

NOT IN THE FLESH

Ruth Rendell



SEAL BOOKS

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The House of Stairs

A Fatal Inversion

A Dark-Adapted Eye

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CHAPTER 1

Tom Belbury died in May and now that summer was over his brother missed him more than ever. Neither of them had married so there was no widow and no children, only the dog Honey. Jim took Honey to live with him, he had always liked her and it was what Tom had wanted. When he knew he hadn't long to live he worried a lot about Honey, what would happen to her after he was gone, and though Jim assured him repeatedly that he would take care of her, Tom said it again and again.

'Haven't I promised over and over? You want me to put it in writing and get it witnessed? I will if that's what you want.'

'No, I trust you. She's a good dog.'

His trust hadn't been misplaced. Jim lived in the cottage that had been the brother's parents' home and there Honey went to live with him. She was no beauty, owing her ancestry to an apparent mix of spaniel, basset hound and Jack Russell. Tom used to say she looked like a corgi and everyone knew corgis were the Queen's dogs, having so to speak the royal seal of approval, but Jim couldn't see it. Nevertheless, he had grown attached to Honey. Apart from her fidelity and affection, she had one great virtue. She was a truffle dog.

Every September, at the beginning of the month, Tom and Honey used to go into one patch of woodland or another in the neighbourhood of Flagford and hunt for truffles. A lot of people scoffed. They said truffles couldn't be found in Britain, only in France and Italy, but there was no doubt Honey found them, was rewarded with a lump of meat, and Tom sold the truffles to a famous London restaurant for £200 a pound.

Jim disliked the taste but he liked the idea of £200 and possibly more. He had never been truffle-hunting with Tom but he knew how it was done. This was why a mild and sunny morning in late September found him and Honey in what their neighbours called the post office part of Flagford where Flagford Hall faced Athelstan House across Pump Lane, each with its own extensive grounds. They had no interest in these houses or their occupants. They were heading for Old Grimble's Field which filled the corner between the gardens of Athelstan House and two identical detached houses called Oak Lodge and Marshmead.

Like the Holy Roman Empire which Gibbon said was neither holy, Roman nor an empire, this open space wasn't a field, nor was Grimble particularly old or really called Grimble. It was an overgrown piece of land, about an acre of what estate agents describe as a corner plot. Due to years of inattention, saplings had grown into trees, shrubs into bushes, roses and privet and dogwood into hedges and trees had doubled in size. Somewhere in the middle of this burgeoning woodland stood a semi-derelict bungalow which had belonged to Grimble's father, its windows boarded up, its roof slowly shedding its tiles. Tom Belbury had been there truffle-hunting with Honey the year before and pronounced it rich in members of the genus *Tuber*.

Because Tom carried the rewards for Honey unwrapped in the breast pocket of his leather jacket, he usually smelt of meat that was slightly 'off'. Jim hadn't much liked it at the time

but now he recalled it with affection. How pleased dear old Tom would be to see him and Honey heading for Old Grimble's Field in close companionship, following his old pursuit. Perhaps he could see, Jim thought sentimentally, and imagined him looking down from whatever truffle wood in the sky he found himself in.

Honey was the director of operations. Tom used to claim that she was drawn to a particular spot by the presence of truffle flies hovering around the base of a tree, and now she led Jim to a mature tree (a sycamore, he thought it was) where he could see the flies himself.

'Get digging, girl,' he said.

The irregular warty lump, about the size of a tennis ball, which Honey unearthed she willingly relinquished in exchange for the cube of sirloin steak Jim took out of a hygienic ziplock bag he had brought with him.

'This old fungus must weigh a good half-pound,' he said aloud. 'Keep on with the good work, Honey.'

Honey kept on. The truffle flies annoyed her and she snapped at the swarms, scattering them and snuffling towards where they had been densest. There she began digging again, fetched out of the rich leaf mould first a much smaller truffle, then one about the size of a large potato and was rewarded once more with pieces of sirloin.

'There's a lot more flies buzzing about over there,' Jim said, pointing to a biggish beech tree which looked a hundred years old. 'How about moving on?'

Honey had no intention of moving on. So might a diamond prospector refuse to abandon the lode where gems worth a fortune had already come to light, until he was sure the search had been exhausted. Honey sniffed, dug, slapped at the flies with her paws, dug again. No more truffles were foraged and the object which she had unearthed was of no interest to her. It lay exposed on the chestnut-coloured soil, white, fanlike, unmistakably what it was, in a human hand.

Or, rather, the bones of a human hand, flesh, skin, veins, tendons all gone.

'Oh, my lord, girl,' said Jim Belbury, 'whatever have you gone and found?'

As if she understood, Honey stopped digging, sat down and put her head on one side. Jim patted her. He put the three truffles in the plastic bag he had brought with him for that purpose, placed the bag inside his backpack and removed from it his mobile phone. Jim might be an old countryman, once an agricultural labourer and living in a cottage with no bathroom and no main drainage, but still he would no more have gone out without his mobile than would his fifteen-year-old great-nephew. Unaware of the number of Kingsmarkham police station, he dialled 999.

CHAPTER 2

The thing that had come out of the pit lay exposed for them to see, a bunch of bones that looked more than anything like broomsticks, a skull to which scraps of decomposed tissue still adhered, all wrapped in purple cotton. They had been digging for two hours, an operation watched by Jim Belbury and his dog.

‘Man or woman?’ Chief Inspector Wexford asked.

‘Hard to say.’ The pathologist was a young woman who looked like a fifteen-year-old model, thin, tall, pale and other-worldly. ‘I’ll tell you when I’ve taken a closer look.’

‘How long has it been there?’

Carina Laxton eyed Wexford and his sergeant, DS Hannah Goldsmith who had asked the question. ‘And how long have you two been in the Force? Isn’t it about time you knew I can give you an immediate answer when a cadaver’s obviously been buried for years?’

‘OK but is it months or decades?’

‘Maybe one decade. What I can tell you is you’re wasting your time taking all these measurements and photographs as if someone put it there last week.’

‘Maybe Mr Belbury can help us there,’ said Wexford. He had decided not to mention the fact that Jim Belbury was trespassing, had probably been trespassing for years. ‘Did your dog ever dig here before?’

‘Not on this spot, no,’ said Jim. ‘Over there where there’s more bigger trees. Can I ask you if you reckon it’s what you call foul play?’

Wexford was tempted to say, well, no, you can’t, but he relented. ‘Someone buried him or her, so you have to—’ he began but Hannah interrupted him.

‘Law-abiding people don’t bury bodies they find lying about, you know,’ she said sharply. ‘Perhaps you should be on your way, Mr Belbury. Thank you, you’ve been very helpful.’

But Jim wasn’t to be dismissed so easily. Finding Wexford sympathetic and everyone else – Hannah, the scene-of-crime officer, the photographers, the pathologist and various policemen – of no account, he began giving the chief inspector details of all the houses and the occupants in the vicinity. ‘That’s Mr Tredown’s place next door and down there’s the Hunters and the Pickfords. Over the other side that’s Mr Borodin. I’ve lived in Flagford all my life. There’s nothing I don’t know.’

‘Then you can tell me who owns this land.’ Wexford extended his arm and waved his hand. ‘Must be at least an acre.’

His politically correct sergeant murmured something about hectares being a more appropriate measurement ‘in the present day’ but no one took much notice of her.

‘An acre and a half,’ said Jim with a glare at Hannah. ‘We don’t have no hectares round here. Them belongs in the Common Market.’ Like many people of his age, Jim still referred in this way to the European Union. ‘Who owns it? Well, Mr Grimble, innit? This here is O

Grimble's Field.'

Though he might possibly be compounding a felony, seeing that the subterranean fungi the bag properly belonged to this Grimble, Wexford thanked Jim and offered him a lift home in a police car.

'And my dog?' said Jim.

'And your dog.'

His offer gratefully accepted, he and Hannah moved away, heading for the road where police vehicles were parked along the pavement. It became, within a short distance, Flagford High Street, a somewhat too picturesque village centre where stood the thirteenth-century church, a post office and general store, a shop which sold mosaic tabletops, another purveying lime-flower honey and mulberry conserve, and a number of flint-walled cottages, one thatched and another with its own bell tower.

Wexford, in the car, said to Hannah that, for all the times he had been to Flagford, he couldn't remember noticing that piece of land before.

'I don't think I've ever been here before, guv,' said Hannah.

He had grown accustomed to her calling him that and supposed she had originally got it off the television. *The Bill*, probably. Not that he liked it, while admitting it was current usage, but the trouble was all his officers had learnt it from her and now no one kept to the old 'sir'. Mr Burden would know who owned that land. He had a relative living in Flagford, his first wife's cousin, Wexford thought it was.

'There's not much to be done,' Hannah was saying, 'until we know how long that body has been there.'

'Let's hope Carina will know by later today.'

'Meanwhile I could find out more about this Grimble and if he owns the old house on it.'

'Right, but let me talk to Mr Burden first.'

Hannah directed one of her looks at him. She was a beautiful young woman, black-haired and white-skinned, with large brown eyes which softened into a quite disproportionate pitying sorrow combined with a desire to reproach him gently whenever he committed the solecism of using terms or styles she thought obsolete. '*Mister* Burden, oh, come,' her glance said while the perfect lips stayed closed. Their relative ranks made reproach impossible but glances were free. As Wexford himself might have said, a cat may look at a king.

It was a gentle sunny day, what weather forecasters were starting to call 'quiet' weather, the temperature high for September, all the leaves still on the trees and most of them still green. Summer flowers in pots and urns and window boxes still bloomed on and on, more luxuriantly than in August. Frosts were due, frosts would normally have come by now but none had. If this was global warming, and Wexford thought it must be, it disguised its awful face under a mask of mild innocence. The sky had become the milky blue of midsummer, covered with tiny white puffs of cloud.

He called Burden a moment after he got into the police station but the inspector's voicemail told him he was occupied in an interview room. That would be his interview with Darrel Fincher, the teenager found with a knife on him. You could predict, without hearing

word of their conversation, what the boy would say: that he carried the knife for protection that going home from school or going out in the evening he wouldn't feel safe without knife. It was 'all them Somalis', he would say. They were everywhere and they all had knives. That was what they called dark-skinned people these days, 'them Somalis' as they had once indiscriminately called Asians 'them Pakis'. Wexford turned his thoughts to the Flagford corpse. With luck, it wouldn't have been there for more than a year or two and would turn out to be that chap he could remember going missing a while back after a ram raid on a jeweller's or the old woman who lived alone in a Forby cottage. After failing to visit her for three months her daughter had remembered her existence but on going there had found her apparently long gone. One of them it would most likely be. Strange, he thought, that death and subsequent decay wipe away age and sex and every distinguishing feature so that nothing is left but bones and a rag or two. And a hand, unearthed by an enthusiastic mongrel. How comforting it must have been when men and women (or women and men, as Hannah would say) believed that the body is but a sheath for the spirit which, at the point of death, flies away to some afterlife or paradise. It would hardly matter to you then, if your faith were strong enough, that you met your death from the blade of a knife, a bludgeon or because your heart gave its final beat in the natural course of things.

He came down to earth from these post-mortem reflections when his office door opened and Burden walked in. 'That bit of land at Flagford where the dogwalker found a body? Of course I know who owns it. Everybody knows.'

'I don't,' said Wexford. 'And what d'you mean, everybody knows? It's not the Tower of London, it's not Harrods.'

'I mean this guy it belongs to tells everyone how hard done by he is by the planning people. His name's Grimble, John Grimble. He's even had a piece about himself in the *Courier*. He's obsessed. His father died – well, his stepfather it was – and left him the bungalow and the land it's on and ever since he's been trying to get planning permission to build houses on it. He thinks he's been badly treated – that's an understatement – because they'll let him build one but not more.'

'Where does he live?'

'The next street to me, worse luck. The dog-walker must have known.'

'He's not a dog-walker. He's a truffle-hunter.'

Burden's normally impassive face brightened. 'A truffle-hunter? How amazing. *Tuber aestivum*, *Tuber gib-bosum*, *Tuber magnatum* or *Tuber melanosporum*?'

Wexford stared. 'What do you know about truffles, since I suppose that's what you're talking about?'

'I used to hunt for them with my dad and our dog when I was a boy. Found a good market too. My grandfather used a pig, a sow, of course. Truffles smell like the male swine sex attractant, you see, but the trouble is that pigs'll eat anything, so they tend to eat the truffles before you can stop them and that's a bit expensive when you consider—'

'Mike, sit down a minute.'

Burden, one of those restless people who perch rather than sit and fidget instead of relaxing, balanced himself on the edge of Wexford's desk. He had at last, regretfully,

discarded his designer jeans and was wearing charcoal trousers with a knife-edge crease and stone-coloured polo neck under a linen jacket. Wexford thought rather wistfully that when he tried to get himself up in casual gear he just looked like someone's dad going to a fancy dress party.

'Never mind truffles. How long has this obsessive owned the land?'

'Must be at least ten years. More like twelve. I don't suppose the people on either side like it much, having a sort of wilderness next door, I mean. Apparently, when old Grimble lived there he kept the place neat and tidy. His garden was quite famous locally. This one – John Grimble has let the place turn into a wood. He doesn't even mow the grass. And he says things are going to stay as they are until he gets his planning permission. For two houses, that is. He'll never agree to pulling down that old ruin of a bungalow – it's called Sunnybank, by the way – and building one house. Or that's what he says.'

'What does he do for a living?'

'Something in the building trade. He's put up a few houses around the place and made a lot of money. If you see a jerry-built eyesore, it'll be Grimble's. He's retired now, though he was only in his fifties.'

'We'll go and see him.'

'Why not? If it turns out he's murdered one of the district planners our task is going to be easy.'

John and Kathleen Grimble belonged to that category of people who, after about forty, decide consciously or unconsciously to become old. While the cult of youth prevails in society, while to be young is to be beautiful, bright and lovable, they sink rapidly into middle age and even seem to cultivate the disabilities of the aged. Wexford's theory was that they do this out of laziness and because of the benefits incident to being elderly. The old are not expected to take exercise, lift heavy weights or do much for themselves. They are pitied but they are also ignored. No one asks them to do anything or, come to that, to stop doing anything they choose to do. Burden had told him John Grimble was just fifty years old, his wife two or three years younger. They looked, each of them, at least ten years older than that, anchored to orthopaedic armchairs, the kind that have back supports and adjustable footrests, placed in the best position for perpetual television-watching.

He nodded to Burden, his neighbour. In response to Wexford's 'Good afternoon, Mr Grimble,' he merely stared. His wife said she was pleased to meet them in the tones of an old woman waking from her afterlunch siesta. On the way there Burden had explained something of the obsession which contributed to Grimble's reputation, so Wexford wasn't surprised by his first words.

'I mean to say,' Grimble began, 'if I tell you something that may put you on the right road to catching a criminal, will you use your influence to get my permission?'

'Oh, John,' said Kathleen Grimble.

'Oh, John, oh, John, you're a parrot, you are. Now, Mr Burden – it is Mr Burden, isn't it? You hear what I say – will you?'

‘What permission would that be?’ Wexford asked.

‘Didn’t he tell you?’ Grimble said in his surly grudging voice. He cocked a thumb in Burden’s direction. ‘It’s not as if everybody don’t know. It’s common knowledge. All I want to be told I can build houses on what’s my own, my own land that my dear old dad left me in his last will and testament – well, my stepdad he was, but as good as a father to me. So what I’m saying is, if I scratch your back will you scratch mine?’

‘We have no influence at all with the planning authority, Mr Grimble. None at all. But I must tell you that this is a murder case and you are obliged to tell us what you know. Withholding information is a criminal offence.’

A tall thin man, one of a race which is classified as white and would be horrified otherwise designated, Grimble had skin discoloured to a dark brownish-grey, suffused about his nose and chin with crimson. A perpetual frown had creased up his forehead and dug deep furrows across his cheeks. He stuck out his lower lip like a mutinous child and said, ‘It’s a funny thing how everybody’s against me getting permission to build *on my own land*. Everybody. All my old dad’s neighbours. All of them objected. Never mind how I know, I can know, that’s all. Now it’s the police. You wouldn’t think the police would care, would you? They’re for law and order, like they’re supposed to be, they ought to want four nice houses put up on that land, four houses with nice gardens and people as can afford them living there. Not asylum seekers, mind, not the so-called homeless, not Somalis, but decent people with a bit of money.’ ‘Oh, John,’ said Kathleen.

Wexford got to his feet. He said sternly, ‘Mr Grimble, either tell us what you have to tell us *now* or I shall ask you to accompany us to the police station and tell us there. In an interview room. Do you understand me?’

No apology was forthcoming. Wexford thought Grimble could take a prize for surliness but it seemed the man hadn’t even begun. His features gathered themselves into a bundle composed of the deepest frown a human being could contrive, a wrinkling of his potato-like nose and a baring of the teeth, the result of curling back his top lip. His wife shook her head.

‘Your blood pressure will go sky-high, John. You know what the doctor said.’

Whatever the doctor had said, reminding Grimble of it caused a very slight reduction in his frown and teeth-baring. He spoke suddenly and rapidly. ‘Me and my pal, we reckoned we could put in the main drainage. Get started on it. Get rid of the old septic tank. Link the new houses up to the main drain in the road. You get me? We got down to digging a trench—’

‘Just a minute,’ said Wexford, loth to remind him of his grievance but seeing no way to avoid it. ‘What new houses? You hadn’t got planning permission for any new houses.’

‘D’you think I don’t know that? I’m talking about eleven years ago. I didn’t know then, did I? My pal knew a chap in the planning and he said I was bound to get permission, bound to get it. He said, you go ahead, do what you want. Your pal – meaning me – he may not get it for four houses but there’s no way they’d say no to two, right?’

‘Exactly when was this? You said eleven years ago. When did your stepfather die?’

Unexpectedly, Kathleen intervened. ‘Now, John, you just let me tell them.’ Sulking, Grimble nodded, contemplated the television on which the sound had been turned down fully but the picture remained. ‘John’s dad – his name was Arthur – he died in the January

January '95, that is. He left this will, straightforward it was, no problems. I don't know the ins and outs of it but the upshot was that it was John's in the May.'

'That piece of land, Mrs Grimble, and the house on it?'

'That's right. He wanted to pull down the old place and get building but his pal Bill Runge that's pal he's talking about – he said, you can't do that, John, you have to get permission, so John got me to write to the council and ask to put up four houses. You got all that?'

'Yes, I think so, thank you.' Wexford turned back to John Grimble who was leaning forward, his head on one side, in an attempt to hear the soundless television programme. 'So without getting the permission,' he said, 'you and Mr Runge started digging a trench for the main drainage? When would that have been? Mr Grimble, I'm speaking to you.'

'All right. I hear you. Them busybody neighbours, it was them as put a spoke in my wheel that fellow Tredown and those Pickfords. Them McNeils what used to live at Flagford Hall. I know what I know. That's why I never pulled down my dad's old house. Leave it there, I thought to myself, leave it there to be an eyesore to that lot. They won't like that and they don't. Leave the weeds there and the bloody nettles. Let the damn trees take over.'

Wexford sighed silently. 'I'm right, aren't I, in thinking that you and your friend started digging a trench between where you expected the houses would be sited and the road itself? A surly nod from Grimble. 'But your application for planning permission was refused. You could build one house but no more. So you filled in the trench. And all this was eleven years ago.'

'If you know,' said Grimble, 'I don't know why you bother to ask, wasting my time.'

'Oh, John, don't,' said Kathleen Grimble, slightly varying her admonition.

'We dug a trench like I said, and left it open for a day or two and then those bastards at the planning turned me down so we filled the bugger in.'

'I'd like you to think carefully, Mr Grimble.' Wexford doubted if this was possible but he tried. 'Between the time you dug the trench and the time you filled it in, was it' – he paused 'in any way interfered with?'

'What d'you mean, interfered with?' Grimble asked.

'Had it been touched? Had anything been put in it? Had it been disturbed?'

'How should I know? Bill Runge filled it in. I paid him to do it and he done it. To be honest with you, I was too upset to go near the place. I mean I'd banked on getting that permission. I'd as near as dammit been *promised* I'd get it. Can you wonder I was fed up to my back teeth? I was ill as a matter of fact. You ask the wife. I was laid up in bed, had to have the doctor, and he said no wonder you're in a bad way, Mr Grimble, he said, your nerves are shot to pieces and all because of those planning people and I said—'

Wexford almost had to shout to get a word in. 'When was permission refused?'

Again it was Kathleen who answered him. 'I'll never forget the date, he was in such a state. He started the digging end of May and the second week of June they wrote to him and said he could build one house but not more.'

Out in the little hallway, shaking her head, casting up her eyes, and with a glance at the open door behind them, she whispered, 'He's still on the phone to his pal most days. After

eleven years! That's all they talk about, those two, that blessed planning permission. It gets you down.'

Wexford smiled non-committally.

Rather shyly, she peered up into his face. She was a little woman with thinning reddish hair, round wire-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose. 'I don't know if I ought to ask but how did you know there was a dead body in there? It wasn't that truffle man, was it? I thought he'd died.'

Wexford only smiled.

'If John thought that he'd go mad. He hates that truffle man. He hates trespassers. But he's dead that's all right.'

'I've a feeling,' Wexford said when they were back at the police station, 'that we've got a mystery person – man or woman, we don't know yet – on our hands. Identification is going to be a problem. I shan't be surprised if we're still asking who this character is in three months' time. It's just a hunch but I do have these hunches and often they're right.'

Burden shrugged. 'And just as often they're wrong. His teeth, her teeth, will identify him or her. His or her dentition, I should say. It never, or rather, seldom, fails.'

'I'm not telling the media anything till Carina gets back to me. It's not a good idea confronting them with a cadaver we can't even say was a man or a woman. We can't say how he or she died or whether foul play, as they always put it, is suspected or not.'

'What is it you always say?' said Burden. 'A body illicitly interred is a body unlawfully killed.'

'Pretty well true,' said Wexford, 'but not invariably.'

'By the way, the kid with the knife said his mother gave it to him. She's called Leann Fincher. She said it made her feel better when he was out of the house knowing he'd got the weapon. I think I'll go round and see her on my way home.'

Wexford too went home. He walked. Dr Akande had told him it was time he paid attention to that long neglected piece of machinery, that once-efficient pump, his heart. Not in the half-hearted (half-hearted!) way he had in the past, dieting in a feeble fashion, forgetting the diet in favour of indulgence in meat and cheese and whisky, exercising in ever-decreasing spurts, letting Donaldson drive him whenever it rained or the temperature fell below fifteen degrees, running out of statins and not renewing his prescription. Now it was a walk to work and a walk home every day, a double dose of the Lipitor, a single glass of red wine every evening and cultivating a liking for salads. Why did all women love salads and all men hate them? You could almost say that real men don't eat green stuff. He had refused adamantly and rudely to join a gym. Burden went to one, of course, bouncing up and down on cross-trainers and walkways – or was it crossways and walk-trainers? – and pumping metal bars that weighed more than he did.

The walk was downhill in the morning and uphill in the evening. He often wished the reverse was true. He had even tried to find a new way of doing the journey so that, if not downhill, it was flat all the way, surely a possibility if one's route went round the side of

hill. It might be a possibility but it wasn't discoverable in the terrain of Kingsmarkham. He turned the corner into his own street and approached the house where Mr and Mrs Dirir and their son lived. It was called Mogadishu which Wexford knew he should have found touching the exiles reminding themselves daily of their native land. Only he didn't. He found it irritating not, he told himself, because it was such a very un-English name for a house, but because it had a name at all. Most, if not all, of the other houses in the street had numbers only. But he wasn't quite sure that this was the real reason. The real reason would be racist and that bothered him for he sincerely did his best, constantly examining his conscience and his motives, to avoid even a smidgen of race prejudice. If it underlay his feelings about the Dirirs, it could perhaps be attributed to the undoubted bias in the town and no less among the police, against immigrants from Somalia. There was a small colony of them in Kingsmarkham, mostly law-abiding, it seemed, though they seemed as a race to be secretive people, modest, quiet, religious – some Christian, most Moslem – industrious and reserved. The bias rested on the fact or the suspicion or the unfounded prejudice, that their sons were about armed with knives.

When the Dirirs and their son came round for a drink – in their case Dora's latest health fad, pomegranate juice or, as they preferred, fizzy lemonade – they all got on well, even if the conversation was a little stilted. They spoke good English, were considerably better educated than he had thought ruefully, than he was, and all of them anxious for the betterment of the community's fortunes. Mrs Dirir constituted herself a kind of social worker among her fellow immigrants, keeping an eye on their health, their work opportunities, their financial state and the welfare of their children. Her husband was a civil servant in the local benefit office, her son a student at the University of the South in Myringham.

Wexford had noticed that while he and Dora called everyone else they knew in the neighbourhood by their given names, the Somali couple were Mr and Mrs Dirir just as the English were Mr and Mrs Wexford. If Hannah Goldsmith had been aware of this she would have called it racism of the worst kind, the sort that decrees meting out an extravagant respect for people of a different colour from oneself; a respect, she would say, that in the half-baked liberal masks contempt. Wexford was pretty sure he didn't feel contempt for the Dirirs, rather a puzzlement and a failure to find any common ground between them. He thought he might try calling Mr Dirir Omar next time he met him, and Mrs Dirir Iman, and as he was wondering how he might achieve this, Mrs Dirir emerged from her front door for no reason that he could discern but to say, 'Good evening, Mr Wexford.'

There was no time like the present. It still took a bit of nerve to say as he did, 'Good evening, Iman. How are you?'

She seemed somewhat taken aback, said in a preoccupied way, 'Fine. I am fine, thank you' and retreated into the house. He worried all the rest of the way home that he had been too precipitate and offended her.

Next day Carina Laxton told him the body found on Grimble's land had once, between ten and twelve years before when it was still alive, been a man. Whoever had killed him had wrapped his body in some kind of purple cloth before burying him. What he had died of she couldn't tell and warned him with a frown that it was possible she might never be able to

tell. It was policy now to have two pathologists conduct the autopsy and Dr Mavrikian had also been present. Scanning the report, Wexford saw that he also had little faith in even finding the cause of death. The only clue to that cause was a crack in one of the dead man's ribs.

CHAPTER 3

He had gathered his team together to give them a rundown on the thin facts as he knew them, but he left the demonstration on the much-magnified computer screen to DS Hannah Goldsmith. He was no good with computers and now never would be. The picture which had come up was a plan of the area, comprising Old Grimble's Field, the land and house on the western side of it, the house facing and the two houses on its southern side. Hannah made the arrow move on to the spot where the body had been found and then, with mysterious skill, Wexford's eyes, to each dwelling in the vicinity and the two cottages on the Kingsmarkham Road.

'The people who live at Oak Lodge are a married couple called Hunter and next door to them at Marshmead, James Pickford and his wife Brenda on the ground floor and in the upper flat, their son Jonathan and his girlfriend Louise Axall. The older couple, Oliver and Audrey Hunter, have been there since the house was built about forty years ago. They are very old, keep themselves to themselves and have a resident carer. As you may know, Flagford is locally known as "the geriatric ward". The place opposite, Flagford Hall, belongs to a man called Borodin, like the composer.'

Blank looks and silence met this disclosure, most of them being aficionados of Coldplay or Mariah Carey. Only DS Vine, the Bellini and Donizetti fan, nodded knowingly. Hannah shifted the cursor to a point across the Kingsmarkham Road, the diamond on her hand no one had seen before blazing as it caught the light. 'He's a weekender, lives in London, and in any case hasn't owned Flagford Hall for more than eight years.' The arrow moved again, flitting from plot to plot. 'Two of the cottages are also occupied only at weekends, the other one by an old lady of ninety. With the exception of the house next door to Grimble's.'

As the arrow moved to the large Victorian villa and the diamond flashed once more, the voice of DC Coleman, deep and resonant, sounded, 'You know who lives there, guv? The author – what's he called?'

'Thank you, Damon,' Wexford said in a tone that implied anything but gratitude. 'Oddly enough, I do know. I've read his books – or one of them. Owen Tredown is what he's called. The other members of the household are his wife Maeve and a woman called Claudia Ricardo. Tredown's lived there for twenty years at least. Those are the neighbours and all of them need to be visited today. You, Damon, can concentrate your efforts on our records of missing persons.'

'They only go back eight years,' Burden said.

Wexford had forgotten. Vaguely he remembered that before they became fully computerised – went on broadband, was that the expression? – they hadn't the space for storing the reams of paper records. It was different now.

'Well, check eight years back,' he said, his voice sounding lame.

There was nothing, in fact, to be ashamed of in keeping a list of local disappearances for so short a period. It was standard practice before the National Missing Persons Bureau was

established. Though it covered a relatively short space of time, it would be a long list Wexford knew. People went missing at an alarming rate, nationwide something like 50 every day, locally one a day – or was it one every hour? And not all of them by any means were sought by the police. Alarm bells rang when the missing person was a child or a young girl. Every available officer was needed to hunt for lost children. Women in general, when they vanished, aroused concern and attention. Young men, indeed able-bodied men of any age but for the very old, were a different matter. This man, Carina Laxton had told him earlier, was probably in his forties. When he disappeared his nearest and dearest must have missed him, if he had nearest and dearest, and perhaps searched for him, but even if his disappearance had been reported, the police would not have done so. It was generally assumed that when a man left home, even left home without saying goodbye or leaving a note, he had gone off to make himself a new life or join another woman.

The post-mortem had uncovered no clue as to how the man, now inevitably labelled X, had met his death. One of his ribs was cracked but apart from that, no marks had showed on his bones. He had been five feet eight inches tall. This measurement, Carina told him scathingly, was for Wexford's ears only. In her report she would give his height in centimetres. The skull was intact. Fortunately, enough 'matter' remained, including marrow in the long bones, to extract DNA for help in identification. The wisdom teeth were missing but apart from that he had a full set, though with many fillings.

Why did he assume identifying X would be such a difficult task? Some kind of intuition, perhaps, which people said he had but which he couldn't accept himself. Surely, one should always rely on the facts and the facts alone. It was far too early to have any idea of who those bones might once have been, still less who dug the grave and put them there. Some of this he said to Hannah Goldsmith before she left to question the occupants of the cottages.

He liked Hannah who was a good officer and, being interested in her welfare, he took her left hand in his and asked her if congratulations were in order.

She didn't blush. Hannah had too much poise and what she would have called 'cool' for that. But she nodded and smiled a rare and radiant smile. 'Bal and I got engaged last night,' she said.

After he had said, in accordance with a long-forgotten traditional etiquette, that he hoped she would be very happy, he thought how absurd it was (by those ancient standards) that two people who had been living together for the past year should betroth themselves to each other. But engagement, as someone had said, was the new marriage and for all he knew, she and Bal Bhattacharya might never marry but remain engaged as some people did through years together and the births of children till death or the intervention of someone else parted them.

'How's Bal?'

'He's fine. Said to say hallo.'

Wexford was sorry to have lost this fiancé of hers who had left to join the Met, the two of them occupying a flat near the Southern line, halfway between here and Croydon. Bal had been valuable, in spite of lapses into puritanical behaviour and wild heroism.

Bill Runge was as jovial and extrovert a man as Grimble had been recalcitrant. Sturdily plumed and looking younger by a dozen years than his friend, he worked at Forby garden centre where Wexford and Burden found him inside the main gate, arranging bags of daffodil and narcissus bulbs.

‘Poor devil,’ he said. ‘I don’t mind telling you, there’s times when I feel like telling him to give it a rest. I did try, I did tell him once. Give over, John, I said, it’s not worth it. Life’s too short. Sell the place like it is. Take the money and run, I said, but he was so upset. In the end I had to apologise.’

‘Tell us about the trench you dug, Mr Runge.’

Bill Runge attached a price ticket to a packet of anemone corms, wiped his hands on the plastic apron he wore and turned to them. ‘Yes, well, we’d dug this trench for the main drainage. Mind you, I said to him, John, I said, leave it. Don’t do it now. Leave it a couple of weeks. Be on the safe side. But he was so sure, poor devil. Then came the bombshell. No permission for four houses. Just the one he could build, on the site where his old dad’s was. I thought he was going to have a nervous breakdown and maybe he did. Maybe that’s what happened.’

‘You filled it in for him, I believe.’

‘I didn’t want to. I could have done without that, I’m telling you, but he got in such a state. It’d break his heart to go near the place, he said. He said he’d pay me for doing it and – well, things weren’t easy. My daughter was only twelve then. She wanted to go on a school trip to Spain and the education people don’t pay for that. So I said yes to John and got started. It took me a couple of days. I could only do it in the evenings.’

‘Let me get this clear, you hadn’t put the pipes in the trench?’

‘Oh, no, nothing like that. He’d got them on order but they hadn’t come, thank God. Well, I filled in the trench, end of story.’

‘Not exactly, Mr Runge. Tell me something. Think carefully. Did you shovel the earth back by putting in a layer the length of the trench and then going back to the beginning and putting in another layer and so on until it was filled up? Or did you fill the trench completely as you went along?’

‘Come again?’

Wexford did his best to put his questions more clearly but, by the look on Runge’s face, he failed again. Burden came to his rescue by producing from his pocket a ballpoint and his notebook. ‘Let me draw it,’ he said.

A neat sketch was quickly achieved, three separate cross-sections of the trench depicting how it would have appeared a quarter filled, half-filled and completely full. Noddin comprehending at last, Runge settled for the middle version. He had half-filled the trench when he went home when it got dark, returned to finish the job next day.

‘You say you worked in the evenings,’ said Wexford. ‘It was June and the evenings would have been light till late.’

‘June, it was. Didn’t get dark till half-nine.’

‘Can you pinpoint the date, Mr Runge?’

‘It was 16 June. I know that for sure. It was my boy’s birthday, he was seven, and he was mad at me for staying out working late. I made it up to him, though.’

It always brought Wexford pleasure to come upon a good parent, something which happened all too seldom. He smiled. ‘Did you see anyone while you were working? I mean, did anyone come into the field? Did anyone talk to you?’

‘Not that I recall.’

‘People do cross that field, walking their dogs.’

‘Maybe, but don’t let poor old John know it.’ Runge put up one finger, as if admonishing himself. ‘I tell a lie,’ he said. ‘There was one person who came to talk to me. Mrs Tredown. Like one of the Mrs Tredowns, the young one, not that she’s very young. Came across the field from her place. I said good evening to her. Very polite I was which is more than she was to me. I don’t remember her exact words, I mean it was eleven years ago. “So he can’t build his houses,” she said, something like that. “I’m glad,” she said, “I’m overjoyed. I’d like to dance on his effing trench,” she said, only she didn’t say effing. I reckon that’s why I’ve remembered, her language and her supposed to be a lady. “We won,” she said, “God is not mocked.” I reckon she isn’t all there, two sandwiches short of a picnic, like they say.’

‘By “we won” she meant the neighbours’ opposition to Mr Grimble’s plan had succeeded?’

‘That’s about it.’

Burden said, ‘I think you’d have told us if anything had been put into the trench overnight. Or if you’d seen anything untoward about the trench?’

‘I would have, yes. I know what you’re getting at. I saw about it on telly. I mean, a skeleton wrapped in purple rags, that’s not the kind of thing you wouldn’t notice, is it?’

Returning to the car, Wexford said to Burden, ‘What did he mean by “one of the Mrs Tredowns”, do you know?’

‘Search me.’

Wexford asked his question again when they were back at the station. The fifth person he asked knew the answer. Barry Vine laughed, then said, ‘He lives with his two wives. It’s not like bigamy, him and the first one got divorced all right and I don’t suppose there’s any how your father, if you get my meaning. Not with the first one anyway. And Tredown’s not a weird man.’

‘You mean his ex-wife came back to live with him and his second wife?’

‘Something like that, guv. I don’t know the ins and outs of it. They’re a weird lot but I think they all get on. Tredown’s ill now. Heart, I think, or it may be cancer. We’ll have to talk to them, won’t we?’

—

The Olive and Dove, not many years ago a quiet and conservative country inn with one bathroom to five bedrooms, a public bar as well as a saloon, prawn cocktail, roast lamb and apple pie served for lunch and music unheard within its precincts, had gradually become a smart and fashionable hotel, awarded four stars in the *Good Hotel Guide*. Once it had stood at the entrance to Kingsmarkham, overlooking the bridge that crossed the Kingsbrook

sizeable river notwithstanding its name) and it was still where it had always been, though the bridge had been widened and the shopping area extended to where once there had only been great beech trees, water meadows, and a cottage or two. The beech trees were still there though now they grew out of the pavement, and the water meadows had retreated a quarter of a mile or so. As for the cottages, they were now weekenders' residences, newly thatched and double-glazed.

Among its new bathrooms, its sauna, spa, Crystal Bar and Moonraker's Bar, its work-room, its IT room called, for some unknown reason to non-francophones, Chez L'Ordinateur, its winter garden and its 'quiet room,' the old snug remained. Rumour was that the Olive had retained it solely – or at any rate, partly – at the request of Chief Inspector Wexford, backed up by its best barman who said if it went it would be over his dead body. 'We don't want any more dead bodies round here,' was Wexford's rejoinder but now they had one and it was eleven years dead.

'So we can pinpoint death to eleven years ago last June,' Burden was saying as he carried to their table Wexford's requisite red wine and his own lager. 'What do we think happened? Sometime at the end of May Grimble and Bill Runge started to dig the trench but on the 12th Grimble's application was refused. I checked with the planners. Four days later, on the 16th Runge filled in half the trench. After dark, X's killer or an accomplice lifted out some of the earth, laid the body, wrapped in a purple sheet, inside and replaced the earth. There'd be nothing to show the trench had been tampered with. Next day Runge finished filling it in.'

'Something like that. Was it a sheet?'

'That's what the lab says. It's in rags but once it was a purple sheet.'

'Who has or had purple sheets, I wonder? The whole job would have been easy enough. The toughest part would have been carrying the body. He's not likely to have been killed out there.' Wexford took a small draught of his claret. 'It's funny, I know it can't be like that, but I fancy I can see this stuff flowing into my arteries and magically melting all that nasty gung that clings to their walls. Of course it's not at all like that.'

'No, it's not,' said Burden. 'My brother-in-law had a thing called a colonoscopy and he watched what they were doing on a screen. He said his intestines looked like they were lined with pink satin.'

'Modern medicine is wonderful. I just wish we didn't have to hear about it day in and day out. In the Middle Ages they say people brought God into the conversation all the time and with the Victorians it was death. We talk about our insides. Ah, well. Now, we have a precise date for the burial, if not the death. Probably death occurred hours or, at most, days before. Whoever killed X must have known about the trench. It's not visible from Pump Lane or the Kingsmarkham Road.'

'It would be visible from windows.'

'Yes, we shall have to check that. I'd guess Athelstan House, Oak Lodge and Marshmead wouldn't you? Possibly Flagford Hall too. Was he a local man, Mike? Or was he here on a visit? Eleven years is a long time. We're going to get pretty tired of that phrase before we're done. Most of them, young or old, walked across that land regularly. However much Grimble dislikes it, all the houses that abut on to the field have got gaps in their fences or even

gateways that give them access.'

'Have we taken into account the predecessors of those residents who weren't there eleven years ago?'

'Barry's working on it,' said Wexford, 'with help from the Hunters. I'm hoping they're the sort of old people who know everything about who lived where since time immemorial. They haven't a clue about what happened yesterday or their own phone numbers but when it comes to years back, they're recording angels.'

'Who's seen the Tredowns?'

'I'm reserving them for myself. They're my tomorrow morning treat. Want to come? I want Hannah to have a look at our sparse missing persons list along with Lyn.'

Eight years before, although quite a large number of men remained missing in the greater mid-Sussex area, there were only two in Kingsmarkham and its environs, which included Flagford. Trevor Gaunt was listed as being sixty-five at the time which made him an unlikely candidate.

'Unless Carina Laxton is way out with her calculations,' said DC Lyn Fancourt. 'I never would understand how they can say someone's been eight or ten or, come to that, twenty years dead just by poking about with bones. Or how old they were.'

Hannah laughed. 'They can, though. You just have to accept it. She could be a year or two out on the age but not twenty years. This old boy isn't our man. He probably dropped dead somewhere,' she said with the callousness of youth, 'and they never found the body. Who's the other one?'

'A guy called Bertram Farrance. This list doesn't give much in the way of detail, does it? I mean, all it gives is his age, which was thirty-eight, his address and that he was reported missing by his wife.'

'What do you expect? You see the telly. You know what they all say. "He went out to buy the evening paper at five and when he hadn't come back by six I was devastated, I didn't know what to do. He'd never done that before," et cetera, et cetera.'

'It can't always be like that,' said Lyn, laughing.

'You could get over there – where is it? Station Road? – see if the woman's still there.'

It went against the grain with Hannah to refer to any woman, even though she might have been married for forty years, was called Mrs and had taken her husband's name, as a wife. She had an even stronger objection to 'lady', a word she had found out came from the Anglo-Saxon *lafdig*, meaning 'she who makes the bread'. Lyn Fancourt thought she was quite right and admired her for the stand she made but, just the same, wasn't it a bit silly?

'I love your ring,' she said.

'Between ourselves, I could have done without. I feel quite committed enough to B without wearing a shackle on my finger. But he wanted it, so what can you do? There's no need to get married, just because you wear a ring.'

Lyn walked down to Station Road. It wasn't far and walking was good for her. When she

had weighed herself that morning she found she had gained sixty-two grams. It wasn't that much but it troubled her and she tried to think what extra calories she had consumed in the past few days. Literally the past few days because she had weighed herself on Sunday and only by a tremendous effort of will restrained herself from stepping on to the scales on Monday and Tuesday as well. Karen Malahyde would tell her she was getting obsessed but that was all right for Karen and for Hannah too. They were naturally thin. Such strength of character was needed to stop counting calories, keep off the scales and, more than that, stop thinking about it all the time! Stop thinking about it, she said to herself and she went up to the green door which opened directly on to the pavement and rang the bell.

Nothing could have been easier, except that the result got them no further. The woman who answered the door answered her question without inviting her in. 'He's not missing. He's upstairs. You want to see for yourself?'

'Well, yes.'

A shriek from the woman, shrill enough to shatter glass, summoned him. 'Bertie! Come down here, Bertie.'

'What happened?' Lyn asked. 'Did he just come back?'

'After about a year he did. Said he'd lost his memory. I don't let him out alone now. If he wants to go out, I say, OK Bertie, but I'm coming with you. And that's what I do. He's never been out alone once since he came back.'

The man who came downstairs looked as if he was of African or Afro-Caribbean origin. He was short and rather fat, wearing camouflage pants and a loose black t-shirt. He didn't speak but confirmed his identity when she asked him. She asked for photographic ID and, rather to Lyn's surprise, Mrs Farrance, if that was who she was, produced a passport. The man was unmistakably Bertram Farrance. Lyn handed the passport back.

'OK, is it?' said Mrs Farrance, amiably enough. Her voice rising several decibels, she shouted at her husband, 'OK, back upstairs, Bertie. Off you go.'

Telling the story to Hannah, Lyn hoped to make her laugh but the sergeant seemed admiring of Mrs Farrance rather than amused. 'Of course I'd prefer to see a couple equal partners,' she said, 'but if there had to be inequality – in the case of a very feckless or weak man, for instance – I'd rather see the set-up these Farrances have. That way things get done. I expect this woman is very efficient and managing.'

It was DS Barry Vine who had talked to Jonathan Pickford's mother and was told her son and his girlfriend both worked in banking and commuted by train to London each day. He was twenty-nine and she was thirty. Both of them had been at university eleven years before and had only lived in this house since Brenda and her husband had converted it into two flats for ten years ago.

'But you and your husband were here eleven years ago?'

'We've been here since we were married.' She took him into the living room of the ground-floor flat and showed him from a window Grimble's Field next door and the boarded-up derelict bungalow. This morning, because it had rained most of the night, the land looked

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