

Prologue

"She's in there...I'm sure of it..."

His gut told him something was wrong. He didn't need to hear the woman standing next to him. Eleven years of experience screamed at him.

The terraced home reeked of death; everything from the closed curtains of the front room to the general neglect of the place. He shook himself slightly and turned back to the woman who stood next to him. She was watching him closely, waiting. 'So, when was the last time you saw Mr Gillespie and his daughter?'

He saw her shudder and draw her coat closer around her neck; he knew it wasn't because of the cool March breeze that ruffled her skirt. She sensed it too. Something bad had happened.

'I told the officer on the phone, the walls are very thin and I know I should have telephoned sooner, but didn't. You know how it is ...'

Sadly, he did, but kept his expression as passive as possible and waited.

'I haven't seen the girl for the last few days. She usually leaves the house at the same time as my son for school. It was her thirteenth birthday last Sunday. No party and no friends called round... poor girl. Not since her mother died a few years back, terrible that.' She slowly shook her head and her eyes glazed over.

'She's a strange girl.' she continued. 'Quiet, never speaks to anyone. I asked my son, Robert, he's in the year above her, if he'd seen her, but no one has seen her. Oh dear, I'm rambling...'

He glanced toward the silent house. Darren was knocking loudly on the front window.

'I heard a lot of banging and a loud crash, like something breaking. I heard a scream and then I'm positive I heard her begging, you know, 'please don't' and all that. Turned my stomach I can tell you. Then a strange noise, like whimpering. I thought I heard crying and... and then silence. At first I thought nothing of it, just another argument between them. I hear a lot of shouting, from him anyway. But I began to think about it and I couldn't sleep thinking about it. Perhaps she'd had an accident or... something. I don't like to gossip but there has been talk... And then it went quiet but I'm sure they're in the house.'

He looked across at Darren. Their eyes met and he nodded; it was time to investigate and find what they both expected they'd find. He turned to thank the neighbour; he was anxious to leave, to get it over with, but he could see her urge to tell him more as she licked her lips and stepped closer to him.

Seeing she had his attention again, she quickly continued. 'My son and others have sometimes mentioned bruising on her arms and legs.'

'Yes, yes I see. So no-one has seen or heard Mr Gillespie or his daughter, Bronwen, since last week?' He put his notebook away and nodded to his partner who walked towards the back of the house. He turned back to the waiting neighbour.

'Right thanks, we'll check it out. I may speak with you later ...' Taking a deep breath he followed his friend. He didn't want to finish the sentence by saying that he would probably need to take a statement after they found what he suspected. She was a witness, possibly the only witness to a death.

He steadied himself as he peered through the window and the letterbox. The letters delivered that morning were strewn on the floor. He noticed the general neglect of the house: peeled paint, dirty windows and rubbish piled in the front garden that was overgrown with weeds. He was focusing on anything to get his mind ready; a child involved in crime was always a heartbreaker. If it was true, it sounded as if this one had been abused for a while and he felt a surge of fury towards the neighbours. Why did they always wait?

Hearing a shout he ran around to the back where he found Darren pushing up a window that was unlocked; another bad sign. The smell hit them immediately and they turned away gagging and tried to breathe fresh air into their lungs. They stopped abruptly as the sounds of a child's whimpering reached them and they turned as one towards the open window.

CHAPTER ONE

Bronwen fidgeted in her seat. Her legs felt hot and itchy; she managed to reach her thigh and scratched nervously. She was desperate to stretch her cramped legs, but gave up; the last thing she wanted was to get the attention of the driver.

She was exhausted. The journey so far had been extremely stressful with a full train carriage as people stood within the aisle, glaring at her for being lucky enough to get a window seat and resenting the three large bags and suitcase that took up precious space in the overhead and on the table; she clutched her shoulder bag to her chest and kept her focus on the passing countryside.

An hour into the journey the need for the toilet became evident, but there was no way she could, or would move. Desperate for a drink to wash away the acidic foul taste in her mouth, she eased out a packet of chewing gum and slipped two into her mouth, savouring the minty taste.

She was sweating profusely, her nerves at breaking point, her stomach doing knots and reminding her that she hadn't eaten since the night before; but she doubted any food would have stayed in anyway.

Once they left the city behind, the crowded carriage began to thin and people were able to sit down. She felt the atmosphere relax, just a little and that helped her calm down and try to enjoy the journey and the new adventure she was embarking on.

Yesterday she had stood in front of the hallway mirror and spoken firmly to her reflection. "You will enjoy the journey. This is a new life, a new beginning. Don't fuck it up by being a scared cat!"

The magazine she'd been determined to read, along with the crossword and novel, were all stuffed in her shoulder bag, unopened. Besides, her attention was now on the scenery. Green as far as she could see. No concrete buildings towering above her. No millions of bodies to push into her. Just miles of fields, hills and distant mountains; the emotions were so close to the surface, but she took a long shaky breath and kept her composure.

Now here she was in the back of a taxi, her luggage taking up the small space. She was beginning to wish she hadn't been so finicky when the driver had suggested he put her bags in the boot. Her desire to be Miss Independent didn't always help her to make the right decisions.

Shrewsbury bustled with midday shoppers as the taxi slowly edged its way through the town. Bronwen shuffled her bottom to ease her cramp, but now her nerves had reached breaking point and it made every muscle in her body ache to hurry up and arrive at her destination.

Opening the window a couple of inches to feel the cool breeze on her hot cheeks, she smiled; only three hours ago she had been standing on that cold, damp station in Liverpool or Hell - both meant the same to her. Now she was in Heaven, or, Shropshire, and she was completely free. She had made it! She was really here.

She recalled a trip to Chester, a stunning Roman city on the North Wales border, many years before during her school days. It had only taken an hour on the bus, which had, as always, been a nightmare with children jumping around, fighting and being a nuisance, while others drew rude pictures on the back of the seats.

Sitting hunched in one of the window seats alone, she'd quietly watched the beauty passing by, needing to take it all in so that she could take the memory home with her. She hadn't wanted to miss a thing, even when Rachel Lockwood had started pulling her hair every few minutes for a joke urged on by her gang of five, the bullies of her class. She'd remained silent as always, detaching herself from the mayhem.

As they'd walked along the river, she'd marvelled at myriad of swans, ducks and the greedy pigeons that came close, expectantly hoping for food, before being chased away by the loud boys trying to get attention. Not from her of course. No one ever tried to get her attention, but some of the other girls would allow a kiss or even a grope if given the right incentive.

She watched the foolishness feeling detached, perhaps even a little jealous, but had turned back to the water. Spanned by two bridges centuries apart in age, the water was fast flowing, powerful and deep. Some children had wanted to go out on the rowing boats, secretly, she'd wanted that too – a way to escape perhaps? But the teachers wouldn't allow it and she'd followed the unruly class into the city.

The old Roman wall was fascinating. It was exciting to know that she was walking where Romans had walked. What had they been thinking and doing? She'd made the mistake of voicing these questions. Mr Rawlings the class teacher looked surprised that she had asked a question. His hesitation allowed the boys' time to give their own version of what the Romans had been doing. She'd turned away from the lewd demonstrations on the girls who giggled and playfully pushed them away.

She'd fought back tears when it had been time to leave and return to the bus. For a moment she'd debated whether to run and hide, but, the reality was, there was no escape; she'd had to return home and Chester had become nothing more than a beautiful memory.

Today it was different. Today, she never had to leave, well, she had at least a year, and a lot could happen in that time. Maybe, she could consider archaeology? Or history? Why not? Be a student of something exciting? Maybe now was the right time to take chances and live? After all, wasn't that why she'd chosen Shrewsbury? The cottage she was renting was paid in full. She had a year to decide whether to stay, get a job, go to college; she had time to think, heal, get her life in order, and then, who knew?

The car picked up speed as they headed out onto a dual carriageway and in a few miles the road for the village of Derwen appeared and they left the busy road behind. The hedges on either side of the narrow lane were too high to catch any more than a fleeting glance at the fields that lay on the other side, stretching for miles in both directions.

Reaching for her old battered shoulder bag she fumbled around for the keys and the official letter that gave directions for her new home. It was worn and frayed around the edges from her constant reading. She had memorised every word, saying the address over and over, forming the words

slowly and liking the sounds. Her stomach clenched with excitement and nerves. Gripping the keys tightly she asked loudly. 'Are we near the village yet?'

Without turning the driver nodded, 'Just coming to it now love.'

She cringed. She hated the word and being called it by complete strangers made her despise the word even more. But the moment was forgotten as they finally drove into the centre of the small village. Passing two small cottages she stared at the thatched roofs with fascination. She turned to look at them through the back window and thought they looked like old dolls houses and wondered if they were as snug and warm as they looked. They were the first houses she had seen since leaving the main road.

The taxi stopped to allow another car going in the opposite way to pass along the narrow lane and she found herself staring at the elderly driver who stared back, before tipping his hat with a slight smile; then was gone.

The village of Derwen stood within a clearing. A quick glance and she wondered if 'village' was the right word to describe it? A small shop, a few small cottages, a couple of detached houses, a tiny pub and a run-down old chapel hardly felt like a village; or did it? What the hell would she know anyway?

The taxi slowly drove around a large circular patch of green grass that had a small pond at the far end. She'd heard of village carnivals and fairs and wondered if they had them here? She could picture the brightly coloured stalls heaving with homemade jams, cakes and whatever else they might sell.

On one side of the green was a basic playground with two swings, a slide, a roundabout and three benches, all in immaculate condition. There was not a sign of vandalism anywhere. Around the edges of the green, brightly coloured flowers filled the narrow trenches of soil. Oranges, reds, blues and purples moved gently in the wind, but beyond that there was no sign of life.

The taxi stopped at another T-junction. Opposite stood a line of ten little, whitewashed cottages with slate roofs and narrow gardens filled to bursting with plants, flowers and cute statues of various characters. Each cottage had a quaint front door that was reached by two steps and each door was a different colour with a matching gate that led out onto the narrow road. Adjoining these was the pub. She could tell that at one time it had been an eleventh cottage, but had been converted with a small extension at the side. Even so, it still looked small and cosy; she hoped it was friendly too. The old sign swinging slightly over the entrance was too faded and far away for her to make out the picture but it looked like a building of some sort.

Further along the lane stood five old red-bricked terraces and two detached houses that were much more modern looking than any of the others. The builder had tried to make them 'fit in' by using grey stone rather than red brick. Anything too modern would have looked terrible and she could see that further up the lane three such ugly houses stood alone and detached from the village, as though the community had 'kicked them out'.

On the opposite side to these stood a dilapidated looking chapel whose walls appeared from a distance to be badly in need of a lick of paint. Beyond the chapel an incline blocked further scrutiny. In the distance though she could see fields and hedges for miles and the tops of a few large trees

were also visible above the hedge that ran along both sides of the road leading out of the village; she wondered what lay beyond and where it would lead.

The driver was watching her through his rear view mirror. '*A pretty girl*,' he thought. '*Nervous about her belongings*.' However, watching her now, he thought, '*she looks a fragile thing*'.

Her behaviour and general body language made him wonder if she'd escaped from somewhere or set free? She didn't look like a bad girl so he didn't think it was prison; more likely a bad marriage or domestic violence perhaps?

A good-looking young woman, nice eyes, kind face, but her body was hidden under layers of over-sized clothes and a black coat. Her golden brown hair was tied back in a tight bun; old women had buns, she should show it off. Yes, a nice girl, but a strange one definitely. Clearing his throat to get her attention he called out, 'Which way Miss?'

Bronwen jumped at the sound of his voice and she dropped the directions on the floor. Blushing crimson she grabbed it quickly. 'Erm...Right ... I mean ... Okay, there's the shop, so we go left ... Yes, left.'

The driver gave her a smile but she had already turned away to hide her embarrassment and the unexpected tears which she hastily wiped away with the back of her hand. Winding the window down further, she closed her eyes for a moment, letting the cold breeze cool her burning cheeks. Damn her! Why did she get so worked up over stupid things? Confidence was thin on the ground for her. Archaeologist! Village fair! Ha! She got nervous just being in a damned taxi!

As the car turned left into the lane she opened her eyes and looked at the small corner shop that for the most part would be her only lifeline, at least for the time being. Lights were on inside but there was no sign of anyone; though something told her she was being watched from within. Which was to be expected, she supposed, being a stranger in such a small place. Besides, they would be wondering about the woman who made a rather large order a week before; she hoped it had arrived as promised.

At first glance it certainly didn't look like the 'gold mine' she had been assured it was by that awful estate agent.

'It's an amazing shop!' He had promised. 'Sells absolutely everything and if she hasn't got it, she'll get it for you apparently. The locals swear by her.' Edging closer he'd whispered knowingly. 'If you like, I could let her know you're coming and put in an order for you. She would deliver it to the cottage ready for your arrival?'

She'd moved away from his hot breath, shook her head. 'Shops don't do things like that, do they?'

He'd laughed and casually leant on his desk. 'Things are different in the country. Apparently this woman-' he shook his head, 'forgotten her name, strange sounding ... Welsh I think - anyway she sends deliveries to the farmers and people who live up in the hills. A few years ago they had a bad

winter and a lot of them were stranded in their homes. This woman was a godsend and managed to get food and other necessities to them until the cavalry arrived with a snow plough.'

He'd looked her up and down in a way that made her insides cringe and she took another step backwards. 'So Miss Mortimer, how about it? I could phone ahead for you and let them know to send you basics, perhaps even a surprise house-warming gift? I could take your number and give you a call, celebrate your new move? We have an office in Shrewsbury as you know. I usually work there, but I'm checking staff today.'

She shuddered. He hadn't bothered to hide the fact that he was undressing her in his mind; he was enjoying himself. Every muscle in her body had wanted run out of that office but somehow she'd kept her control, focusing on what really mattered. 'Thanks but no, I'll take the number and the address of the shop myself.'

He'd grinned and reached for the lease, which she had quickly signed. Grabbing the information she'd muttered a goodbye and fled, leaving his proffered hand untouched.

She let out her breath, which until that moment she hadn't realised she had been holding. That encounter had happened three weeks ago. Since then the sale of her Aunt's house had been completed without any setbacks and she had been selling or giving away all of her junk. Charity shops all over Liverpool had praised her generosity as box after box was carried in all overflowing with dresses, suits, kitchenware, books, cheap prints and tacky porcelain figurines; all of it had to go; nothing had any value to her. Everything left, including her meagre wardrobe fit into the three large bags and suitcase.

She'd plucked up the courage to telephone the small shop, and left her order on the answering machine. The machine had surprised her; it felt wrong somehow and she found it a little disappointing.

She'd sent a large cheque, which she knew would cover the bill and any change she would collect at a later date when she had settled in. Just doing that action had made it all very real. Now three days later, her journey was almost over. She felt exhausted, terrified, yet, extremely happy.

The taxi had slowed to a crawl and she eagerly looked ahead, as the lane narrowed even more, becoming a track with passing places. The large entrance to the Kenward estate loomed up on her right. The imposing black gates stood open, the high brick wall on either side swept in an arch following the curve of a large passing place before a high hedge carried on along the road. A cattle grid at the entrance gave way to a tarmac road that ran straight until it disappeared over a slight ridge; fields on either side were dotted with horses of various colours and size. '*Well, let them keep themselves to themselves*', she decided hopefully. They had her year's money, there wasn't any need for them to contact each other and that suited her perfectly.

The lane turned sharply to the left and there, snuggled in the opposite corner, sat Oak Cottage: her new home.

Before the driver had put the handbrake on and undone his seat belt she was opening the door and yanking out her bags. Throwing them on the ground she grabbed her shoulder bag and slammed the door shut. Thrusting a twenty pound note into his hand she muttered a thank you and turned away.

He stared at the money, then the girl and shrugged. He quickly put the car in reverse and needed to do a four-point turn before he could head back the same way and all the time she didn't move, she just stood, staring at the cottage. For a second he wondered if he should stop and ask if everything was all right, but just as quickly decided against it. Driving slowly away he glanced up into the darkening sky and then checked his rear view mirror, he hoped she was okay. Why was she just standing there like that? If she didn't move soon, she'd get wet. Spatters of light rain began to obstruct his vision. He turned a corner and she was gone from sight.

The slight drizzle suddenly became a downpour as he emerged into the village. He was glad to be going back to town, his shift finished soon. He shuddered as he passed the shop; this place gave him the willies! Switching on his radio he hummed loudly to the tune and drove as fast as he dared back to civilisation.

Bronwen didn't move. Her gaze travelled over every grey stone upwards to the slate roof and small chimney. Ivy covered almost half of the left side of the small, two-storey cottage. Two wide windows peeped out from among the green leaves. One she knew was the kitchen; the one above might be her bedroom. Her gaze took in the four trees that stood within the overgrown grass. *'Mature apple trees stand amidst a well-developed garden with plenty of opportunities'* she had read at the estate agents' office. *'A small, well established garden with apple trees all right.'*

She took a step forward. 'Where might I ask are the established blackberry bushes?' A small, brown sparrow landed on the branch of the nearest tree and hopped along for a moment as if listening and then abruptly flew into the air as a large drop of water shook the delicate branch. She smiled at the sight. She couldn't see the blackberries but didn't they grow later on in autumn perhaps? It was only April and if she was honest, she had no idea what a blackberry bush looked like, so she'd have to wait and see and get a book from Shrewsbury library and learn. Positive attitude was all it took!

Pots. That was as far as her green fingers went. Basic kitchen herbs like rosemary, coriander, sage and of course, parsley. Her aunt would grow a large pot of daffodils every year as they were her aunt's favourite and she'd occasionally be allowed to grow tomatoes in the old, run down greenhouse, but that enterprise had never been successful; perhaps here it would be different. She'd always longed for a garden of her own. Okay, she hadn't quite expected her first garden to be so overgrown and neglected, but she would manage. It was all a learning curve from today.

'I can do this.' She spoke to no one in particular, but hearing it out loud made her feel a little calmer.

The silence suddenly hit her like a punch. She whirled around to look at her new surroundings. Hedges on either side of the lane blocked a lot of her view, but she got the general idea; she was alone. The hedges enclosed the garden, across the lane, down the lane, everywhere. She felt entombed by them, cut off from the rest of the world. Glancing towards the Kenward estate she was glad she couldn't see the hall through the network of hedges and trees; it meant they couldn't spy on her either so that was another worry off her mind.

Ignoring the sudden rainstorm, she stood in the middle of the road and listened but there was nothing to hear except the rain, and one or two birds giving a quick whistle. Were they warning each other about the rain or of an intruder in their peaceful world? 'Well, don't worry little ones, I won't

hurt you.' The sound of her voice breaking nature's peace sounded intrusive. She stood silent for a long time, just listening to her new peaceful world.

By now the rain had soaked her coat and her hair was plastered against her scalp. A large drop ran down her nose and she gently wiped it away where it mixed with a tear that rolled down her cheek. She was truly happy at that moment and she couldn't believe it was happening.

Pushing her emotions down, she turned to her luggage. Picking up the two heaviest bags she walked awkwardly, pushing her way through the waist high gate which desperately needed mending; it hung from one hinge. The narrow stone path that led directly to the front porch could hardly be seen as the knee-high grass brushed against her, wetting her jeans even more. Throwing them down inside the dry porch she jogged back to the other one and her large, black shoulder bag. Almost running now, she dived under cover and fumbled around in her pocket for the key.

It was easy to find. A large, heavy thing and now looking at the front door she could see why. It was the original 19th century door with grooves and thick wood and dripping with history; she loved it. Stepping backwards, she wiped the raindrops from her eyes as she glanced up at the beautiful porch. It was of the same dark wood as the door. Only this wood had been bent and shaped to give an arch above her head. On either side she could see where different planks of the wood had been fitted together to form the small, cosy space.

Reaching up, she could just touch the top, where carved into the wood was the date '1875'. She ran her hand along the sturdy frame, it felt strong and solid. Good. Just what she needed.

Stepping back under its cover she slowly ran her hand over the door. The wood was rough under her fingers. Pushing the key into the lock she could feel the strength of the wood. She heard the click and then a soft groan as she pushed open the door; the thickness of it made her feel safe already. It was heavy, not like a 21st century door, this one was solid and strong. This one kept out unwanted visitors.

She stood dripping in the narrow hallway and the tears welled up again. She found herself recalling all those years of tangible dreams where she had woken in tears, hating the moment of waking, of hoping for an escape. She yearned for something she wasn't sure of, but knew she would know it when it happened. The dream had finally happened.

The photograph in the Liverpool estate agents didn't do the cottage justice now that she was here; it was much more perfect. How long had she stood mesmerised by the picture in the window, before some horrid brute had pushed past her, literally knocking her back to reality? She had watched his departure through the throng of people, waiting for an apology but none came; none ever came.

Her dream was looking back at her from that window and in that moment it was out of reach, impossible. She had memorised her perfect home to the last detail and this cottage fit it to perfection. Secluded and peaceful.

'Get a grip, dearie.' She spoke aloud and grinned at her melancholy, brushed her tears and the rain away from her face. All that had changed and she was here. Her dream was now a reality. This was her life and now came the hard part. A new beginning. She turned to grab the first of her bags and noticed the covered box in the corner.

‘My order!’ Bending down she tried to lift it. ‘No way could a granny carry this!’

She managed to drag it inside the hallway and the newspaper which had been covering the contents fell off to reveal tins, fresh bread, jam, butter, tea, coffee, biscuits, pasta, juice and much more, including two bottles of wine, one red, one white. Her stomach growled at the sight of food, perhaps now she would be able to keep something in.

Quickly she dragged in her heavy bags and was about to close the door when out of the corner of her eye she saw movement. Stepping over her luggage she stood within the porch and looked closely past the apple trees towards the hedge. It was shoulder high and unruly. It would be easy for someone to hide. She suddenly scolded herself. What the hell was she doing? Why on earth would anyone be hiding in this weather, out here? Smiling to herself, she stepped back into her new home and gently closed the front door.