

Thursday 31 October

Dusk was falling on the Corpse Bridge by the time Jason Shaw reached the river. The broken stone setts felt slippery under his boots after a heavy shower, and the walls ran with moisture in the fading light. He shivered and shook the rain from his hair as he checked his watch one more time. He was going to be late.

Jason had come out unprepared for a downpour. He'd been in such a hurry, and the autumn weather was so unpredictable, that he'd been fooled into thinking a light jacket would be enough, and he'd left his water-proofs in the Land Rover. So when the shower started he'd stopped to shelter under a sycamore tree while the water drummed on the earth all around him and turned the river below into a seething foam. But it was

the end of October and the leaves were almost gone from the trees. Within seconds his hair was plastered to his skull and water dripped inside his collar as rain cascaded through the branches. He decided he'd get less wet if he returned to the path and just hoped for the shower to ease off. By the time the sky cleared he was soaking.

And that was one of his problems. He always seemed to be in a hurry these days. There was too much going on in his life, so he was constantly rushing from one thing to the next. Sometimes he just wished everything would stop for a while and let him get his breath. If only he had time to think, at least. Perhaps he wouldn't make so many bad decisions. He might be more prepared for what the world threw at him.

But circumstances were conspiring against him all the time. The situation was out of control and he was being dragged along, as if by an irresistible current. The most important decisions in his life were being made by other people. He was aware of it, but couldn't do anything about it.

And Jason knew who was responsible for that. The one person he could never say 'no' to.

He was trembling with cold as he stepped round a patch of mud that had collected in a damaged section of the track. Every few yards the setts had been shattered or dislodged, exposing the earth beneath to serious

erosion. Much of this destruction had been caused by off-roaders. The national park authority was trying to enforce a traffic regulation order on some of these narrow-walled byways and green lanes to keep four-by-fours and trail bikes from using them. There were places in Derbyshire where off-roaders swarmed in their hundreds on bank holiday weekends, with whole convoys of Land Rovers forcing their way down bridleways and gouging new tracks out of the hillsides. By the end of the summer you could see their wheel tracks for miles. Most were intruders from the cities, leaving their mark on the landscape.

It was as he was wiping the water from his eyes that Jason saw her. At first she seemed like an illusion – a pale shape glimpsed through a blur of water and the deceptive colours of twilight. He wasn't a superstitious person, but Jason felt a jolt of fear at the ghostly flicker and swirl as the figure dodged its way through the trees on the other side of the bridge.

But did the figure run? It hardly seemed the right word. To Jason, she appeared to float or hover, her feet hardly touching the ground. By the time she vanished from his sight on the opposite hill, he still wasn't sure whether he'd imagined the figure or not. He realised there had been no sound from her. But that could have been an atmospheric effect, a result of the damp air and the evening stillness.

And finally there was a noise. Something bigger and definitely physical was crashing through the undergrowth where the woman had disappeared. Jason saw nothing, but he felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to stir, an icy chill surging through his limbs. He heard one shout, an incoherent yell with no words, a cry that might almost have come from an animal.

Then the crashing stopped, and there was silence.

Jason was left standing for a moment on the approach to the Corpse Bridge, listening carefully for a sound, but hearing only the rush of the river and the dripping of rain from the trees.

Of course, Geoff and Sally Naden shouldn't have been there at all. Not that evening. It was entirely the wrong night, a different time of the week from the one they'd planned. Yes, it was definitely a mistake. At least, that was what Geoff insisted.

Sally was in a bad mood even before they came out. She recognised her own moods, and knew that Geoff would say she was sulking. But she didn't really care tonight. She wasn't as young as she used to be, and she just wanted to get this over with.

'It was definitely you,' said Geoff. 'You got it wrong again. You're always getting things wrong.'

'Rubbish,' she said. 'It's tonight, I'm certain.'

Sally had been saying ‘rubbish’ all evening, since even before they left the house. She didn’t have the energy or inclination to spell out her argument in coherent sentences. But she was starting to get bored with ‘rubbish’. She might have to think of something else to say.

‘You’ll get things wrong once too often some day soon,’ said Geoff, ‘and that will be the end of you. I hope you’ve written your will.’

‘Nonsense,’ she said.

Of course, Geoff was talking through his elbow. But Sally had to admit he was right about one thing. Some mistakes could have disastrous consequences. You found yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time, met the sort of person you’d normally spend your whole life avoiding, and you could end up putting yourself in a dangerous situation. In those circumstances, one of you might have an accident. Out here, in a spot as quiet as this, an accident might be fatal.

Sally had been thinking about murder for a while now. Not all the time, just off and on when the mood took her. Sometimes it would be when she was in bed at night, trying to get to sleep but finding herself staring at the bedroom ceiling for hours, while the weight of her husband’s comatose body dragged the duvet off her again. Or it might be while she was driving, frustrated by the traffic, hearing his parting words repeating

in her mind over and over. Those were the times when she fantasised about finally putting an end to it all. It would be a kindness really.

She'd once heard someone claim that the best way to commit a murder and get away with it was to lure your victim up on to a high place, such as a cliff. As long as there were no eyewitnesses, it was almost impossible to prove from forensic evidence whether that person fell or was pushed. The fall had to be terminal, and unobserved. It needed to happen at a time when no one else was around.

But there was someone else here. Sally had been absorbed in such a world of her own that the sudden realisation came as a shock.

'Did you hear that?' she said.

Geoff had already stopped, his head tilted on one side. 'I'm not sure.'

'I thought there was something—'

He'd obviously heard the same thing, but Sally saw that he couldn't bring himself to agree with her, even now.

'Perhaps we should go back,' he said instead.

And that was typical. He wouldn't get into an argument, but would make it seem as though whatever they did next was entirely his own idea.

Geoff and Sally Naden turned back and began to walk up the track. They knew someone was nearby,

and it made them nervous. Sally was still sure she was right. But this wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

Just before six o'clock, Poppy Mellor was sitting in her car, parked against a stone wall on the Staffordshire side of the river.

Earlier that afternoon she'd been for a trip with some friends to Monkey Forest in Trentham. She'd always had an interest in apes and monkeys. And those forty acres of land south of Stoke were the only place in the country you could see them roaming free. A hundred and forty Barbary macaques in a Staffordshire woodland were the closest she could get, until she'd saved enough money for a trip to North Africa. Up in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, that was where the macaques came from.

Poppy gazed down the slope at the dripping trees and bare fields. The Atlas Mountains were a bit different from the borders of Staffordshire and Derbyshire, she imagined.

She'd been sitting in her car for a few minutes thinking about the noise. She was in the middle of reading a text message from Imogen, one of her friends from the drama studies course at uni. Her dad would raise his eyebrows at the idea of her texting someone she'd seen only a few hours before. He would say it

was a kind of compulsion. But she always felt this need to be in touch.

Those monkeys at Trentham lived in close family groups. She loved them for that. Whenever you saw them, they were either physically touching or talking to each other, sometimes both. Their hierarchy was complex too, though she supposed one always had to be the leader. Every macaque knew its role, and they could rely on each other totally for loyalty and support.

Poppy sighed. Humans had a lot to learn from other primates. She ought to tell her dad that. She could just picture his face now. Some people's reactions were so predictable. For months she'd longed for something to happen that would make her life more interesting.

She turned up her CD player and wondered if anyone had heard that scream. There were lots of strange noises out in the country at night. It could have been a fox, perhaps? It was mating season and vixens called like that sometimes.

But Poppy knew it hadn't been a fox. Even from a distance, it had unmistakably been a primate. Or more specifically, human.

Further down the slope, on either side of the bridge, Jason Shaw and the Nadens were unaware of Poppy's presence. Jason peered cautiously into the trees as he

climbed the slope, stopped, walked a few yards into the undergrowth, then changed his mind and came back again.

Three hundred yards away, Poppy had got out of her car. She glanced for a moment at the clouds scudding overhead, revealing brief glimpses of the moon, still pale against the twilight blue sky. Then she leaned on the stone wall and gazed down into the valley where the river ran through the darkening woods. Her eyesight was good, but she could see no movement, no sign of any human presence among the trees. Poppy thought of making a phone call, but knew it would be pointless. So she got back in her car, switched on the headlights and accelerated away down the road towards Hartington. The Nadens took longer to reach their home, after stopping to argue about the best route to take.

None of them would forget that night for a long time. Though, in the end, it was someone else who found the body.

Detective Sergeant Ben Cooper was still sleeping badly. He'd been relying on the help of tablets for months now, switching from herbal aids to chemicals and back again, fearing that he'd get too reliant on some particular substance and would never be able to sleep without it again.

But this particular night had been full of demons and ghosts. And many other creatures too. Vampires, witches, skeletons. And hordes of stumbling, bloodied zombies like the entire cast of extras from *The Walking Dead*.

Well, it was always like this on Halloween. By twilight the streets of Edendale had been full of groups of children in home-made costumes fashioned from plastic

bin liners and toilet rolls. After them came the teenagers with their supermarket horror masks and pumpkin lanterns. Later the atmosphere changed as the pubs filled with flesh-eating monsters, their prosthetic fangs dripping with gore. All in the name of harmless fun.

So Cooper was awake at 2 a.m. From his ground-floor flat in Welbeck Street, he could hear the distant sounds of revelry from the pubs in Edendale town centre, just across the river. Though revelry was a kind word for it.

‘Harmless fun,’ he said with a sardonic laugh, breaking the silence of his flat.

There were police officers on duty out there, some of his E Division uniformed colleagues from West Street, assigned to the drunk shift. They would have been shivering in their vans for the past couple of hours, waiting for the bars to empty and the fights to start.

In the old days, before the formation of professional police forces, the duties of watchmen had included firefighting and sweeping the excrement from the street. Many officers would say they were still doing the same thing now.

Edendale wasn’t much different on a Thursday, Friday or Saturday night from any other town up and down Britain. Halloween just meant the prisoner cages would be full of battered Draculas and legless Egyptian mummies. Fake blood would be mingling with the real

stuff. And the pavements would be littered with the dead, staggering towards home.

‘And do it quietly, please,’ said Cooper. ‘Like a good zombie.’

He was glad no one could hear him. He’d always thought people who talked to themselves were definitely a bit weird.

Cooper looked around for the cat, but found her asleep, curled up by a radiator. She was probably aware of his presence, but too wise to think it might be breakfast time so early. She’d grown used to his erratic hours over the last few months and refused to let his unpredictable behaviour affect her routine. Lucky animal. She seemed oblivious to the noise outside too, except for a twitch of an ear if someone passed too close in the street. Occasionally, there was a wandering ghoul, lost and drunk, clattering down the road and vomiting in the gutter.

What could you expect from a celebration based on fear? This was the time of year when graves opened and the spirits of the dead returned to the world. In traditional belief, these few hours of darkness saw the doors between life and death standing ajar.

But just these few hours. For some of his ancestors, the concept of the dead returning had been too much to bear. For them, Halloween was a time to shut themselves inside their homes and protect their families with prayers and charms.

For others, though, the time was all too short. There were so few hours until daylight came. Halloween just didn't last long enough. If it came to the crunch, Cooper knew he'd be counted among their number himself. It was the reality that he couldn't escape, the one fact that never left his mind all night. The dead never really got a chance to return to the world.

'No, never. Never.'

Cooper threw a tired glance round the familiar walls of his flat. The dead who would never return – they were here, too. Their photographs were lurking in the darkness. His father, Sergeant Joe Cooper, killed in the execution of his duty. His mother, Isabel Cooper, dead of natural causes. And civilian scenes of crime officer Elizabeth Petty, who died . . .

Well, she'd died anyway. And that was an end to it.

Just outside, in Welbeck Street, he heard banging and laughter, followed by the shriek of a car alarm.

'For heaven's sake, go away,' he said, more loudly.

Behind him, the cat made a small questioning noise. Cooper turned.

'Not you, obviously. I was talking to . . . well, who *was* I talking to?'

The cat gave him a despairing look and went back to sleep.

'No, I don't know either,' said Cooper.

He thought of putting the lights on, but there didn't

seem much point. At this time of the morning artificial light only made the flat look ghastly and unreal. He felt like a character in a film, hiding away in precarious isolation, fighting desperately for survival while the world outside disintegrated into chaos, as the dead walked and cities burned.

With a vague sense of surprise, Cooper looked down at the mug clutched in his hand. He'd forgotten that he'd been making himself a drink. Camomile tea, by the smell of it. His sister Claire had insisted he tried it to help him sleep. But it had gone almost cold in his hand as he stood here near the window, listening to the sounds of the night.

Life shouldn't feel so cold and wasted. Not at his age. He was only in his thirties, after all. It was too young for everyone he cared about most to be dead and in the ground. He shouldn't have to spend half his life visiting graveyards.

Cooper shuddered as a cold certainty ran through his limbs. There would be people out tonight who gravitated to cemeteries and graveyards. Halloween was their night. And cemeteries were their playground.

He sighed again. All Hallows' Eve. That was where it all started. It was supposed to be dedicated to remembering dead saints and the faithful departed. Souls wandered the earth, looking for one last chance to gain vengeance on the living. People would wear masks or

costumes to disguise their identities and avoid being recognised by vengeful souls.

People often complained that Halloween was an imported American tradition. But surely it was only because Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night had poached some of the customs of Halloween. For centuries English people had preferred burning effigies of Catholics, rather than remembering dead saints. Halloween had become a focus of superstitions about witches and ghosts.

Just last week the *Eden Valley Times* had published a letter written by a local vicar complaining that the newspaper was encouraging Satanism and witchcraft by reporting Halloween events and publishing pictures of children dressed as ghosts and vampires. He'd done it every year, for as long as Cooper could remember. Like everyone else, the clergyman had probably forgotten the origins of the festivities.

'Not that anybody really believes in anything any more.'

He realised that he was mumbling a bit now. He wasn't even sure what words were coming out of his mouth. The last sentence had sounded like a meaningless jumble, even to his own ears.

With a weary stretch of his limbs, Cooper went to lie back down on his bed, though he knew he wouldn't sleep.

There must be so many people who'd lost loved ones during the past twelve months. Some of them must have been wishing that the dead really could return. How did they react to ghosts and corpses banging on their door all evening? What were you supposed to do, except offer a treat from a tub of miniature chocolate bars? A modern ritual to keep the spirits away.

But if he slept tonight at all, Cooper knew the dead would walk in his dreams.

Fifteen miles from Edendale, Rob Beresford cursed to himself in the darkness. It wouldn't happen tonight. Something had gone wrong.

He pulled out his phone, tried to dial the number again, but could get no signal. Down here by the river, with dense trees around him and hills rising on either side, he was bound to be in a dead spot.

But they'd known this was likely to happen and they'd planned for it. That was why the timing had been so carefully worked out. So what had gone wrong? Why was he on his own out here?

Rob waited. He didn't have much patience, but what else could he do? Turn round and go home? He didn't want to be the one who did that. At least, when tomorrow came, he'd be able to blame the others for wrecking the plan. He wondered who had actually got

cold feet. It could be any of them, of course. They were a bunch of wimps, mostly. And worse – they'd left him out here on his own, in the dark, with no idea what was going on.

He was beginning to get angry. Rob paced up and down, swinging his torch along the track, its bright LED beam flicking from stone wall to hanging branch, from a splash of water stirring a muddy pool to the flutter of a dead leaf in the breeze. He was oblivious now to their agreement not to make too much noise or show any more light than was necessary. It was obvious he was on his own. Abandoned, and made to look an idiot. And what a place to be in at this time of night. It was lucky he wasn't a nervous bloke or he could start imagining things.

But where was he exactly? There had been no map. He only followed the directions he'd been given. Nowhere looked the same in the dark anyway. People who lived in towns didn't realise how black it was out in the proper country at night. They never saw total darkness like this. So a map would have been useless.

A noise made Rob whirl round suddenly. It sounded like a voice – a garbled word spoken from the darkness, a liquid gabbling from a throat that surely wasn't human. But then the noise came again and he saw the river. He could see the surges of water bubbling over the rocks, sucking and gurgling through gaps and crevices in the

riverbed. He saw the muddy bank and the skeletal outline of a stunted tree growing on the water's edge.

And something else.

Rob realised with a shock that he could see a pale face caught in the light. It was the mask of a ghoul, white and ghostly, with the unnatural gleam of cheap plastic. He had a glimpse of a profile pulled into a grotesque shape – a gaping mouth, a blank eye, a trickle of blood. It was surely a Halloween joke to scare the children. Just some bad taste prank.

The hairs on the back of Rob's neck stirred, and he swung his torch wildly across the trees until its beam lit the glittering water rushing between the banks and highlighted the arch of the bridge. His trembling hand swept the light backwards and forwards along the parapet looming above him and probed into the gap between the stones to pick out the ancient trackway. It was half in shadow and half illuminated by his wavering torchlight. It looked like an empty stage, garishly lit, awaiting the next scene of a drama.

Rob had lived in this area all his life and he knew what this place was. Everyone called it the Corpse Bridge.