anything feel so ominous. The stone-work looked strangely grey, water dripped over one overfilled gutter, and I heard other drips going down the drainpipes – like tears they were. The windows were like vacant eyes. Everything looked bleak and sad and rundown. I'd worked at the farm only a couple of months earlier and I hadn't seen

it like that. Back then the sun was shining, the rape was in the field, there was colour – and life!

For a moment, I almost felt that something was trying to speak to me. I stood there, holding my breath. For a moment, the wind stopped blowing, everything went still, and I almost imagined the house smirking at me, refusing to let go of its secrets. Then the wind picked up again.

You don't know what it's done to me – being the one who found them. I haven't slept properly since. I hardly taste my food. Lucy keeps banging away that I need to see someone about it. People look at me differently now. I know Mike Styles has been saying things about me. 'Something about Teddy Butler's story doesn't ring right,' he said to Trevor Hodgson; I know that because Trev is a good, sensitive guy and was really upset about it and said so to Styles. Told Styles to be careful what he said. Even Thomas Pinnington wanted to know exactly why I headed out to the Abbot farm *that* afternoon. 'To look for work,' I told him, 'to tide me over until things get back to normal.' His eyes were sceptical. 'Couldn't phone him, Ted?' he asked. I was too flummoxed to answer straightaway. Sidney wouldn't have appreciated a phone call; if I was serious about picking up work it needed to be done face to face. That's the sort of man Sidney was. I spluttered out my explanation, feeling myself growing red in the face. 'Pissing down with rain and you head out like that,' continued Pinnington. I couldn't believe it: I'd worked for Thomas for ten years and here he was grilling me. 'There'd been a break in the weather,' I told him. That journalist from Collingwood, Jaffa Cruz – he called me wanting me to tell him my story; I told him to take a leap, but he said that I should tell my side of the story, that it was in my best interest to do so. Cheeky shit. I haven't done anything wrong but I'm being victimised. It's not fair. I mean, someone had to find them, right? Even Lucy got in on the act. 'There wasn't any other reason you went to the farm, was there?' I stared at her. 'What do you mean Luce?' She looked uncomfortable; she has this characteristic way of tilting her head to one side and screwing up her face a little when she's stressed. 'Well, I was just wondering whether you might have heard something.' 'Like what?' 'Like the Abbot farm being unusually quiet; or that something wasn't right down there.' I shook my head. I hadn't heard anything, I told her. I just wanted to earn some money. The Chinese Communist Party has fucked up my life, I swear it.

I didn't knock on the front door; I never would. I went round the back and called out 'Hello Sidney!', but got no reply. Usually the dog would come running, or start barking in the house, but it didn't. I saw that his Defender Land Rover was where he often parked it, by one of the sheds nearest the kitchen door. The old farmer loved his vehicle, bemoaning that they didn't make cars like them anymore. I called out again. I could hear the animals whining in the stables. I noticed that Sidney and Peter's car was there; I walked over to where Peter had parked his car and for some reason felt the bonnet: it was stone cold. I thought I smelled something bad, and I opened the green shed there; it smelled extra bad inside but I didn't see anything unusual; just lots of straw and hay. A dead animal, I thought. During the harvest, the shed was used to store produce: it's important to keep oilseed rape in tip-top condition and prevent spoilage from fungi and mites; now all the rape had been sold on, the space was filled with a dozen or so haystacks and livestock feed.

I checked the barn where the combine and equipment was kept; this was chain shut, but you could slide the door open a little and I did that, just to check a robbery hadn't taken place. But everything looked normal. 'Sidney!'

I looked at the farmhouse. I can't explain how lifeless it looked. No lights were on. 'Hello Sidney!' No one came to the windows. I could feel myself getting worked up.

It had only just stopped raining, and more was on the way: there was no reason for the Abbots to be anywhere but home. It was so dark, and getting darker by the second. Anyone in that house would have put a light on. And Sidney, with a break in the weather, would have come out to check the animals, check what damage had been done to the property from the deluge.

I went to the main storage shed – the one closest to the farmhouse... and that's when I found them. Sidney was, well, he was mangled a bit, his face caked with dry blood, and it was clear he had been both shot in the head, his nose, his jaw, his left eye badly closed, one arm twisted under his torso; it took me ten or fifteen seconds to digest the sight, to know what I was looking at. You see in movies how people scream instantly, but it wasn't like that. I really had to process the horror. And then I saw Hannah. At first I thought her head was missing, but it was just the way she was lying, and her black blood-soaked hair had fallen across her face. They'd both been murdered. I could see that. I also saw her wrists: someone had bound her up, though the cords were missing. 'Jesus help me!' I remember saying that to myself. I really wanted Jesus to help me; I couldn't think of anyone else who could.

It didn't occur to me at the time that the killer might still be there. Nor did I think of reaching for my mobile. Didn't even think those thoughts. That troublemaker Theo Junkaris – I know at the White Hart pub, was telling people it was suspicious that I didn't call the police, didn't worry that the killer might be waiting for me in the house. What a piece of shit he is! All I thought about was Mary and Hannah. So I raced to the house. Like I said in my statement: the kitchen door was open. Yes, I flicked off my muddy boots out of habit – no other reason. I called out their names, but everything was cold and dark and silent. I went into the living room. That's where I found Crispy, the dog, hiding at the back of the sofa, whimpering.

'Hey boy,' I said as softly as I could, but my voice was trembling. That was the first time I felt real fear – the need of self-preservation. I reached for the fire poker and headed up stairs. I was later told that the maid was dead in that room behind the main sofa, but I didn't even see her. I must have walked within about two yards of where the poor woman lay and *I didn't even see her*. Nothing was amiss in the room, right? No signs they'd been a fight, nothing was disturbed?

The farmhouse has two different staircases, and I wasn't sure that I'd headed up the right one to the bedrooms. When I reached the landing, I went into the first room, flicking on the light. I cannot remember if any of the doors were shut or open. Sounds silly, but I just can't recall. Maybe it had something to do with what the doctor later gave me: he prescribed Valium and something else to help me deal with the shock, and maybe those things affected my memory. Everything that happened was just so terrifying: a little boy shot in the head while he slept, Mary slumped by the door, a blood trail from the bed to where she finally fell. I can't explain what it was like, seeing that. Then I heard something – someone on the gravel outside, a voice maybe. I raced downstairs, no idea who it might be, the fire poker in my hand. When I reached the kitchen I heard a boy's voice yelling out '*Hello, anyone there? Nick?*' I put the fire poker on the kitchen bench and headed out. It was little Adam O'Donnell. He was pushing his bike around, looking for someone. 'Don't go in the house!' I yelled, or something like that. Then I thought of the bodies in the shed. 'You need to ride home Adam. Now! Something bad has happened.'

He just stared at me. But a primal fear came into his eyes. I guess I terrified him, because I must have looked so worked up. I was sucking in breath and feeling nauseous and really scared myself now. But I needed to get him away from the farm.

That was the thing. I knew that if he saw those bodies, he would never be able to forget that image for the rest of his life.

'Is Nick okay? Where's Peter?'

I had no idea how to answer either question. Then I remembered that bad smell in the shed next to Peter's car... and I figured I knew where Peter was. I reached for my mobile phone – only to realise that I'd left it in my car on Little Compton Road. I could feel my brain starting to fry.

'Where's Nick?' Adam pressed.

I didn't want to snap at the kid. He was only looking out for his mate. 'Listen Adam, I need you to do something important. Ride home, as fast as you can. Tell your Mum and Dad something really bad has happened here, and to stay in the house –'

He was backing away from me. *'Why - ?'*

'Just do it!' I yelled.

He backed away some more, his eyes darting all over the place. *'Is it the curse?'*

'Go! Now!' I knew I was screaming at him. I had no choice. He finally turned his bike round, almost toppled over as he mounted, then began pumping the pedals, looking back at me as he rounded the bend, before racing out of view.

I headed back to the shed where I'd smelt that awful smell. I found Peter under three or four hay barrels. I'm not doctor, but I could tell he'd been dead a long time. Even with the recent downpour, the weather had stayed warm, and the decomp reek was intense: my eyes watered and blurred from it.

Dead. They were all dead! I ran as fast as I could to my car and pulled out my mobile. Thankfully the blasted thing was charged, and I called the police.

'Oh Teddy. Why didn't you have the phone on you?'

That was the first question Lucy asked me, when I told her the story. I couldn't believe it. All those innocent people, dead at the farmhouse, and all Lucy asked was why I hadn't taken my mobile phone with me when I went to speak with Sidney. I would have a lot of explaining to do to the police, Lucy said. 'Why?' I asked. I was dumbfounded. She looked me up and down: 'They're always suspicious of the person who finds the bodies!' Then she said, 'Poor Peter.' She didn't mention any of the other victims by name, only *his* name, and that pissed me off. *Poor Peter*. I always knew she had a real soft spot for Peter Abbot; I'd sometimes thought she wouldn't want to marry me because she preferred him. Some people even said they'd had a fling together once, but I never believed that. There are lots of foul-minded people in these parts, but then again, maybe I was blinded by my love for her. I'd do anything for Luce, right? *Poor Peter*.

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not
become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss,
the abyss will gaze back into you
Frederick Nietzsche

As Murdoch walked the blackened streets, he recalled once seeing a machine that tumbled dull rocks until they became polished gemstones. The inside of his head felt like that tonight. Lots of jumbled thoughts banging into each other, confused and indistinguishable one from the other. He knew from past experience that the late-night walk would do little to knock those thoughts into sense, but it might help prevent the thoughts from spiralling out of control and making things worse.

For years he'd done this. Walking through the ugliest, most despairing parts of the town. Whenever sleep slipped from his grasp, when his eyes were so droopy that he could no longer read about someone else's evil or misery, when things got too much, he walked. Alone, into the darkness. Not looking for anything, and knowing he wasn't likely to find anything.

Along the river embankment, tall towers and apartment blocks to one side, filthy putrid water the other. The smell of filth in his nostrils. Above him, the dark empyrean was dotted with rather dull-looking stars and a malevolent full moon.

Past the 24/7 Asda and across the main drag. Darborough didn't really have a red-light district, but it had its share of whores and pimps, dopers and sharks, the homeless and unwanted. A lot of them knew his face by now. Sometimes he held stares when he knew he shouldn't. Looking into windows, streets and alleys and back lanes. Places where nothing good ever happened. The more people he passed, the more misery he felt. The more drug deals he saw. Different accents and tongues. Thinking through people that had wronged him; villains he'd locked up, and not always by the book.

The newspapers and media were talking about the massacre at the farm, and he was starting to feel like a fall guy.

He paused on the edge of a public park. Along with the usual revellers and villains, he spied one obnoxious rough sleeper on a park bench getting into his cheap booze; another was under a shrub, using newspapers as a makeshift blanket; there were zoned-out junkies with blank eyes. Behind him a couple of mini-buses passed by – likely ferrying immigrant cleaners to the big office towers for their nightly cleaning rounds. He wondered who was exploiting who.

He headed past the railway station, standing back in the shadow as a police car crawled by; Murdoch waited until the Panda had reached the T intersection and its taillights disappeared from view before continuing on. Past a hospital, a church, a cemetery. In a patch of wasteland he saw a handful of people standing round a makeshift fire. He slowed, eyeing them: a knot of men huddled round low flame, using their bodies to stop the wind putting it out. Fire still held us, thought Murdoch; not much had changed since Hesiod put down the first-known account of Prometheus nearly 3000 years ago. The thought took Murdoch's mind to the tattoo they'd found on Hannah's lower back, a weird symbolic image he'd finally identified as representing the Greek myth of Persephone: the daughter of the earth goddess, Demeter. One day she was seized by Hades and taken to the underworld. She was rescued, but not before she had eaten six seeds of a pomegranate. So for six months of

the year she had to return to Hades. Which is why we have winter. Perhaps Hannah saw herself as a prisoner? Trapped in hell?

Murdoch could have kept walking, but he decided to head over to the group hunched around the fire. They'd staggered themselves in a large semi-circle, so they could see all around themselves. As he approached, one of the men spotted Murdoch and nudged the guy beside him. The low mutter of conversation suddenly ended and several heads turned his way, looking him up and down, looking at the way he kept his hands in his jacket pockets. They stayed silent as he worked his way to be adjacent to the flames. He looked into the faces of the men; they looked gaunt, troubled as he was, and nervous too. He wondered if any of them recognised. None of them looked violent in the flickering light, but then, no one on the village of Compton Tamor looked dangerous in daylight.

So far forensic had pulled some unidentified DNA and fingerprints from the scene, but that didn't mean a great deal; the Abbots may not have received many visitors in a social context, but throughout the year, plenty of people went out to the farm, to collect things, to help at busy times, to pick up produce or to drop things off.

His mind kept coming back to Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper. Had he somehow survived Basra and made his way home, only to discover that his wife had kept her pregnancy silent from him, and that the entire Abbot family that had discarded him the moment he went missing? Did he snap – or had he snapped already?

Murdoch looked briefly into every face around the fire, their gauntness and despair made worse by the way the flickering firelight danced on their weathered and marked faces. These were long-term rough sleepers, he thought; either rejected from society, or maybe they were the ones who rejected the world. Perhaps Daniel Tapper, suffering PTSD, had lived among them; perhaps he'd done so for years without even knowing who he was until he suddenly stood on Dead Man's Hill and looked down at Grange Farm and it all came back to him.

Ridiculous, thought Murdoch, then realised he'd said the word aloud. Every man around the fire looked at him. He waited another minute, staring into the dancing flames, then glanced once again into each face before turning and walking away, not once looking back.

By the time he neared his bungalow on Darborough Road, he became aware of the deep fatigue in his system. It was surely in his marrow now, in every cell. He needed to crawl into bed and sleep, and tomorrow, he told himself, he'd find a way to move closer to the killer of those six people on the Abbot farm.

He unlocked the front door and stepped inside the darkened hall. He didn't click on the lights, and traipsed down the corridor to the two bedrooms at the back. His was on the right. He knew he was only moments away from falling facedown on his unmade bed, moments from losing consciousness for a few hours – just enough to get him through the next day shift. His glance went to the sliver of light shining beneath the guest bedroom door and he felt an unexpected bolt of adrenaline course through his veins. *Ridiculous*, he said, and pushed open his bedroom door, slamming it shut behind him.

*

Murdoch, Fox, and several members of the Murder Squad arrived at Compton Tamor a little before 8 p.m. for the village meeting arranged at the school hall. Superintendent Sol Butcher had wanted to show his stripes, and he'd sat in the back seat of the police car as Murdoch drove past Grange Farm. All that was visible from

the Little Compton Road was hedge, some bracken, and several spindly leafless trees. They saw nothing of Top Farm, owned by the Claxtons, and just a brief flash of the empty monstrosity built on a high point of land overlooking the Claxton farm, another flash, this time the stone cottage owned by Gilbert Gleeson, the handyman father of the maid Amy, and then, through tree stumps and more hedge, a partial view of the ugly Junkaris farm, and that was it. Another mile and they'd be at St Margaret's, where officers had set up the adjoining school hall to host the event.

Murdoch caught a glimpse of Butcher's reaction in the rear-view mirror and smirked to himself. *Yes, mighty Sol, it's another world, isn't it?* Like they'd left 21st century England and entered a bad dream, or a movie set where the director was trying to portray what a medieval Armageddon might be like.

Murdoch slowed as he neared St Margaret's. Several orange witches hats had been placed with police signs along the meandering stone path which led up to both the church and the school, but he didn't pull into the car park. There was enough artificial lighting out there to enable them to see the top of the St Margaret's spire, pointing like a finger to the heavens. It was a clear night, with only the most delicate skeins of cloud drifting across the thin sickle of the new moon. He was surprised by the disappointing vista, expecting more stars would be visible as they were far away from the light pollution of the city. And beyond St Margaret's stood the silent and ominous Haxley Wood.

He continued on, slowly, down the High Street, which consisted of a chemist, a rural produce store which doubled as a garage, Mike Style's shop, and not much else. A roundabout now stood where the village green once existed, the place where they would give bread to the poor before Henry VIII's regime stopped such charitable communal practices. A signpost pointing left said Collingwood; a signpost pointing right said Harrington. Murdoch completed a 360-degree turn, bringing into view as he did so the cottage owned by the O'Donnell family and Ted Butler's place, from which a single light emanated.

There wasn't a soul to be seen. Perhaps they had already gathered at the hall, or maybe none of them had. More than once Murdoch had chosen to walk around the village after nightfall, and he was yet to come across anyone out on the streets. It was as though the inhabitants didn't trust the dark, and what might be out there. Often when tragedies like this happened in small communities, the people came together; wives gathered in corners, the menfolk might form a group and patrol at night to reassure the vulnerable; lights would be turned on, dogs would growl. Murdoch saw no one and heard nothing. Compton Tamor resembled a medieval village under attack from the Black Death. *What was wrong with these people? Where were they all?* Murdoch had once read about the infamous – and to some, debunked – School of Night, the strange group of Elizabethan free-thinkers and intellectual illuminati who'd met secretly after dark in order to share their dangerous secrets: legend had it that these men honoured the night, with their dark knowledge and heretical musings. Out here, the night was different to the town or the city; Murdoch had felt that on his walks, even if he hadn't been able to explain it.

'I hope this isn't a complete waste of time, John,' said Butcher when they pulled into the car park.

'It's good PR,' replied Murdoch. 'No one can say we're not being proactive or interacting with the community.'

'True.'

Murdoch knew those Butcher loved catchwords like 'pro-active' and 'interaction'. Better than, 'totally fucking clueless and desperately clutching at straws.'

Murdoch said, 'Murder is like charity: it usually begins at home. The problem here is that everyone in that home, the entire family, is dead.'

'Have ballistics come through yet?'

'No final report. Not that I think it will help us.'

It appeared that all bullets fired at the farm came from the Remington 22 Rifle semi-automatic kept in the Abbot gun cupboard. The gun cupboard was in a downstairs room, not easy to find. It was yet another suggestion the killer knew in advance where his preferred weapon would be, along with the ammunition; it also suggested he was smart, because what better way to kill a trail than use a gun belonging to the victim? DI Fox would no doubt put it down to more dumb luck; she would point out that Peter, killed on the Thursday evening, had not been shot; Sidney was the first to be shot, early Saturday evening, so maybe the killer had ingratiated himself into the household for the interim 48 hours and come across the gun cupboard that way. Needless to say, the gun was wiped clean before being calmly put back in its usual place.

With the assistance of Trevor Hodgson and Ben Ridley, Murdoch made the decision to gather all the inhabitants of Compton Tamor in the old hall of the local school, which adjoined St Margaret's church. The vicar and teacher had liaised with several uniforms to work the logistics, and when Murdoch entered the Victorian hall, he was impressed that more than one hundred and twenty men, women and children were present, including a decent number from nearby hamlets and villages. Murdoch hoped that at least some of them had come from a genuine desire to help rather than morbid curiosity. Speaking one-on-one via the usual protocols just wasn't working; if nothing else, at least it was an act of initiative in an otherwise stalled inquiry.

The hall was humming quietly when Murdoch and Fox walked in, and quickly fell silent. Murdoch couldn't pick the vibe. It was as though everybody understood that something very bad had happened, and they were part of it.

And then there were the faces themselves: Oriel and Anne Claxton, the estranged relatives of the Abbots; Gilbert Gleeson, the father of the murdered maid; the three Junkaris men, looking aggro, Damon in a chequered Kempton shirt, the younger Theo in a dark grey hoodie, both peering malevolently at Murdoch; Mike Styles the shop owner whose eyes shone like a debutante at the ball; Teddy Butler, who found the bodies; the O'Donnell family, whose lad Adam had been best friends with Nicholas; Jaffa Cruz, the industrious journalist from Collingwood; the old lady who'd stood on Dead Man's Hill and seen the killer but couldn't identify him; the postman, Arthur Clegg.

Murdoch kept his face expressionless as he walked up to the small stage, knowing every eye was on him, including that of Superintendent Sol Butcher, who stood against one wall, arms folded. DI Fox was beside her superior officer, looking at the assembled crowd, doubtless wondering whether the killer was among them. Maybe she was also looking for the local witch, Flora Tranter to make an appearance.

The vicar Ben Ridley made the final adjustment to the height of the microphone, then rather flamboyantly gestured for Murdoch that all was ready. Murdoch glanced once at Sol Butcher, who didn't respond, then looked out over the sea of heads. 'May I have your attention please? There are a few things I need to say.' The microphone was turned up loud, so he was able to talk softly, calmly, as though he was directing his words to an individual, not a group. Every face was turned his way, and for a moment he almost went nauseous, as though he was looking at a Van Dorn painting where all the little faces had come to life. 'I'd like to thank you all for coming down. The purpose of tonight is to try and find a spark. We've gathered much fuel, if you

like that analogy – a lot of data – but we are missing a key element, perhaps even several key elements.

‘As you can see, we have many police officers present, and at the far end of the hall, we’ve set up a row of tables. What we want to do is a mass sweep. We want to take statements from all of you, focusing primarily – but not exclusively – on the stretch time this brutal crime took place, in the hope that the pieces of information you give us can be put together and lead us to the killer. I know that many of you have already fielded questions and given statements, but we have put together a more specific questionnaire, and we need each and every one of you to cooperate with our enquiries.’

Murdoch was relieved that the message and words came across as he’d mentally rehearsed on the drive over. He had no idea how the people were taking it, but he had a sense they weren’t impressed, as if there was something lacking in his performance. ‘We are in a rural location, as you know; Compton Tamor and the surrounding hamlets and villages are very spread out; by bringing you together like this, we’re hoping to feed all of your accumulated knowledge into the system, hoping we can put the pieces together quicker and more efficiently than would otherwise be possible.’ He paused for effect, then said: ‘I also wanted to look each of you in the face and assure you that we are working around the clock to bring this killer to justice, and we *will* do that. But we need help. Cases like this are often solved by little things, by something that was seen or overheard, by a piece of knowledge someone possesses. We can’t discount anything at the moment. I encourage you to come forward and tell us all you know, even if you don’t think it is particularly important or relevant. This is a time when there are no stupid questions. Also, rest assured that we’re not here to worry about little matters of law-breaking, local scandals, in-fighting, whose sleeping with who – unless those things have a bearing on the case, so please offer all you can that may be of relevance to the death of these six innocent people.’

Another pause. Murdoch thought he was doing well, but still there was an air of expectancy. He realised what it was; what the villagers wanted to hear. He thought about that old lady who’d stood on Dead Man’s Hill and looked down on the killer; she had not described him as a ‘man’, but a ‘shape’. She’d seen a shape standing there, apparently staring back at her. A shape. A barely human form. That’s what *The Fall River Globe* wrote about ‘THE THING That Butchered the Bordens Still at Large.’ Not a person, but a thing. ‘I know a lot of you believe that past events live on in this village and that things like curses are very real phenomena...’

It was like he’d touched a collective raw nerve with those words. Eyes flashed, lips twittered, heads bobbed. He had their attention now. There were one or two appreciative murmurs. They were like one big dysfunctional family; it was as though some kind of energy was holding them together. Murdoch thought of Christian martyrs about to enter the arena to face certain death; young children about to head into a haunted forest; an awed sailor seeing a mighty wave about to hit.

‘Look, it’s not my job to judge or mock any belief system entrenched in any community, only unless it interferes with our current investigation. Right now, we’re keeping a *very* open mind. All we ask is that you people share your thoughts with us; no one is here to judge you but to work *with* you. We need your help.’

Murdoch’s attention was drawn to a man standing against one wall, sinewy arms folded across his chest; he had a crew-cut and hard features and looked familiar. Murdoch realised it was the ex-soldier he’d spoken to at the White Hart pub, who’d served with Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper overseas.

‘Finally,’ said Murdoch, ‘I know it may be a bit late for saying this, but try not to talk to each other about what you may have seen, or what someone else thinks they saw. Your statement needs to be *yours*, and yours alone. We’ll sift it over, and if we need further information, we’ll come and find you.’ He paused one last time, then said, ‘Okay, we better get started.’

The process took two hours. Murdoch dreaded to think how many trees were felled to deal with the paperwork, or how ugly the department’s overtime budget was looking right now. One by one people moved forward to the waiting officers, rather like people at a bank – depositing their information, offering their opinions, many times asking questions of their own. Only occasionally did anyone approach Murdoch himself, except for the vicar who offered him refreshments, the postman who asked, ‘Do you really have no idea who did this?’ and Jaffa Cruz, who wanted a juicy quote for his following day’s article but knew he wouldn’t get one.

‘Come on Murdoch: I’m being fair to you boys and girls on this one, but we know how this is going to go if you don’t come up with something soon.’

‘That’s why I’m not talking to you.’

‘Some of the locals *are* talking to me. They want to know why you didn’t get the firearms sniffer dogs out to smell every male in the area. Those dogs are trained to sniff out explosives, firearms or signs that a person had recently handled a firearm, right?’

Murdoch wondered whether any local had really spoken to the journalist. ‘That’s the thing, Jaffa: these days, the average Brit has consumed 10,000 fictional murders by age of 18, they all think they know how a criminal investigation works. They don’t, in fact. When it comes to the dogs, too much time had elapsed; most of the victims were dead more than 48 hours by the time they were found. The killer almost certainly wore gloves. Moreover, almost every man in this village owns a gun and has reason to shoot it off. Any other bright ideas?’

The other man grinned. ‘Anything to say on whether Peter Abbot was involved in drug dealing?’

‘We have no evidence he was.’

‘And Hannah? She *was* schizophrenic, wasn’t she?’

Murdoch just stared at him. ‘Do you have anything useful to add to the inquiry, arsehole?’

Cruz chuckled. He thrived on antagonism. ‘Scared I’m going to solve it before you do?’ He walked away before Murdoch could reply, which was just as well.

A young woman, perhaps thirty years of age and dressed in black from head to toe, and who’d made the voyage from one of the hamlets east of the Claxton’s Top Farm, approached Murdoch and asked him if he’d found out anything about Daniel Tapper, or any of the men who’d served with him during that last patrol in Basra. ‘We’re dealing with MoD right now,’ he replied. The woman rolled her eyes and went on a monologue about the evils of the British Army, and how a crazed soldier fitted the bill for the murders. What most caught Murdoch’s attention was not anything the woman said, but her face; it was almost heart-shaped, the jaw pointy and the cheek bones prominent: he had seen similar features on other people in the Compton Tamor. He wondered just how much inter-breeding had taken place in these parts.

He wondered something else, too. One of the locals had said to Murdoch that ‘For as long as I can remember, I have felt a weight resting on me; a sadness that has always been part of me, but also feels as if it doesn’t belong to me. It’s something that’s in the air here, like an illness in the bloodstream of a living body. Lots of people have nightmares around here.’ After World War Two, a number of psychologists would

talk about what Sigmund Freud referred to as ‘emotional inheritance’ – the way trauma is passed down through multiple generations. Given the horrors of battle, the concentration camps, what happened in isolated communities, there came the view that the transmission of trauma can take place on different levels: via genetics, ties to parents, the atmosphere in which a person grows up, the stories that are told, and the stories that are left untold. Experts suggested that the core of a trauma lies in the inability to process terrible experiences, to overcome them by grieving, and to integrate them into their own stories. Unprocessed trauma is then passed on to the next generation, revealing itself in their dreams, feelings and behaviour. Had such a collective event happened in Compton Tamor, Murdoch wondered, back in 1542? A trauma which had never been cleansed?

He looked across the hall to Sol Butcher and Erin Fox: both of them were playing politicians with the crowd. There was plenty of concern in people’s eyes, and fear for what had happened, but Murdoch was yet to hear a single villager suggest that anyone else’s life was in danger, that the killer might strike again. He found that interesting. Perhaps there was a belief in the village that some bloodletting had been required, the same way that ancient people selected to be sacrifice accepted their fate without question.

Maybe the people who lived here knew their fellow villagers and simply could not reconcile the crimes committed at the Abbot farm with any one of them. There was truth in the elemental rule of psychology: *nemo fuit repente turpissimus* – ‘no one ever becomes evil all of a sudden.’ Dig deep, and you’ll find signs. A lot of these people were intermingled, with multi-generational ties. They would surely know if one of them was off the rails. Whatever happened at the Abbot Farm spoke of an implacable badness, and perhaps the villagers had determined that no one in Compton Tamor was *that* evil.

By 9.30 p.m. Murdoch had performed a brief touch-base with every officer on duty and was ready to write off the enterprise as a waste of time. Perhaps he’d spoken to the killer, perhaps not. He’d hoped the anonymous soldier from the White Hart pub would approach him, have a word, but he seemed to have left the hall not long after Murdoch gave his opening address. It seemed that no significant information had been attained, no fresh insights, putting him in an even bleaker mood than usual. Then Barbara Handsworth, the secretary at the Abbot farm, who’d reached the exit door, turned about face and walked his way. ‘You remember me?’ she asked.

Murdoch smiled. ‘Sure do, Barbara.’ 53 years old, plain but efficient, worked as the farm secretary for over a decade, devastated by what had happened, and possibly in love with Sidney Abbot, who almost certainly did not reciprocate her feelings. ‘How can I help you? Or better still, how can you help me?’

‘Well,’ she frowned. ‘It’s what you said before – about not discarding any piece of information, however inconsequential it may seem. I didn’t tell the young officer I spoke to tonight, nor in my first statement because frankly I’d forgotten all about it. But it’s been niggling away at me. I’m sure –’

‘Barbara,’ said Murdoch, seeing that she was getting quite worked up, ‘all I’ve got is appreciation for any information you can provide.’

That settled her down. She said in a direct manner: ‘Do you know anything about the burglary that took place at Grange Farm six months ago?’

Murdoch allowed his eyebrows to rise once again. ‘Burglary? That’s a new one to me.’

She nodded, drawing in breath. ‘You may recall that Sidney used to have an office-cum-den in the downstairs room, adjacent to the gun cupboard?’

Murdoch nodded.

‘He sometimes went down there when he needed some space – from people, from problems, from Mary’s constant religious chit-chat. That’s where he kept his private papers, employment records, information about the business, memorabilia about the time he served in the army. He kept some letters there, too, some private letters. Well, one Saturday afternoon he went off to a farmer’s meeting and when he got back, he later told me, he discovered that the room had been burgled. Not that he used the word ‘burgled’. Only that someone had gone through all his possessions.’

‘Was anything stolen?’

‘I asked him that, but he didn’t answer me. I don’t know if that meant he didn’t know or didn’t want me to know what was taken.’

Murdoch took all that in. There had been no report of any criminal behaviour associated with Grange Farm in the preceding twenty years. The last reported incident was two decades ago when Oriel Claxton apparently punched Sidney Abbot in the face regarding that disputed piece of land. ‘He never reported the incident to the police?’

‘God no. Sidney and Mary were not people to air their dirty linen in public.’

Murdoch held her stare. Waited.

She sighed. ‘Yes, Inspector Murdoch: Sidney suspected that Peter had rifled through his things looking for some spare cash. Like I said in my statement, it was so sad that Sidney had worked all his life and couldn’t even trust his own kids to take on the farm and the responsibility that came with it; he also had to deal with the fact that Peter collected fresh produce and handed it off to certain people for favours, such as free drink at the pub. And now Sidney had to deal with the possibility his son had ransacked his personal space and stolen some money from him.’ The farm secretary hesitated.

‘Go on Barbara: tell me everything.’

‘I don’t really have anything else to add,’ she insisted. ‘It’s just that Sidney was puzzled by what had happened. There was something about it that really troubled him – more than the idea of someone simply going through his things. It was from that moment on that Sidney grew increasingly depressed and started talking about the possibility that he might not live much longer.’

Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully.

Thou lovest evil more than good, and lying rather than to speak righteousness.

Thou loveth all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue.

God shall likewise destroy thee forever, he shall take thee away, and pluck thee out of thy dwelling place, and root thee out of the land of the living.

If you're going to do something, do it well. And leave something witchy.
Charles Manson

Theo had always been interested in other people's fantasies. But he'd never followed through on his own – not like Damon, who knew how people thought, why they did the things they did. Damon could read people. Once, in Liverpool, he'd had it off with a nun! Inside 'a house of God', he got the nun to masturbate him.

'You're so dark, Damon.'

'Dark as hell itself, bro.'

Damon always had stories like that to tell. Theo always believed him. The old man never had time for either of them, not even after their mother walked out. One day, without warning, she just got up and walked off the face of the earth. Not a word or sight of her since. Like Sven Jasper. One minute there; the next minute gone forever. He'd asked his Dad what happened to Mum, but his Dad's face screwed up in anger. 'You never ask that question again, right!'

Theo had recoiled in fear. When the old man lost it, he fucking lost it.

Their mother became a non-subject. Even Damon never spoke about her. After a few months, Theo stopped thinking about the woman who'd always been there for him. He told himself that he didn't need her anymore. He had Damon. Damon would protect him. Damon would see him right. Damon was blood.

Theo wanted to be like his older brother. To have the guts to do whatever he wanted. Theo headed out to the forest a couple of times, hung around St Margaret's. Maybe there would be a visiting nun, and he could get her to give him a hand-job. Damon would be proud of that. But it didn't have to be a nun. It didn't have to be a hand-job. He could flash an old dear – scare the fuck out of her! That was a start, at least. Theo was sure it was Trevor Hodgson who'd doxed him into the police; once Theo had looked up at the school and seen Hodgson eyeing him through the window.

One day Damon came into his bedroom. Theo was watching porn and he quickly clicked it off. But he wasn't quick enough. 'I know what you were doing, you sick little fucker,' said Damon, grinning like a hungry wolf.

'I wasn't doing anything.'

'Yeah, you were; I've looked at the History of your computer. I know exactly what you've been looking at night after night.'

Theo blushed.

'You need to turn some of those fantasies into reality bro,' said Damon, sitting down on the end of the bed. 'No point having them, otherwise.'

'I'm thinking about it.'

'Maybe you should pay the witch a visit? She's out there in that forest every day and night, all alone.'

Theo felt his blood run cold. He shook his head. 'No way. Not Haxley Wood!'

'Scared of the curse, are you?'

Damon started laughing, a static, guttural sounded. Like machine-gun fire.

Theo said, 'Flora's never done anything wrong by us.'

Damon thought about that. 'You're right. For once in your useless, miserable life, you're right. Not like Peter, hey?'

'Peter?'

‘Apparently he’s been going round selling some grass, and telling bad stories about us.’

‘No way.’

‘About you, especially.’

‘Hey! What’s he been saying?’

Damon looked out the small crack in the curtains, westward to Grange Farm.

‘Reckons you can’t get it up with a real woman.’

Theo felt his whole body going hot and red. As though there was too much blood in his body. ‘He’s an asshole.’

‘Yeah, he is. And so’s Hannah, right?’

‘*Her!* Stuck-up bitch.’

‘Thinks she’s a super-model, right?’

‘She ain’t *that* good.’

‘She thinks she is. A cock-tease, right? Always teasing men That’s what she does.’

‘The maid too. Amy. She’s a fucking whore as well, Damon.’

‘Ha! Now you’re getting it, bro. Maybe we should do something about our neighbours? Have some fun with them.’

Theo started laughing. It was great when Damon talked like this. Crazy stuff. Never knowing whether he was serious or not, but egging each other on, all the same. Never knowing how far Damon would push the envelope, how far they would go, together.

That was the thrill: doing crazy things, together.

All men harbor a beast in the depths of their heart
Michael Hibbard

Murdoch had a number of questions for the man in front of him. If the Abbot household had possessed a secret that sparked the tragedy, then Gilbert Gleeson was his best – perhaps only – chance of prying open the door. It was Gleeson's daughter, Amy, who'd worked at the farm for five years and had become a close confidante of the family, Hannah in particular. Villagers had told Murdoch that Gilbert and Amy got on well together; surely Amy would have told her father about the comings-and-goings inside the farmhouse?

Gilbert had identified his daughter's body at the morgue and had something of a breakdown afterwards. Doped up with tranquilisers by an over-enthusiastic GP, he'd only been able to mutter monosyllables at their last interview, a few days ago. Now they were at the man's cottage, which was a sixteenth century affair, set a little way back from the Little Compton Road, and sandwiched between the Claxton and Abbot farms. Centuries old, the cottage had been renovated much to the delight of the nearest bank's loan department, and was surprisingly large, with a living room, separate dining room, large kitchen, and separate family/reception room. There was a bedroom and ensuite downstairs, two double-bedrooms upstairs – which were unused, and an annex outback, which Amy had moved into a couple of years ago, keen for extra independence. The annoying aspect about this latter fact is that Gilbert didn't always know whether his 24-year-old daughter was home: she had her own kitchenette and didn't own a car – walking and bussing her way around. If they'd been under the same roofline, thought Murdoch, the father would have known his daughter had not come home from work that Monday evening. He would have headed out to the farm, and the bodies would have been found nearly a full day earlier than they were.

The two men sat in facing armchairs in the front living room, the host serving up two hot bowls of vegetable broth, which were watery and with an earthly taste. Murdoch had accepted the offer, thinking that Gleeson had suffered a lonely stretch of time, and was probably using the guest as an excuse to get some food down him. Bereaved family members often needed to go through the motion of normal acts and routine as if, by doing so, they could force events back into their usual course. The fifty-six year old looked only slightly better than he had the last time they'd spoken. Somewhere in the background classical music played, a penetrating sadness.

'When's the inquest?' Gleeson asked, after he'd taken away the food bowls and returned with two mugs of strong coffee.

'Cheers. The inquest? Sometime next week, I imagine. Coroners go slow when it's a case involving mass casualties.'

Gleeson looked into his dark brew. Black coffee, strong, no milk, no sugar. 'Sounds like we're talking about a war zone,' he said.

Murdoch pulled out his notebook, trying to formalise the occasion a little, reminding the grieving father that he needed information. 'Amy had worked at the Abbot farm for a number of years; I'm told she was happy there.'

'Yeah. I mean, they looked after her well, and I think she became indispensable to them. Started off as a kind of maid or home-help, but then she ended up being part of

the family. You know, she helped take care of Nicholas – what a bonnie boy he was. She was very close to Hannah.’

Murdoch had heard that – from everyone. Perhaps he imagined it, but the handyman seemed to tighten just a little in the silence that followed. *She was very close to Hannah.* How close? Hannah, ten years older than Amy, was flirty by nature, but she hadn’t had a serious relationship since she lost her husband, and Murdoch could find no evidence that Amy ever had a boyfriend. There were several photographs of Amy in the room, and a couple in the hall: she looked a happy sort, a little submissive perhaps: small, oval face, light brown hair, grey-green eyes with blond-brown lashes, an upturned nose lightly freckled, a pointy pixie chin under a narrow, timid mouth. She could have been fourteen rather than twenty-four. She was elf-like cute rather than glamorous; whereas Hannah was fiery and rebellious. A good match, perhaps. The writing was on the wall, that maybe the two women were in some kind of relationship, but Murdoch didn’t want to twig the man off by asking him directly. Were Hannah and Amy building themselves up to become a family and raise the boy as their own?

‘Amy wasn’t in a relationship was she?’ asked Murdoch at last, tone neutral.

‘No,’ said Gleeson. ‘There might have been the odd lad who caught her eye, but I think she wanted to make her own way in the world, know what I mean?’

Murdoch nodded, though he had no idea what the man meant. ‘She was never hassled or threatened by anyone?’

‘God no,’ replied Gleeson instantly. ‘I mean, I know the two Junkaris boys would sometimes egg her a bit, but I don’t think Amy ever felt threatened by them. I’d have put a stop to it, if that was the case. Gary Junkaris is all bark and no bite, and the younger son, Theo, is a perv, but I’ve never had reason to think they were dangerous.’ Peter Sutcliffe’s neighbours never thought he was dangerous either, thought Murdoch. ‘Were there any problems with Amy at the farm?’

Gleeson shook his head. ‘I think Sidney liked having her there during the day. Not that he ever paid her quite right. He was a good man, Sidney, but very tight with his money. He was the sort who showed his appreciation through trust rather than a pay rise. Amy kept an eye on both Mary and Hannah because they were both volatile, and I’ve been told that there was worry surrounding Nicholas. Not that Nicholas was being hurt or mistreated in any way, but Hannah could have episodes, and she could be forgetful.’

‘Yeah. I’ve heard that Hannah may have feared Nicholas might get taken away from her – if she stopped taking her medication or her mental health deteriorated.’

Gleeson didn’t visibly react. ‘It may have been mentioned, but Amy never indicated that such a thing was imminent. Over the last few months, she told me Hannah was doing okay – just the occasional flip-out when other people came to the farm unannounced. Hannah didn’t like that.’

The medical community hadn’t been helpful with the inquiry, but they provided enough material for Murdoch to draw his own conclusions, which matched the testimony of witnesses: Hannah was borderline schizophrenic, her state acerbated by her taut relationship with Mary; Hannah had been made aware from an early age that her birth prevented Mary from ever bearing more children; Mary had once called her the ‘devil’s child’, and also a ‘harlot’ when Mary caught her daughter having sex with a local boy. As Hannah saw her mother in a dark light, the opposite was true of Sidney; she idolised her father; no doubt her admiration for her ex-soldier father led her into the arms of Daniel Tapper, a young handsome soldier, who went off to fight and didn’t come back. ‘Did Amy ever mention Hannah’s husband?’

He frowned. Blinked. 'You mean Tapper? He died in Basra.'

That's what MoD were telling Murdoch. Daniel Tapper was a closed file. 'So, Amy never mentioned him?'

'Never,' said Gleeson.

'That doesn't surprise you?'

Gleeson shook his head. 'I never thought about it. He'd been dead a few years before Amy ever began work at the farm, remember.'

'Yeah, I get that. I just thought Hannah would want to talk about him, especially as Nicholas was a bright kid: he must have wanted to know about his father?'

Gleeson eyed the detective for a moment. He said, 'I think you need to understand: the Abbots weren't a demonstrative or affectionate family. Amy once told me that Hannah was never hugged by her parents. Not even when news came through that her husband was missing in action. They never touched each other, and whenever Hannah or Peter did anything wrong when they were growing up, Mary would quote scripture at them. Mary saw these sorts of things as signs from God, punishment. How do you 'talk' in an atmosphere like that? Amy said Mary was 'getting worse'; she told me that a few weeks ago, but I didn't ask for detail. Perhaps I should have done.'

Gleeson went back to staring into his mug of coffee.

Punishment from God thought Murdoch. Did Mary think that what happened to Daniel Tapper was also God's punishment?

Murdoch sipped on his still steaming brew, which was bitter in the extreme. He wondered whether Gilbert Gleeson knew a lot more than he was saying. Gleeson had no known trade or skill; he worked around the region as a handyman – he admitted he was a Johan a Factomen, or Jack of All Trades – and routinely helped out the farm owners over summer when extra labour was required. He had little or no money, but not many people in the area did. He'd lived in Compton Tamor all his life, as had his parents, and he'd bought the stone cottage on the Little Compton Road back in the 1990s, after marrying a local girl, who died from ovarian cancer five years after giving birth to Amy, making a tough situation even tougher. He knew the Abbot farm, not only having worked there during harvest time, but also from doing repair work inside the farmhouse; he had admitted in his statement that he knew where the gun cupboard was, and that it was rarely locked; he admitted owning a gun and knowing how to fire one, though he rarely had reason to do so. Moreover, Gleeson's property bordered the 350 Grange Farm; he knew the ins-and-outs of the family, but no one suggested he had anything but goodwill toward them. He saw and heard nothing over the five days the crime took place; he said he last saw his daughter as she headed off to work, on foot, that dark Monday morning, less than an hour before the storm broke. Murdoch said, 'Barbara Handsworth, the farm secretary, told me that Sidney was increasingly fearful in the last months of his life – as if he knew his life might be in danger. Did you know that?'

He shook his head. 'Sidney was a little edgier than usual; I put it down to the drought, and Peter not pulling his weight. But no more than that. My Amy never spoke of any major problems at the farm in the days or weeks before this happened. And, well, Barbara...' he paused, searching for the right words, 'was keen on Sidney, if you know what I mean. I don't think anything happened, but I think she wanted it to. I think she genuinely loved him.'

Murdoch had guessed that. He also thought the secretary was a reliable witness. 'Did you know that one of the Abbot tombstones at the St Margaret's graveyard had been desecrated – about six weeks before the killings?'

‘I don’t go to the church much,’ he replied. Realising that he’d avoided the question, he exhaled and let his head fall in a resigned nod. ‘Yeah, I heard about that.’

‘What did you think?’

‘I thought it was one of the Junkaris boys; taking a swipe at Peter, maybe giving him a warning just in case he ever opened his mouth about some of their bad habits. That was my first thought.’

‘Your second thought.’

‘That someone did it as a sick joke – because the curse weekend was coming, and there are people in these parts that like stirring up the hocus-pocus.’

Murdoch pondered the reply, and again wondered whether the Abbots being killed on the ‘curse weekend’ was by chance or design. ‘You don’t believe in the hocus-pocus?’

Gleeson flicked his head up, looking Murdoch in the face while managing to avoid his stare. ‘Not really,’ he said, but his voice quaked a little. Then he asked, ‘Have you interviewed Flora Tranter?’

‘Not personally,’ admitted Murdoch. ‘Do you know her?’

‘I don’t think anyone *knows* her. She rarely leaves Haxley Wood. People generally stay clear of her.’

‘She had nothing to do with the Abbot household, did she?’

‘No,’ said Gleeson. ‘Flora keeps to herself.’ He took in a sharp breath, placed his mug on the coffee table, and looked hard at Murdoch for a moment. ‘Look, I don’t know how these things work, but I don’t understand all these questions. The Abbots kept to themselves; they didn’t interfere with other people’s lives. In this village, we don’t mix with outsiders, and don’t really mix with each other. What difference does it make if Hannah and Mary didn’t get on so well together, or if Sidney was disappointed in Peter’s work ethic? How does any of that impact what happened to them? What happened in that house between those people has no relevance to why some sick bastard killed them all, does it?’

Murdoch had no edifying answer to deliver. Just as all local inquiries had failed, so all inquiries fanning outwards had drawn complete blanks: there wasn’t a shred of evidence, a single tangible lead pointing to the existence of an outside suspect. Every police department in the surrounding counties had checked their books, made inquiries, leaned on anyone they could, and nothing came back. Murdoch had little doubt when he spoke to Erin Fox and his team at the evening’s debrief, they would have little to offer. There was nothing in the sequestered phone records, computer hard drives, financial statements or witness statements that indicated why the massacre had occurred, or who was responsible. ‘If it sounds like I’m fishing,’ admitted Murdoch, ‘it’s because I am. There are a number of hints suggesting the killer may have known the Abbot family, though nothing conclusive. It also appears that the killer felt the need to interact with Hannah in some way, suggesting there was some connection to *her*, but again, we don’t know that for certain. The fact the killer stayed at the farm for such a long time, or went back on several occasions, also suggests familiarity to the scene.’

None of that seemed to impress the handyman. His gaze seemed to settle on something in the middle distance, something only he could see. He said in a quiet, almost trance-like voice, ‘A few years ago, a group of gypsies settled on some land, just beyond the Grange Farm – sort of where the edges of the Abbot, Claxton and Junkaris farms met in a kind of triangle. Junkaris threatened them to move on or else, Oriel Claxton wanted to shoot them, literally; he actually pointed a fully loaded shotgun their way. Sidney, instead, gave them some food, gave them some work and

paid them for it – on the proviso they'd move on in a month's time – and they did so. That was Sidney; you got nothing for nothing from him, but he was always reasonable. Out of all the farmers in these parts, he was the most honest and decent of them all. He would look you in the face, and he would always play fair. What I'm trying to say is that he was a good man, he wasn't nasty, and not every man in these parts can make that claim. So why would anyone want to kill him and his entire family? It doesn't make sense.'

In the midst of life we are in death
English Book of Prayer

To be honest, I don't remember much about the funeral. 'Good of you to be here, Mr Hodgson,' said Mike Styles, the shop-owner, as if his appraisal mattered most. He spoke so loudly that several heads swivelled in my direction.

I was surprised that Oriel Claxton showed up at the funeral. Practically the whole village turned out at St Margaret's, where Mary had worshipped for so many years, but I think it would have been more decent if Oriel had stayed away, but there he was, dressed like the village squire. Like he was posing for *Country Life* in his Hoggs of Fife Kinloch tweed sports jacket, single-breasted, satin-lined and Teflon coated if you don't mind, with matching tweed trousers! Front and centre he was. Perhaps I imagined in, but there seemed to be a certain malignant satisfaction about him. His wife Ann was by his side, but I couldn't see her face; she had a habit of looking down or away whenever I peered over. For some reason, a passage from Virginia Woolf came to my mind: 'Once you conform, once you do what other people do because they do it, a lethargy steals over all the finer nerves and faculties of the soul. She becomes all outer show and inward emptiness; dull, callous, and indifferent.' Poor old Virginia had ended up walking into a river to drown herself.

It was disturbing to see all those rubberneckers on the road with waiting journalists and photographers. The assembled media gave the proceedings an air of melodrama. Strange too, that no family member was there to console because they were all dead.

I think most people at the funeral were still in a state of shock, or maybe fear, thinking it could have been them instead. It was horrible seeing the smaller coffin, carrying dear Nicholas's body. Teddy Butler was one of the pallbearers: fancy that, the man who found the bodies! Another was Adam O'Donnell's father; he used to play rugby and he had an incredibly solemn look on his face.

Come ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you...

The vicar gave a speech, though I can't recall much of what he said. He spoke well, did the vicar, but it was a lifeless performance, not quite fitting for the enormity of the event, and I noticed a number of people in the audience watching him the way you might watch a comic on stage who just wasn't getting it right. I saw Gilbert Gleeson biting down on his lip: perhaps he expected the vicar to offer a hell-fire sermon for his atrocity, to will the wrath of god on the killer, but Ben Ridley was very much New Testament rather than Old. He spoke about the 'much-respected' Sidney, his 'sweet-natured' and 'devout' wife Mary, and Hannah 'for her caring as a mother.' He said Peter was a 'good sort' and that Nicholas was a 'tragic loss of innocence.' And that was it! *A tragic loss of innocence*. One of the most beautiful young boys you could ever hope to meet!

Across the aisle from me were the three Junkaris men: Gary, Damon and Theo. I was sure I saw Theo smirking. That made me very mad. The postman, Arthur Clegg, saw it too. Arthur is a rather bloodless chap, always looks slightly anaemic, but I could see he was mad about that smirk. So was the witch: when I looked across the aisle there she was, her gaze drawn on the Junkaris trio, as though sensing their nastiness. That was one of the things I learned when I came to Compton Tamor: that witches are real and not necessarily creatures to be feared.

That detective and his blond sidekick were standing by one wall. For the most part, they kept their attention on the vicar, but now and then they would gaze at the crowd, as though judging how certain words were received. The woman looked suitably pious, but the man looked angry, the muscles in his jaw tensing, his eyes reduced to burning slits. I was sure he kept looking at someone in particular, but I couldn't see who it was. Perhaps it was that journalist Jaffa Cruz who was revelling in writing gratuitous headlines about the crime.

I wondered what it must be like to be Murdoch. One minute, your part of normal society, such as it is; the next moment you're examining six human beings, alive and healthy a few days ago; now massacred from close range. How could anyone walk through that farm and ever forget what they'd seen? You'd shut your eyelids but still see it. He must have asked himself just what sort of hatred, what evil madness, could ever do such a thing?

There had been a rumour that Hannah and Nicholas may be buried in Thorpe Malsor Cemetery, in a plot reserved for Daniel Tapper if his body was ever located and brought home, but someone had made the decision for the Abbots not to be separated after death. They would all remain in Compton Tamor until the end of time, and that was how it should be.

The burial itself was depressing. Watching those coffins lowered into the ground, one after another. I was one of the first people to leave the church. I don't know why, but I needed to get away from the place. Even though we were outside, it felt like I couldn't get air. I headed west along the Little Compton Road, then realised I was driving in the wrong direction, away from where I lived, and did a U-turn. That would take me back past the church, past the Junkaris property, the Abbot Farm, the Claxton's Top Farm. There was no way of avoiding those places. The road was completely void of traffic, and I drove on the limit, but no matter how I tried, my eyes kept lifting to the rear-view mirror, to the mass of humanity gathered in that ancient churchyard, and the forbidding millennia-old forest behind it.

The stone which marked Mary and Sidney's grave contained the words *Tragically taken from us*. Like the vicar's words, it seemed a masterful understatement. When we are all dust, a passer-by would never perceive the truth from such a plain epitaph, I thought, which was probably just as well. Not only were their deaths horrible, but so often in cases of murder the more explanations that are offered the less people understand.

I think the mistake lots of people make when it comes to a psychopath is that they completely write off their actions as cruel, callous and completely calculated, but actually, the truth is that they have interests and reasons behind their actions.

James Norton

It was the perfect vehicle for him. The Land Rover Defender was practical, workmanlike and simple enough to operate. Yes, it might have been a noisy, slow, no-nonsense boneshaker of a thing, but Sidney loved its strength, quirkiness and durability. He'd been disappointed when the last Defender rolled off the production line back in 2016. Out with the old, in with the new – even if the old was usually better than the new.

At this hour the narrow roads which tapered through the flat landscape were dark and deserted. Sidney looked in his rear-view mirror: there was no one behind him, and he issued a sigh of relief. He felt like he'd been watched for months, but he couldn't put his finger on it. A niggling sense that something in his environment had changed, or someone around him had changed. Maybe he was just run down; that's what Barbara said; he wasn't as young as he used to be; he needed to take things easier. But Sidney knew it was more than that; he'd heard footsteps on the gravel drive at night; he'd seen a moonlit silhouette on Dead Man's Hill, he'd felt shadows behind him the last time he walked to the High Street. A chicken knows when the fox has entered the pen. Something in Compton Tamor had changed but he couldn't say what it was.

Sidney swung the Defender onto the Little Compton Road. It was 'curse Saturday' and everything was dark and silent; he remembered when he was a kid, how they would head out across the moors or into Haxley Wood, daring the Black Lady to appear. Kids didn't do things like that anymore. They sat in front of I-phones or computer screens. They didn't want to get their hands dirty. Peter was like that: always looking for cheap entertainment, the easy option. Sidney sighed. Perhaps if Daniel Tapper had made it through Basra, he might have settled down on the farm: Tapper was made of stern stuff, he loved discipline and routine and hard work; he would have worked with Sidney and they would have ran the farm like a million-quid operation. Tapper would have done the work of three men; he wouldn't have let the outbuildings go to wrack and ruin. He'd have looked after the animals, too, and the gardens; every time he'd come to the farm, he'd checked on the animals, offering to feed and water them. He'd even collected some cow manure once and spread it around that red rose tree at the back of the house. As if Peter would ever do that! Mary hadn't liked Hannah's young handsome husband very much: 'There's something about him...' she'd insisted. Doubtless there was 'something' about him, thought Sidney: there was something about any young man who was trained to kill other human beings on the order of their government. Sidney knew from personal experience that you're never quite normal again. Now the poor bastard was no more than bones in foreign soil.

Hannah had never been settled since – though dear Amy kept her on the right side of sane. But everything was a bloody battle, thought Sidney. He was tired of trying to hold it all together. Tired of getting old too: nothing was working as it should, his eyes were playing him up, his joints ached, and he was tired and foggy-headed all the time, as if his nervous system was breaking down under the everyday strain.

He just couldn't shake that tingling, unpleasant sensation – that something bad was coming. Maybe it was an instinct he developed when he was a soldier, or perhaps it was deeper than that, more primal – as if he'd picked something up which didn't sit well with him. Something someone had said or done. A strange look in someone's eye. Something...

He turned into the driveway which led to the Georgian farmhouse. The driveway was more of a private road, which travelled nearly three quarters of a mile before the trees and foliage cleared and the darkened farmhouse came into view. The wind picked up for a moment, the branches of the leaves dancing, the brittle weak leaves fluttering down to earth. The weathermen kept insisting the drought was about to break, the rains were coming, and some were issuing warnings of flash floods across the north-west and south-west.

He drove round the back of the house to where he normally parked. The kitchen light was on, and so was the light in the master bedroom, but nowhere else; that likely meant Nicholas had just settled in bed or was finishing off supper in the kitchen with Hannah before bedtime, and Mary was in their bed, reading her Bible.

Sidney got out the vehicle, closing the door quietly behind him and sliding the keys into his pocket. He never bothered to lock his vehicle at night. Years ago, he'd got an offer to have the driveway all around the house tarmacked at a really good price; it would have perked the place up, no doubt, but Sidney liked the gravel; it stopped anyone from sneaking about the farmhouse late at night.

'That you Sidney?'

He spun round, looking for where the voice came from. The hay shed. He saw in the gloom that the door was a few feet open, but it was too dark inside to see anything.

'Who's that?' he asked. He wasn't unduly concerned, because it wasn't yet late, and he knew the voice from somewhere in the recesses of the mind, it wasn't the voice of a stranger, even though he couldn't immediately put a face to it.

The door pushed open a little wider. 'Just a wee word, Sidney?' said the voice.

'You don't want to come into the house?' Sidney asked the silhouetted form. *Who are you?*

'No; Hannah's just put the boy to bed. Don't want to disturb anyone. And it won't take long.'

Sidney didn't like it. Those instinctive alarm bells were going off inside him, but not too loudly. It was the curse weekend after all, and people always acted a little oddly at this time of year. He'd felt bewitched and paranoid now that he was beginning to mistrust his own shadow. But he was curious; curious to see who that familiar voice belonged to, and what he had to say. 'Okay,' he muttered, and walked into the shed.

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.
William Wordsworth

Murdoch picked her out the moment he entered the Market Darborough café. Blond shoulder-length hair, large blue eyes, leg-hugging slacks and a tight pale blue T-shirt with a dragon-like insignia across her chest. She had naturally pale skin, but she'd clearly taken some amount of time to make herself up: heavy red lipstick, bluish-purple mascara, brogue. Maybe the make-up was an attempt to make herself look older; Murdoch's first impression was that she was very late teens or early twenties. Despite the overcooked make-up, she was a pocket-Venus, no doubt.

She'd looked up when he pushed open the door, but now she was staring at the shiny polished table in front of her, bare except for the small white coffee cup just beyond her right hand. Murdoch had the idea that she had been sitting there, waiting, for quite some time. He walked in a straight line towards her. He noticed her eyes open a little wider, and he thought again about that nervous, breathless voice over the telephone. She looked uncertain, chewing on her bottom lip, hands under the table. But more beautiful, close up, definitely more beautiful. He didn't apologise for being late, and said, 'Lisa?' His voice was consciously devoid of welcoming inflection.

She nodded, once, a quick bird-like movement. 'You're John Murdoch?'

'I am.' He sat down. 'Another round?' he asked, nodding to her empty cup.

'Yes please.'

Murdoch gestured to the waitress and gave his order, then turned his attention back to the girl.

'You look older in the flesh than in the paper,' she said, not uncharitably.

Murdoch noticed the folded *Daily Mirror*. 'Wait till you reach my age, and you won't be so cocky.'

She grinned at him, or maybe at the corrosive bitterness in his voice which he couldn't hide. 'You don't look old, not really. Except for your eyes: they definitely look old.' She added, sensing his impatience, 'You must be busy.'

'I haven't slept in three nights. I'm only here because it's on the way back to my bungalow, and I need to unwind, otherwise I wouldn't have found the time.'

'Charming,' she said. 'The massacre at the farm, right? Must be,' she said, more to herself, 'because they found the bodies three days ago.'

The coffees arrived. Murdoch drank half of his cup in a single mouthful.

'You call that unwinding,' she said, watching him.

He looked her up and down. A decent padded bra probably made her breasts look bigger than they were, and he noted too that she had dark roots, indicating she'd died her hair blond. 'The message was that you had urgent information for me. I'm giving you another five minutes.'

'You're very rude,' she said.

'Yeah, I am. Have you got information about the Grange Farm murders? Another case?'

She sipped at her coffee. 'That is still so hot. How the fuck did you gulp it down like that?'

Murdoch wondered whether she was trying to get under his skin, or just couldn't read the room.

The girl said, 'I'm a friend of Joanne Swalling.'

Murdoch felt his heart bounce about in his chest. It wasn't an earth-shattering moment, but the shock of suddenly hearing a name he'd tried to forget the best part of two decades ago, a name he hadn't spoken out loud since then, definitely had an effect on him. 'Joanne...' he said. The one woman on earth who'd come close to having 'Murdoch' as a second name. It was probably his first serious relationship, and most assuredly his last.

'She married after you guys split up. The man she married was my dad, a dude called Roger. He walked out on us before I learned to walk so I don't have much memory of him.' She cleared her throat, 'Joanne asked me to pass on a message to you. That's why I called the station to speak to you. But I know this is a bad time.'

He replied in a quiet voice, 'Honestly, in my life there aren't many good times. But with six dead bodies on my plate, I haven't got much interest in social matters. I apologise for that.'

She shrugged. As if she hadn't really expected it any other way. But Murdoch could see that was stung to anger, or perhaps disappointment. Her large, ungiving blue eyes were suddenly hard and unblinking.

'What was the message?' asked Murdoch, his mind already rezoning back on the six bloodied corpses at Grange Farm.

'She just wanted to say goodbye to you?'

He frowned.

'She died two months ago.'

That snapped him back to the present reality. Which, as per usual, was a place of dark misery for him. 'Shit,' he said. 'I'm sorry. She was your mum. I didn't know.'

'How could you?'

Murdoch sat quite still. Beneath his unreadable expression, a conflict of impulses raged. He felt rebuked by the young woman and deservedly so. He also felt something else, an emotion he hadn't felt for years and which was so foreign to his being now that he couldn't identify it. He'd been in love with Joanne, he supposed; there were times when he'd even been deliriously happy. Twenty years had passed – too quickly – and he had become, not a wise, compassionate being, but a criminal-hunting monster, a machine more than a man.

'How?' he asked.

'Breast cancer. Acute. The doctors said she wouldn't last six months; she made five years. She didn't want to die.'

Murdoch waved to waitress for another round. He didn't want to think what this girl's last five years had been like. He understood now the reason for the heavy application of make-up. 'Have you told your dad, Roger.'

'Yeah,' she said, smirking. 'He didn't even turn up to her funeral.'

'Fucking asshole.'

'Mum didn't have a message for him,' said the girl. 'No other man. Only for you.'

Murdoch was glad the waitress came with the two cups at that point. He felt like vomiting. A deep guilt and self-disgust tugged at him. 'I would have gone to her funeral, Lisa, if I'd known. Mind you, I don't think she, or anyone else, would have wanted me to. We had a good couple of years together, but I'm not a good man, I could never be a decent partner to anyone. That's why I'm single. I don't even have a pet; it wouldn't be fair on the pet.'

She took a moment to digest all that, not sure what expression to put on her face.

‘Are you still at school?’

Her nose crinkled. ‘*Please*. Be serious.’

‘I was. University, I meant.’

‘I left school *ages* ago.’

‘Why?’

‘I hated it – all of it. The teachers, the kids, the subjects.’

He noticed the large blue holdall she’d stuffed in the empty chair opposite her. ‘Do you have a job?’

‘I’m just surviving at the moment.’ Her eyes moved a little from side to side, fingers playing with one another. ‘Not sure where I want to end up. Somewhere.’

‘I’ve heard that’s an interesting place.’

‘I’ve heard it’s over-rated.’

His softer tone had caused her sullenness to vanish, replaced by a childish concentration. ‘What about *you*?’

Murdoch felt himself tense up a little. ‘*Me*? I work.’ He took a breath. ‘Work, work... work. That’s all.’

‘What’s the point of that?’

Damn good question, one that circled his mind - like a shark scenting blood - a dozen times a day, every day, but one he pushed away with a disciplined oar.

‘Ever read *Tender is the Night*?’ she asked. ‘F. Scott Fitzgerald.’

Murdoch surprised her by nodding. ‘He was always trying to go back in time, to find that fleeting moment of perfect happiness – in real life, and in his books. But it was always in the past for him, always drifting further away. *Tender is the Night* is about a beautiful young couple with the world before them. They’re waiting for a rich relative to die, so they’ll inherit everything. Only thing is, he goes on living. When he finally dies and they inherit, they find there’s nothing left about themselves they like.’

‘The moral being: seize the day?’

‘Something like that. His wife Zelda ended in a nuthouse and that hurt him; both of them ended up in miserable places. Not many great artists lived happy lives.’

‘Eric Van Dorn?’

Murdoch blinked. ‘You know about him?’

‘He gets a mention in the article,’ she said, her eyes lowering to the newspaper by her side.

‘Ah.’

She smiled, holding his stare. ‘I thought you were a good detective.’

The tone was pleasantly mocking. Then she yawned, her hands stretching outwards. For a crazy moment he thought she was going to reach for his hands, but she didn’t. Instead, her blue eyes opened a little wider, and against all logic, Murdoch felt himself in. He suddenly wished he wasn’t doing this Job anymore. He wished his nose was smaller and straighter, that his eyes weren’t so detached and inhuman, that he was smooth and charming, more of his real self, or what he thought was his real self. He wished, in that moment, that he was richer and stronger, and braver, and a lot of things he wasn’t, but most of all, he wished he was younger.

*

In real estate terms, Murdoch was living in purgatory; not quite reaching the leafy nirvana of the priciest parts of the Market Darborough environs, like Palace Hill, yet having climbed out of the graffiti-stained, metal-shuttered shithole that was the south end of Billing Town, where he’d grown up.

‘The spare bedroom’s through there,’ he said. She didn’t smile as he thought she would. He didn’t know how to read the look on her face.

‘One night,’ he said. ‘That’s the deal.’

‘The *first* thing I need to do is boil the kettle,’ she said, ‘and make you a lemon tea. Your acid-alkaline levels must be off the charts.’

He waved a hand and took off his tie. ‘Suit yourself.’ The abrupt tone didn’t quite work, nor dispel the gnawing feeling that he was caught in a momentum he didn’t understand. Less than a handful of days into the most surreal investigation he’d ever faced – and this happens! No warning, no portent, no preamble! He felt like he needed to run hard in the opposite direction to the one he was taking now, but when wasn’t he running? If he wasn’t running, he thought, he’d be over-run.

He noticed that from the kitchen she was watching him, taking everything in. The bungalow was neat, with few personal items, as though the owner had dispensed with the past. The only discordant note was the *Evening Post* on the glass table, open to a double-spread article by Jaffa Cruz covering the atrocity at Grange Farm.

He sat down in the sofa. It was 11 p.m. Perhaps tonight he would not go for his midnight stroll. Perhaps he would go into his bedroom and lock the door and wait till daybreak. The girl was squeezing lemon and honey into the tea – and Murdoch realized in an abstracted way that she must have bought the lemon in her handbag because he’d sure as hell never had a lemon in the flat. She seemed very serious about it all. And once his eyes rested on her, he found it very hard to pull his gaze away. Her silky black blouse was opened to her cleavage, no longer tucked into the slacks she wore, and she moved like a long-limbed colt, as though still unfamiliar with her developed breasts and swelling hips. There was something wanton in her disarray, Murdoch thought. These days, girls her age – whatever her real age was – all knew what was what, yet Murdoch couldn’t help but feel that there was also a certain innocence about her: she was more like Alice from a child’s book than a street-walker. But there was also something in her eyes he didn’t like. He didn’t know what that ‘something’ was, only that he saw something similar every morning when he gazed despairingly into his own eyes.

After sipping their coffees in the café, he’d taken her to the best a curry house in town. He told himself that he needed to eat. Tough murder inquiries always started as a sprint, then turned into marathons. Upstairs there was a proper restaurant with white tablecloths, gleaming cutlery, and poised, helpful waiters. So... they ate upstairs. Middle-class Maharanas. They talked for half hour about her mum, the cynical part of Murdoch making sure that the tale she’d spun wasn’t complete fiction.

‘Have you found anything out yet?’ she asked, half-way through.

‘About?’

‘Who killed those people on that farm.’

‘Oh!’ The curry instantly lost some of its taste. In fact, the thought of a rampaging Superintendent Sol Butcher almost killed his appetite on the spot. The Grange Farm murder case was still technically in its initial stages, but it already had a stagnant, hopeless feel about it. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Early days, hey?’

It was a slightly mocking taunt, just enough to get under his skin, but not enough to get his blood boiling. Murdoch shovelled some more food into his mouth, an excuse to avoid further conversation on the subject. She didn’t seem to mind.

Bloated and sated at the end of the meal, with a stomach bubbling away like a heated beaker in a mad-scientist movie, Murdoch asked: ‘Have you a place to sleep?’

She shook her head, not looking at him.

Murdoch knew the error was in his tone: it was meant to be neutral, indifferent, but it was none of those things. Instead of rushing on, naming some popular B&Bs in the locality, even handing her some cash, he allowed silence.

Well, thought Murdoch, she had to sleep somewhere... and maybe it was only right, in memory of her mother, that he kept an eye on her until she moved on, having delivered her message. Murdoch briefly began to examine this conclusion for self-deceiving edges, but was so overwhelmed by them, he gave up. 'You don't know anyone in these parts, right?'

'No.'

A long pause. '*One* night then,' he muttered.

She looked up, smiling.

No words, just a killer smile. Murdoch felt his heart soaring. He knew there and then what an ill-fated gesture it was, but it didn't seem strange at the time; indeed, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

The lemon tea was nice. While the girl had a lengthy shower, Murdoch sat in the living room of his flat, a three-fingered whiskey on the armrest. Thinking about Joanne Swalling and marvelling that he had managed to think so little about her for so long. Two good years, then she had come to her senses and realised she was better off without him. He'd moved further east, bought the bungalow, and married the Job.

The shower taps were turned off with a disagreeable crunch. He wondered what it was the girl was up to. Surely not a bit of friendly blackmail? And why was she so interested in the farmhouse massacre? That was the problem with being a cop, he thought; you looked for the bad in everyone, suspected a conspiracy in a cloudy day. After offering her a room for the night, she'd thanked him and assured him, 'You'll hardly know I'm there, I promise.'

But she *was* there, right now, in the bathroom, naked as Eve, singing like a future Idol performer. Another man might not have been so acutely aware of her presence. But Murdoch's existence had been monastic for a long time. The girl's bag was lying on the floor. More to distract himself than anything else, Murdoch leaned forward, unzipped it and began to examine the contents. There wasn't much. Some clothes, shoes, a couple of paperbacks and a wallet.

He opened the wallet. It contained less than a hundred pounds. In another pocket there were several names and numbers. There was a timetable for coaches from London to the east coast. He heard movement in the bathroom and quickly returned everything to the bag. He had no doubt that she would emerge provocatively dressed.

One night, he reminded himself. One night, and then the lunacy would end and she would be gone forever.

Man is the cruellest animal
Friedrich Nietzsche

Ann found him by the pig pen, looking down at the pigs.

‘It was you who ruined that headstone, wasn’t it Oriel.’

He didn’t turn to face her. ‘No. You’re wrong, woman.’

‘Like you punched him in the face.’

‘I never denied that.’

For the first time in more years than she could remember, she wished he would look at her. Instead, his gaze lifted only marginally, towards that ugly house on the hill which overlooked their property – which never would have been there if Oriel and Sidney had been able to form a pact rather than go their separate ways. Everything would have been different, thought Ann, if all that business had not happened.

‘St Margaret’s is hallowed ground, Oriel.’

‘I just told you woman: I never smashed it. I reckon it was those two Junkaris kids – a warning to Peter not to step on any toes with his little drug deals, or simply because they didn’t like the Abbots.’

‘I saw you do it.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘I should tell the police I saw you do it.’

He shrugged, kept looking down at the pigs, which were Ann’s favourite animals on the farm. There was Tamworth, a Yorkshire Large White Boar, a Berkshire, and a British Saddleback called Alf, who was nibbling a turnip. Ann had given all of them names, and she knew their personalities and quirky ways. Winston Churchill mused: ‘Cats look down in you; dogs look up to you; but pigs look you in the eye as equals.’ She kept a regular eye on them also, because most modern pig herds were vulnerable to all sorts of diseases: meningitis, porcine pneumonia, blue ear, mastitis, streptococcus, swine fever. But it was more than that. The pigs were family to her, watching them grow up, tending to them, talking to them – it was the closest Ann ever came to having her own children.

‘Which one,’ said Oriel, looking down on them, ‘do you think I should slaughter next?’

Their belief in the Magic was an abiding thing.
Frances Hodgson Burnett

Erin thought it must one of the few places in England which got through the hell-like summer unparched. So ancient, so magnificent, and if you were in a certain mood, so *terrifying*. Haxley Wood had been designated a Royal Forest by the Normans in the early eleventh century, but as timber and metal extraction gathered pace during the Tudor era, much of the forest was thinned to the brink of extinction. What remained was now protected by law.

Spooky, Erin thought, parking the car on the side of the lane which bordered the forest. The sensation in her belly was primal. Maybe it was the sheer age of Haxley Wood; some of those trees were there before the Vikings ever conducted their raids on the north-east, even before St Augustine visited Canterbury. The early Romans had called it *Silva Nigra* – Black Wood – the same term they'd used on the Black Forest in Germany.

It was a dull, dark, oddly soundless day. The clouds hung oppressively low in the sky, and the wind whirled about, frequently altering in its direction. The warm autumn air had that heavy, pregnant feel you sometimes felt before a tempest. Erin looked across at the man beside her, who seemed equally mesmerised by the sight.

'They reckon Sven Jasper might still be living in this forest somewhere,' Murdoch said out the side of his mouth.

'Twenty years hiding out, hey? Much more likely he pissed off to Manchester and started a new life up there.'

'Why Manchester, Erin?'

She shrugged. 'Why not?'

Murdoch said, 'Right. Does the Homicide Manual say anything about to interview a witch?'

'You mean, Flora Tranter who lives in a cottage in Haxley Wood, or the Black Lady, in case we come upon her? Or maybe they're one and the same?'

Murdoch wasn't in the mood for her cleverness. 'Did that profiler get back to you? Wilson, wasn't it?'

'Professor Bernard Wilson,' Erin said. 'And he's not a profiler: he's a behavioural scientist. They don't like being called 'profilers' these days, John, because they fucked up so many times with their 'profiles'. But yes, he did get back to me. He said the murders have all the hallmarks of a familial killing spree.'

Murdoch pondered that. 'Go on, then, I'm listening.'

Erin coolly flicked through her notebook. 'Professor Wilson said that the Abbot killings do not fit any kind of mould, but he believes the most likely bracket is the familial murder pact. That's where the killer slaughters multiple close family members in quick succession.'

'Right.'

'In about half the known cases, the killer exits the scene and either gets away with his crime or is later arrested; in the other cases, the killer does a Lord Lucan, and we're left wondering if he went off to kill himself in a secluded location – not wanting to die with the family that he perceived as betraying him – or he is sunning himself in the Caribbean.'

‘So Professor Wilson read the papers and knows all about Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper.’

‘You’re such a cynical bastard. Anyhow, he says the killer is almost always a man, and usually there is a troubled relationship in the mix, or severe financial or social pressures. Also, perhaps significantly, the killer in these types of cases has no former criminal history or history of mental health.’

A first-time offender. Perpetrating a massacre. ‘We keep coming back to the missing husband, don’t we? Daniel Tapper. Somehow he made it out of Basra and back to Compton Tamor. He felt betrayed. He wiped out the family in a gratuitous act of revenge. That’s what the German authorities thought regarding Hinterflaik in 1920, and they were wrong.’

‘He’s just calling it as he sees it, John. As far as Professor Wilson is concerned, Tapper died in action. But if Tapper did survive the war, did manage to escape, can you imagine the state he might be in, with what he went through? They labelled him the ‘last to die’. So it wasn’t just his family that gave up on him, but the entire world. And then, having survived... he finally wound his way home to find that his wife and child couldn’t be bothered to even put up a photograph of him anywhere in the farmhouse?’

Murdoch knew that a warrior with a cause was the most dangerous soldier of all. Murdoch had compiled a bio on Tapper despite the explicit lack of help from the MoD. Tapper had been born in Collingwood, a garrison town; as a young lad he’d spent a couple of years in Germany when his father, also a soldier, was posted to Fallingbommel, near Hanover. His first school was the Kings School in Gutersloh, North Rhine Westphalia. He was reasonably academically gifted and passed his eleven plus examinations with flying colours. Army life meant moving around a lot, different schools according to father’s postings, both in Britain and abroad. There were troubles in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and the Middle East. They returned to England when his Mum got terminally ill, the old man at the time was a captain in the Royal Army Service Corps stationed at Yeovil, Somerset. Within a few years of returning, both his parents were dead. Daniel Tapper was fostered out and joined the Collingwood Cadets where he endured log runs and exercises in the wettest parts of the south-east, long nights spent polishing kit, gut-busting early-morning exercises, and days digging trenches and filling them in. It was a year or two after joining up that he met Hannah. Passionate from the beginning, Hannah was in something of a compressed state – wanting to get away from home, but unable to take the leap. She told Daniel that she had been expelled from school once, and that she’d had an abortion as a teenager, and that she mostly hated her mother; Hannah told Daniel that her mother had once called her ‘the Devil’s child.’ It was always volatile between them: the sort of relationship where they could barely live with, or without, each other. They got married and were planning to set up home together, maybe in a nice village near the coast, but then he got the call up for active service. Everything was put on hold until he came back. But he didn’t come back.

‘I’m thinking,’ said Erin of that famous young Christian named Origen; as a young man he’d believed that martyrdom was the only way to heaven; his father Leonides had died in the arena four years earlier and Origen had tried to join him. People in extreme states can possess a very different view of ‘death’.

‘Thank you for the lesson.’

‘Tapper was trained to survey an enemy, to contain a scene, to kill specific targets; he also knew the farmhouse and all the adult victims. It would explain a lot of things,’ added Erin.

‘And a lot of things it would *not* explain,’ said Murdoch. ‘Besides, there are other sorts of familial murders. What else did the learned professor have to say?’

Fox looked back at her notebook. She imagined how relieved Murdoch’s teachers were when he’d left school. ‘Familicides were used as an enhanced punishment in antiquity – long ago as ancient China. The Nazis used Sippenhaft, or the responsibility of kinship – a legal principle derived from Germanic law in the Middle Ages – the idea that a family or clan shares the responsibility for a crime or act committed by one of its members, justifying collective punishment. You see it in North Korea, where whole-family internments take place, usually ending in death.’

‘You mean that a wronged person feels justified, not merely in killing the person who offended them, but their whole family?’ Murdoch thought about that. ‘Surely that would require a hell of a motive.’

‘Not to a disordered mind.’

Murdoch knew that after the July 1944 plot to kill Hitler, the S.S brutally murdered every member they could find of the family of Count Schenk von Stauffenberg, the ringleader, including at least six people over the age of seventy. Was Sippenhaft still alive and flourishing in rural Compton Tamor? He shook his head.

‘Wilson says that a familial killer’s internal logic stems from four main sources: anomic – that is, breakdown, disappointment, self-righteousness, and paranoia.’

‘That could mean anything.’

‘Maybe; but there’s something about these characters and how the killer may have perceived them: Sidney being slightly high and mighty, Mary holier than thou, Peter a wasteful son, Hannah a loose cannon.’

‘What family isn’t dysfunctional Erin? And why kill the boy and the maid?’

‘Maybe they were just collateral damage.’

Murdoch shook his head some more.

Fox said, ‘Wilson is actually something of a world authority on familial murders. He’s just completed a twenty-year study on the subject.’

‘And let me guess: his study concluded that most of the perpetrators were white males, in their thirties, who experienced marital discord, abuse as a child, suffered some kind of mental illness, and committed the murders because their spouse cheated on them?’

‘Yes, all of that. But there is something else, John. Wilson found that in a number of cases, familial killings are motivated by a person’s desire to stop their loved ones from suffering.’

He stared at her. ‘An idealistic massacre? Are you serious?’

‘Yes, driven by love, not hate. And there’s another common reason.’

‘Enlighten me, DI Fox.’

‘The killer wished to save their family from a perceived threat.’

‘By killing them?’

‘Exactly. In those situations, we are dealing with a killer who, in his own mind, did not see himself as an annihilator, but a liberator.’

‘So we’re back to Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper once again?’ Murdoch shook his head. *Our only suspect is almost certainly a dead man.* ‘Why kill a fellow ex-soldier like Sidney Abbot, who’d done him no wrong? Would he kill his only son?’

‘Yes. To spite Hannah. Because he didn’t want his son to live in this evil world. Remember, if he survived the war, he may have been tortured for years. You don’t know how damaged he might be.’

Murdoch shook his head. ‘If he was that psychotic, how did he manage to get back to England, plan these crimes, and get away, and no one caught sight or smell of him?’

‘Simple answer: he’s a trained killer, we’re in a rural location, and he attacked under the cover of darkness. Geographical isolation is often a key factor in most family-annihilator stories. I think he’s our best option; the problem is – ’

‘The problem,’ interrupted Murdoch, ‘is that our prime suspect is dead.’

Murdoch thought of green beret Dr Jeffrey MacDonald, convicted in 1979 of killing his pregnant wife and two pre-school daughters; he’d spent the next six decades in prison insisting he was innocent and he had a case. In 1985 Peter Abbot was convicted for the massacre of five members of his family; once again, many people believed the police got it wrong. Other familial killers got away and took on new identities, living with new wives and children who were completely unaware of their violent pasts; American John List killed his wife, mother and three daughters and then disappeared: he had planned the murders so meticulously that nearly a month passed before anyone suspected; William Bradford Bishop killed five members of his family and was never caught. Jean-Claude Romand, a French killer pretending to be a medical doctor for 18 years, killed his wife, children, his parents and his parent’s dog, when he was about to be exposed. In 2008 in Shropshire, Christopher Foster killed his wife, daughter, horses and dogs in his luxury home before setting the house on fire, dying himself. Jennifer and Sarah Hart deliberately drove off a cliff with their six adopted children out of fear that they would be found out as abusive parents. These types of personalised mass killers used axes, baseball bats, knives, poison, but the most common way was gunshot.

There were plenty of stranger-mass-murders, too, where the motive would never have been deduced if it wasn’t for the guilty parties being caught. The ‘Blockland Murders’ in Germany in 1945 saw twelve people killed on a farm in one night. The group were marched down into the cellar, forced to go down on their knees, and massacred. The motive was part robbery, but it was also because the killers – forced farm labourers from Poland – had suffered at the hands of the Nazis and were happy to take out their hatred on an innocent German family. As Murdoch would remind Erin Fox: context is everything. That was why Murdoch wanted to know why the killer at Grange Farm had not killed the dog, why he had looked after the farm animals, and why he had bothered to prune the red rose tree by the back door.

‘The answer is in this village,’ he muttered.

‘Well,’ said Erin, ‘it’s hardly likely to be anywhere else. Maybe the witch can help.’

They headed into the forest, following a track locals used which ended by the Black Lady pool. The path was sodden underfoot and smelled of rotting leaves and decomposing material, and a diffident sun gave scarcely enough light to cast shadows. She knew that the boy Nicholas had walked this path; he was the only Abbot who ever came to the forest.

They paused when they reached the Black Lady pool. Erin said, ‘Locals reckon the water turns black before the Black Lady appears.’

‘Well, I heard that barren women have more than once come out here hoping the Black Lady would give them fertility.’ He looked at her and almost smiled, then pointed towards the heart of Haxley Wood. ‘It’s actually half-a-mile that way.’

Flora Tranter’s cottage seemed to grow out of the forest. There was no fence, no demarcation setting it apart from its surrounds; narrow and vertical, the two-storey structure was built mostly from the large oaks which grew in this part of the forest. Moss-covered stone steps led to an arched front door, and the few small windows were small and leaded. Beyond, above, and all around was the all-encompassing forest. And animals, thought Murdoch, spying a furry-tailed squirrel was watching them from the branch of a nearby tree. Several birds chatted away. He was suddenly

aware of other sounds too; she didn't know what they were, toads, crickets, other insects, all making a chorus of existence.

The front door opened and an elderly lady appeared in the arched doorway. She didn't look like a 'witch'. Here was no shrivelled, hunch-backed creature, with a long, curved nose, wrinkled face, dark, immobile eyes, small wrists with long claw-like hands. Instead, she wore light-coloured clothes, there were no rings on her fingers; her cheeks were pink and her blue eyes were watery and friendly. Murdoch couldn't imagine the women feeling ill will towards anyone, let alone casting evil spells on them. The only creepy aspect was the grey cat which circled around her feet, brushing against her ankles and shins, performing a figure-8 movement over and over again. The schoolteacher Trevor Hodgson had told Murdoch that school kids occasionally came out to the cottage and got treats from Flora, and most parents had no problem with that. It seems the locals trusted Flora at least as much as they trusted the vicar, Ben Ridley.

'Biscuits and tea?' she asked, stepping back into the cottage, and leaving the front door open.

The inside was cosy, a wood fire against one wall with a stone chimney, oak beams across the ceiling, narrow staircase, simple chintz-covered chairs, and a large bookcase. There were a candle burning incense, a painting of the moon braking through clouds at night – maybe a Van Dorn, and several green plants in pots, none of which Murdoch recognised. He made Murdoch made the introductions and a moment later they were sitting down at a small dining table.

'I have given a statement,' Flora said. 'Not that I had much to say. I rarely leave Haxley Wood.'

'What about things like supplies?' Murdoch asked.

'I have them delivered. I do grow quite a bit of food for myself and look after my own medicinal needs. And I do receive visitors, who often bring things in exchange for help.'

'How do you help them, Flora?'

'In unearthly ways that would not interest a police inspector.' She smiled at him, but not condescendingly.

Murdoch found himself instinctively liking this unusual woman, but he was curious about the deep sadness he saw in her eyes. 'What would interest me is if any of these people showed an interest in the Abbot farm.'

'None,' she replied.

'Do you have any suspicions yourself as to what happened there?'

'No.'

'No insights whatsoever?' There was a note of incredulity in his tone this time.

The old lady smiled and shook her head.

Murdoch looked around the interior of the cottage again and felt perturbed that the grey cat was nowhere to be seen. 'Is anyone in your coven on the dangerous side of wonky?' he asked.

'Not at all,' Flora replied, then asked if they were enjoying their tea and biscuits. 'The reason I live in the forest is to stay away from human greed, madness and cruelty. Every hour of every day in farms across England there is barbarism and killing, which to me is as terrible as what happened to that poor family at Grange Farm. Leonardo said that as long as we went on killing animals the way we did, we would go on killing each other, and he was right. We should have made a religion out of Leonardo, you know.'

'What did you think of Hannah or Mary?' asked Murdoch.

'I haven't spoken to Mary since the bust up with the Claxtons.'

'You took the Claxtons' side in the argument?'

'Not at all. Mary kept harping on about my lack of attendance at St Margaret's; she wanted to save my soul, you see. Little Peter and Hannah used to complain when they were kids because Mary used to make them pray all the time, even when cleaning their teeth. And Mary didn't care about the animals on the farm – according to her, none of them had souls. I once gave Mary a book by Walt Whitman with a passage marked: 'Animals, unlike mankind, do not sweat and whine about their condition; they do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins; they do not make me sick discussing their duty to God; not one is demented with the mania of owning things.' You could say that our relations cooled from that moment on.'

Murdoch fidgeted in his chair for a moment. 'I know Mary liked reading Ezekiel, which is a very disturbing chapter in the Bible, especially for a woman to read. I mean, the Bible can be twisted to let you get away with anything, right: warfare, sodomy, incest. Was there anything in that household, or in this village I should know about?'

'Compton Tamor is hardly Sodom and Gomorrah, if that's what you're asking.'

'But the Abbots, or anyone they associated with?'

Flora silently shook her head.

'Did you interact with the other family members of the Abbot family?'

'Apart from the odd wave or passing word, I never interacted with Sidney or Peter, even though I've known Sidney since he was in the army, and Peter since he was in the cot. I last spoke to Hannah about a year ago, when she and Nicholas visited the Black Lady pool. He was still at an age when one instinctively believes in magic.'

'What did you talk about?'

'The forest. Nicholas did most of the talking. He was a very bright boy.'

'Did you ever meet his father, Daniel Tapper?'

The old lady looked very sad in that moment. She said softly, 'It really does seem like they were cursed, doesn't it?'

Murdoch didn't want to go there. Their job was to find a rational explanation to the mystery. Crime deduction was about scientific truth, cold facts, logical analysis. All things were Newtonian, answerable to objective investigation. But what did you do when those things no longer worked? thought Murdoch. Well, you ended up walking into a thousand-year-old forest and talking to a witch.

'How about the farmhouse?' asked Murdoch.

'I visited the farm once, but I did not go in the house.'

Both detectives waited.

The old lady looked into each of their faces for an extended moment. 'I'd heard that Mary had been sick; something of a breakdown. This was several years after Hannah was born. I didn't know whether it was post-natal depression, or something more than that. I went to the house with a basket of herbal remedies. Let's just say I wasn't exactly welcomed.'

'By Mary?'

She shrugged. 'I did not mind; I did not press; I offered. And... there was a coldness in that house. I don't want to say a wickedness because they were essentially good people. But it was very strained. Mind you,' she added, 'I am a very sensitive person to those sorts of things. Whenever I walk into a crowded shopping mall I'm badly overwhelmed with the negative energy fields. So you mustn't read too much into what I'm saying.'

'And lately?' asked Murdoch. 'Have you felt bad energy in this village?'

The witch nodded.

‘And the source of it?’

‘That I cannot say. I just can feel it – at St Margaret’s, in the High Street, on Dead Man’s Hill. A residual evil force. A subtle malice.’

Murdoch allowed nearly a minute of silence to endure. ‘Did you often go to the top of Dead Man’s Hill?’

She almost balked a little at his suddenly intense manner. ‘Now and then, yes. Why not?’

‘See anyone hanging around? A man?’

Flora took a long time to answer. ‘It is a public place, you know.’

‘Yes, I know. But have you seen a man – a local man – hanging around Dead Man’s Hill in recent weeks?’

‘I saw a man standing there once, in dark clothes. He was by himself, and he was looking down at the Abbot farm.’

Murdoch held her stare. ‘Don’t tell me that he was too far away to describe him, or that your eyesight isn’t very good. I’ve heard that record before.’

‘As it happens, I didn’t pay him much attention; I only saw him for a second or two.’

‘Enough to recognise him?’

The woman shook her head. She said, ‘No, I don’t know who he was, local or otherwise.’

Murdoch didn’t believe her. Witch or no witch, he had been around long enough to know when someone was telling lies.

One sided love lasts longer than any other type of love.
W. Somerset Maugham

I didn't need to work all those years as the secretary of Grange Farm to know that Hannah wasn't like Mary. Not at all. Hannah's approach to life was much... looser. As a teen she liked parties, and by the age of sixteen she openly defied Mary when she refused to go to St Margaret's anymore.

Hannah used to sneak a lift into Collingwood on weekends and see boys. I'd been working at Grange Farm a few years at this time, and I remember how Mary internalised at this: she became duller, her eyes lost their sparkle; the lilt in her voice died and she was increasingly given to Biblical imagery. She kept muttering the word 'evil' and 'devil' under her breath. I know Sidney was worried that she was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

Mary had a tendency to see everything in terms of good and evil. She often went to bed early at night, especially if Sidney was away from the farm. She would read the Bible over and over again, trying to figure out why the family had earned God's wrath. Then Hannah finally met a guy she was keen on – Daniel Tapper. He was a soldier like Sidney had been; Daniel even served in the same regiment. Starting as a combat infantryman, he'd been efficient in the act of warfare: foot soldier, patrol, guard duties, protecting convoys: he was one of the boys on the front line who get shot at. Within five years he'd made Lance Corporal and had won two medals of honour, the second one posthumous. Hannah fell for him and within a matter of months they were married and Hannah was pregnant. Then Daniel Tapper had to go off to the Middle East, just like Sidney had done years before. But Daniel never came home.

You can imagine what Mary made of that! It was yet more evidence, to her, that they were all being punished for some reason. And Hannah kept provoking her. Look at her last 'fling' for example. A non-Christian cretin called Freddie Armani. But I don't want to talk about Freddie; Hannah never cared for him; she was just taking yet another swipe at her mother.

Not that Peter alleviated Mary's concerns. He had his own bad 'habits'. Don't get me wrong: Peter wasn't a *bad* fellow, but he wasn't *motivated*, wasn't turning out as his parents had hoped. He mixed with a few oddballs. Peter was the only son remember, but he didn't care for work, for the privilege of running the farm that fate bestowed on him. No one knew if he was going to take on the farm in the future. Both Sidney and Mary viewed their large acreage as a responsibility, rather than a gift: the farm represented their birthright, their expectations, their future and their children's future.

As to the last time I saw Sidney: that was Friday, October 5. The day before he...

I mean, I had no idea I would never see him again. There was no reason to think –

I do recall that he looked edgy. He'd been extra edgy for several weeks, but he never told me why. I guessed it may have had something to do with what happened to the tombstone in the St Margaret's cemetery, but I didn't pry. I wanted to ask him a couple of questions about the farm, about some produce shortfalls, but I could tell that he didn't want to talk about it. 'Not now,' he snapped. It took a lot to get Sidney to be even mildly impolite like that, so I knew he was troubled. Something was wrong. Something had been wrong for weeks: Sidney hadn't been himself; his once sprightly

step had been replaced by a shambling, sagging gait, shrouded by an air of almost resigned defeat.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked him. I rarely asked personal questions, and he seldom answered them, but he looked at me, and said, ‘Barbara, you bring children into the world, and they seem so ungrateful.’

We were in the farm office, which is next to the stables and the shed where the combine and tractor equipment was kept. I’d been using that place as a work office for several years. I waited for Sidney to keep talking, but he seemed uncomfortable, lost to his thoughts. I wondered if he was ill? Under the natural light streaming in through the office window, he looked like a torn man. I prodded, and Sidney fixed me with a firm stare. ‘Barbara, we’ve known each other a long time, haven’t we?’

I felt my heart clutching. As if the next thing he would say might be truly earth-shattering. ‘Yes, Sidney; a long time.’

‘If anything were to happen to me,’ he said suddenly, will you promise to look after the farm and make sure that everything carries on as normal?’

‘Yes,’ I said quietly, feeling shocked. ‘Of course.’ I then asked Sidney if he was seriously ill.

Sidney shook his head. ‘No, but maybe I haven’t got long.’

It seemed a strange answer.

‘There’s so much to tell,’ he said, enigmatically. ‘I can’t bother you with all that. It’s not your burden. And none of it may be relevant – to anything. But if something bad were to happen to me, you will promise me you’ll do that?’

‘Yes, of course I will.’

‘Of course,’ Sidney added, ‘Living on a farm is a dangerous place and one never knows what’s going to happen. Lots of guns in these parts, and it’s open season for some animals, right?’ His voice tailed off and he looked away. Then he said, ‘I could go out one day shooting and you never know, do you? These things do happen. You can never tell...’

Psalm 54

Save me, O God, by thy name, and judge me by thy strength.

Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.

For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul.

Behold, God is mine helper.

I will freely sacrifice unto thee.

And sleep shall obey me,
 And visit thee never,
 And the curse shall be on thee
 For ever and ever.
Robert Southey

It rained hard that day, all day long until early afternoon, and the previous day – it was actually worse on the Monday, like God was once again sending His blessed floods to cleanse a world turned foul by sin. That's what my mum said, mimicking the vicar's voice. She'd never really liked the new vicar, Ben; she liked the old one much better. He was more 'with it', my mum told me, more legit. My mum's really a pagan, though she never uses that word. 'There are calves which are months old,' she'd told me that morning, 'which have never seen the rain before – and now we get this. Hopefully none of them drown.'

I didn't like the future prospects of those calves, either way.

The long summer had left the land so hard that half the country ended up with flood issues. Rivers were bursting their banks everywhere. My dad said that in less than two days we received more than three months of rain. There was water everywhere; in the ditches, flowing over gutters, parts of the Little Compton Road were mini-lakes and we were told that the road heading down to Harrington was impassable; several trees on slopes came down where the earth covering their roots was washed away. Last night on telly we saw footage of cows floating down rivers and birds resting on their bloated bodies.

Mum hadn't let me ride to school yesterday – first time for that in ages, but I'd insisted on riding today. The weathermen said the rain would stop around midday. 'I can drive you Adam,' Mum insisted, but I held my ground. I planned to ride over to the Abbot farm if Nick didn't show up at school. He hadn't shown up on Monday and I was worried, because Mr Hodgson looked worried. I think that was because he hadn't got any phone call or email from the farm explaining why Nick didn't come to school on Monday. Maybe Mr Hodgson put it down to the weather, or maybe he thought Hannah had had another one of her 'turns'. Mr Hodgson looked worried and out of sorts all day long. If Nick didn't turn up to school that Tuesday, I was going to ride over and check things out.

We weren't allowed out to play on Monday or Tuesday, but when the rain finally stopped on Tuesday, Mr Hodgson opened the windows in the classroom. I noticed that he stood there for a few moments, looking out, his forehead creased. Perhaps he was looking out toward the Abbot farm.

A little before 3 o'clock I snuck out the classroom. I told the other kids to tell Mr Hodgson that I'd gone to the toilet if he noticed I was missing. I didn't think he would; he was too distracted. I planned to make it back before the final bell went off. If he scolded me, at least I could tell him that Nick was okay. It was tough riding the bike out to the farm: I had to go by the Little Compton Road rather than the back tracks, and the road dipped about two hundred yards before I reached the farm into a kind of valley – that's where the Junkaris men lived. I couldn't ride on the side of the road because it was under water and all slushed up, but I ploughed on through, the water at one point nearly coming halfway up the wheels, so one pedal was above the water, one pedal underneath. It was like riding through quicksand. At the worst point I

had to get off the bike and walk. It was hard work and I knew I was going to get into all sorts of trouble now; everything from the knees down was soaking wet. One or two cars passed me by as I finally made it out of the valley – a delivery truck, and a young family in a blue Ford – neither of them were locals; they looked at me in my school uniform like I was a circus freak, but at least it showed that people could drive up and down the Little Compton Road. I wondered how the postman, Arthur Clegg, in his spotless red uniform, would have gone about his daily routine. I knew he had got the mail out; he was like clockwork, more reliable than Big Ben according to my Mum, but he must have got absolutely soaked! I couldn't remember the last time I saw him get wet: I was so used to him in his immaculate red polo shirt and shorts, those protruding white forearms and legs which never tanned no matter how often they were exposed to the sun, with his cycling helmet, mobile device in one pocket which allowed him to log deliveries. He would have probably been the only villager out and about that Monday morning, when the heavens broke. And again this morning at first light, when it was still bucketing down. The only one.

I turned into the driveway of the farm, opposite where someone had parked an Escort on the side of the road. Riding on the gravel was like riding on wet sand. I also saw footprints in the gravel which made me a little scared; you could tell they were recent, and they belonged to a man – they were a work-boot, and there was only one set of prints walking towards the house. None coming back.

When I made it to the house everything was dark and deserted. I leant my bike against a low stone wall and started moving towards the house. I saw Sidney's truck beside one of the shed but nothing else. I called out, for Nick. Usually there's someone about, Peter or Sidney or Hannah. You just yelled out and someone heard you. It was eerie, how quiet it was. Except for the animals – they were still in their pens. They would have had a pretty scary couple of days, I thought – with all that rain.

Suddenly the kitchen door flew open and Teddy Butler came staggering out of the house. 'Don't go in the house!' he yelled at me.

I just stared at him. My legs turned to water.

He looked at the outbuildings, then at the house, then back to me. 'Go!' He screamed my name once or twice, then yelled at me that 'something bad has happened!'

I wanted to know what had happened, but the words got stuck in my throat. He looked seriously crazed – like you'd see in a horror movie. Possessed! His eyes were wild, and he was breathing so deeply his shoulders were shaking.

'Is Nick okay?' I asked. 'Where's Peter?' I never thought Peter would let anything bad happen to Nick. A lot of people didn't think Peter was very tough, but he could handle himself. And he was a crack shot. 'Where's Nick?' I said again. My voice was trembling, and I started backing away from him, to where I'd put my bike.

He took a few steps closer. Teddy told me that I needed to ride home as fast as I could. That I needed to tell my Mum that something really bad had happened and I needed to stay in the house.

I asked him *why*.

'Just do it!' he snapped. 'Now!'

I raced for my bike, almost falling over as I jumped on, and started pedalling as hard as I could. I only looked round once – to see what Teddy was doing. He was just standing there, watching me. I rode so hard along that sticky gravel drive that I was totally exhausted by the time I reached the road. Then I had to navigated through the flooded valley dips. I know it was gone 3.30 before I reached the High Street, because I heard the school bell ringing. I wondered whether Mr Hodgson even knew that I'd snuck out, but I didn't care about getting into trouble now. Something really bad had

happened at the Abbot farm. I wiped my face, thinking it was water flicked up on my cheeks, but it was tears. Something really, *really* bad had happened. It took another five or ten minutes before I reached home. I dropped my bike on our front lawn and ran to the door. But before I got inside, before I got to tell my mum anything, I heard the sound of a distant siren, heading our way.

The long-awaited inquest into the massacre at Grange Farm in Compton Tamor began today in Thorpe Malsor, the hearing led by Coroner Wynne Baxter. The bodies of Sidney Abbot, his wife Mary, their children Peter and Hannah, as well as the child Nicholas Abbot and family maid, Amy Gleeson, were discovered at the family property two weeks ago, on Tuesday, October 9.

Graphic new details were aired before Coroner Baxter as authorities continue to investigate the case which has left the rural midlands community in a state of shock. The court was told that local resident, Ted Butler, was first to raise the alarm and call an ambulance and police to the scene. Sadly, all victims were long-dead by the time any help arrived. The father of the murdered maid, Gilbert Gleeson, the only surviving family member of any of the victims, told the court that the Abbots were of good stock, and his daughter never expressed any concerns or fear for her life in the months leading up to the killings. Other witnesses, such as the vicar Ben Ridley, gave similar evidence, saying he had been in contact with the victims only days beforehand, and there were no signs that such a calamity was on the horizon. The only dissenting voice was the farm secretary, Ms Barbara Handsworth, who insisted that Sidney Abbot had been fearful that his life might be in danger, but Ms Handsworth was unable to provide any details to support her claim. No motive for the gruesome attack has been ascertained, as the Abbot family were generally well-liked in the area, had no known enemies, and held no controversial views. Several locals have told the *Post* that the ancient village is a superstitious place, with a violent history, and that 'bad things happen here.'

One piece of fresh news which emerged in court was that among the documents found after the murders was a letter in Mary's handwriting, which had been placed in an envelope in her bedside drawer, and marked 'Not to be opened until my death.' The letter was addressed to her husband and children. It read: *My darlings, Should anything happen to me and I have to leave you, I write this to tell you of my love for you and to thank you for all you have given me. All I ask is that God will love and protect you through the years ahead, and that some day, God willing, we may meet again. My love always, Mary.* The date the letter was written isn't known, and no one knows what prompted her to write it.

The man leading the inquiry, DCI John Murdoch, from Darborough CID, confirmed that pathologists had determined the sequence of the murders, believed to have commenced on the Thursday evening, October 4, and – horrifically – continued for five days, the final killing taking place on the Monday morning, October 8. Five of the six victims died from gunshot wounds; in at least once instance a blunt instrument and knife was used. The inquest will resume tomorrow with medical evidence from the two pathologists who performed the autopsies on the six victims...

In this truck is a man
 Whose latent genius, if unleashed
 Would rock the entire nation
 Whose dynamic energy
 Would overpower all those who came into contact with him.
 Better let him sleep?
Peter Sutcliffe

The building had a strange air of being distorted; like it was meant to be a cottage rather than a large detached house, and somewhere along the way it had swollen out of proportion. The off-angle beams, the crooked half-timbering, the uneven ridge tiles, the numerous gables which all seemingly ran to different heights and degrees. Some of the windows were arched, some rectangular, some leaded, and none of them aligned. Even the front door wasn't quite level with the world. Everything seemed off-centre, unbalanced; it gave Murdoch a strange feeling, almost as though he was looking through a telescope at something directly before him. Murdoch imagined a near-sighted builder looking at the plans with a magnifying glass and then building off his memory. The result was striking, and strikingly nonaesthetic. Keeping with this, minimal care had been given to the garden: the stone walls surrounding the front of the property were bleak, broken in sections. Murdoch noted that the paint on the door and windowsills was flaking.

The man standing by the front door was slightly off angle, too, as if one side of his body was longer, or weighed more, than the other. Murdoch could tell from the way he just stood there, not moving, not blinking, that it wasn't going to be a friendly encounter. Oriel Claxton had already internalised the calculation that he could not benefit from the meeting; his eyes glowed with contempt as Murdoch and Fox showed their warrant cards and introduced themselves.

'I know *who* you are,' he said, not offering them entry. 'And I know *what* you are.'
 'We're trying to find who killed several members of your wife's family,' said Murdoch.

'Ties were cut, long ago.'

'For you,' said Murdoch. 'What about Ann?'

'For both of us.'

It was a mild day, grey, with a low cloud cover. The man's face also looked grey and washed out, but his attitude was unbending: the jutting aggressive chin, the large mouth with a natural quirk at the corners that made it look like he was on the edge of a perpetual grimace. And yes, those eyes brimming with contempt. Murdoch noticed that the man wore long leg boots, as if he was about to go out hunting.

'You told one of my officers that you never left this farm from the evening of Thursday, October 4 right through until the morning of Monday, October 8. Do you stand by that?'

'Has someone said I was elsewhere?' he asked.

Murdoch simply replied, 'We have lots of witness statements that we're following up on.'

'I'll take that as a 'no', then.' He watched as the blond DI scribbled something in her notebook. 'Neither myself, nor my wife, went out that long weekend. Had no reason to.'

‘Not even for any food or drink, a newspaper, cigarettes?’

‘Nope.’

‘And I suppose that you didn’t see or hear anything unusual or helpful over those several days?’

‘You’ve read my statement, so you know my answer.’

‘You said you heard several gunshots.’

‘Yeah, and I told your officer with his pretty little clipboard that I didn’t pay any attention to them, when they happened, or where they came from. The Abbot farm, as you can see, is on the other side of that valley. It’s tricky, at the best of times around here, to know the source of a shot.’

Murdoch could feel himself getting nowhere fast. ‘Can we speak with your wife, Ann?’

Claxton shook his head. ‘She gave a statement, and that’s all she’s giving. We know our rights.’

‘We know you do,’ said Murdoch, holding the farmer’s hard stare, ‘because you’ve both refused to voluntarily provide DNA and fingerprint samples.’ Murdoch wasn’t surprised at the man’s belligerence, but he wondered why Claxton was being so protective of his wife Ann, whether she perhaps knew something that was best left unsaid. ‘Is she upset at what happened?’

‘None of your business.’

‘Could I look at your right hand, Mr Claxton?’

The sudden change of question took him back.

‘I’ve been told you had a scratch in your right hand directly after the murders. You’ve been holding it out of view.’

He tried to grin, but his eyes were dark and seething. ‘Was that the postman – Arthur-bloody-Clegg? Or Mike-big-mouth-Styles?’ He lifted the back of his right hand; the scratch had mostly healed, but a thin red line, more than two inches long, was still apparent. It would have been a nasty scratch when it happened.

Erin yelped. ‘How did you get *that*?’

‘Gardening.’

It was Erin’s turn to eyeball him. ‘Pruning roses, by chance.’

He stared at her. ‘Maybe.’

‘You have roses on your property, do you? I had a look round and couldn’t see any.’

He kept staring at her.

Murdoch had a crazy thought: surely Oriel Claxton hadn’t cut himself on that rose by the back door of the Abbot home, and that was the reason why the killer had pruned it – paranoid the SOC experts would find his blood and DNA on the rose tree?

Murdoch asked, ‘When was the last time you spoke to any of the inhabitants of Grange Farm?’

‘Years,’ he replied. ‘Like I said, in my statement.’

‘But Ann spoke to them now and again, didn’t she?’

Once again, his hostile reaction to having his wife’s name brought up was immediate.

‘If so, we never talked about it.’

Murdoch looked over the farmer’s shoulder; the front door was open, though he couldn’t see far into the house – what he could see looked spartan, dim and colourless. He wondered whether Ann was standing close by, listening to their conversation. ‘Sidney never pressed charges against you for punching him in the face, did he?’

‘That was his choice.’

‘Smacking your own brother-in-law in the face – because you didn’t get your own way. Don’t you feel bad about that?’

Claxton shrugged. ‘Are you a police inspector or a counsellor?’

Murdoch smiled at him, because he knew that would piss him off. ‘You have to be both, these days.’ He turned to look at the architectural monstrosity which sat perched the crest of a facing hill; the building had no style, it was a lineal design, mostly brick, but with wood and stone and rendering aspects, as if the architect, like the one who’d built Claxton’s farmhouse, had only one wish: to desecrate the landscape. Maybe the curse of village had worked away at them, distorting their vision, turning their hearts ugly? Either way, the empty house – it’s owners had been living in Spain for the last few years apparently – was on the highest point of the hundred or so acres that the two sisters, Mary Abbot and Ann Claxton, had been bequeathed, but which had then been acrimoniously sold. Oriel could not fail to see that monstrosity in the distance every time he walked out his front door; it would have been a constant reminder of his sense of betrayal by the Abbot clan.

‘Is that bequeathed slice of land what caused all this angst?’ said Murdoch. ‘Or is there more to it?’

‘Mind your own business.’

‘It is my business,’ said Murdoch, but inside he sighed. All of a sudden he felt genuinely fatigued. ‘If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to go round, asking everyone in this village about you and your wife, particularly about Ann, given her blood ties to the dead people. I can do that. I can dig and dig – *and dig*.’

Claxton rolled his eyes. ‘That hundred acres was split between Ann and Mary. I wanted to keep the land; myself and Sidney could have farmed it together. He was a good farmer, he had better finances than me, but I’m prepared to work, and work damn hard, and we could have kept it in the family, so to speak. He basically told me to get lost.’

‘Which was his right, wasn’t it?’

Claxton let his head fall a little to one side, as if he was suddenly as tired as Murdoch, as if they’d been playing the same stupid game for too long and just wanted to be done with it. ‘You don’t understand.’

‘Try me.’

A couple of deep breaths. He looked over his shoulder, then re-zoned on Murdoch. ‘It was the money, of course, but it was more than that. We should have pulled together. You don’t realise how hard things were at that time; you don’t realise what was at stake. Other farms were going down across the region. Farmers were throwing in the towel. Several of them turned their farms into caravan sites. It just wasn’t worth the heartache anymore. This was the time of MCD, remember?’

‘What’s that?’ interjected Erin.

‘Mad Cow Disease,’ said Claxton. ‘Maybe a little before your time. The government bastards forced farmers to slaughter eight million animals – one in eight of all farm animals in Britain, and almost always for no good reason whatsoever. Few people were ever aware that only a very small percentage had the disease. Another chapter of incompetence by the State. But no one spoke out on our behalf.’ He shook his head, more sad than angry. ‘You know, more than a year after the foot-and-mouth epidemic was over, the Welsh Assembly announced that as a precautionary measure it was going to slaughter tens of thousands of healthy sheep around the Brecon Beacons. The pre-emptive cull policy so enraged Janet Hughes, a Welsh environmental sciences teacher, that she bought 10 sheep and took the Assembly to court. Even though the action was completely illegal, the courts bowed to the State; they bankrupted Janet in

the process, bailiffs even taking her 12-year old son's toys for outstanding legal fees. When it was shown that not one of the tens of thousands of sheep killed on the Brecon Beacons was infected, the powers-that-be rushed through an Animal Health Act which gave them powers to kill any animal they wanted, without having to give a reason.' He looked at the two coppers. 'That's the reality we were up against to keep our livelihoods, to keep our way of life, to keep Britain self-sufficient. I was on the edge of losing everything. Sidney was prepared to throw me to the wolves.'

And you're still gut-filthy angry, thought Murdoch. Despite himself, Murdoch felt a smidgen of sympathy for the other man. But was Oriel Claxton angry enough to kill Sidney all these years later? Would he become so enraged and twisted that he would plot to kill Sidney's entire family? None of Grange Farm would come his way. If he was that deranged, surely he would have wanted Sidney to know what had happened – but this killer took out Sidney before wiping out his wife, daughter and grandson. 'Mr Claxton: did you burgle the Abbot farmhouse six months ago?'

Either he was a good actor, or he had absolutely no idea what Murdoch was talking about. 'Who said they were burgled?'

Murdoch didn't reply.

'Not Barbara Handsworth? Oh, Christ. She's a fucking fantasist. Don't listen to her: she was having a fantasy love life with Sidney, and he never looked twice at her.'

Murdoch raised an eyebrow. For someone who'd supposedly had no contact with his brother-in-law in two decades, he seemed to have a pretty good grasp of what was happening between Sidney and the farm secretary. 'What about the desecrated headstone of an Abbot ancestor. Did you do that?'

'I punched him in the face,' said Claxton. 'Man against man. Do you really think, twenty years later, I would sneak around a cemetery late at night, like a teenage daredevil, and graffiti a relative's headstone?'

Probably not, thought Murdoch. Besides, he didn't know whether the burglary or the incident at the cemetery were directly connected to the murders. 'Did Peter Abbot pilfer stuff from Grange Farm?'

'Bits and pieces, most probably,' said Claxton. 'Sidney was tight, and Peter, ever since he was knee-high to a grasshopper, was a wastrel.'

'Drugs?'

Claxton's gaze went eastward, towards the Abbot farm. 'There were whispers. Especially when he went off to Amsterdam a couple of times. But I don't think anything *bad* was going on – just some personal use. Peter was the sort of guy who could never cut along the dotted line, but he had to be secretive. Sidney would never have put up with that kind of thing. Is that your angle, Inspector? A drug cartel wiped them out?'

'We're keeping an open mind,' said Murdoch.

'Right.'

'What about Crispy?'

'The family dog?'

'You know his name.'

'Yeah, why wouldn't I? I'm told that the O'Donnell family have taken him on. What's so important about a dog?'

Murdoch left that question unanswered.

Our belief in civilisation rests on the assumption that
there is no one out there who wants to kill us.

Agatha Christie

Some people say that I know everything that goes on in this village. That when it comes to spreading rumours, I'm the Compton Tamor equivalent of the nine-headed Lernean of Hydra! That isn't true. I just have an interest in human affairs. My wife Louisa always tells me that I should have been a detective – like you! But I couldn't do your job. I couldn't deal with the *slime*. It's one thing to inquire about the latest eruption in the Teddy-Lucy relationship, or whether Ann Claxton is planning to leave Oriel after all (and who could blame her!), or consider what Arthur Clegg gets up to in that lonely stone cottage of his, but... what you do is *tough*. Dead bodies. Blood! Grieving relatives! That isn't me at all. And remember; I'm a shop-owner; I have to sell products to survive. Half my clientele use this place as a cornerstone of social interaction – keeping people abreast of affairs helps keep me in business. I believe in circulation – circulation of blood in the body, of money, of ideas.

Anyhow, all these questions you're asking me have been asked by everyone who comes into my shop, and I've asked them to myself over and over again. Who? Why? Was it someone in this village that killed that poor family, or an outsider? I don't know. I don't think we'll ever know.

From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law...

Where was I during all that time? That's easy. Every day but Sunday I work in this shop. Plenty of witnesses to that! At night? I close up around 6 p.m., and me and the wife live in the house at the back of the shop. No; I didn't receive any visitors at those key times: people don't go out on the anniversary of Tilley's execution: they've been staying indoors for nearly 600 years, so why stop now, hey! My wife? No, Louisa isn't here at the moment; she's down with her sister on the coast; her sister – Betty – lost her husband a few months back and just isn't coping at all. So yeah, I was all alone. I don't even have a pet parrot to vouch for me. And they can, you know: some parrots have a vocabulary of 4000 words. That's more than those three Junkaris men put together! Don't tell them I said that.

The Abbots? They were good people, kept to themselves. The only one I had much to do with was Peter. He was the one who usually left the farm – you know, to pick up supplies, or run an errand; he was the only one who had any kind of social life, or ever went up to London, or the Continent. I don't think he was a black sheep exactly, more of a lost soul, caught between familial loyalty and the urge for freedom and independence. I don't think anyone in that family was especially close to one another, if you know what I mean, but there was a kind of loyalty amongst them to stick things out. That farm, all that land – they had blood ties to it, right? It's a shame what happened with the Claxtons – sort of put a bad taste in the air, if you know what I mean.

The servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows.

Yeah, Peter never quite fitted in; I remember that he often used to head out by himself as a kid rather than mucking in with others. Back in the old days, before Mary really started taking a turn for the worse with her religion, I'd sometimes deliver goods to the farm. I'd see Peter stalking round the outbuildings and dens by himself. Brooding. Solitary. He'd go out by himself to the ancient saltings and marshlands that stretched from the creek at Harrington to Dingley Point.

He was lazy I suppose; maybe he hung around at the family farm because he was too lazy to strike out on his own. I think he respected his father and put up with his mother; I don't think he had any brotherly love for Hannah, they had very little in common, and I think Peter struggled with her moods; they pumped so many different drugs into poor Hannah I think they did more harm to her than good. Peter liked Nicholas, though. Nicholas was a smashing kid. I know there are rumours that Peter was dealing with or stepping on the toes of the two Junkaris boys, but I don't think that's true. I never saw the Peter with either one of those troublemakers. I think Hannah used to flirt with the older boy, Damon Junkaris, but only to piss off Theo; Theo was very jealous and possessive of his older brother. Theo absolutely idolised Damon.

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wished it were already kindled!

I felt sorry for Peter when they sent him up to a strict boarding school, in Norfolk. He was only eight years old; it was like Sidney and Mary were grooming him for a future life of an upper-middle class gent and business owner. Poor kid must have been frightened and bewildered, and while it may have taught him self-sufficiency, I don't think it served him well. I think he saw it as a kind of betrayal – especially as Hannah was still at the family home and never sent away. I think Peter sometimes suspected Hannah might have played on her mental issues to win sympathy of her parents: I mean, they gave her an allowance, she never had to work, and they employed a full-time maid who spent a lot of time looking after Hannah's whims.

When Peter came back from school he joined the Cadets, became a crack shot, and went on the occasional field trip and summer camp, but he didn't like the military drills and over-regimented way of life and decided against joining the army as his grandfather and uncle had.

Yeah, I'd say he did the usual substances in his late teens, early twenties: drinking, smoking, light drugs – grass mainly. Maybe cocaine; that gets used a fair bit up there in the Garrison Town. He passed some on, sold a bit; I think it was more about the thrill, the rebellion, the anarchy, than anything else. I don't think he ever crossed any heavy characters; he wasn't that sort. He routinely drove up to Collingwood on weekends – not when the harvest was on, mind you – which was probably the nearest thing around here to the bright lights of London. He had a few girlfriends, never had any problem picking them up, but he never settled with any of them either. I was told that he once had it off with Lucy Broadbent. Yeah – that's Teddy Butler's fiancé. Yeah – the guy who found the bodies. Small world, right?

I thought Peter would develop a wanderlust to travel, but other than a couple of times on the Continent, he stayed put. It was his habit to head off on the long weekend of the 'curse'; I think the 'small-mindedness' of the villagers on the matter got to him.

But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

I was told his relationship with father was a bit of a roller-coaster; Sidney wanted him to inherit the farm, but Peter had not made his mind up.

Peter got free alcohol at local pubs in exchange for fresh produce from the farm – I'm not sure if Sidney condoned that. I know there were rumours that things were missing from the farmhouse: cash, the odd bit of jewellery, some farming equipment – perhaps not surprising, because a lot of menfolk worked there in the summers and more than once Sidney had trusted gypsies and immigrants to muck in for some cash. So I'm not saying Peter was behind any of it; the farmhouse was usually unlocked and pretty easy pickings – providing you were game to go on a property with three crack shots living there. The only time Peter seemed to enjoy the farm was harvest time: he got to boss some of the local menfolk about, and ride around in his combine like Lord Almighty; I think he was quite happy about that. He did his bit around the farm, but no more; if he could delegate, he would, and if he could get away with doing nothing at all, even better.

My wife visited Mary once or twice over the years, but poor Louisa felt a little uncomfortable out there on the farm. All that religious stuff on the walls and sideboards, all those Bibles. Louisa was there, once, when Peter brought home a girlfriend who stayed overnight in his room; Mary very much believed that sex before marriage was a sin in the eyes of God; she confronted the two of them when they were at the breakfast table, literally holding up the Bible like a crazy evangelist and quoting screeds of moralising scripture at him. How did Peter reply? With contempt. My wife was shook up. She said they were like spiders, trapped in their own web that they'd each spun in private fury.

Mary never stopped trying to foster religious faith and fervour in her son, but Peter wasn't having any. He wasn't freaked out by it like Hannah. Once or twice Peter talked to me about going elsewhere, doing something else. He had a notepad which he'd sometimes jot down ideas on while having a pint at the White Hart. People used to rub him up about it: he was always jotting down his thoughts and plans, but he never acted on any of them.

From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law...

Last time I saw Peter? That was probably at the end of summer, maybe six weeks before the murders. He popped in to pick up a crate of mineral water. It was a gaspingly hot and long summer, and he liked his flavoured mineral water. They'd managed to have a profitable harvest despite the drought, but it wasn't as good as usual, and it was extra hard work. He didn't say much to me, but I remember thinking that he looked a little deflated, and I thought, 'your heart's not in it. You're just not cut out to be a farmer.' Farming is very much a feel thing; it's experience with each field, and luck with the weather too. The gods never made Peter to be a farmer.

That was the thing with the Abbots. They'd been here for generations, but you never really got to know them. I don't think they knew each other. Nothing was out in the open. They were all tugging in different directions: Sidney with his ambition and disappointments; Mary with her delusions; Hannah with her fears and dreams; Peter with his secret contrivings. None of them seemed aware that time was running out, that they were being watched, studied, that there was a killer out there, biding his time and waiting to strike them all down. To be honest, I still can't wrap my head around what has happened. Anyway, I've done my best, though I don't know if anything I've said helps you very much.

Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully.
Thou lovest evil more than good, and lying rather than to speak righteousness.
 Thou loveth all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue.
*God shall likewise destroy thee forever, he shall take thee away, and pluck thee out of
 thy dwelling place, and root thee out of the land of the living.*
Psalm 52

He kept banging on about the weather. How damn hot it had been that summer. The unrelenting, unending heatwave. Hot enough to fry an egg on the car bonnet. Day-after-day blue-white skies and a burning sun you couldn't hide from, that you came to hate, that you begged would just fuck-off for a single afternoon. He promised he'd never whine about the cold ever again. *Never* again. It was a summer that broke all the rules, all the records, defied all mercy. Classes at school, and even in the major universities, were cancelled. Students and teachers were fainting left, right and centre. Building sites partly shut down. Air conditioners ran 24/7. Even after midnight, even in the bewitching hours, the air outside was hotter than inside. It was hell on earth, or, perhaps, more like hell than earth.

They were in a one-bedroom flat in London. Murdoch standing with his back to a window that overlooked Regent's Park, Erin on a poxy two-seater beside a man of uncertain age, uncertain nationality, whose name was 'Freddie' and who couldn't stop talking about the summer that was. As if it hadn't actually ended six weeks ago. As though it would *never* end.

'And to think the drought broke that very morning – the morning the last murder on the farm was committed!'

Freddie shook his head. It was all too much for him. 'No wonder poor Hannah suffered from mild psychosis. How could she not – growing up in this fuck-off world and in that fuck-off place?'

Surely it was true, thought Murdoch – what people had told him: Hannah had picked out this creepy stool simply to piss off her parents, Mary especially. Hannah would have known how horrified C of E Mary would be to know her daughter was heading to London to shag this jerk. But had she loved him? Had she shagged him?

Murdoch tried to remember whether he'd seen Freddie at the funeral; he couldn't recall whether he had or not. He had walked around Compton Tabor the previous evening; there were no rough sleepers in the remote rural village slugging cheap alcohol, no one out warming themselves by an open fire. Here, rather in his home town of Darborough, you feared the things you couldn't see or hear. Like an automaton, he'd found his steps heading towards Eastwood Cemetery. He drifted between the grave sites. The mist had thickened and the quarter moon offered little illumination, its diffused light shimmering on the headstones. The inscriptions wavered like incantations. There were several flower bouquets by the Abbot graves; Murdoch read every card or note that had been deposited: there wasn't anything from Freddie Armani. It must have been midnight, and he'd stood there, staring at the earth by his feet. Perhaps the stress he was under was short-circuiting his nervous system, but for a moment he almost thought he heard the voices of the brutalised victims crying out at him from the earth. Several times he looked over his shoulder, expecting to see the silhouette of the killer observing him with a measure of mild curiosity, but all he saw were shadows.

Murdoch rezoned on the young man before him. A young man he didn't like. 'How long were you together?'

'Nine months?'

'You met?'

'At a Club in Soho. We just got talking – and hit it off.'

Birds of a feather, thought Murdoch. Or maybe something else was going on. 'What do you do for work, Freddie?'

'I'm in job transition, right now.'

'Right. How long have you been in England?'

'Hey! I was *born* here, man.'

Murdoch glanced at Erin who was shaking her head at him. 'Did you ever go to the Abbot farm?'

'Once,' said Freddie. His naturally olive skin blushed a darker colour. 'It wasn't a pleasant experience.' He paused, as though looking for better words, then shook his head a couple of times. 'Let's just say it wasn't a pleasant experience.'

'Confrontational?'

'No way!'

He almost shouted the words, and Murdoch contemplated just how many different drugs Freddie Armani might have pumped into his veins over the last ten years.

'It was the opposite of confrontation, yeah? It was utter indifference. They just looked at me as if I was dirt on the end of the shoe.'

Who could blame them? thought Murdoch. 'And this was in the middle of summer?'

'Yeah, during the harvest.'

'You offered to help out?'

'*What?*'

'Doesn't matter. You know that Hannah was on medication, don't you?'

'Yeah. She was trying to get off the stuff; she was sick of it. That maid was trying to help her.'

'Amy?'

'Yeah – fucking Amy.'

'Why 'fucking Amy'?'

Freddie started waving his arms around. 'I shouldn't have said that. I apologise. Amy was nice. But Hannah and Amy were, like, best friends, you know.'

I actually don't know, thought Murdoch, once again considering the possibility that a sexual relationship may have sprung up between the two young women at the Abbot farm. 'You're saying you were jealous of Amy?'

He looked sheepish. 'I was, I suppose. I just wanted to get more serious with Hannah. Wasn't gonna happen with Amy around. She didn't like me very much. But Amy was trying to get Hannah off the drugs as well.'

Murdoch had been told the only reason Hannah went out with Freddie was to get back at her parents. Maybe there was a secondary reason: to hide where her true feelings lay. Perhaps Hannah had come to realise that it wasn't a man she wanted, but another woman. Maybe that was why she easily forgot her soldier-husband and didn't put up his photo anywhere: she wanted a future free of men.

'Did you know Peter?'

Freddie shook his head. 'Not really. Peter just looked down his nose at me, and that was about it. If you didn't know better, you wouldn't have guessed they were siblings.'

People had remarked to Murdoch how different Peter and Hannah were, in personality and outlook. Even in photos they didn't look like sister or brother. Only when they

were dead, laid out on a morgue slab for their final photo shoot, their eyes closed, did their expressionless bloodless faces affirm that they were kin.

‘Never did drugs with Peter, Freddie?’

‘I never even had a conversation with him. Farmers aren’t exactly friendly folks, are they?’

‘They don’t suffer fools gladly, by and large,’ said Murdoch in a neutral tone. Before the other man could compute that, he asked, ‘How about the Junkaris family?’

‘Who?’

‘Gary, Damon, Theo: ever dealt with them?’

‘I don’t even know who they are.’

Murdoch paused, then asked, ‘Did Hannah ever say anything to you that might explain what happened to her, and her family?’

He was shaking his head before Murdoch finished the question. ‘Not a syllable. I mean, she had some issues. Who doesn’t? I have a few myself.’

‘Stick with the question, Freddie.’

‘When she was in a low mood, she was really low, and sometimes she just twiggged off. I remember once she was talking to someone on her mobile and the call got cut, and she just flipped. I mean, she went fuck-off crazy. Just because a call got severed. As if MI6 or the CIA had done it. All this shit about the Devil conspiring with her mother against her; it was like one of those 1980 horror movies; I reckon the fuckers who wrote those movies were on anti-psychotics. Once I had to call Sidney out – he was really pissed, having to drive here to London, but Hannah was going off her nut and I didn’t know what else to do. Hannah had previously told me that if she ever went fuck-off crazy I should call Sidney: he was the only one who knew how to calm her down. She once made me promise to look after Nicholas if she suddenly disappeared.’

Freddie stared off into space.

‘And?’

‘Well, I promised I would, but it was just words. She was just in one of her states – things like that happened when her medication was wearing off and she was due her next shot. More than anything else, she just got really unhappy. But like I said, the last couple of months she seemed happier. I thought she might have met someone, but she said she hadn’t. But I remember that she smiled when she said that, which made me think that she was in love with someone else. So I was spinning a little, you know? I couldn’t get that smile out of my mind.’

Murdoch exhaled. He thought again of the terrible last hours of Hannah’s life, bound and helpless. He forced himself to imagine it all in slow motion, like reviewing a movie frame by frame. Usually, he tried to distance himself emotionally from the mental images he constructed; if he allowed himself to hear the victim’s cries, feel her fear, experience her helplessness, his own anger and revulsion and pity would paralyse him. He wouldn’t be able to do his job. But in this case, he broke the rules. There must have been significant interaction between the killer and Hannah. After binding and presumably gagging her, he moved her into the shed where Sidney had been killed, and he must have sat with her, keeping watch, hour after hour. What did they talk about? Had the killer made the decision already to kill her, or did he give her a chance to talk her way to freedom? What did he want from her? It wasn’t sex, and he did not physically abuse her, nor did he damage her face. Was it significant that Hannah was killed in the same outbuilding as her father – the only two victims to be found next to each other?

As though able to read Murdoch's mind, Freddie said in a ragged voice, 'I have nightmares, of what it had been like for her in those last moments. Looking up into her killer's face. The last image she saw on earth – the killer's eyes! All that hatred, vengeance, insanity. What had she seen? *Who* had she seen?'

'That's what we intend to find out, Freddie,' said Murdoch. 'Tell me about your relationship with Hannah.'

His eyes darted. He wiped his brow. It wasn't that hot today, but he hadn't stopped sweating, as if thinking about that summer had twigged off a physical reaction. Or maybe it was the dope still in his body from last night's party. Plenty of party drugs caused profuse sweating; maybe the thought of cops coming to his digs to question him, had seen him reach for a couple of pills. 'There's not much to say. We didn't really have a 'relationship'. We just hung out together. There were times she just needed to get away from the farm. We didn't have regular phone calls or hooks up; I wanted us to, but it never progressed that far.'

'Did you spend much time with Nicholas?'

'Hardly ever. Sometimes Hannah would drive over during the day, when the boy was at school, then head off to pick him up.'

'Here in this flat?'

Freddie balked a little at the tone, at the way Murdoch made the question sound like an accusation. 'Yeah, here, wherever. Like I said, it wasn't formal.'

'What was she like as a Mum?'

He didn't like that question either. 'She loved her boy to bits, but I think she struggled. Someone in her world once raised the possibility of fostering out the kid for a while, just so she could get her shit together. I know Nicholas got a bad ear infection once and the nurse or doctor expressed concern because Hannah had been late taking the kid in. I know Hannah felt really guilty about it; she kept saying it was her mother's fault, because the old girl wouldn't top jabbering on about God; Hannah couldn't think straight. I remember Hannah once just grabbing my arm and yelled at me that God was on *her* side, not her mother's; God loved *her*, she said.' Freddie shivered, despite himself.

'Did Hannah ever mention suicide?'

'She'd talk about characters in the Bible who made sacrifices, things like that. I didn't really get what she was saying. There seemed to be so much *guilt* inside her. She once quoted something to me, and I wrote it down.' Freddie feverishly searched through a pile of books, magazines and newspapers stacked up against the leg of the sofa behind him. Then he was flicking through pages in a notebook. Like his life depended on it. 'Ah, here we go. *'There is no sin, no matter how great, that God cannot pardon.'* That's what she said. Is that Jesus talking?'

'No,' said Murdoch. 'It's actually the last words of Gilles de Rais before his execution in 1440 for serial murder.'

Freddie's eyes bulged. He gulped and put the notebook back where he'd found it.

'Did she ever talk about her ex-husband?'

'Only that he died in the war.'

'Did she tell you that he was the last to die?'

'No.'

'What about the future?'

He shook his head. 'I wanted to plan a future, but she had a real fuck-off attitude to that, I don't know why.'

Murdoch paused, ostensibly to check DI Fox was keeping pace with her shorthand, but also to see how Freddie reacted to the extended silence. As expected, Freddie

didn't like the silence one bit. Unbelievably, he began to sweat some more. 'Freddie, I don't want you to be offended, but I've got to ask you some personal questions.'

'I don't do drugs,' he said.

'We're not interested in that. I want to know about your sex life with Hannah.'

It took a few seconds for him to comprehend what he was being asked. He blinked his confusion and disgust. His chest heaved a little, like he'd just finished climbing Mount Ventoux on a bicycle with flat tyres. 'Why do you want to know about *that*?'

Murdoch planted a half-smile on his face. 'I wouldn't ask if I didn't need to. Do you need a glass of water?'

'I don't drink no fuck-off water. I've got other stuff in the fridge. Can you believe my fridge broke down in the summer –'

'Freddie. Simple question: did you ever have sex with Hannah Abbot?'

He really wasn't happy about the question. About Murdoch's total lack of class. 'You must have a sick mind.'

'I'm hunting a sick mind, Freddie. You want me to catch the bastard who did this?'

'Yeah, of course –'

'Nine months, you said; you'd known her nine months, you were keen on her; she came to this flat, she introduced you to her family at the farm. Just tell me: were you fucking her?'

'Was I - ? Man, you've got a real *bad* attitude.' He looked at Erin for support but didn't get any. 'This is unfair.'

The two detectives waited.

Freddie looked at each of them, then his head fell. 'Just once,' he said.

'Once,' echoed Murdoch.

'Yeah. We'd only known each other a week or two. Here, in my bedroom. It started okay, but halfway through... Well, you could tell she was only half interested. It was a little embarrassing, but it was nice too. I mean, I didn't mind that. I thought if we got more serious, she would want that to happen, again and again. I was in love with her. Deep down, I knew she was a caring person, just messed up. Hey: who isn't messed up these days?'

'Just once,' said Murdoch. Then he said, 'She had someone else, didn't she?'

'I don't know.'

'Yes, you do.'

Freddie stared at the dirty carpet by his feet.

'Hannah was in love with someone else, wasn't she? That's why she just went through the motions with you.' Murdoch didn't have any evidence to back up his statement, but the knowledge came to him as if through his pores. Moreover, there was an ache in Freddie Armani, the ache of betrayal. It was palpable.

'Did you want to kill her Freddie for playing games with you?'

'*What?*'

'For using you?'

'No way!' His words came out in a whimpering tone, like a puppy left out in the rain. Murdoch looked around the tiny flat while the miserable man opposite him muttered under his breath, and repeatedly wiped his brow. Everything in the flat was basic, minimalist, cheap. The only religious insignia in the house was a hanging crucifix, splayed with the forlorn figure of Jesus. Murdoch wondered whether Hannah had bought the item and hung it on the wall. The crucifix was at eye-level, next to a framed photograph of Freddie and Hannah, taken in the nearby Regent's Park by the look of it. Beneath the crucifix, in gold-plated letters printed on an oak shield, was an inscription from Lamentations 2:21:

*Young and old lie together
In the dust of the streets;
My young men and maidens
Have fallen by the sword.
You have slain them in the day of your anger;
You have slaughtered them without pity.*
All three people in the flat looked at it. None of them said a word.

It's funny. All you have to do is say something nobody understands
and they'll do practically anything you want them to.

J. D. Salinger

Erin didn't know what the bastard was up to.

She found him that morning sitting behind his desk, pouring over the autopsy reports. He'd read them before, and had chatted to the pathologists, but now he was studying them again – or at least one page again – with renewed interest.

'You wanted to speak to me, Guv?'

He nodded without looking up. He kept reading for a moment, then his eyes narrowed and stared at the nearest wall, in the direction of the incident room. Erin imagined he was seeing that crime board with the six faces attached. 'Edmond Locard,' he said, more to himself.

Erin knew Locard was a famous name in criminal investigation. During the opening years of the twentieth century, the French forensic scientist established a principle that still guides the investigation of every crime, namely: 'every contact leaves a trace.' It was Locard's belief that criminals couldn't avoid leaving traces of their presence at a crime scene, and they always carried away with them some evidence that they'd been there. This should have been particularly true when a scene was littered with six dead bodies, but it hadn't turned out that way.

'I have a job for you, DI Fox.'

She waited. *Another wild goose chase?*

He said, still looking at the wall. 'Our killer was always in control, wasn't he?'

'Like a soldier?'

Murdoch went on, 'His efficiency, the way he cleaned up after himself, how he never seems to have made a mistake. I say he planned it; most people say it was dumb luck. But if I'm right...?'

'Yes?'

'Remember yesterday, when we were at the Grange Farm and I looked through all the bins, inside the kitchen and everywhere else?'

Erin nodded. Whatever Murdoch had been looking for, he hadn't found it. When she'd asked him what he was doing, he'd stayed mums.

'Well, that's why I came in this morning and have spent the last hour reading these autopsy reports.'

He looked down at the papers spread out on the desk in front of him. He said, 'Rubbish collection along the Little Compton Road was on Wednesdays, right.'

'Yep.'

'We presume that the killer first came to the farmhouse on the Thursday evening, and was last there on the Monday morning. The place has been sealed off ever since.'

Erin wondered what he was getting at. 'That's right.'

'Well, I gathered up every bit of paper, receipt, you name it, and I've looked at their financial statements, because Hannah, Amy, and Peter all used cards when they bought things; Mary and Sidney used cash. Barbara the farm secretary used both cards and cash, but she isn't relevant to this discussion.'

Erin asked, 'What do you want me to do?' She took out her notebook and pen.

He looked up at her for the first time. 'I want you to make a thorough and detailed list of what every member of the Abbot household ate.'

‘Sorry?’

‘What they ate, and where they bought their food. I know they occasionally shopped in the High Street, but sometimes they went into Thorpe Malsor and Harrington, and other places.’

She glared at him. ‘Are you serious?’

Murdoch scribbled a few words down on a piece of paper and handed it to her. ‘Don’t show anyone else that page. Find out where they bought that product from, who bought it and when. And yes, I’m deadly serious.’

I live in sin. I live dying within myself.
Michelangelo

Everything was dark now. I sat down by the old oak at the top of Dead Man's Hill. Lots of people came up here – but rarely at night-time. There were no stars visible in the sky, and I couldn't understand that: it had been a clear day, so it wasn't from a heavy cloud cover. It looked like there'd been a power-cut in the sky. No stars, no moon.

The only lights I could see were those on the Abbot farm: the kitchen light at the rear of the house was on; so was the light in one of the upstairs bedrooms. I could see a thin sliver of light to one side; maybe Sidney was out working in one of the sheds. Or Peter. *Fucking Peter.*

The other night me and my bro had caught up with Peter at the White Hart pub. He'd shouted us a drink: a full pint from Damon, a half-pint for 'little Theo'. There was a smirk on his face as he pushed the drink my way. 'Cheers, lads.'

'How's business?' Damon asked.

Peter paused, as if he needed to look at the harmless-sounding question from multiple angles. 'So, so,' he said at last. 'You boys?'

'Today is the same as yesterday, and the same as tomorrow, for us,' said Damon. 'Not much changes in these parts, does it. You got another holiday lined up?'

Peter grinned. 'Canary Island this Christmas, I hope.'

I could see the envy on Damon's face. Peter had the dosh to go to places like that. It wasn't just Amsterdam. My bro was sure that Peter had figured a way to bring back drugs through customs. Or maybe he mailed them back, somehow. Theo had a feeling Peter wasn't interested in the Canary Island beaches as much as the Las Palmas red light district. Peter liked slumming it; he liked the hustle, the underbelly, the vicing and pimping and dealing, or so Damon said. He liked talking about drugs: heroin, smack, spiff, Charlie, ecstasy, LSD, you name it – not that Peter ever used any of the heavy stuff, not like that boyfriend of Hannah, Freddie Armani. Damon told me that he'd heard on the grapevine that Freddie ran an independent drug lab somewhere in London. Damon told me that they produced Rohypnol at this lab, giving it out to young men as a rape-drug. Rohypnol, said Damon, kicked in 15 minutes after ingestion, and the effects lasted 4–8 hours. Like a strong sedative, Rohypnol had severe motor-impairing properties and sent the girls into a hypnotic trance; an added benefit was that it also caused 'anterograde amnesia' – meaning the girl who managed to escape from their clutches several months ago had no reliable memories of the event.

I wondered if Damon had ever used it himself.

'You got any stuff on you now?' Damon asked Peter.

Peter shook his head. 'I haven't done anything for ages.'

Damon sipped on his beer, then said, 'Bullshit.'

'Serious. I think I've grown out of it. Doesn't get you anywhere – not anywhere good. My Dad keeps telling me it's time I grew up. Maybe he's right about that.'

'You're no more a farmer than I am, Peter Abbot.'

Peter looked at both of us. 'Aren't you farmers? How else do you make a crust?'

There was a suave, mocking aspect to his tone. I kept looking at Damon, not sure whether this was a friendly conversation or otherwise, not knowing if something

might be about to tick off. Before spotting us, Peter was chatting to a couple of other blokes in the corner, along with a few nice-looking chicks. The other men looked to be in their early forties, and they looked like hard nuts. Soldiers or ex-soldiers, maybe. One of the women, a real eye-popper in a mini-skirt, kept looking over at Peter as if she was right keen on him. (No woman had ever looked at me like that.)

I shook the image from my mind. I wasn't sure if my eyes were playing tricks, but I thought I saw a shadow moving across the courtyard at the back of the Abbot house. *Was that a man down there?* I squinted harder, but everything was blurred and indistinct, the shadows merging into the natural blackness.

I like the dark. I remembered the first time I got in trouble with the cops. Can't remember the pig's name, but he kept calling me a perv and a nonce, for flashing a girl in the forest. Big deal. I was only doing it for a laugh. I was sure Damon would get a kick out of it, when I told him. But the cop wouldn't let it go. *Fucking perv. Right fucking nonce. Aren't you?* Maybe it was *his* daughter who ran off screaming! As he walked me out the back door of the police station to send me on my way, after hours of questions and paperwork and phone calls, I saw him look up to where the security camera was, then the next minute I knew I was on the ground. Had I tripped – or had he - ? I felt something hit me low down, right in the kidneys. I gasped. Then I was being helped to my feet. 'You fell on the step, you perv. Be a little more careful next time.' A final shove, and I was on my way, my court date booked.

I told Damon about what happened. I didn't know how he'd react. We were at home, in the front room, which was always dim and dirty, because mum wasn't there to keep it clean anymore. Damon looked at me with dull eyes. He didn't speak for a long time. I didn't know if he was disappointed in me, or whether he was calculating his revenge. Damon never forgot things. Never forgave anyone. He was like that. Life was a contest to Damon; he kept a balance sheet in his mind. He was always thinking about ways of getting back at people who wronged him. He'd been like that with Mum, too, before she went away. I never admit that I miss mum, because I know Damon and Dad get aggro if I ever happen to mention her name – even after all these years. Maybe I miss mum because I was the weak one, the small one. I was born premature, mum once told me: I barely weighed five pounds. They said I was healthy and all that, but I never got as big as the other kids, and so I hated school; I preferred to stay indoors rather than join in the rough games the other kids played. High school was the worst: I'd spend each play-hour standing in a safe corner, away from the others. Damon would sometimes walk by and just look at me, shaking his head. But no one ever bullied me. Damon saw to that.

Damon once explained to me how bats produce sounds inaudible to the human ear and use echoes to locate their prey; but moths not only have soundproofing, they have ears specifically designed to listen in to an approaching enemy transmitter. To counter this, bats developed an irregular flight path, which confused the moths until they in turn came up with an ultrasonic jamming device. 'On and on it goes, Theo. Hunter and prey.' An escalating drama of nature. 'We're a part of that chain.'

'Kill or be killed?'

'Exactly. And in more ways than one. You gotta understand psychology, Theo.'

I didn't even understand what 'psychology' meant.

Damon was always reading books, then telling me what he'd learned – not that I could understand much of it. But it was exciting to listen to him: talking about Nietzsche and the Will to Life, and Superman theories and all that. He must have read

Beyond Good and Evil ten times! He had a deep understanding of human psychology. He had a magic about him which was very black. He was calculating, a deep thinker; he would often stay up all night long just thinking –

Down on Grange Farm the kitchen door opened. I thought someone had just entered the house, but then I caught movement across the courtyard and realised that a man had left the house and was moving to one of the outbuildings. Yes, it was definitely a man – something about his size, or the way he moved. The light inside the shed was turned off, making everything even blacker.

I stayed where I was. Watching.

‘Lizzie Borden did not do this crime! It was the work of an insane man
or of a person whose heart was black as hell itself.’
Defence counsel Jennings at Lizzie’s preliminary hearing

Tell me about the case.

Don’t be daft

What’s daft about it. I don’t mean details – privileged info: just general stuff; I might be able to help.

Yeah, right.

You’re so suspicious.

Experienced, you mean. That was a nice dinner by the way.

Don’t change the subject. And yes, I am a very good cook. I have to be, because I’ve been here for over a week and you haven’t taken me out once. Don’t you ever go out for fun?

No.

Why not?

I generally don’t like people. And vice-versa.

Deprivation for you is what daffodils were for Wordsworth.

I never liked Wordsworth. Too much fairy-talk, too much going on between his ears, too much orthodoxy. I prefer mystics like Keats.

Do you believe in God?

Why would you want to know?

Why would you avoid answering the question?

I think ‘God’ is the most misused word in the human language. There is no God in the man-made sense, only us and our sordid desires to drive us through our days until we’re too old or sick to desire anything. And then we are meat in a box, or ash in an urn.

Charming.

Voltaire put it best: ‘There is no God, but don’t tell my servant that, lest he murder me at night.’

Less than five people turned up at his funeral, not including his dog. Did you know that? Well then: stop thinking I’m not smart enough to understand the case. I’ve read all the newspaper reports, what’s being said on media, social networks. Then again, if you’re in your usual bad, defensive mood you may not want to read what this one journalist is saying about you.

Jaffa Cruz.

I think that’s him; he had an unusual name. Do you know him?

I tried to nick the bastard once – for interfering with an inquiry. Let’s just say that we are not friends.

You have no friends.

It’s simpler that way. What’s on the social media vine?

Everyone’s got an opinion as to what happened, usually a supernatural one.

Surprise, surprise.

There’s all this talk of the massacre being some kind of sacrifice – Satanic in nature, which is why the police can’t catch the killer – he isn’t part of this world.

Well, I met a witch today.

Really?

Yeah, she lives in Haxley Wood. Has a grey cat. Grows herbs.

Definitely a witch then. There's a site listing all the people known to have ever been accused of witchcraft and killed because of it – 236,870 and counting. Most are women. You see: I'm pretty smart. Smart enough to know that you must have picked something up.

I've picked many things up, but I don't know what's important and what isn't.

Such as?

Such as someone damaging a Abbot family headstone six weeks before the murders took place. Was that connected to someone ransacking through Sidney Abbot's study one evening, but apparently not stealing anything?

I'd say such petty things have no link to wholesale massacre. That's my opinion.

Yeah, but I hate coincidence. I think this killer was circling that farm and had been for months and months. Watching from Dead Man's Hill.

That's really creepy. Innocent people going about their lives and some sicko studying them from the shadows, ready to strike.

I'm not even sure this guy was in the shadows, Lisa. He might have been out in the open.

What about Hannah?

Why do you ask?

Because she seems to be the victim that gets the most attention. Several people on social media reckon she had mental health issues. Even the media writes about her as if she was the spark somehow.

I can't tell you about her, but yeah, there's a reason to think the killer zoned on her.

A jilted lover? Her soldier husband returned from the grave?

Maybe; it's also possible that she swapped sides.

Really?

I think she was in love with the maid they hired, a girl called Amy. And I think the feeling was mutual.

And that's relevant to the murders? You think this Amy girl's father killed them all because her daughter was having a lesbian affair with Hannah?

No. I don't think that at all. It could be that nothing sexual happened between them – just a close bond, which was developing.

Most people think it was an outsider.

They're wrong.

Give me one reason why they're wrong.

The killer pruned a rose bush at the back of the house.

So what?

Sociopaths aren't usually so tender. Anyhow, I looked everywhere for gardening tools like hand-pruners. This was a 350-acre farm; the Abbots weren't into fine-tuning the garden; that rose tree is about the only decorative plant in sight of the house. I finally found some gardening tools in one shed; they were in a container and covered in dust. The killer didn't use those pruners, of that I'm quite confident.

Then he took the pruners away with him – is that what you're saying?

More than that: I'm saying he saw that rose, it annoyed him the way it was straggly and neglected, with all those in-growing branches, and he gave it a prune. What he did, the next time he came to the farmhouse, was bring pruners to tend to that red rose, and then he took those pruners away with him. In other words –

He went back and forwards, from his place to the farm; ergo, he lives local. What a Sherlock you are.

It's one of those stupid details that just doesn't sit right.

Did you find the rose cuttings?

What?

You said he did quite a bit of pruning of that red rose, which I imagine is a kind of creeping rose, not a bush or standard. If the killer didn't think anyone would notice, he may have chucked those prunings along with his pruners and stuck them in his house or garden somewhere. Wouldn't that be the most stupid way a mass murderer was ever caught!

Fuck. I never thought of that.

Think about it John: if the killer has no red creeping rose on his property – and in this rural backwater, hardly anyone might, then how would he explain those cuttings in his compost heap? He would never, ever think that anyone would look.

Maybe you are pretty smart after all. There's another thing that bugs me: something that we found inside one of the victims.

Inside?

Yeah, something one of them ate, but I can't say anything more than that.

You don't trust me?

You said not to give details.

Is it possible that Daniel Tapper made it home? What a horror story that would make it: the endless summer... the long-dead soldier coming back to life... Old sins have long shadows: is it relevant that Sidney Abbot was also a soldier?

I don't know what is relevant, and what isn't. all I know is that I have six corpses and a killer whose laughing at me right now. He's reading the paper, and watching me walk around his village, and knows I can't nail him.

He might not be in the village John. He could be in Thorpe Malsor, or Harrington or Collingwood, or in any of the farms and hamlets nearby. Think of all those all those gypsies and illegal immigrants who worked on the Abbot farm during the summer; they'd kill for a farthing. And people like that are steeped in curses and dark magic. It would be impossible to track them, though.

Like you said, impossible.

What about the postman? It'd be the perfect cover, wouldn't it? A postman is always invisible, hiding in plain sight. What if he'd been doing shifty shit with the mail?

You think I should arrest him?

No need to be sarcastic. I take it that none of the victims were in bad health?

We checked that. There were no unusual or pressing health issues. Besides, this wasn't a murder-suicide pact.

People have arranged for others to kill them in the past. It almost has the feel of a professional hit, doesn't it?

There's a photo in the Post of a really aggro-looking guy, yelling at some journalist in the High Street, telling him to get away and leave them all alone.

Gary Junkaris. He lives next door to the Abbot farm.

I hope you've got him on your list.

Him and his two sons, yeah.

It all feels – religious, somehow. Religion can make otherwise good men commit the most horrific crimes. Tortures, massacres, sacrifices. It would explain why the killer felt comfortable to stay there so long, all those days, feeding animals, pruning roses, showing no signs of remorse – because he believed he was doing God's work. Killing that family was to him a divine mission. What do you think?

I think it's time I took a shower young lady, and time you went to bed.

Give ear to my prayer, O god, and hide not thyself from my supplication.

Because of the voice of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked: for they cast iniquity upon me, and in wrath they hate me.

My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.

Horror hath overwhelmed me.

Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell.

Those who appear the most sanctified are the worst.
Queen Elizabeth I

He stood at the kitchen sink, watching the steam rise from the tap as the hot water filled the white ceramic bowl. When the water overflowed, he turned off the tap and picked up the sponge, slowly running the sponge around the inside of the bowl. No matter how carefully he ate his morning oats and his assortment of dried fruit, there were always a few which stuck to the bowl, and it was best to clean them away before they set hard. Even when he was sure that the bowl was clean, he continued sponging it.

That was the thing with the human psyche. The more unusual and extreme the circumstances, the more a man or woman fell back on old ways. A man under severe stress becomes an automaton, unoriginal. His reflexes follow the track of least resistance.

Sponging away.

He looked out the window at the hay shed. There was Sidney's beloved Defender. It was a still morning, and nothing moved; there was no sound: it was almost as if the image he saw had been painted onto the glass of the window. He wondered whether Hannah was asleep or awake; she may have been faking falling asleep a couple of hours ago, thinking he might get careless, and she might escape. But he had bound her well, and there was only one door to the shed, which he'd padlocked.

Twelve more hours he thought. Hannah had twelve more hours.

He'd let Crispy out that morning, comfortable that the dog would come back on his own accord: they were friends now, even though the Irish Terrier still looked at him with nervous eyes, still guzzled down his food way too fast – once vomiting it all back up within minutes. The other day, the poor boy had just curled up in the corner of the living room, quietly whimpering. The dog never once went up the stairs, which was just as well.

He dried the bowl, over and over again. He'd brought his own food bowl to the farm, his own oats and bag of dried fruit, his own soy milk, and spoon and water and tea towel. Everything he needed. The only thing he hadn't brought to the farm was the gun.

He felt bad about Sidney. The rugged old farmer had fought. He took the shot front on, but like the brave soldier he was, he'd fought for his life. The sound of the rifle butt striking his face had been horrible: a dead thudding sound, echoed by Sidney's groans. Thud, thud, thud, until the fight went out of him.

'Why?' Hannah wanted to know.

She never got to ask the question, because he'd gagged her, but it was there in her eyes, in her quivering shoulders, in the terror that came out of her body. Why was he doing this to them? He'd sat with Hannah all last night; at one point he'd taken the gag off her mouth, scared she might swallow her tongue, or choke somehow. She was subdued at that point, having squirmed and cried and silently screamed for several hours. Hannah had just stared at him, a pinioned animal with no escape route.

'Recognise me?' he asked.

The hay shed was almost pitch black. He'd left the door open slightly, the only luminance coming from the searchlight above the kitchen door across the courtyard. She mumbled something.

He told her everything. Why he was doing what he was doing. Why she had to die. It was only fair, he thought. He told her that if she screamed he would gag her again. She didn't scream; she just sobbed and sobbed. At one point she asked after 'Nicholas', and once she said, 'Dad.' But that was all; she may have been in shock, with her brain-body connection overloaded, misfiring. Early morning, maybe an hour before dawn, her head fell limply on the ground and he gently tied the gag back around her mouth and came back to the farmhouse to make breakfast. It was important to keep his energy levels up, and oats were really good for you. He didn't know where he'd be without them.

Life is like getting into a boat that's just about to sail out to sea and sink.
Buddhist saying

They were speeding along the A4500, halfway back from London, when Murdoch's mobile rang. Murdoch's heart bounced with the noise, thinking it might be Lisa. He felt Erin Fox's inquisitive stare all over him. Lisa had promised she would never call or text him at work unless it was an absolute life and death emergency, and so far she'd been good to her word. Murdoch managed to pull the phone out, checking the incoming number, and audibly sighed relief that it wasn't her. Not that it was good news. It was Superintendent Sol Butcher, doubtless wanting to know where his Senior Investigating Officer was and why he was making such a balls-up of the biggest high-profile case in Campbell's tenure.

He lifted the phone to his ear. 'Yes sir?'

A quick message, that was all. Murdoch and Fox were expected to be in the Superintendent's office at 4 p.m. that afternoon. Murdoch's first thought was that there had been a leak in the team, that someone had fed a journalist like Jaffa Cruz a juicy morsel of information and all hell was about to break loose. Nothing stirred Butcher's blood more than bad press coverage. But it wasn't about the Press, or even about the stalled investigation. Instead, they had a visitor. Roland McCarthy, the local, MP. 4 p.m., *John, my office.*

Great, thought Murdoch. Political heat. That meant he would have to get his case notes together and explain why the investigation, more than two weeks old now, and nearly three weeks having passed since the first victim, Peter Abbot, was killed, had gone nowhere. Forget talking about a *result*. They didn't have a fucking clue. Murdoch could imagine how the politician's mind was working: how could three generations of an entire family be wiped out in cold blood, yet the police were unable to come up with even a theoretical solution to the crime.

The MP, holding onto power with razor-thin margins, had doubtless been watching the evening news waiting for a breakthrough; for some sociopathic scoundrel to be led in handcuffs through the back door of the Darborough Police Station. Nothing like that had happened.

He clicked on the car radio for a moment, wanting to hear a song, a soothing tune that might stimulate a memory, or a flash of inspiration – something to take him out of his clogged-up mind to a more creative place. Out belted a Marvin Gaye song – a soulful romance ballad, whose title eluded him. He glanced across at Erin, who couldn't blink the disdain out of her eyes. 'You don't like Marvin Gaye?' he asked.

'Before my time.'

'I thought you might have studied him: pathological relationship with his cross-dressing father, drug-addict, physically beat up his lovers, finally his father shot him dead. Right up your alley.'

Murdoch clicked the radio off.

'How are we going to play it?' asked Fox. 'The MP, I mean.' She seemed quite excited by the encounter. Any chance to meet powerful people turned her on, regardless of the circumstances.

'McCarthy has an academic background; he'd love nothing more than to hear Professor David Wilson's take. Do you have his final report?'

'Such as it is.'

Murdoch's right foot went down a little firmer on the accelerator.

'You're above the limit, Guv.'

'Within five percent, Erin. We can get away with that. What does Wilson reckon?'

Erin looked out the window as they crossed Fletcher's Grove and the bridge over Little Ford River, which marked the western border of the county. 'Half the report waffles on about disclaimers and caveats, and most of the other half is about things which don't exist in this case. There are no common denominators or indicators you'd expect to see in a serial killing case or mass murder. No consistent MO even though our killer appears to have been a highly organised killer; no signature, nothing to demonstrate the mindset of the killer or his emotional state.'

'Just the main points, please.'

'Wilson says our killer is too organised to be insane in the accepted sense of the word. He spent considerable time at that farm, suggesting he is socially engageable. There weren't any disorganized elements in the first two killings: the murderer was always in control of the death scene, the victims were left where they were killed; in Peter's case the body was hidden to avoid discovery over the next 48 hours; with Sidney the body was not hidden because the killer clearly knew he intended to kill or restrain the other adults and therefore there was no danger of discovery. Organised offenders are verbal, glib, and some are prone to keep their victims alive for long periods to exercise their charm or form a kind of relationship with the victim, which happened with Hannah. The other victims he killed quickly after coming into contact with them, which is a trait of a disorganised killer, but this was more likely out of necessity. Targeting his victims shows that he is organised, as does the fact we saw no overkill – attacking beyond what was required to end the victim's life. It appears that at least three of the adult victims were approached face-to-face; that is also a trait of an organised killer – a man of at least some intelligence and social skill. That he left no forensic evidence shows he is organised; that he cleaned up peripheral areas of the scene indicates he may be fundamentally disorganised, or maybe he was just extra careful. The victims were not ritualistically laid out, which implies he is not a fantasist. The killer offered no indication that he needs to be recognised for the murders; he hasn't boasted about his success, which suggests he is organised. Organised killers prefer to kill in surrounds they find comfortable, and Wilson believes the killer at some point before the murders took place developed an awareness of the farm and knew its environs. Given the level of sophistication involved in the attacks, Wilson thinks the usual age bracket for such killers – being 22 to 35 – cannot be applied here; put simply, the killer could be any age. And yes, while Wilson believes the killer was likely a man who knew how to handle a gun, it remains possible that the killer was a woman.'

Murdoch didn't argue the toss with any of that. Most of it was so generalised it didn't help. Wilson was trying to pigeon-hole a human killer into computer-generated criteria. But as far as Murdoch was concerned, general trends and statistics were of little use for a set of killings so unusual.

On Erin ploughed, in bullet-point fashion, knowing her Guvnor was growing less impressed by the minute: Each killing was slightly different in nature: Peter was a blunt strike from behind, then a cut throat; Sidney, two days later was a gunshot from in front, then a beating as the wounded Sidney fought back, then another gunshot; Nicholas was shot from behind while he lay asleep in bed; Mary was killed in her room in a kind of turkey-shoot encounter – from several yards, to up close and personal; Hannah was bound and gagged and then executed from close range; Amy the maid was blasted in the chest, followed by a head shot. None of the victims were

posed. No signs of remorse or contempt. He never touched any of their faces, except in the brief fight with Sidney. The primary and peripheral scene was left clean, suggesting the killer was forensically savvy, or like many schizophrenics, obsessed by cleanliness. Wilson could not say whether the killer knew the victims. The killer felt no need to leave any clues or message behind.'

'That last point is curious,' said Murdoch. 'Given the history of the village, and all the superstitious clap-trap, he could have left clues to try and throw us on a false trail, or put extra fear into the community at large, making our jobs even harder. The Manson group wrote a bloody message on the wall in the victims' blood to try and throw the police off their scent; Jeffrey MacDonald did the same thing; at Lower Quinton the killer murdered a black dog as a dead black dog was part of the old superstition, and so on. It would've been easy to play on the Compton Tamor curse, but he didn't. He could have easily left an army boot-print somewhere for us to find, pointing at the missing husband, but he didn't even do that.'

'Perhaps,' said Erin, 'because he wasn't local and didn't know anything about those details.'

Murdoch shook his head. 'The killer is in our face, Erin. We have his name in our incident room. We've spoken to him, or to someone who knows him.'

'So you keep saying, John. Then why didn't he throw the world a red herring to really spook everyone out?'

'Because he's smart,' said Murdoch. 'The crime scene tells us that. He was always in control. There's no sign of frenzy. I think he knew from the beginning that he was going to wipe out that entire family, and that's all he cared about. He was confident he could get away with it, without needing any camouflage or misdirection. He didn't want those things to backfire. Maybe he realised, from reading books like the ones in the Abbot living room, that the more featureless a crime, the harder it is to solve.'

'Or the motive was revenge,' said Erin. 'If your mind is filled with nothing but fulfilling your revenge, you don't worry about getting clever. The need to kill is everything. All the killer cared about was making sure every one of those Abbots ended up dead.'

A sign announced they were about to enter Market Darborough. Murdoch pulled over to the side of the road, where there was a gravel border leading onto unfenced fields.

'What's up?' asked Erin.

'Just a minute.'

She wondered if he was going to take a toilet stop behind a tree on a busy road; she wouldn't put it past him. Instead, he walked about twenty yards into a slightly muddy field, paced up and down a couple of times, head bowed as if deep in thought, then headed back to the car. Erin watched the performance with bafflement. A minute later they were speeding back to the nick 'What was that all about, John?'

'A thought, that's all,' he replied. Then he said, 'This killer knew Hannah Abbot. Hannah is central to the case. He needed, or wanted, something from her. There was a reason he didn't kill her in the house along with Mary and Nicholas, and instead marched her out into the shed. Did Professor Wilson give us anything on Hannah's death?'

'He believes the killer may have wanted her body to be found next to her father's, because that's who Hannah was closest to.'

'If so, that's another indication that the killer knew the dynamics of the household.'

'Not necessarily. Hannah may have begged the killer to see her father, and so that's where he took her before he executed her. Maybe he even thought that showing Hannah her father's body would break her down, if he needed information from her.'

Murdoch exhaled loudly. They didn't even have answers to the simple questions. They could not even be certain only one killer was involved; some villagers suspected that the Junkaris clan had executed the deed, and more than one local suggested the two brothers, Damon and Theo, entangled in a bizarre *folie a deux* relationship, had taken turns in committing the murders, as a kind of sick dare, egging each other on until there were no more people left to kill. Professor Wilson had pondered that latter scenario, too, pointing out that the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were a typical *folie a deux* storm, one superior, the other submissive: just like in the case of the Menendez brothers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, Leopold and Loeb.

At 4 p.m. they were in Superintendent Sol Butcher's office, which, keeping in the direction of the modern police service, resembled the suite of a company executive. You could have run a mini-conference given its size, thought Murdoch, along with the octagonal mahogany board table and high-backed chairs, the computer whiteboard on one wall, Butcher's own black chestnut desk, the views over the best part of Darborough, the oxygen-cleansing plants in each corner, the photos and frames on one wall highlighting the Superintendent's quarter century of service. Murdoch had no doubt the politician would have sucked in every aspect of it. At least Butcher was a grass roots copper who'd earned his stripes, unlike many others of equal rank across the realm. For Butcher, a police officer had to be straight down the line. If he wasn't, then there was no hope left, the whole edifice of Law and Order was built on a lie, or at best, a compromise. To Butcher there was only one thing more detestable and dangerous than a dirty villain, and that was a dirty cop. Not that Butcher ever thought Murdoch was dirty, but he sure as hell didn't think Murdoch was clean.

MP McCarthy was late fifties, a flash dresser with a flair for colourful ties, dark good looks: tanned, brown hair in the style of a Talking Head on Fox News. A born politician, he always seemed to have an expression on his face: frowning, smiling, his political nature evident in the pause he gave before every answer, contemplating first and foremost if the answer he gave benefited him or not. Everything in his life was risk management. McCarthy never had any claim on brilliance, but he was good at self-marketing, so he'd done well without doing much at all.

'Roland and I have been discussing the Abbot case,' said Butcher, not caring for preamble. 'Obviously it's very high-profile, and we don't seem to be making good progress at the moment. Is that a fair assessment, Inspector Murdoch?'

'Very fair,' came the reply. 'We've worked our backside's off, followed the Book, and we simply do not know who killed those people, or why.'

McCarthy stepped in. 'Surely a killer cannot go to a crime scene for five days and not make a mistake? The Rule of Transference. There must be a clue somewhere in this whole bloody mess that you've missed.'

Murdoch thought there may have been a mistake made by the killer, a tiny oversight, and he had given Erin Fox the task of tracking it down, but that line of inquiry could take weeks, and may end up leading nowhere. Either way, he was determined to keep the angle under wraps for the time being. 'We're still investigating, Mr McCarthy.'

That formulaic response didn't impress anyone. 'Do you have *anything*?' The MP stressed the final word. He was quite incredulous.

'Anything for the CPS, or for the Press?'

McCarthy took a moment to arrange his face. Then he said, 'Both, preferably. Because they're both smelling blood in the water. I'm old enough to remember the Bamber massacre in 1985, when the police botched that case. I remember all the tabloid journalists descending on the area, hanging out at pubs, grilling the locals. The *Daily Mirror* called the Essex detectives 'The Clouseau squad that let the evil

murderer stay at large for too long.’ It took a generation for the police to rebuild their reputation. A few weeks ago, no one in the realm had heard about Compton Tamor; now it’s the most talked about village in Britain. We’ve kept road-blocks up on the roads that lead in and out, and only residents or people with demonstrable reasons for coming and going are allowed in, otherwise the place would be overrun with morbid tourists.’

No one spoke for a moment. Murdoch, thinking that they were expecting some input from him, said, ‘We have built, I believe, a good understanding of the crime itself, the victims, and the village – because all those things are rather unique. What we don’t have is a common thread, and, without looking for excuses, we haven’t had any luck. For a killer to have committed so many crimes over several days, you would expect a mistake: we haven’t found one. You’d expect a witness: we don’t have one. With such a brutal crime, you’d expect there would be obvious motives and suspects, but we washed out there, too. Every question that could be asked, has been asked. All we can do is keeping digging and hope that something gives.’

No one in the room was inspired by any of that.

McCarthy said, ‘Look, I know you think I’m here because of the optics, and that’s partly true. I’m also here because of the police-community relationship. When a whole family gets butchered in their home, the public demands we solve it. Or at least, we look to be working effectively towards a resolution of some kind.’

‘I can’t control what the Press say, Mr McCarthy.’

‘Maybe you can, Inspector.’ He smiled as he said that, yet beneath the politeness was the steely gaze of a man who usually got what he wanted. ‘You must have theories as to what happened?’

‘More theories than I can poke a stick at. Right now, every male in the area above the age of sixteen is a suspect. Sure, we’ve uncovered a number of minor incidents which could have led to animosity: blood feuds, relationship issues, personal beefs, the suggestion that Peter Abbot was running some light drugs, which we haven’t been able to prove either way. Compton Tamor is a bit like a large dysfunctional family, but we haven’t come across anything to justify the crime in question. Only one young man in the village has anything approaching a criminal record, but he’s more of a pest than anything else.’

‘You said ‘blood feud’?’

Murdoch nodded, with minimal enthusiasm. ‘Compton Tamor is both Christian and pagan: the roots in the past are deep. The Abbot family had issues with another family over some disputed land, but it wasn’t an ongoing feud, exactly. We are talking Midlands, not Albania.’

‘Yes, but my roots go deep in this locality. I was taught that ‘blood feuds’ were legal under old Anglo-Saxon law, though some deny it; Anglo Saxon society was based on close-knit farming communities who shared responsibility for maintaining law and order in the village. That sense of self-sufficiency still permeates here. They didn’t have prisons back then – they had more inventive punishments. Have you looked deeply into this particular feud?’

Murdoch consciously decided not to take the politician’s question the wrong way. ‘We have, but there’s no evidential case against the side in question.’

‘A psychopath in transit? Is that your favoured theory? Superintendent Butcher has informed me how thoroughly you’ve worked with surrounding constabularies, pursuing that angle.’

Perhaps the Powers-That-Be, resigning themselves to a ‘no-result’, wanted mitigation. A roaming killer, from another jurisdiction, could be sold as a lesser failure than if the

killer was born-and-bred under their very noses. Murdoch knew that an overview had already taken place of his handling of the case and that he'd done nothing wrong; if he had, Butcher would have already brought out the sledgehammer. They were all dancing on eggshells on this one. Removing the SIO and bringing in a fresh face after only two weeks would hardly reassure the press or public. Kicking Murdoch off the case could wait. The Guvnor no one liked could still turn out to be their best friend on this one.

'It's possible,' said Murdoch, 'that we have a transitory killer, but I believe the killer showed a familiarity with the scene along with a degree of premeditation, which suggests he is a local man.'

It wasn't what McCarthy wanted to hear. 'It seems so unlikely. Surely such a fiend would stand out a mile? No man this evil could have nestled in such an insular community for so long and not raised alarm bells, before or after the killings.' Something about Erin Fox's face caught his attention. 'You disagree?' he asked, either forgetting her rank and name, or simply not bothering with it.

Erin flicked her gaze briefly at Murdoch, then said, 'There *are* grounds to think the killer knew the layout of the farm and the people in question, as DCI Murdoch pointed out, but that does not necessarily mean he was part of the community. He may not have lived there for several years. He may have worked one summer on the farm long ago.'

'Good point,' said Butcher, looking at Murdoch as he spoke.

'Could this have been a hired hitman?' asked McCarthy.

'Unlikely,' said Murdoch. 'A hitman would take them out at night in one attack; he would kill them quickly and efficiently, and then flee the scene. He would not have kept Hannah bound and alive for an entire day; he would not have stayed or returned to the scene like this killer did; he would have used the same weapon, not different weapons and methods. Having said that, there are aspects of the crime which accord with a hitman's style: there was no sex, no sadism, seemingly no personal interaction between the killer and his victims except in the case of Hannah, no overkill. We cannot bracket this killer.'

The MP nodded to himself. 'So it could be a madman passing through, who saw the farm, hid out there, and picked them off one by one. Like that book by Truman Capote.'

'*In Cold Blood*,' said Murdoch. 'Yes, I've read it. But in that case the motive was instantly apparent: attempted robbery.'

'But in that case the killer, or killers, weren't local, right? Same with the Charles Manson murders. The killers were *outsiders*.'

'True.'

Sol Butcher looked briefly at the MP, then at Murdoch. 'What about Hannah's husband, the soldier, Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper? Surely he forms a large part of our working theory?'

Murdoch waved a hand. 'The MoD maintain that he died in Basra. According to the official record, he was the last to die.'

McCarthy raised his chin. 'What did you say? Last to die?'

'Daniel Tapper was the last British soldier killed in that particular campaign.'

The MP was silent for a long time. Then he said, 'I didn't know that.'

'But he must still be considered a suspect,' pressed Butcher. 'We have no evidence he did die. Already blooded by his training and warfare, perhaps mentally unstable from what he'd been through, he had reason to secretly return to the farm. It would explain a lot of things.'

The MP nodded. ‘Yes, Sol; such as the time between the murders. When this killer’s blood cooled, he hung around. It shows nerves, someone comfortable with killing, and surely it shows a *personal* element.’

Murdoch coughed. ‘I thought it was a stranger passing through.’

Sol Butcher didn’t like that, but the MP seemed lost to his train of thought. ‘Christ, killing them off one by one, hours, days apart – I’ve had never heard anything like it before. It *does* fit with the killer being a damaged ex-soldier.’

Murdoch stayed silent. He noted the way Butcher and McCarthy looked at each other again, and could imagine the cogs of their brains whirring away: Missing-in-action, presumed dead, trained by the Government on behalf of the British people to be a killer in uniform, and so badly effected by what he’d gone through in the war he was barely responsible for his actions. In that sense, all of society was to blame. The narrative could be that an unhinged Tapper, perhaps sparked by despair, jealousy or for reasons no one could discern, acted like an automaton: he was trained to go in, secure, control, kill, and that’s what he did. He knew the people and the layout of the scene; he took the two men out first as they were his primary threats; he killed his son mercifully with shots to the back of the head while the boy slept, and he kept Hannah alive, perhaps, at the end, trying to explain himself, before killing her, too. Murdoch could imagine that the two politically-minded men were contemplating how, if the killing was never solved, they could argue that they had in fact solved it, that they had the answer. People would buy it: Lance Corporal Daniel Tapper had killed his family in a fit of madness and then went off and killed himself in such a manner that his corpse would never be found. It was a way of solving the case without solving it at all.

‘What happens to the farm now?’ asked the MP. ‘It’s a non-residential area; it can’t be developed.’

‘We’re still looking into that,’ said Murdoch. ‘There are no surviving family members, no distant relatives who could make a claim as far as we know. Sidney and Mary’s wills were made out to the children... both of them are dead and not known to have made wills; we know Peter didn’t make one because he was asked by Mary to consider taking that responsibility and he said it was bad karma, the family solicitor was never contacted by Hannah to arrange a will for the benefit of Nicholas, she would never have assumed a time when her whole family would be wiped out in one hit. No one has come forward to try and gain possession of the farm. The Abbots solicitors suggest it will end up in the hands of the local government and perhaps with offloads to some charities, but that might take several more weeks or months to sort out.’

‘The killer used a gun from the farm, right?’ This was McCarthy, looking at Murdoch. ‘Yes, the gun and ammunition came from a downstairs gun cupboard which was seldom locked. Did the killer get lucky, or did he know in advance that a loaded weapon was there? It’s possible, though unlikely, that he had taken the gun days or maybe even weeks in advance. The Abbot farm had about eight or nine rifles, so no one might have noticed that one was missing.’

‘It’s also possible,’ said Butcher, ‘that he was a burglar who came across that cupboard... and then he was in the shed looking for something to steal when the first victim, Peter Abbot, stumbled across him. And everything just snowballed from there.’

‘Anything’s possible,’ admitted Murdoch. ‘But Peter, the first victim, had his throat cut; he wasn’t shot, and clearly didn’t stumble on anyone as he was bashed on the head from behind before being set upon with the knife.’

Butcher looked like he'd been slapped.

'The first shooting was early Saturday evening,' said Murdoch. 'Therefore it stands to reason that the killer got his hands on the gun sometime between the Thursday and the Saturday murders.'

The MP paced about. 'Why did it take so long to find the bodies? How was it that no one noticed these people missing?

'A confluence of reasons,' said Murdoch. 'The family kept to themselves, as did most of the villagers. The harvest was over, so no one outside the family had reason to be at the farm, which is mostly self-sustaining, not visible from the road, and is spread out over 350 acres. On the Monday we had a savage downpour, which lasted more than 24 hours. And that particular weekend happened to be the curse weekend.'

McCarthy stopped pacing. 'The what?'

Murdoch looked across at the stony-faced Superintendent Butcher. 'Back in 1542 the State tortured and executed a local hero, a religious leader of the community. The killing took place on Dead Man's Hill, which overlooks the Abbot farm. It's believed by many locals that a curse was put on the village. Every year, on the first weekend of October, this man's death is remembered; people tend to stay indoors, some out of respect, some out of fear. That was the weekend our killer chose to act.'

'Shit,' said Roland McCarthy. 'I knew the place was a bit backward, but I didn't know they took things like curses so seriously.'

'These people carry history in their blood,' said Murdoch. 'We did get an anonymous call: a man called the nick from a phone booth in the village, which is tucked at the back of the High Street, to report that a murder had taken place at the Abbot farm.'

'This was before the bodies had been discovered?'

'Yes, shortly before. The person gave no details. We tried calling the farm, then sent a squad car out; however, by that time, a local man and a boy had happened upon the scene.'

McCarthy looked at Butcher. The latter said, 'We're keeping that stuff to ourselves Roland.'

'You think that was the killer who sent the message?'

'I do,' said Murdoch. 'And that first phone call was on the Tuesday afternoon – meaning he was still in the village, and comfortable to be walking around the High Street at that time. It's one more reason to think our killer is local.'

'Shit,' said McCarthy again 'Shit. Why call the police, though?'

'We don't know. And I could be wrong; it may not have been the killer; it may have been someone else who'd stumbled upon one of the bodies and wanted to let us know without getting involved.'

Whatever Roland McCarthy had hoped to get from the visit, it hadn't worked out. He looked thoroughly dissatisfied. After a moment's introspection, he looked at his wristwatch. 'I have to go I'm afraid; I have an important appointment.'

'Fund-raiser?' asked Murdoch.

The MP looked at him. 'With the way this inquiry is going, I wouldn't be making jokes like that.'

Murdoch sniffed and gazed out the window.

The politician's farewell was as brief and perfunctory as his greeting. He thanked them all, only shaking Sol Butcher's hand, then walked out. 'Anything else, sir?' asked Murdoch, motioning for Erin Fox to head for the door.

The Superintendent's expression made Murdoch think of a pressure cooker in the instant before the steam pushes the valve open and fills the kitchen with hissing steam. 'Yeah there is, John.'

Murdoch waited.

‘Next time,’ Butcher squealed, pointing at the muddy footprints on his recently steam-cleaned carpet, ‘wipe your fucking shoes, yeah?’

Listen to my prayer, O God,
Do not ignore my plea:
Hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me,
And I'm distraught at what my enemy is saying
Because of the threats of the wicked;
For they bring down suffering upon me
And assail me in their anger.

Be sure your sin will find you out.
Numbers

I saw that horrible detective walking down the Little Compton Road this morning. Stalking away he was, outside the front of Grange Farm. He had a mobile phone to his ear and was rollicking someone off – probably a junior officer who wasn't pulling his weight; or maybe he just wanted to vent on some poor sod.

I crossed the road when I got within twenty feet of him. He didn't pay me attention until I'd practically walked past him. I got close enough to the man, however, to see the truly hard glint in his eye. I'd heard that Mrs O'Donnell was most upset with the way the detective had questioned her little Adam, at one point snapping at the sobbing child: 'Your crying won't help me!' Mrs O'Donnell had intervened, 'You're a hard bastard.' The detective shrugged. 'If I'm hard, it's for a reason.' 'Well,' she told him, 'I can tell that you don't have kids of your own. Wee little Adam doesn't know anything; I've questioned him about it and he would have passed anything on. Nicholas was perfectly normal in the days and weeks before the murders happened. They went out riding their bikes together. There was no sign anything was wrong with Nick, or at the farm...'

I didn't cross the road again until I was beyond the Junkaris farm. There was smoke coming from the back of the yard – probably a clean up after the storm of two weeks ago; it was smoking quite a lot, the fuel being so green and damp. Alive one minute; then burned into nothingness the next. I often wonder what happened to Emily, the wife of Gary, the mother of Theo and Damon. She was an unusual woman, to be sure. You'd have to be unusual to be in that household! I wondered whether she was still alive, and if so, *where*. Canada, Australia, the south of France? Anywhere sounded better than here. Even London! I remember when she went missing; no one in the village even knew about it for months. When the news leaked out, Gary Junkaris refused to talk about it. 'Good riddance, that's what I say!' And that's what the bastard did say. 'Maybe she's ran off with Sven Jasper; the two idiots would make a good pair, wouldn't they.'

'Emily would have sent me a postcard,' I said. 'We were friends.'

He'd looked at me with contempt, his eyes as dull and cold as an underwater stone. 'No one's your friend Ann.' If that wasn't enough, he added, 'Not even Oriel likes you.'

I thought about calling the police. Maybe Emily had left the country; they'd know if they contacted the airport, or the docks, wouldn't they? Everything is computerised these days. I told Oriel that I needed to be sure that those three Junkaris thugs hadn't hurt Emily, weren't keeping her hostage in the cellar or something. 'Keep your nose out of it woman,' Oriel snapped. 'It's not our business.'

I wanted to protest. I didn't. I wanted to call the authorities, but I didn't do that either. The only person I ever told about my suspicions was my sister, Mary.

I'm not surprised that hardly anyone is talking about the Abbot massacre. Right round the country it got attention, but in Campton Tamor most people focussed on other news. Everybody wanted to convince themselves that the killer was in transit, a roving psychopath; he wasn't one of them. Maybe that was the reason why so many people in these parts were superstitious: it took the responsibility from you. The Roman Catholic Church figured that out long ago, didn't they – offering absolution

from sin, usually at a price. Others believe in destiny: if things turn out crap, it wasn't really your fault: it was fate, destiny, karma.

Many locals believed that the evil which had come alive so terribly at the Abbot farm was otherworldly, even if it expressed itself through a human entity. At Compton Tamor, every century or so something terrible erupted, as if some residue of evil built up and needed to find explosive release. The Abbots had been the unlucky ones. But if they all stayed quiet, kept their heads down, the evil would go back to sleep, and it would be generations before anything like this happened again.

As I neared the High Street I had a flashing memory of the burial service a few days ago. Coffin after coffin going into the ground. One funeral is traumatic enough. But six funerals! Listening to Ben Ridley and other speakers give their lame speeches. I saw Flora Tranter. The witch was standing a few metres away from the group; somehow she was a part of it all, yet separate. There was a strange look on her pink face and her watery blue eyes were focused on one of the people at the service. I tried to follow her line of vision, but I couldn't make out who it was that held her attention. I kept my stare on each of those familiar faces – bunched so close together they resembled one of those horrid Van Dorn paintings – faces and faces blurring into each other, but none of them looked back at Flora. When I turned back to the witch she was gone. I gave a small gasp, and one or two sympathetic eyes turned my way.

After the service I found her on the north edge of the St Margaret's land where it edged the forest. She was looking back to where several locals had gathered by the steps of the church, Ben Ridley clearly visible in his robes amongst them. In the cemetery, several men with shovels were filling in the graves.

'You okay Flora?'

She didn't seem to hear me. Then slowly, almost reluctantly, she turned my way. 'Dead Man's Hill,' she muttered under her breath.

I only just caught the words. She looked at me, and her eyes were suddenly quite wide and intense. She nodded toward the phone booth which was at the back of Mike Styles' shop. 'I just heard that someone made an anonymous call – *there* – ' she pointed at the phone booth, which stood beside the post-box where Arthur Clegg collected the mail.

I don't know why, but thinking about Clegg made me feel uneasy: his bright red uniform, his cadaverous complexion – even his lips were pallid, his strangely liquid eyes.

I shook my head to get the postman out of my mind. But I couldn't shake the suspicion that Flora knew who the killer was.

She looked straight at me then. 'Why?' she said.

I stared at her.

'That's what I don't understand, Ann. *Why?*'

I watched her head off, back towards the forest, melting into it as if she had temporarily lost her solidity.

'*Stupid witch!*'

I turned to the voice behind me to find Oriel standing there.

He said: 'Stupid fucking witch.'

'If I was a betting man,' said Mike Styles. 'I'd have my money on the husband.'

I watched as he scanned the items, putting them back into my basket.

'You ever read *Murder in Mesopotamia?*' he asked me.

I shook my head.

‘One of my favourites,’ he said. ‘Spoiler alert: The husband disappears... is presumed dead... then, years and years later comes back in disguise – back to his wife, the woman he is obsessed about, who he can’t ever allow to love another man... and she doesn’t recognise him – and then –’

I put up a hand. ‘Will you stop banging away Mike? Are you seriously suggesting that Daniel Tapper has come back and is living incognito in the area?’

‘Why not?’ he asked.

I rolled my eyes.

‘But of a coincidence, though, isn’t it?’

‘What?’

‘The withdrawal of the Afghan war was at the end of August, into September – and these killings take place in the first week of October.’

‘That isn’t a coincidence at all. It’s not even connected.’

‘Ending the war might have twigged his memory if he was suffering from amnesia, right?’

‘How much do I owe you?’

‘Twenty pounds will do, Ann. Sure you don’t prefer a bag?’

‘I’m fine, thank you. Why would Daniel Tapper simply not show himself, if he made it back? Hannah hadn’t married again; she hadn’t started a new family. There was no reason for him to go berserk, was there?’

‘Who knows what was going on under the surface, Ann. Besides, the killer must have been insane.’

I scooped up her basket but didn’t move on. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because of what happened on that *Sunday*.’

I looked around. No one else was in the shop. I knew that Styles had studied everything publicly available about the case, and he’d spoken to everyone, from the postman to Teddy Butler to the Junkaris boys to the O’Donnell lad. He was also known to have a huge collection of crime books. ‘What about the Sunday, Mike?’

‘Well, I’ve been putting together the sequence of events. You know how Peter would often head off on the Thursday night before the curse weekend. Well, he was the first to be killed, and then on the Saturday –’

‘Yes, I know what happened on the Saturday.’

‘Sidney, Nicholas, Mary,’ said Mike. ‘Now, the police don’t give us the details, but Hannah must have known what had happened in the house, yet the killer spent the next 24 hours at the farm presumably keeping guard over her. I spoke with the teacher Trevor Hodgson and he said he was out walking Sunday night. He’d gone a little stir crazy with ‘the curse lock-down’ if you will, and he says he heard a gunshot coming from the direction of the Abbot farm around 9 p.m.. He assumed it was Peter having a crack at rabbits. I reckon that was the shot which killed Hannah.’

‘Mike – you’re talking about my niece.’

‘That’s why we have to solve it. Whoever did this must be caught.’

‘The police –’

‘The *police*, Ann, couldn’t find a cold in a wet November. I had that blond female detective in here the other day –’

‘DI Fox,’ I interjected.

‘Well, the name fits. She’s a sly one, alright. You should have seen what she was asking me! Wanting to know what the Abbots ate, what they bought from my shop. Product after product. I kept asking her: how will any of this help them solve who killed them, but she wouldn’t answer any of my questions.’

‘I bet that upset you.’

He looked at me coolly for a moment. 'They don't know these parts. They haven't even been able to trace Sven Jasper, as far as I can make out. Nor half the Irish and East European gypsies who'd spent time at that farm in recent years, helping with the harvests. Have they even interviewed you, yet?'

'I've given a statement, but Oriel keeps telling me to say as little as possible, given all the history between our families.'

There was an awkward silence. Then Mike Styles said, 'Ah.' He continued, 'Anyhow, I couldn't stop thinking about that Sunday, so I drew up a list of suspects.'

'*Suspects?*'

'I was trying to eliminate all the menfolk in this village.'

'And did you?'

'Only one; can you believe that? I mean, the vicar gave a small service that Sunday morning, but only a handful attended. Most people can account for their whereabouts for an hour here or there, but no one has a strong alibi for that Sunday.'

'How about you?'

He stared at her. 'I was doing the books.'

'Right.'

'I was! Anyhow, my point is this: what sort of maniac hangs around a farm with all those dead bodies day after day – especially on the Sunday? Imagine that Sunday, will you: he's on a farm with three dead bodies and a bound and terrified woman, and knowing he is going to kill her that evening. What the hell is going on his mind: why not just kill her if that was his intention. Why wait until it was dark? Five people, and they all died *after* dark.'

'Not the maid – she died Monday morning.'

'I don't think she was an intended victim; I think the killer either didn't know, or forgot she was going to suddenly turn up to work that Monday morning. I think the five Abbots were the main victims. And they were all killed at night. But Hannah is different to the others; the killer treated her differently, or so we're led to believe.'

'Her boyfriend, Freddie? Is that where you're going? Wouldn't that be convenient.'

He shook his head. 'I have someone else in mind – someone who might have been in love with her. A creepy guy, who happens to be the only man I can find in this village who indeed had an alibi that Sunday.'

'I'm dying of suspense,' she said sarcastically.

He leant forward over the counter and lowered his voice, even though there was no one else in the shop. 'The postman.'

'*Arthur Clegg?*'

Styles nodded. 'Yep. He knew the farm, he worked during the day so the killings took place at night, and Monday morning he could have detoured to the farm to check all was okay, when Amy suddenly showed up.'

'What's that got to do with Hannah and Sunday?'

'Arthur went to church that Sunday. I spoke to Ben Ridley about it. Ben told me it was the first time Arthur ever attended St Margaret's. He also went into Thorpe Malsor where he picked up some compost: apparently he fancies doing a bit of home-growing; got a sudden urge to grow some asparagus! Arthur also made a point of telling me that he'd stopped in for a pint that Sunday evening at White Hart: so there he is: morning at Church – first time ever, lunchtime picking up compost for a veggie garden which he's never shown an interest in before, then at night, he's at the White Hart eating a fisherman's basket and a half-pint of NBC Starlight – first time in months he'd popped in there, according to the proprietor. Don't you see, Ann? He was establishing himself a rock-solid alibi. *That's why he kept her alive all day until*

after dark. He tied her up, maybe doped her, trusting that no one would go out to the farm that Sunday, and no one did. He only lives half a mile up the road and would have known that in October, the Abbots didn't get visitors on Sunday, just as he would know that locals stayed indoors that first Sunday in October because of the curse.'

'And motive: why would he kill them all?'

'He's a fantasist! He built up a love affair with Hannah; he rides past Grange Farm every morning, sometimes goes up to the house with packages. He probably felt sorry for her after she lost her husband, and he's just built up this whole fantasy in his head: of being her man, her white knight, being part of the wealthy Abbot family – because he doesn't have a family or a penny of his own. But then he realised, in those last months, that there was someone else.'

Ann studied him coolly in silence. Nearly a minute went past. 'Was there someone else, Mike?'

The shop-owner winked at her. 'You and me both know that there was, don't we?'

Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.

Leon Bloy

After they'd finished dinner, she told him that the witch had written a book.

'Really? I didn't know that.'

She dutifully scrolled down the screen of her mobile phone. 'Flora Tranter: *The Other Side of Darkness*. 1986; that's nearly forty years ago, now.'

'You don't need to remind me. *The Other Side of Darkness*. Sounds like one of those American books from the 1970s and 80s – Harold Robbins, Sidney Sheldon. Not that they were into the occult, just power and porn.'

Lisa shook her head. 'Flora's book isn't about witchcraft as much as dealing with despair. She lost a child.'

'I didn't know that, either.' Murdoch thought about the sadness he'd seen in Flora's stare, which he'd put down to a kind of universal sympathy with the plight of humanity, rather than from any kind of personal loss. He couldn't recall seeing any mementos of a lost child in her cottage.

'Do you want me to order you a copy?' Lisa asked.

'No; I've dealt with too many dead children in my time.' Then he reconsidered. Flora had lived in the village her entire life. He suddenly wanted to know how the child had died, and who the father was. 'Actually, yes, get me a copy if there's one available.'

She clicked away for a few seconds. 'Done.'

'Thanks. That all-inclusive pasta was really good, by the way.'

'I'm not just a pretty face,' she replied, and began to collect the plates and cutlery.

A little later, after the dishes were washed, dried and put away, they were face-to-face in the front room. To say the furnishings were minimalist was an understatement: a low glass-topped coffee table, a two-seater and armchair, a TV unit in one corner, a small sideboard with a few framed photographs and a bookshelf against one wall. That was about it. He knew that the blond girl had been all over the room, because everything had been lifted and cleaned.

'I bought us a bottle of wine, by the way,' she said. 'I thought it might help you sleep.'

'Doubt it,' he said.

'Surely you can let yourself unwind just a little?'

They were both on the sofa, their legs less than ten inches apart. 'Not with six dead bodies on my conscience, I can't.'

'You didn't kill them,' she pointed out.

He didn't bother to try and explain himself. He didn't have the energy and didn't think she'd get it.

'"Zozobra",' she said.

He frowned.

'That's when you get the feeling that you can't make sense of what's happening. One moment everything seems normal, then suddenly the frame shifts to reveal a world on fire, struggling with too many bad things, all of them outside your range of control. That's 'zozobra,' the peculiar form of anxiety that comes from being unable to settle into a single point of view, leaving you with questions like: Is it a lovely autumn day, or an alarming moment of converging historical catastrophes?'

‘Zozobra’ hey? Well, that’s me. A wobbly ship about to capsize.’

Murdoch looked around his near-empty room, which always resembled a place of sojourn rather than a long-term home. What you’d expect from an owner who was yet to find the rhythms of normal life.

He looked sideways at Lisa, who was nibbling on a bowl of fresh fruit salad. She’d offered him some, but he’d declined. ‘Beats all that white sugar you put in your coffee,’ she said, as if caring for his well-being was the most natural thing in the world.

‘With a job like mine, a few misdemeanours on diet are excusable. Besides, I’ve been overeating every night since you’ve taken up residence.’

‘Good.’

They’d established a kind of routine; they’d sit and talk for a couple of hours after dinner, studiously avoiding her personal life, or her future, because she showed a peculiar distaste for both subjects. Occasionally she wanted to know about what was going on with the case, but for the most part it was general chatter – the sort of talk you might expect from a long-married couple who had little left to reveal to one another, and talking was simply an alternative to silence. But it was more than that to Murdoch because the sound of her voice had cast him into a world without any hard edges. Once she had offered to massage his feet to de-stress him, but he’d demurred.

There was no doubt about it. She was more beautiful than he remembered, more coy, more tempting, more... everything. He found himself lingering with the details of her person, the gold-hammered earrings, the odours of her bathwater and her breath, the soft bluish nape of her neck when her dyed blond hair fell away. He was like a man caught in a wonderful dream and didn’t want to wake up, just yet.

Yep, there was no doubt about it. Lisa Swalling, daughter of his long-dead ex partner, had achieved a strange domination over his feelings. At work, reading a report, answering the phone, taking a statement – there she was, dancing about in his mind’s eye. Fantasies, conversations. Not sexual, not really, but intimate. And he, always heroic, she admiring. A debased obsession for sure, and so unlike him. Maybe he entertained the fantasy because he knew it was going to end badly, with tears and heartache and regret.

‘What is that?’ he asked now, inhaling her perfume. She must have put it on after she’d cleaned up the dinner dishes.

She hesitated only a moment before she answered, perhaps noticing his slightly flaring nostrils. ‘It’s called ‘Night Flowers’. It’s a combination of scents, mostly jasmine and honeysuckle. Nice?’

‘Yeah.’ He tried to hide from her just how nice he thought it was. Looked away.

‘Are you alright?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Just lately... You’re not being yourself.’

Who is that? he wondered. ‘You don’t even know me.’

‘I’m trying to, but unlike the Berlin Wall, the one you’ve built around yourself is still standing.’

So many times their conversations reached this point: a brief silence where everything hinged on the next thing he said. No sexual contact had ever been offered or invited, but sex was in the air, in the extended pauses. He thought of the crime board at the nick – those six faces which looked down on him every morning when he entered the incident room, demanding he find their killer.

‘It’s hardly in the papers anymore,’ Lisa said. ‘The local *Post* is the only one still covering it.’

‘There’s always fresh blood somewhere else,’ he replied.

The blond girl nibbled on a strawberry, which closely resembled the colour of her lips. ‘So... what do you do now?’

‘Keep looking for a break,’ he managed. ‘Another perspective. A stroke of luck. This job I do... people think it’s exciting. It isn’t; it’s downright tedious slog for the most part.’

‘One percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration?’

‘Something like that.’

She put the bowl on the arm rest and turned to face him. ‘You must suspect *someone*.’

‘Everyone... but no one.’

‘Am I a suspect, then?’

He took the opportunity to look into her eyes, but kept the tone firm, official. ‘Don’t be silly.’

‘You’re scared of interrogating me?’ Her smile, so arch and delicately contained, broadened.

‘Do you have guilty secrets?’

‘I do what I think is right, what my heart tells me is right. You should *never* feel guilty about that.’

Murdoch mulled over her words. He didn’t know if she was speaking glibly, or whether she’d just made an offer of sorts. He looked casually about the room, while he felt a silent gathering in the air, a racing current. He knew, only, that he had to say *no*. He yawned. It wasn’t yet 10 p.m. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a wink of sleep before midnight. It was raining lightly outside, and the weathermen said the rain was going to get heavier and wasn’t going to stop till morning. ‘I’m going to try and get an early one,’ he said, avoiding her stare, and lifting himself to his feet. Still without looking at her, he said, ‘See you in the morning.’

‘I’ve got the bacon and eggs,’ she replied.

For the next two hours Murdoch lied there in the darkness, far removed from sleep’s gooey embrace. Some would have found the constant pitter-patter of rain soothing, but he found it annoying, distracting. It was like he needed to concentrate on something, that his subconscious had picked something up recently, and he had to bring it to the front of his mind. Was it something about the burglary at the Abbot farm – when nothing of value was stolen? Something to do with how the killer had treated Hannah? Murdoch felt his attention drawn to another sound, from somewhere in the bungalow. Footsteps. Crossing the living room of his flat, moving towards his door.

He reached out and snapped the bedside light on. The girl was standing in the door. She wore her black negligee, the black panties and bra visible underneath. The soft light from the pink-shaded bedside lamp gave her exposed skin the glow of dark-gold honey.

‘What’s up?’ he asked with a thickness in his voice.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ she said sullenly.

‘I could,’ said Murdoch. ‘Make yourself some cocoa.’

She didn’t move.

With troublesome pests over the past twenty years, Murdoch almost always went on the offensive. He did so now. He pushed himself upright and said, ‘What are you trying to say, girl. *See anything you fancy?* Is that it?’

She bowed her head. ‘Well, don’t you?’ Her words were packed with intensity, as though her entire existence depended upon his answer. For a moment he couldn’t lie, but he dared not tell the truth.

‘Besides, I’m a woman... not a girl.’

‘I can see that.’

‘You’ve let me stay here. You can’t blame me if I’m wondering where all this is heading.’

Now, *that* was something he didn’t want to consider. She wasn’t even half his age. And if she got any closer to the bed, there was only one way it was going to end. Murdoch knew what he should have done from the very beginning, right from the moment he made the mistake of letting her spend one night at his bungalow: he should have given the girl her marching orders. He should have put the fear of God into her.

For a bizarre moment, Murdoch felt that he was leaving his real life behind, stepping into a black comedy when the impartial investigator of a crime discovers it is his own family, his own history, he is investigating, and ends up arresting himself.

‘Is it that I’m not good enough for you?’ the girl said then, the silence clearly getting to her. ‘Or are you scared you might enjoy yourself a little too much?’

She’d blown it, thought Murdoch. Like an inexperienced interrogator, she’d pressed onwards when all that was required was silence.

‘Listen to me.’ He felt safety in anger. ‘I think I’ve got you well figured. Your soppy story about losing your Mum; the message she had for me. Was any of that true? What is all this: a blackmail attempt?’

There was no yelling back. He saw her shoulders slump. Felt the agony in her whispered words: ‘If that’s what you think of me, I’ll go.’

‘Not until daylight,’ he said.

She turned; no slamming door, she just walked slowly back to her room.

Murdoch fell back on his pillow. He imagined her crying, packing her clothes and meagre belongings. He’d previously secreted five hundred quid in her carry-all. When she left Darborough he would text her, letting her know the money was there. It might help a bit. More importantly, it might help settle his guilty conscience which was devouring him but which he couldn’t explain.

Murdoch didn’t get a wink of sleep. He waited to hear more footsteps, the closing front door. None of that happened. When he woke up the next morning, there was no smell of bacon and eggs, and the door to the spare bedroom was closed. He hesitated, then decided he would go to work, and he spent the whole day with the blond girl at the back of his mind. Avoiding Erin Fox’s stare at every turn. It was starting to go around the station that something was up in the Guvnor’s private life. They could tell how moody he was: at one moment ragged and caustic, the next jumping about like he’d just been shot up with adrenaline and endorphins.

He didn’t get home until 8 p.m. that evening. Plenty of time for Lisa to have cleared out. But she hadn’t. She was standing in the kitchen, waiting for him. No smell of dinner, no final casserole. She was wearing the same clothes she’d had on when he met her at that café, and her holdall was stuffed full by her feet. ‘I bought you something,’ she said, nodding to a rather large present on the kitchen bench. The item was wrapped in gold paper, and she was waving towards it with both hands, like a quiz show model showing off the latest prize on offer. ‘It’s nothing much, but it might help.’

Nothing much... but all she could afford, thought Murdoch. And it came from the heart. He tried to think of the last time anyone had made an offer his way from the heart. Years. Maybe decades. Not since he’d split with her mother.

The present was a tub of low-fat protein powder, a mixer, and a colourful mug. The latter she had purchased from Mike Style’s shop in Compton Tamor when she’d taken

a ride out there to put flowers on the victims' graves. There was something in big red letters written on the mug, but Murdoch was too besotted by his cross-firing emotions to read it.

'Instead of those extra unnecessary cups of caffeine per day, have two small protein-vitamin shakes... you'll feel much better for it.' She moved a little anxiously from foot to foot.

'Thanks,' he managed, feeling as gracious as a billionaire tossing a starving pauper fifty pence.

She gulped once, her shoulders dipped, then she turned and moved to her bag. Throwing the strap over one shoulder, she returned to the centre of the flat. There was no defiance to her, but rather, a deep sadness. 'I wasn't out to take advantage, John. Just a little affection, maybe. I didn't think you'd find it so hard to give.'

That's because I've got a soul the size of an acorn, Murdoch thought. He looked into those blue eyes for what he imagined was a final time, and they seemed as opaque and cloudy as the glaze on pottery. He said coldly: 'You have to go. You know that, don't you?'

Crestfallen. Staring at her feet.

'You're young, beautiful, clever enough. If you're a little lost right now, I'm sure there are plenty of lucky lads who'd like to help you find your way.'

It didn't come out how he wanted, but the message was clear. He was washing his hands of her.

She closed her eyes for a moment and kept them closed. Murdoch thought: *one genuine tear, and I'm mincemeat*. But she didn't cry. She reached out and touched his hand and said goodbye. And slowly headed towards the door, looking back once at the mug.

It's late, Murdoch thought of saying. *You can wait till the morning. One more night won't hurt...* But the words didn't come. He watched those feet padding their way to the door, and out of his life, taking his heart with her, and he knew that he was letting the opportunity and the sin slip by, as he always had, always did, always would -

'Wait,' he said.

The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

The servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows.

But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wished it were already kindled!

But I have a baptism to undergo: and how distressed I am until it is completed!

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law...

Hell is empty and all the devils are here.

Shakespeare

Murdoch knew that charismatic cult leaders like Jim Jones and Charles Manson somehow had a hypnotic effect over certain people. Ben Ridley wasn't like that. The 38-year-old vicar of Compton Tamor seemed quite devoid of any compelling charm or aura which might inspire devotion in others. Maybe that made him a good match for the village, thought Murdoch, a counter-balancing figure of calm and common sense.

For Murdoch, it wasn't so much life, as death, that continued. More dead bodies showed up: accidents and suicides and domestics. There were new cases; there were internal courses to attend, autopsies to observe, suspects to interview, prosecution briefs to complete, appearances in court. 'One phone call could provide the breakthrough...' he told himself this when he climbed out of bed each morning. He repeated it like a mantra. But that phone call never came.

It was Sunday evening – three weeks to the day Hannah was butchered – when Murdoch arrived at St Margaret's. He found Ridley in a back-office at the rear of the church. It was a cramped, book-filled space, what you might expect a high school teacher to occupy. Except for all the religious paraphernalia, of course: tiny crosses wedged into gaps in the bookshelves, icons, reproductions of Romanesque ivories: Christ in agony; Christ in glory; saints luminous in their aureoles. In a cardboard box beside the tiny wooden desk were several Bibles; Murdoch wondered whether the vicar had brought them to Campton Tamor that first day he came here.

The only painting on the wall was a small, colourful image depicting an Old Testament scene, where the men wore bright multi-coloured robes, most had beards, and all looked appropriately amazed or aghast to be part of God's magnificent plan. The men had gathered around an altar, where a high priest stood with knife in hand. A sacrifice of some kind was about to take place, but the victim was out of sight. 'The Day of Atonement,' said Ridley, following Murdoch's stare.

'Leviticus.'

'Very good.'

'I read a lot.'

'Very good,' repeated the vicar. 'Sacrifices were all about deterring people from sin, a symbolic payment for wrong-doing, a purification of the temple and the community, and above all, allowing God to maintain his presence with his people.'

'By cutting the throat of an innocent animal?'

Ridley didn't blink. 'Yes.'

Was the Abbot family killed as a sacrifice? The behavioural scientist, Professor Wilson, said there were ritualistic aspects to the crime, but when wasn't there? You didn't have to be a behavioural scientist to know that many of the worst serial killers of the last century were driven by warped views of sex and religion. No remorse or shame was displayed by the killer at that farmhouse, and that fitted with a man who believed he was doing God's work. 'Deus Vult' the Crusaders cried when they went into battle: 'God wills it'. If the killer viewed death as nothing more than a passage to eternity, to Paradise, then maybe there would be no guilt attached.

'You were close to Mary, weren't you?' Murdoch asked.

Ridley visibly gulped. The vicar was yet to reach the age of forty and in a certain way had retained his boyish looks, with his sea-blue eyes, slightly puffed lips, soft chin and unblemished skin. But there were signs of wear and tear, too, with lines forming at the edges of his eyes and mouth, his light brown hair thinning. The way he almost slumped in his chair, his shoulders rounded as if protecting himself from imminent physical attack, suggested a far older man. 'Mary was a wonderful asset to St Margaret's,' he said. 'She helped out wherever she could, to keep people coming to church; she cleaned the place on her hands and knees, arranged flowers; she rarely missed a meeting or working bee... she was a very selfless woman.'

'And very devoted, I'm told.'

'A traditional Christian,' said Ridley, and the words rolled out as if they'd been rehearsed.

Murdoch waited.

After a moment's introspection, Ridley said, 'Mary worried a great deal about her family. These days, most mothers are worried about what career their children will get, what partner, will they be financially secure? Mary was worried first and foremost about her children's souls.'

'Hannah?'

A shrug. 'There are many people in this village who could tell you more about Hannah than I. Mary never got into details.'

Murdoch didn't know whether that was true. 'Same for Peter and Sidney and Nicholas? You know next to nothing?'

The vicar nodded.

'Did she mention any particular concerns in the last weeks and months of her life?'

'Why would she?' came the instant reply. 'How was she to know that a psychopath would want to hurt her?'

Murdoch fell silent and this time, Ridley stayed silent too. 'You're single, aren't you vicar?'

'You make that sound like a crime. And you can call me Ben.'

'Okay, Ben.'

'Are you suggesting that myself and Mary were having some kind of affair?' There was no passion or anger behind the question.

'Not at all. I just have a dirty mind. And this village is a place full of hidden things; things out of sight, tucked away, cryptic. Also, Ben, you're from outside this village: you and Arthur Clegg are the only residents in this village who have been here less than 20 years. Maybe that means you saw the people and goings-on here differently to most.'

'I didn't see anything to explain this,' said Ridley. 'I don't believe it has anything to do with the people here.'

Murdoch looked around the cramped room again. It looked even messier on a second inspection. 'Did you ever meet Daniel Tapper?'

'No; I came to the village after he'd died. No one ever talked to me about him, so I didn't ask.'

Why did no one talk about him? Because it touched raw nerves? Because they believed Tapper had been cursed and that was why he'd never made it home again? 'I don't get that,' said Murdoch. 'He was a war hero, who gave his life for his country. Yet he's a non-subject?'

The vicar remained silent.

There's a little War Memorial by the green, such as it is,' said Murdoch. 'All the way back to the Boer War – right through to one poor lad who didn't come back from the Falklands. Daniel Tapper hasn't been added to that list.'

'Correct.'

'Is that because people here know that he isn't dead?'

'I don't know.'

'You never inquired?'

'No.'

'I take it,' said Murdoch, after a lengthy pause, 'that you have not heard anything from your parishioners that would help our investigation?'

He shook his head. 'No confession if that's what you're after. I doubt any parishioner could know more than the SIO leading the case.'

They couldn't know much less, thought Murdoch. He looked levelly at the other man, who seemed to have grown a little pasty. Though it wasn't a warm day by any stretch, a thin sheen of perspiration had developed on his brow. Somewhere in Ben Ridley's sea-blue eyes Murdoch thought he saw a deep loneliness, or some central sadness. It seemed peculiar that a man serving the Divine Creator should appear so lost.

'Sometimes, vicar, it isn't about what people know. It can be useful to hear what people think or suspect. I don't mean trashy gossip, rumours, speculation; I mean what might be picked up at gut level, unconfirmed suspicions, educated guesswork. When you have a case as hazy as this, you sometimes need just that one shaft of light...'

'All I can say is that it has been extra-tense this whole summer long. I think a lot of people have been worried that England has been simmering away along with the hot weather: financial stresses, political issues, Big Brother, changing attitudes, immigration, the war in Europe, the threat of pestilence, a collapsing religious base – it's rather like Tudor times in some ways. Up and down the realm church groups and community and counselling services have been in uptick. That's the backdrop. But I have nothing of specific value to pass on to you.'

'Okay.' Murdoch pulled out his notebook, read through a few pages, then put it back in his trouser pocket. He said, 'We checked BT records and discovered that a call went out from St Margaret's to the Abbot residence on Friday, October 5, at 5.15 p.m.; the call lasted for approximately seven minutes. I presume that was you, Ben?'

His eyes narrowed. 'Yes, it was.'

'Care to tell me what the call was about?'

Ridley half-smiled and his shoulders rolled a little in a kind of compromised shrug. 'Mary had left behind at St Margaret's a notebook she sometimes carried around with her; I think she used it as a reminder book, though she sometimes scribbled down random thoughts in it. I called to let her know I'd found it, in case she was wasting time looking for it.'

'Do you have it?'

Ridley looked uncomfortable, then rifled through a pile of paperwork on his desk for a moment, before extracting a yellow notepad, hard-back, A5 in dimensions. He handed it over.

Murdoch opened the notebook. All he saw was blank pages, but it was clear that several pages had been ripped out. 'You did this?'

'No; that's how it was. Mary usually ripped out pages after she'd written them, or ticked off jobs: she liked starting afresh with a blank page, I suppose.'

Murdoch sighed. Yet another dead end. 'So you called Mary Abbot to let her know that she'd left a blank notebook behind?'

‘Yes. It was as harmless as that, which is why I never mentioned it in my statement. She said that she’d pick it up Sunday, but she never attended service that day. Of course, I never suspected...’

‘You didn’t follow up?’

‘I assumed she had reason not to come; maybe she came down with a sniffle, or Nicholas was crook. On the curse weekend, usual practices sometimes go out the window.’ He almost laughed at that, as if it was almost funny.

Murdoch looked again at the notebook; it wasn’t completely blank – on one page Mary, presumably at random, had written the words, ‘Love one another.’ Murdoch showed the vicar the page. Ridley offered no expression in reply. ‘Do those words mean anything to you?’

‘Love one another... A determination always to act in the others’ best interest, whether we feel good or not, whether we like them or not? It is an act of will, a commandment to obey. It’s an adage Mary lived her life by, God rest her soul.’

Murdoch racked his brain trying to remember where he’d seen that phrase before in the context of a crime scene. Then he recalled that the words ‘love one another’ were written on a banner over the religious community in Jonestown, where 909 people died several years earlier in a mass murder-suicide pact.

Murdoch turned over every page; he almost got to the end of the notebook when he found another scribble in Mary’s handwriting: ‘my life for thy sake.’ He read the words aloud, then asked, ‘Is there any passage in the Bible you can think of where those words are found. New Testament preferably.’

The vicar replied instantly, ‘They could apply to a passage in The Book of John, Chapter 13.’

‘Is that the last supper?’

‘Very good – again.’ Ridley returned to auto-pilot, ‘After supper was ended, ‘Simon Peter saith unto him Lord, wither goest thou? Jesus answered him wither I go thou canst not follow me now but thou shalt follow me afterwards. Peter said unto him Lord why cannot I follow thee now, *I will lay down my life for thy sake...*’

Murdoch pondered those words. Was it consistent with the mind-set of a woman who thought the Devil had taken possession of someone and there was a need to purge that evil via sacrifice? Was she suspecting that someone was watching her beloved family, thinking those very thoughts? Murdoch sighed. There were a hundred different possible interpretations, and probably none were relevant. ‘Mary believed in sacrifice, didn’t she?’

The vicar chose not to read anything sinister into the question. ‘Who doesn’t? It’s just a question of degree. She believed in salvation. She believed that Christ would come again and save mankind.’

‘She really believed that?’

‘Yes. Jesus foresaw and spoke of the events that are making news headlines today: of wars and commotion, that ‘nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom... And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places... All these are the beginning of sorrows.’ Look at the apocalyptic weather England has experienced this summer; drought and flood. Look at the plague and mandated vaccines. Look at what is happening to our planet: the sea is turning to acid, the air is choking us, the polar ice caps are melting. You do not have to be radical to believe that we are living in End Times.’

‘A Second Coming...’ Try as he might, Murdoch could keep the mockery out of his tone.

‘The reality, Inspector, is that we are not a secular age, so much as a post-secular one; not enlightened but post-enlightened. Religion hasn’t been replaced by science and reason so much as by emotionalism, and a kind of needy, vague mysticism, a dissatisfied sense of spiritual absence. The human race is caught up in an act of global collective narcissism.’

‘Well, I can’t argue with that.’

‘Emotion,’ he said. ‘That is our new religion, for an age with too much reason and not enough faith. Yet without faith, what do we have left?’

Murdoch knew the answer to that question. Nothing. Without faith, we have nothing. He was living proof of the fact.

*

Murdoch had just pulled onto the deserted High Street, the shadowy silhouette of St Margaret’s receding in his rear-view mirror, when his mobile rang. He pulled over to the side of the road and lifted his phone. His heart beat a little faster, thinking it was Lisa, but it wasn’t her. He didn’t recognise the number.

‘John Murdoch,’ he said.

There was a moment’s pause, then a rather delicate male voice said. ‘Hello Mr Murdoch, my name is Harley Rickard. I’m a solicitor for Menlove and Rickards, in Thorpe Malsor, and I apologise for calling you on a Sunday, but I thought it was important enough to do so. It’s a sensitive matter, too.’

Murdoch digested all that like it was a piece of resilient gristle. ‘You have information for me regarding the Abbot killings, is that it?’

‘Indeed,’ said the voice.

‘How did you get my mobile number?’

‘Gilbert Gleeson gave it to me. You gave him your card when you interviewed him, I believe, and he passed the number on to me.’

Murdoch frowned. Why would the father of the maid Amy be giving a solicitor in Thorpe Malsor his mobile number? And then it clicked. It made sense. Before Harley Rickard uttered another syllable, it all made sense. He knew who, he knew how, and he knew why.

Sinful and forbidden pleasures are like poisoned bread; they may satisfy appetite for the moment, but there is death in them at the end.
Tyron Edwards

Amy loved the countryside. Loved the fact that there was no truly commercial building or industrial estate within miles of Compton Tamor. She loved Haxley Wood, too, even though she'd never be game to walk in the forest by herself.

It was Monday morning and she hadn't heard from Hannah over the weekend, which was a little strange; Amy had sent two text messages but had no reply. She'd thought about walking over to the farm, but social calls on the curse weekend were usually kept to a minimum, and surely someone would have called her if anything was wrong, if Hannah was having one of her episodes for instance.

She walked past St Margaret's, named after the woman cruelly martyred in 304AD. Margaret had refused an arranged marriage and was consequently beheaded after undergoing extravagant trials and tortures. One such trial saw Satan, disguised as a dragon, swallow Margaret whole; his stomach rejected her, however. Still, even that miracle didn't stop her execution. St Margaret was one of the saints Joan of Arc attested to hearing, but that admission didn't go down to well, either.

St Margaret's looked rather forlorn and gothic at this early hour, with Haxley Woods as a backdrop. The old stones of the church were cut deep as you often found in pre-fifteenth century churches – so deep that even lichen wouldn't colonise the incisions. The church gardens were never remarked upon for their beauty, but in spring, with the sun beaming down, there were outbursts of primroses, daffodils and bluebells; sometimes, in the best years, there were so many daffodils you could barely see the gravestones. There wasn't a flower to be seen today, not a fleck of colour. Up above, the dark skies seemed to be building in energy and density. Amy couldn't recall seeing such black clouds before. Over the last five months, every promised rainfall hadn't worked out, but this time, the heavens were truly set to open. She needed to get her things and head down to the farm before she got drenched – especially as she was wearing her favourite plum Champion Windsor three-quarter-length coat. The coat looked good, and Hannah loved it, but it wasn't the most rain resistant.

As she reached the High Street she heard 'Morning Amy!' as Teddy Butler cycled past. For a moment she thought it was Arthur Clegg, the postman, then she realised that the rider wasn't wearing red clothes.

She gave a smile and a quick wave. Teddy was fast on his bicycle and was quickly out of earshot, though he was daring enough to be looking back over his shoulder at her, a fierce grin on his face. He seemed to be riding especially fast today – maybe because of the approaching storm.

In some places the High Street was so narrow two cars had to creep alongside opposing curbs to avoid removing each other's side mirrors. There was no Tudor-thatch cottage here, no glossy Dick-Turpin-style old inn, even the ancient village green had been forever compromised by an ugly roundabout. It seemed that every passing generation had felt the need to disfigure Compton Tamor in some way.

Across the road she noticed the vicar chatting to one of the elderly parishioners. It seemed a quite earnest conversation: several locals had been complaining lately about the vicar's sermons: they were far too restrained and predictable for their liking. The vicar turned away from the woman at that moment and started heading across the road

towards St Margaret's, a rather flustered look on his face. Amy pretended not to see him. She hadn't been to church in ten weeks. She could recall the precise moment she had ceased to believe; it had not been a process, a gradual degradation of her faith; it had been a sudden and total realisation that it was all a lie. The moment had been when Hannah first brought her mouth to her's.

A car beeped. She looked up to see Adam O'Donnell drive past with his Mum to the school. Another wave. They were earlier than usual; perhaps Mrs O'Donnell suspected that some really bad weather was about to hit. The vicar headed past her, nodding his head in her direction, but avoiding her eyes.

Thankfully one or two villagers were in the shop when she filled her basket. Being alone with Mike Styles could be frustrating: he hated letting anyone go without trying to cipher them for information. She sighed when she saw Ann Claxton in one of the aisles: Amy always felt uncomfortable around that woman – she was so downtrodden and self-pitying and resentful. This morning Ann had donned a tan Percussion Ladies Rambouillet jacket – Ann and Oriel often wore hunting outfits; the jacket was all pockets and buttons and she looked very small and shrivelled inside it – like she was enclosed in a tent – the waist belt impossibly tight around her small waist.

Amy knew that Mike Styles had been leaking innuendo about her and Hannah to other villagers: nothing blatant, just vague suggestions. It had got Hannah's back up enough to want to head down to the shop and sort Styles out, but Amy had talked her out of it. Such a reaction would only make things worse.

'We seriously have to get out of this place, Amy,' Hannah hissed.

One day, thought Amy. 'Yes,' she said.

She paid for her goods, stuffing the change and receipt in her pocket, then began the walk back along the Little Compton Road. The wind picked up for a few minutes, then suddenly died. Amy looked up at the sky. The black clouds were low and moving fast. She wondered what the old pagans would have made of such a sight, a thousand years before the term 'science' was invented. When Mother Nature got really angry, it made an aware human being realise just what a tiny, insignificant carbon unit he or she truly was.

Another car drove past, but Amy kept her head down, walking as fast as she could now. It wasn't Sidney's Defender: she knew the grumpy sound of that vehicle from a mile off. She wanted to make it to the farm before the rain unleashed. They were about to find out if there were any leaks in the roof!

Past the Junkaris property she scampered, turning right onto the gravel drive. Her right arm was starting to ache from carrying the basket.

Up ahead there was the sound of crunching gravel. She looked up. It was Arthur Clegg, the postman. You couldn't miss him: bright red polo shirt and red shorts, his pale legs pumping away. Another Amazon buy for Peter, most probably, she thought. Clegg started a little on seeing her, then forced a stiff, bloodless smile onto his face. 'Morning Amy.'

'Good morning, Arthur,' she replied, not breaking stride, hoping he would take her purposeful body language as a sign that she didn't have time to stop. Thankfully it worked: the postman kept on his way, staring determinedly ahead of himself.

She was within a hundred yards of the farmhouse when a young fox belted across the drive in front of her. Amy paused, wondering whether Crispy might be in hot pursuit, or even if someone might carelessly let off a shot, but the fox disappeared safely into undergrowth. The wind picked up again. Amy resumed walking.

She rounded the final bend and there was the farmhouse. It looked particularly bleak this morning, the glass windows like vacant eyes staring back at her. She drew her

breath for a moment, not knowing why a sudden chill went through her body, almost pinning her to the ground; only the blustering wind convinced her that the world had not ground to a stop. There were not any sounds: no birds, no bleating of sheep on the far side of the field, no traffic noise from the nearby road. No lights were on in the farmhouse, and there was no sign of life, but that wasn't unusual. Amy imagined that Peter would have got back late from his trip and was probably sleeping it off; Sidney would doubtless be out on the land, working away, Mary tidying away upstairs in her bedroom. Mary liked to look after the upstairs herself; it was always quite spotless, but Mary kept cleaning away regardless.

Amy felt a swirling excitement in the pit of her belly at the thought of seeing Hannah again. It was like a dozen tiny electric snakes were suddenly sliding around in her abdomen. *One day*, she thought. She pushed open the kitchen door, placed the basket of shopping goods on the wooden table, and took off her coat, placing it over the back of a chair, the coins in her pocket jangling. The kitchen looked a little different this morning, but she couldn't say why – other than it was clean, as if no one had eaten breakfast that morning.

She heard a noise in the living room. Amy began tying her cleaning apron around her waist. She decided that it would be best to say hello before getting on with her duties. Good to check that everyone was okay, and braced for the bad weather ahead. 'Hello,' she chirped, knotting her apron tight behind her back.

There was no reply.

Amy stepped into the living room.

In order to obtain the impossible, one must attempt the absurd.

Miguel de Cervantes

Murdoch looked into the face of the man he believed had killed six innocent people. It was early evening, maybe an hour before dusk. Late autumn cold now; all the trees bare. When Murdoch looked out the window there was hardly any colour apparent under the steel-grey sky. Even the fields beyond the stone wall were a kind of off-green, like a photograph which was more black-and-white than colour. Haxley Wood, just visible in the distance, was a black mass.

They were quite alone.

Here in front of me is a monstrosity, he thought. A man who had no criminal past, but to whom the Devil – define that word how you will – had offered a golden goblet and all he had to do was drink the poison. And he had drunk at a gulp! What Murdoch couldn't get over was the lack of guilt; it was one thing to kill if you felt driven by God, or revenge, or from unreciprocated love: *but for money?* To wipe out an entire family, six innocent people, for mere financial gain? The gulf between the massacre and the reason for doing it felt incomprehensible to Murdoch – even if it made more practical sense than most motives for committing violent crime than he usually encountered.

Greed. What a foul word it was. Pumping around the veins of an otherwise reasonable and tolerant man. If they opened up the killer's head, they would find unremarkable viscera. Bouncing all around the vault of his skull would be a lump of grey jelly, outwardly indistinguishable from the brain of a saint. Examiners had cut out the brains of Einstein and Mussolini, but all they'd found were two heaps of mush indistinguishable from each other. No secrets ever emanated from the coralline grey whorls of those small, silent kingdoms.

Over the last twenty years in the Job, Murdoch was rarely surprised on the downside. When it came to the ugliness of the human race, the blackness of the human psyche, he set a very low bar, and he was vindicated more often than not. In this case however, even his worst imaginings undersold the hideous reality. A madman passing through who just killed an innocent family for his own gratitude would probably be less harrowing to deal with than the solution his mind had concocted. He had reached this dark truth on circumstantial evidence, with no direct proof. All the pieces fit, and the truth was there in the man's eyes: the look of a killer. The man's green-blue eyes condemned him. He'd seen guilt many times before – from gross to subtle; a man can stand up to interrogation; he can answer questions for hours on end; he can lie, manipulate, only cough up the answers he chooses to give; he can match cunning against cunning and personality against personality. But guilt was another kettle of fish altogether. This killer had spent many lonely hours, days, weeks with his guilty knowledge, he had lived with it, and his conscience and guilty knowledge had eaten into his brain even if he had not realised it yet.

That morning Murdoch had walked to the top of Dead Man's Hill, as he had that first afternoon he'd visited the farm, nearly a month ago. He'd stood for a while beside that solitary oak, its thousand-year-old body thick and gnarled, looking down on the property that had once been the home of the Abbot family. The landscape felt full of ghosts; the old priest Tilley they'd hanged, drawn and quartered nearly five centuries

ago, and who'd never been forgotten; the artist Van Dorn, the ghosts of all those boys who'd died in wars which never needed to be fought; now the Abbots.

He'd walked through the farmhouse, leaving the lights on in the rooms where the victims had died. In the diffident light, the Georgian farmhouse was a smouldering monument under the leaden sky. Back on Dead Man's Hill, he was confronted with an English vision: an undulating patchwork of fields, thin winding lanes, stone walls and hedges, remote buildings and hamlets, the old rubbing with the new. The clouds were heavy over them, soft woolly bottoms scraping against the hilltops. It could be nowhere else on earth, thought Murdoch.

How summarise the whole bloody saga? Mary and Sidney were decent people; even their children, far from perfect, were not inherently evil by any stretch. And young Nicholas: losing his dad in Basra, then his own life eight years later. How unjust. Behind closed doors, every family has its own nasty secrets and hidden tales; the Abbots perhaps had more than most, but none of the victims deserved the fate handed out to them. All those questions which had rattled Murdoch now had answers: the burglary where nothing was stolen, the desecrated Abbot tombstone, feeding the animals and pruning the rose, the reason for treating Hannah different to the other victims.

From his elevated vantage post, Murdoch had looked left and right; he saw thin clouds of smoke arising from nearby chimneys: the Claxton's Top Farm, the Junkaris farm, the cottages owned by Gilbert Gleeson and Arthur Clegg. Over to the east of where he stood, more smoke rose heavenward, from the few properties scattered around the High Street and Green: Mike Styles, St Margaret's, Teddy Butler, the O'Donnell clan. He thought of the other people he'd met: the witch Flora in her forest hideaway, Ben Ridley, vicar, the teacher Trevor Hodgson, the farm secretary Barbara Handsworth: all going about their day, playing their roles, and the intrepid Jaffa Cruz over there in Collingwood, clicking away on his keyboard.

Murdoch felt bereft.

The night after they'd made love, Murdoch had got home to find the girl had left the bungalow. That hadn't happened before in the three weeks she'd stayed with him. 'Lisa?' No evening meal had been cooked; he looked in the bathroom and all her things were gone. He pushed open the spare bedroom door. The bed was perfectly made, her holdall wasn't there. The air was free of her scent. He performed a quick check that nothing valuable or obvious was missing, hating himself for suspecting the blond girl of being a thief. Nothing appeared to be missing. He looked for a note or message of some kind but there wasn't one. He pulled out his mobile phone, then put it away, somehow knowing that she had already blocked his number. He moved into the kitchen: the protein powder and mixer was there, so was the colourful mug. Leaning against it was a photo of Lisa next to his mother, Joanne Swalling, the mother Murdoch himself had loved and intended to marry at one point. He wondered what Joanne had told Lisa about Murdoch, about their life together, and what had driven the blond girl to track him down and play her little testing game of seduction. He lifted the photograph and picked up the colourful mug. He'd noticed the other night that it had some writing on it, but he hadn't paid it any attention. There was only one word on the mug: 'Dad'. Murdoch felt himself hurrying to the toilet, the vomit rising in his throat.

Murdoch had walked down to the farm, as the killer had done. He needed to click off the lights and check the buildings were locked and secure. The O'Donnell family had

been looking after Crispy until decisions regarding the property were finalised; other farmers had collected all the animals and taken them away. Grange Farm was now a truly soulless place.

Murdoch then headed to the White Hart pub for a bite to eat. A bowl of chips and orange juice. He hoped he would see that soldier he'd spoken to who'd served with Daniel Tapper. Murdoch could tell him that he did not know what had happened to his lost mate, but he knew who'd killed Tapper's wife and child, and why. At a table next to Murdoch, four men in suits and ties were talking in acronyms; Murdoch guessed it was stock-market talk; one of them tipped the waitress who walked past; he was a fat bastard and his wallet was fat too. The waitress gave him a cheeky grin. Then the men went back to talking in letters.

Murdoch had felt from the get-go that the massacre was planned. There were too many indicators that the killer was a local man – acting alone – and knew the layout of the farm, knew the victims. Too many signals, to Murdoch's mind at least, that the killings, the means and method, and order of the victims, was not arbitrary, but *designed*. Peter Abbot had been planning to head away for a long weekend that Thursday night; he had been struck over the head and then had his throat cut in the shed next to where he always parked his car. His body was then hidden. The killer had not risked firing off a shot, just in case Sidney came out to check. Two days passed, and then Sidney, coming back late Saturday afternoon from a farmer's meeting, was killed in another shed, closer to the farmhouse. With the two main threats neutralised, the killer had gone after the women and children. Nicholas and Mary were killed quickly, but Hannah was not killed inside the farmhouse. Murdoch suspected that Hannah, or her murder, was critical to the killer's plan and motive; the killer had purposely kept her alive for more than 24 hours after all the others had died, before brutally executing her late Sunday night.

Murdoch had told Erin Fox that in order to understand the crime they needed to go back in time and find a logical starting point. Something sparked this plan. Murdoch recalled when he had interviewed Gilbert Gleeson, who was struggling with his finances to hold onto his home, and the handyman had referred to himself as a 'Johan o factum' – the Latin phrase attributed to Robert Greene in 1592 to describe William Shakespeare: Jack of all Trades. Despite his lowly status, Gleeson was a reader. He regularly worked at the farm and knew its layout just as he knew the inhabitants inside out and everyone else in the village for that matter; he knew about all those true crime books on the Abbot bookshelf which dealt with farm massacres: in Hinterflaik, New Zealand, America, and at home. Gilbert Gleeson also knew how close Hannah and Amy had become; they were a couple, if not actual lovers, and maybe they were planning a life together.

Then, a little more than a year ago, Hannah made a decision which would cost her life. Avoiding the Abbot family solicitor, she went to Amy's solicitor and drew up her will, where she discharged what few assets she had to Amy Gleeson, and vice-versa, with a pledge from Amy that she would look after Nicholas if anything were to happen to her. Amy practically played the role of a second parent to the boy as it was. Given Hannah's mental health issues, the whispers that one day she might have Nicholas taken from her, her action was of no great surprise, and maybe the two women saw it as a means of cementing their bond. At that point, Hannah only had a thousand quid to her name, and Amy even less, so it was more a gesture of faith than anything else.

Amy, sometime later, then made a decision that would cost her own life: she told her father, just as she kept her father well informed of everything that was going on in her life, and at the Abbot farm.

Months rolled by, and like stirring oats into tasty porridge, Gleeson's obsession grew. That magnificent Georgian house and all those outbuildings; 350 acres of prime land. It could all be his. He could end his life of servitude, of chronic lack. Amy had told him that she had willed what little she had to Hannah when they'd written up their mutual wills, *but that if anything happened to Hannah first, whatever Amy had would go to him*. He was her next akin; he was the only other person named in her will. Just as she was the only one named in his will. Very simple, very natural.

Gilbert Gleeson then 'burgled' Sidney's den where the Abbot family papers were kept; nothing was stolen; Gleeson was looking to see whether there was a copy of the will on the farm, and whether Hannah had told her parents and stored a copy of her own new will in the filing cabinet. Murdoch had no idea if Gleeson found it or not.

No wonder the ex-soldier, Sidney Abbot, had the feeling his life was in danger. It was; and the killer was circling him in ever-diminishing circles that whole summer long. Gleeson was regularly at the farm; he knew where the gun cupboard was; he knew the routines of the Abbots. Being a self-employed handyman answerable to no one, he had ample opportunity. Gleeson never overplayed his hand, but he desecrated the Abbot family tombstone at St Margaret's – implying that there was someone in the village with a real grudge against the Abbot clan. A religious vendetta perhaps. All attention needed to be on the first five Abbot murders; he wanted the death of Amy the maid to be perceived as a mere incidental victim. Gleeson had no motive to hurt the Abbots per se. Nor did Gleeson need to frame anyone – be it Oriel Claxton, the Junkaris men or Daniel Tapper; he just needed to get away with his crime.

The key was the order and timing of deaths. Peter was the first-born son of Sidney and Mary, their primary heir. That was why he needed to die first. He needed to die a full 48 hours before the parents, so there could be *no possible confusion or doubt as to the order of deaths*. Nicholas was not cited in Mary and Sidney's will, unless he survived Peter and Hannah, so Nicholas was executed at the same time as Mary and Sidney. *But what the killer could not do was allow any possible confusion as to the time of Hannah's death*. That was key to the plan; Gleeson needed to be certain that the post-mortems would show Hannah had definitely died *after* the parents: that way their inheritance passed directly and totally to her, and no one could contest otherwise. Thus Hannah was kept alive for more than 24 hours. Hannah was then executed. The following day Amy Gleeson headed off to work. She had no idea that she was now the heir of everything Hannah owned: and Hannah's wealth had gone from one thousand pounds to several million in the space of a few days. It wasn't by chance that the killer was waiting for her that Monday morning: *she was the intended final victim*. Amy had to be *the last to die*.

The curse-weekend was perfect. It kept people indoors, making it extra unlikely anyone would stray near the farmhouse. Gilbert Gleeson's cottage was situated between the Abbot farm and the Claxton's; it was easy for him to move to and from both properties. Peter often went away that Thursday evening so his absence would not be noted, and it was the only Sunday of the year when Mary's absence from church service might draw a response. It was the only feasible stretch of time where he could kill so many people over such a length of days without their absence being noted. By Monday morning the rain broke, further hampering investigative efforts, but everything had gone to plan. However, Gleeson might have started to worry when Monday evening passed and no one went out to the farm. He wanted those bodies

found quickly, so there could be no doubt as to the order of their deaths. By lunchtime Tuesday, still no one had gone out to the farm, not the teacher Hodgson, not the vicar, so Gleeson entered the phone booth at the back of Mike Styles' shop and anonymously reported the crime at the Abbot farm. He didn't know that at more or less that exact time, Teddy Butler was heading down Little Compton Road hoping to speak to Sidney about future employment options.

Gleeson had known Crispy for several years; the dog would not have barked constantly at the familiar handyman. He looked after the animals and pruned the rose because he now considered the farmhouse to be *his*, so the animals and the rose were now his, and he wanted to take care of them.

There was only one tiny thing that went wrong. As a handyman, Gleeson would have carried about with him a carrier bag or tool box, something for his tools, and his food and drink. Murdoch thought that Gleeson had created an excuse to be at that farm on the Saturday afternoon, making sure everything was going to plan, and readying himself for Sidney's return. Gleeson was one of those men who ate the same foods and stuck to the same routines; he liked his oats and dried fruits, and he liked the special muffins Amy often baked for him. Gleeson had low calcium and phosphorous levels – he suffered from hypoparathyroidism: a rare condition that occurs when the parathyroid glands in the neck don't produce enough parathyroid hormone, and which required lifelong monitoring and treatment. Every week Amy baked her father a dozen or so tasty muffins into which she inserted Tricalcium Phosphate powder supplement, $(Ca_3(PO_4)_2)$, into the recipe. Gleeson was ritualistic about his diet and would carry his food bag around with him everywhere he went, always reaching for a muffin if he felt hungry, as a diabetic might reach for glucose. He took some to the Abbot farm that Saturday afternoon, knowing he had many long hours of arduous work ahead of him. He sequestered those muffins in the kitchen, thinking nothing of it, but 8-year-old Nicholas got his hands on one and consumed it only an hour or two before he went to bed and was killed. The extremely rare components Amy put into the muffins – her credit card confirmed the products she'd bought from a health food shop in Collingwood, which were never bought or used by anyone else on the Abbot farm – were shown to be partly digested inside Nicholas during the post-mortem. The chain of evidence did not prove Gleeson killed anyone, but it strongly implied he was at the farm on the Saturday, immediately before the murders occurred. In his statement to police, Gleeson stated that he had not been to the Abbot farm for at least ten days prior to the first murder taking place.

Then, when a number of weeks after the killings had passed, all Gleeson had to do was make an inquiry at Menlove and Rickards, in Thorpe Malsor, regarding his daughter's will. And in Amy's file, was the copy of Hannah Abbot's will when they'd cross-bequeathed one another a year before. How shocked and amazed Gleeson must have appeared – to learn that he was the sole beneficiary of the Abbot fortune! It would take several months for it all to be probated and finalised, and to become public knowledge, but it was all there in legal black and white. Gleeson had immediately urged one of the partners at the firm to call the police and let them know all about it, being the responsible citizen that he was.

Murdoch knew there would be no confession on this one, and the case they had would be unlikely to make it past the CPS. But Murdoch wondered how Gleeson would feel when he finally took up residence at Grange Farm. No more debts, suddenly the wealthiest man in Compton Tamor, a Lord in his own right, with his own kingdom. But he would have inherited more than goods and chattels; there was the knowledge of what he had done, the ghosts of the people who'd lived there; the sacrifice he had

made of his own daughter Amy, the only person who'd loved and cared for him. With time, he might come to learn that curses could be real. Meanwhile, for John Murdoch, the future was far more predictable. There would always be another body, another source of despair. And for that he was thankful.

The End

Next in the series...

MURDER IN SW19

Sunday, mid-July. The Wimbledon Men's tennis final is underway, and the country is glued to the event like never before. Nineteen-year old Ollie Smith is trying to become the first Londoner to win the event since 1906. His story has captivated the world: homeless for several years after losing his parents, the game of tennis offered him salvation. An improbable qualifier, he'd battled through round after round – and now he stands on the threshold of the greatest underdog victory in the history of sport.

Three people are watching the final. David Hogg, Cassia Fermi and Sande Cornelius. Three very different people, who on the surface seem to have no connection to one another.

Hogg is a narcissist, a ruthless entrepreneur. He lives in the most expensive street in SW19, and is on the cusp of pulling off a major property development deal, his biggest yet, a development which threatens the homes and lifestyles of thousands of people. There's no way he's going to miss the tennis and he's possibly the only man in England who won't mind too much if Ollie loses. Hogg likes other people to feel pain.

Cassia is a tele-marketer by day and fantasist by night. A sensitive loner, her mind is continually filled with improbable relationships and scenarios which are more exciting to her than her drab existence in the real world. Part of her wants to come back to planet earth and be normal like other people, because constantly tipping over the edge into fantasy can get tedious after a while. It can be dangerous too.

Sande, meanwhile, is fighting with all she has to maintain a tiny horse farm south of the district. A lifelong horse lover, she gave up her job in retail to live her dream – helping as many mistreated animals as possible. Her house is now mortgaged to the hilt, she is running out of funds, and her partner Jamie is unable to do anything to help, his hair-brained schemes always failing to deliver. Now she learns he has taken all his life savings, and bet on Ollie to win Wimbledon. He did it at the start of Wimbledon, when the odds of the teen winning were 200-to-1.

Three people watching the Wimbledon final. The match itself is a metaphor for each of their lives: their hopes and fears, who they are, what they have at stake, and what risks they're willing to take in order to win. Ollie Smith takes the final to a nail-biting fifth set, and with each passing point, the tension on and off the court grows to breaking point.

Three people. Watching a game of tennis. Before the day is over, one of them will be killed. And one will be arrested.