Abattoir Blues

Also by Peter Robinson

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PETER ROBINSON

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For Sheila

'But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.'

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Copper Beeches',
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1892)

I

Terry Gilchrist came out of the woods opposite the large hangar, which loomed ahead of him like a storage area for crashed alien spaceships in New Mexico. Only he wasn't in New Mexico; he was in North Yorkshire.

It stood at the centre of a large area of cracked and weed-covered concrete, its perimeter surrounded by a seven-foot chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. A large sign on the padlocked double gates read PRIVATE – KEEP OUT. About a quarter of a mile beyond the hangar, a passenger train sped by on the East Coast line, heading for King's Cross.

As he usually did at this point on the walk, Gilchrist let Peaches off her leash. The space was open far enough that he could easily keep an eye on her, and she always came back when he whistled or called her name.

Peaches sniffed around the edges of the fence, and before long she had found a way in, probably the same hole the kids used when they went there to play cricket or smoke joints and try to feel up the local girls. This time, instead of continuing to sniff around the concrete and weeds, Peaches headed for the dark opening of the hangar and disappeared inside.

While he waited for her to finish her business, Gilchrist leaned his stick against a tree, stretched his arms out to prop himself up against the trunk and started doing a series of simple leg exercises the army medics had given him. They were already pleased with his progress: out walking, albeit with a stick, after only four months, when they had at first

thought the leg was as good as gone. But Gilchrist wanted rid of the stick now, and the only way to do that was to build up the damaged muscle tissue little by little. His leg might never *look* the same, but he was determined that it would function as well as it ever had.

When he had done, Peaches had still not reappeared, so he whistled and called her name. All he got in reply was a bark followed by a whine. He called again, adding a bit more authority to his tone, and the whining went on for longer, but Peaches didn't reappear. She wasn't coming back. What the hell was wrong with her?

Irritated, Gilchrist grasped his stick again and made his way along the side of the fence, searching for the gap Peaches had found. When he saw it, his heart sank. He could get in, of that he was certain, but it would be a difficult and painful business. And messy. He called again. Peaches continued barking and whining, as if *she* were calling *him*.

To get through the hole, Gilchrist had to lie flat on the wet ground and edge slowly forward, sticking his arms through first and pushing back against the fencing to propel himself along. There was an immediate familiarity in lying on his belly that flooded his mind with fear, more a cellular or muscular memory than anything else, and he almost froze. Then he heard Peaches barking through the haze and carried on. Standing up was another awkward manoeuvre, as he could hardly bend his leg without causing extreme pain, but he made it, hanging on the links of the fence and using them as climbing grips. Finally, he stood panting and leaned back against the fence, clothes damp and muddy, then he grabbed his stick and made his way towards the hangar.

It was dim inside, but enough light came through the large opening to make it possible to see once his eyes had adjusted. Peaches was standing near the wall about thirty yards to his right; she was barking and her tail was wagging. Gilchrist

made his way over, wondering what on earth was making her behave in such a wilful and excited manner. Irritation slowly gave way to curiosity.

The floor of the hangar was concreted over like the surrounding area, and it was just as cracked in places, weeds growing through despite the lack of light. He could hear rain tapping on the steel roofing and the wind moaning around the high dark spaces. He felt himself give an involuntary shudder as he approached Peaches.

Even in the dim light, it was easy to see that she was sniffing around a dark patch on the concrete, but it took the light from Gilchrist's mobile phone to see that what interested her was a large bloodstain dotted with chips of bone and chunks of grey matter. Immediately, an image of blood on the sand flashed into his mind and he felt the panic rise like the bile in his throat.

Get a grip, he told himself, then he took several deep breaths and bent to peer more closely in the light of the mobile. He didn't have Peaches' acute sense of smell, but close up he picked up that rank and coppery smell of blood. It was a smell he remembered well.

The thought came into his mind unbidden: *someone has died here*.

'A bloody stolen tractor,' complained Annie Cabbot. 'Would you merit it? I ask you, Doug. Is this why I put in all those years to make DI? Risked life and limb? Is this Homicide and Major Crimes? A stolen tractor? Is that why I was put on this earth?'

'It's rural crime,' said DC Dougal Wilson, taking his eyes from the road for a moment to flash Annie a quick grin. 'And rural crime is major crime. At least according to the new police commissioner.'

'Christ, anyone would think it was election time again already.'

'Well,' said Wilson, 'it's not as if it's the first piece of farm equipment gone missing over the past while, not to mention the occasional cow and sheep. And it *is* an expensive tractor.'

'Even so . . . Is this farmer we're going to see a personal friend of the commissioner's?'

'No, but I do believe his wife is a friend of Area Commander Gervaise. Book club, or something.'

'Hmm. Didn't know Madame Gervaise was a reader. Hidden depths. She and Alan must have a lot in common. And where is DCI Banks when you need him? I'll tell you where. He's off in Cumbria for a dirty weekend with his girlfriend, that's where he is.'

'I think you'll find it's Umbria, guv,' muttered Wilson.

'Umbria? That's even worse. It'll be sunny there.' Annie paused as Wilson negotiated a narrow humped stone bridge. Annie had always been nervous about such bridges. There was no way you could see whether someone was coming from the other side. The best you could do was close your eyes and put your foot down. She closed her eyes. Wilson put his foot down. They made it. 'What is it about these Italians?' she went on. 'First it was Joanna Passero, the one he went to Estonia with.'

'She's not Italian. She's Scottish. Now she's got divorced, she's gone back to her maiden name. She's just plain old Joanna MacDonald.' Wilson blushed. 'Well, not exactly plain, perhaps, but you know what I mean. Works at County HQ in Criminal Intelligence. Quite the rising star.'

'I've always thought there was something criminal about the intelligence at County HQ,' said Annie. She shot Wilson a suspicious glance. 'Anyway, how do you know all this?'

Wilson pushed his glasses up on his nose. 'One of the perks of being a lowly DC. Privilege of low rank. You get to hear all the good gossip.'

Annie smiled. 'I remember. Vaguely. Still, a bloody stolen tractor. I ask you.' She squinted at a road sign between the fast-beating windscreen wipers. 'I think we're here, Doug. The Beddoes' farm. Here's the track.'

'I know. I can see it.' Wilson turned so sharply that the car almost skidded into the ditch. The ground was sodden and the mud churned to the consistency of porridge. They hung on as the car bounced and squelched down the quarter mile of rough track that led to the farm itself, giving its shock absorbers a workout they probably didn't need. At least it was a car from the police motor pool, Annie thought, not her new red Astra.

Wilson pulled into the farmyard, where the mud wasn't any more welcoming, and parked beside a silver BMW. Beyond that stood a new-looking Range Rover. The layout was that of a typical courtyard farmstead: a two-storey farmhouse, built of limestone with a flagstone roof, surrounded by farm buildings, including a barn, also of limestone with big wooden doors with flaking green paint, what looked like a garage built of corrugated steel, a pigsty, whose natives sounded happy to be rolling about in mud and worse, and a chicken coop so fortified that the local foxes had probably all slunk off with their tails between their legs.

The usual farm smells assailed Annie's nostrils when she got out of the car. No doubt the pigs contributed a great deal to it, she thought. And to the mud. You never knew what you were squelching through when you walked across a farmyard. The rolling fields of rapeseed, which would blossom a glorious bright yellow in May, now looked brooding and threatening under a louring gunmetal sky. Very *Wuthering Heights*, Annie thought, though she knew that was miles away. Dark clouds lumbered overhead, unleashing shower after shower of rain, some heavy, some more like drizzle, and the wind whistled in the emptiness.

Annie had come prepared for a cold wet day in the country – it was only late March, after all – her jeans tucked into a pair of red wellies, flower-patterned plastic rain hat, woolly jumper under a waterproof jacket. Doug Wilson looked a little more professional in his Marks and Sparks suit, trilby and tan raincoat with epaulettes and belt. In fact, Annie thought, he looked a bit like a private detective from a fifties movie, except for the glasses. And when he took his hat off, he still looked like Daniel Radcliffe playing Harry Potter.

There was an arched porch over the entrance, where they removed their outer clothing. When Annie took off the rain hat, her chestnut hair tumbled around her shoulders. The blonde was all gone now; she had let her hair grow out and return to its natural colour. She could certainly testify that she had not had more fun as a blonde.

A tall, wiry man in his mid-fifties, with a fine head of grey hair and a light tan, answered the door. He was wearing jeans and a red V-neck sweater over a pale blue shirt. Despite the casual clothing, Annie thought he looked more like a business executive than a farmer. There was an aura of wealth and power about him that she had never associated with farmers before. 'You must be the police,' he said, before they could pull out their warrant cards. He held the door open and stood aside. 'Are your coats wet? If so, please don't hesitate to bring them indoors. We'll soon dry them out.'

'They'll be fine,' Annie said, rubbing her hands together, then reaching for her warrant card. 'DI Cabbot and DC Wilson.'

'I'm John Beddoes. Please, come in.'

Most farms Annie had visited – admittedly not very many – smelled of mouth-watering baking, of pastry, marzipan, cinnamon and cloves, but Beddoes' place smelled of nothing but lemon-scented air-freshener.

'I know you probably think this is a huge waste of your time,' said Beddoes. 'Not to mention a waste of police resources, but it's not the first such crime we've had around here this past year or so.'

'We're aware of that, sir,' said Annie. 'That's why we're here.'

Beddoes led them through to a cosy sitting room. First he bade them sit down on a three-piece suite that definitely hadn't come from DFS, then he called to his wife. 'Pat? The police are here, love.'

Patricia Beddoes walked in. Wearing figure-hugging designer jeans, trainers and an orange T-shirt, she was an attractive, elegant woman, with expensively coiffed dark hair, a good ten years or more younger than her husband. Even though she had been on holiday in the sun, her tan looked fake, from a can, like the kind that the young women all showed off on *Coronation Street*. She still looked a little chilly and severe to Annie, too many sharp angles, but her welcoming smile was genuine enough, her handshake firm, and she immediately offered them tea. Annie and Wilson said yes. Neither had eaten breakfast yet. Outside, the rain poured down and the wind blew it hard against the windowpanes and on the parked cars and tin garage. It sounded like someone chucking handfuls of gravel.

'Miserable weather, isn't it?' said John Beddoes. 'And they say there's more to come.'

Everyone was saying it had been the wettest March since records began, and Annie wasn't about to argue with that. Apart from a few days earlier in the month, it hadn't been all that warm, either. There was even snow forecast. And all this coming on the heels of a miserable winter, a particularly tough one for farmers, who had lost so many sheep in snowdrifts out on the moors. 'I understand you were away on holiday?' she said.

'Yes. Mexico. You might think it an odd time for us to go away – if there ever is a good time for a farmer – but we don't have any sheep or cattle, you see, so we have no need to worry about lambing or calving.' He nodded towards the kitchen. 'And Patricia needed a break.'

'Very nice.' Annie didn't think most farmers could afford to go to Mexico, not given the way they always seemed to be complaining about low prices of dairy produce, prohibitive EU tariffs and whatnot, but then with all the cheap flights and bargain all-inclusive holidays, it probably wasn't all that expensive these days. Not that Annie fancied the idea: a bunch of yobs in leopard-print swimming trunks, slathered in coconut sunblock and pissed on weak beer had about as much appeal for her as a wet Sunday in Wales, or Yorkshire, for that matter. 'I understand you only just got back,' she said.

'Late last night. About half past eleven. We were supposed to arrive early in the morning, but the flight to New York was delayed and we missed our connection. Well . . . you know what it's like. Stuck in the airport lounge all day.'

Annie had no idea, never having been in an airport lounge. 'So that was when you found out?'

'Yes. I noticed that the garage had been broken into right away and telephoned the police. I must say you lot are quick off the mark. Much quicker than you used to be. That uniformed chappie who came around last night seemed very sympathetic, too.'

'PC Valentine?' said Annie. 'Yes, sir, he's a very sensitive young man.'

'So what's being done?' Beddoes asked.

'We've got a description of the tractor out, sir – a green Deutz-Fahr Agrotron, if I'm not mistaken – and we've got people looking for it, keeping an eye open at ports and so on. We've been in touch with Customs & Excise. They have the

details, description, number plate, engine serial number. Of course, the criminals will most likely have altered those by now, but sometimes they're lazy, or they slip up. It's our experience that most stolen farm equipment is shipped out of the country pretty sharpish.'

John Beddoes sighed. 'It's probably in bloody Albania by now, then. It's worth a hundred K at least.'

His wife came in with a tea tray and served everyone. Annie could hear the radio in the kitchen. Ken Bruce playing golden oldies on Radio 2. 'Runaway'. She knew the song but couldn't remember who sang it.

'I don't suppose you have any idea exactly when the tractor went missing?' Annie asked. Doug Wilson pushed his glasses up again and bent over his notebook.

Beddoes shook his head. 'We were only gone a week. We're not that big an operation, really, and it's mostly arable. Some cereals, vegetables, potatoes. Rapeseed's our biggest crop by far. We supply a specialist high-end oil-maker. As you probably noticed, we also have a few pigs and chickens to keep the local quality restaurants supplied. Free-range chickens, of course, when it's possible. And the pigs are British Landrace. Excellent meat. So there really wasn't much to do last week.'

'I've heard that certain breeds of pig can be valuable,' Annie said. 'Are yours?'

'Quite, I suppose.'

'I wonder why they weren't taken, too?'

'I should think these people specialise, wouldn't you? There's a lot of difference between getting rid of a tractor and a pig. Also, you've got to know how to handle pigs. They can be nasty when they want to be.'

'I suppose so,' said Annie, though she knew absolutely nothing about pigs except they smelled and squealed and she didn't eat them. 'Now the thieves know that the pigs are

here, though, perhaps you should think about improving your security?'

'How am I supposed to do that, apart from standing outside the sty all night with a shotgun in my hands?'

'I'd forget about the shotgun, if I were you, sir. They only get people into trouble. There must be special fences, alarms, Country Watch, that sort of thing.'

'I'll look into it.'

'Where was the key?'

Beddoes looked away. 'What key?'

'To the tractor. I imagine if it's modern and expensive it has various security features.'

'Yes.'

'So where did you keep the key?'

'Hanging on a hook in the garage.'

'And the car keys? The Beemer and the Range Rover.'

Beddoes patted his trouser pocket. 'They're on my key ring. I carry them with me.'

'But you didn't take the tractor key with you while you were away?'

'Are you here to interrogate me or to help me recover my stolen tractor?'

Annie and Wilson exchanged glances. 'Well, sir,' Annie went on, 'at the moment we're trying to establish just how the tractor was stolen, and it would seem to me that being able to start it is a major issue. I mean, you could hardly push it into a waiting lorry, could you?'

'How could I know something like this was going to happen?' Beddoes had reddened and started waving his arms around. 'We were running late. Pat . . . The bloody taxi was waiting. I just didn't think. The garage was securely locked when we left, for crying out loud.'

'John,' said his wife. 'Calm down. Your blood pressure.'

Beddoes smoothed his hand over his hair. 'Right. Sorry.' He

turned to Annie again. 'In retrospect I know it looks stupid, and I didn't want the insurers to know, but I . . . I mean, mostly we're around, so it's not a problem. I often just leave the tractor in the yard with the key in the ignition. When you get on a tractor, you want to just start it and get going, not search around for bloody keys. In this case, the garage was well locked, I had someone keeping an eye on the place. What more was I supposed to do?'

'I've no idea,' said Annie. 'Who took care of the place for you while you were away?'

'Frank Lane from over the dale said he'd feed the pigs and chickens and keep an eye on everything for us. Not that we blame Frank for what happened, of course. He can't stand on twenty-four-hour vigil any more than I can. Besides, he's got his own farm to take care of, and it's far bigger than ours.' He laughed. 'Frank's a *real* farmer, as he never ceases to inform us. And he's got that tearaway son of his to worry about. We're just grateful he was able to help at all.'

'What makes you call his son a tearaway?' Annie asked.

'Oh, he's always been a handful, ever since he was a nipper. Mischievous imp. He got into some trouble with the police a while back.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Frank wasn't specific about it, but I think it was something to do with a stolen car. Joyriding. Got probation, community service, something like that. I didn't like to say anything to Frank, but to be honest, the lad always seemed a bit of a shiftless and mischievous sort to me, if truth be told. He doesn't live at the farm any more, but he turns up now and again to see his father.'

'Capable of stealing a tractor?'

'I'm not saying that. I don't think he's basically dishonest.' Beddoes took a deep breath. 'Just misguided. Frank calls me a hobby farmer. Laughs at me behind his back, like they all do.

It's true, I suppose. But I was born on a farm and grew up on one, dammit, until I was twelve.'

'I see,' said Annie. 'Is there any bitterness between you and the other local farmers?'

'I wouldn't really call it bitterness. More envy. They tease me, make fun of me, exclude me from their little cliques, but that's just their way. You know Yorkshire folk. God knows how many years before they finally accept you, if they ever do.'

'Any recent disputes, arguments?'

'None that I can think of.'

'Nor me,' Patricia said.

Annie made a note to have a chat with Frank Lane and his 'tearaway son' later. Intelligence had it that those responsible for the recent surge in rural thefts used 'scouts', usually local delivery drivers, or itinerant labourers, who built trust by helping out the farmers with maintenance, crop-picking or vermin control, as the seasons demanded. A tearaway son could easily get involved in such a racket if the price was right. Or if drugs were involved. There were plenty of cannabis farms around the region. Not that Annie saw any harm in having a few tokes now and then. After all, she had grown up surrounded by the stuff in the artists' colony outside St Ives, where she had lived with her father and a constantly shifting cast of bohemian types and plain ne'er-do-wells, maybe even a minor drug-dealer or two. But it wasn't just a couple of spliffs that bothered the police; it was big business, big profit, and that was what drew the nastier type of international criminals and gangs. It was hard to turn a blind eye to them.

'Do you have any security alarms?' Annie asked.

Beddoes snorted. 'What, up here? Waste of bloody money, like I told the constable earlier. Any self-respecting criminal would be long gone before a patrol car got up here, even if one happened to be free when you needed it.'

He was probably right, Annie realised. Once she had as much detail as she could get from John Beddoes, there seemed little reason to stay. Annie stirred herself and gave Doug Wilson the nod. 'We'll be in touch as soon as we know anything,' she said. 'We'll just have a quick shufti around outside before we leave.'

'Right you are,' said Beddoes. 'Please keep me informed.'

'We will.'

Patricia Beddoes lingered behind her husband, her hand on his shoulder. 'Thank you for the tea, Mrs Beddoes,' said Doug Wilson, ever the polite young man.

'You're welcome. Goodbye.'

Once they had put their rain gear on again, they squelched over to the garage where John Beddoes had housed the tractor. PC Valentine had examined it earlier, of course, and they saw nothing he hadn't mentioned in his report. It looked like a crowbar job, Annie thought. The entire metal housing had been prised from the wooden door, and the heavy padlock that lay in the mud was still intact. Annie took a photo of it in situ with her mobile phone, then dug a plastic bag out of her pocket and carefully picked up the lock using the end of a pencil and dropped it in the bag.

'A kid could have broken into that garage in five seconds,' Annie said in disgust. 'Come on, Doug. We'll send some CSIs to poke around in the mud when we get back to the station. There's no hurry.'

'Poor Beddoes,' said Wilson, as the windscreen wipers slid into action and the police Volvo shuddered to life.

'Oh, I wouldn't feel too sorry for him. That BMW over there looks new to me. And as you said, it's an expensive tractor.'

Annie made herself as comfortable as possible in the passenger seat, rubbing at the steamed-up window beside her. Unlike Banks, whom she felt always needed to be in control, she didn't

care who was driving. In fact, all the better if it wasn't her. She didn't like driving, especially in this weather. And there were too many arseholes on the roads these days, no matter what the weather. This week wasn't starting out well, she thought. It was only mid-morning on Monday, but already her back was aching, and she wanted nothing more than to go home and have a long hot bath with a pile of trashy gossip magazines.

When DS Winsome Jackman arrived at the abandoned airfield, there was already a patrol car parked at the gate and two uniformed officers, one of them enjoying a cigarette, were talking to a man through the chain-link fence. The man was tall and slim, wearing a camouflage jacket, waterproof trousers, sturdy walking boots and a baseball hat, black with a stylised white 'A' on the front. He was taller than Winsome, but stooped a little and leaned on a walking stick. Whether it was a rambler's prop or a genuine need, she couldn't tell. It was also hard to tell how old he was under the baseball cap, but he seemed too young to be needing a walking stick unless he'd had an accident. A beagle sat quietly by his side, nose twitching as Winsome appeared.

The uniformed constable introduced herself and dropped her cigarette and trod on it as Winsome approached. Winsome had been told by dispatch that someone had reported seeing what he thought was a bloodstain in a disused hangar near the railway line. It was her job to go over there and assess the situation, weigh up the pros and cons of bringing in an expensive CSI team. The wind tugged at her hair and seemed to permeate the very marrow of her bones. The rain felt like a cold shower.

'What have we got?' Winsome asked.

'They're padlocked shut, ma'am,' said one of the officers, pointing at the gates. 'There's nothing urgent, so we thought it best to wait for you.'

Winsome looked at the man inside. She couldn't help but see him as a man imprisoned in some sort of prison camp or compound. He had a military air about him, though she would have been hard pushed to put her finger on what made her think that. 'How did you get in there, Mr . . . ?'

'Gilchrist. Terry Gilchrist. There's a gap round the side. I wouldn't recommend it, though. It's a tight squeeze, and it's mucky down there.' He gestured to the mud-stained front of his jacket and knees of his trousers. Winsome was wearing black jeans and a belted winter coat, not exactly her best outfit, but not something she wanted to drag through the mud, either. She guessed that the uniformed officers also hadn't liked the idea of crawling through a hole in the fence and getting their uniforms dirty. 'Do you know who owns the place?'

'Government, probably. You coming in?'

Winsome sighed. 'A good detective always comes prepared,' she said, and returned to her car. She opened the boot, took out a torch and a pair of bolt cutters and approached the gates. She handed the torch through the fence to Gilchrist, and with one quick, hard snip of the bolt cutters she snapped open the padlock, which clattered to the concrete. Then, with Gilchrist's help, she pushed the gates open. They grated as they followed the semicircular grooves already etched in the crumbling concrete. They might not have been opened frequently, Winsome noted, but they had certainly been opened occasionally, and quite recently by the looks of the tracks.

Gilchrist smiled at her. 'Thanks for rescuing me,' he said. 'I was beginning to feel I'd never get out of here.'

Winsome smiled back. 'You won't. Not for a while yet.'

Gilchrist turned. 'Follow me.'

As he walked towards the hangar entrance, the dog

trotting by his side, his stick clicked on the concrete. Winsome could see by the way he limped that the walking stick was no affectation. What had happened, then? An accident? A war wound?

Winsome paused in the doorway and took in the hangar. She imagined you could fit a few planes in here, at a pinch. She had no idea how many Lancasters or Spitfires there were in a squadron, or even if the hangar had been used during wartime. Her grandfather on her mother's side had fought in the Second World War, she remembered, and he had been killed somewhere in Normandy shortly after the D-Day landings. She doubted that there were a lot of fellow Jamaicans with him; he must have been very scared and lonely for his own people. A place like this made her think about such things.

Gilchrist stood by an area of the concrete floor and the dog's tail started wagging. Winsome went and stood beside him, taking her torch and holding it up, at eye level, shining the light down on the floor.

On the patch of cracked concrete Gilchrist pointed to Winsome saw a large dark stain shaped like a map of South America. It certainly resembled congealed blood. There was the familiar smell of decaying matter, too. She squatted closer. Just around where Brazil would have been, she saw fragments of bone and grey matter stuck to the scarlet stain. Brains, she thought, reaching for her mobile. Maybe they were both wrong, maybe it was paint, or a mixture of water and rust, but now that she had seen it for herself, she could understand exactly why Gilchrist had been concerned enough to ring the police. It could be animal blood, of course, but a simple test would determine that.

Winsome keyed in the station number, explained the situation and asked for AC Gervaise to be informed and for the forensic bloodstain analyst, Jasminder Singh, and

DC Gerry Masterson to come out to check the blood at the hangar.

The Lane farm seemed a lot less grand than the Beddoes' spread, Annie thought, as DC Doug Wilson parked behind a muddy Rav 4 outside the front porch, a cobwebbed repository for inside-out umbrellas, wellington boots and a couple of rusty shovels. The farmhouse was smaller and shabbier, with a few slates missing from the roof and a drainpipe leaning at a precarious angle, water dripping from the gutter. The yard seemed neglected, and the outbuildings were fewer in number. They looked old and in need of repair. One barn was practically in ruins. A couple of skinny chickens pecked at the wet ground inside their sagging wire coop. Annie doubted that Frank Lane had a Deutz-Fahr Agrotron locked in his garage, if his garage even had a lock, and she wondered what the relationship between the two farmers really was. Beddoes hadn't given much away, but surely Lane had to envy the newcomer's obvious wealth? Or resent it? And was Beddoes patronising or honestly supportive of his neighbours? Perhaps in their eyes he was merely playing at being a farmer while they were living the very real hardship of it. He had hinted at so much himself. These considerations might matter down the line, she told herself.

They got out of the car and tried to avoid the worst of the mud, which seemed even squelchier than that at the Beddoes' farm. At least the rain had abated to a steady drizzle over the short drive, and there were now a few patches of blue sky visible through the cloud cover. Not enough 'to make baby a new bonnet', as her father used to say, but a small handkerchief, perhaps.

Annie knocked on the door, which was opened by a broad-shouldered man in his mid-forties. Wearing jeans and a wrinkled shirt, he had a whiskered, weather-beaten

face that conformed more closely to Annie's idea of a farmer. Satisfied by their credentials, he invited them in. There was a weariness and heaviness about his movements that told Annie he had perhaps been overdoing it for years, maybe for lack of help, or because the stress of survival was eating away at him. Farming was a hard physical job and often involved long hours of backbreaking work with little or no relief, though it was also seasonal and subject to the vagaries of the weather. But whereas Beddoes had seemed fit and fluent in his movements, Lane seemed hunched over and cramped up.

The living room smelled musty and stale, no scented air-freshener. No offer of tea, either. Everything in the living area demonstrated the same quality of neglect and plain utility as the farmyard itself.

Frank Lane moved some newspapers aside and bade them sit on the worn sofa while he settled himself into what was no doubt his usual armchair by the fireplace. There were cigarette burns on the armrest beside an overflowing glass ashtray.

When everyone had made themselves as comfortable as possible, and Doug Wilson had taken out his pen and notebook, Lane looked at Annie as if to tell her to get on with it.

'We're here about your neighbour's tractor, Mr Lane. I understand Mr Beddoes asked you to keep an eye on his place while he and his wife were on holiday in Mexico?'

'Aye,' said Lane, lighting a cigarette. 'Bloody Mexico. I ask you. But you can't keep your eye on a place unless you're living there, can you, and I've more than enough to do here. I did my best.'

'I'm sure you did,' said Annie. 'Nobody's saying it was your fault. But how did you manage it? What did your duties consist of?'

'I drove over there every day, fed the pigs and chickens, checked that everything was still under lock and key. He

never told me to keep a particular eye on his tractor. I saw nowt amiss.'

'That's very neighbourly of you.'

Lane gave a harsh laugh. 'Neighbourliness has nothing to do with it. Beddoes paid me well enough.'

'Ah, I see.'

'A man deserves to be paid for his labour. And it's not as if he can't afford it.'

'When was the last time you checked on the place?'

'Saturday. Day before they got back.'

'You didn't go over on Sunday?'

'No. They were supposed to be back by early morning. How was I to know they'd have problems with their flights? Nobody phoned me or anything.'

'And everything was in order on Saturday?'

'It was. Or I'd have said something then, wouldn't I?'

Annie sighed internally. *Here we go again*. She was used to this type of cantankerous and patronising Yorkshireman, but she still didn't have to like it. 'What time was this?'

'Late afternoon. Around five.'

'So the tractor was probably stolen sometime after dark on Saturday night?'

'It were still locked up at five when I left. Make sense to steal it after dark, wouldn't it?'

'Were you at home on Saturday night?'

'I'm always at home, unless I'm out in the fields. You might not have noticed, young lady, but it's lambing season, and with no help that means long days and even longer nights. Those young 'uns don't always know the most convenient time to be born.'

'Did you notice anything wrong at all while you were over at the Beddoes' place during the week? Hear anything? See anything?'

'No. But that's not surprising. If you've been up there, you'll

know there's a fair bit of distance between us. Two miles at least, as the crow flies.'

'Yes, but I think you'd probably hear a tractor starting up, for example, wouldn't you?'

Lane's face cracked into a mocking smile. 'You don't think they just got on it and drove it out of there, do you? They'd have needed summat to take it away, a flatbed lorry or summat.'

'There would have been some noise,' said Annie, blushing at her mistake. 'A lorry, van, flatbed, whatever.'

'Aye, but you hear lorries and cars from time to time. Even tractors. Nothing unusual about that in the countryside.'

'In the middle of the night?'

'When your days are as busy as mine, you sleep like a log. I wouldn't have heard the bloody Angel of Doom blowing his trumpet. I said I didn't hear owt unusual, and I didn't. I'd have reported it if I had, wouldn't I?'

'What were you doing here on Saturday night?'

'Watching telly, when I finally got the chance. Not that it's any of your business. Then sleeping.'

'Might Mrs Lane have heard something?'

Lane snorted. 'Not unless she's developed superhuman powers. She's stopping with her mother out Whitby way.'

'Oh. Is her mother ill?'

'No. More's the pity. Old bag's as fit as a fiddle and twice as squeaky.'

'So your wife's on holiday?'

'I suppose you could call it that.' Lane snorted. 'Extended leave.'

Annie sighed. 'Mr Lane,' she said, 'I'm just trying to get some basic information here.'

'Well, the basic information, if it's any of your business, which it isn't, is that's she gone. Left. Bolted. Buggered off. And good riddance. Been gone two years now, and she still

hasn't got out of the old bag's clutches. Serves her bloody well right, is what I say.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Lane.'

'Don't be,' Lane snapped, his face darkening. 'I'm not. Though what it's got to do with Beddoes' tractor I don't know.'

'We just try to gather as much background information as we can, sir,' Doug Wilson chimed in. 'It's perfectly routine.'

Lane gave Wilson a withering glance. 'Has anyone ever told you you look just like that bloke who plays Harry Potter?'

Wilson reddened.

'Watch them with your son, did you, Mr Lane?' Annie said. 'The Harry Potter films?'

'Leave my son out of it.'

'Is he here? Can we have a word with him? Maybe he heard something.'

Lane stubbed his cigarette out viciously in the ashtray. Sparks flew on to the upholstery. It was a wonder he hadn't burned the place down years ago, Annie thought.

'He doesn't live here any more. He says there's nowt for a young lad in this life, around this place. Nowt to do, nowt worth doing. Nowt but hard graft. I just about reckon he might be right.'

'So what does he do?' Annie persisted.

'Don't ask me. He lives in town. Wanted his own "space". I can't help it if he's drinking himself silly, like they do, or smoking Ecstasy.'

Annie stopped herself from telling him that people don't usually smoke Ecstasy. It would only antagonise him further. 'Is your son involved with drugs, Mr Lane?'

'I've no idea. He doesn't confide in me.'

'But you brought it up.'

'It was just something you say. I didn't mean owt by it. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. Can't say as I care one way or another.'

Annie didn't believe that. She sensed that under Lane's brittle anger and truculence were sadness, regret and guilt. Perhaps even love. But the anger and self-pity went deep, she felt. She knew from experience that people don't always have the patience, or the skill, to cut through someone's layers of aggression and unpleasantness to whatever kindness and vulnerability might lie below. Sometimes they might try for a while, then they realise life is too short, so they cut their losses and leave, move on to someone else, maybe, someone more open, someone easier to be with. Perhaps that was what both his wife and his son had done.

'What's his name?' Annie asked.

'We christened him Michael, but he goes by Mick. Why?'

'I understand he was in a bit of trouble some time ago. Something to do with a stolen car?'

'Silly bugger. It were nowt, really. Storm in a teacup.'

'Even so, he got probation.'

'They give kids probation as soon as look at them these days. It doesn't mean owt. Used to be ASBOs. Now it's something else. And community service.'

'How old is he?'

'Nineteen.'

'Where is he living in Eastvale?'

'I don't know the number, but it's one of them tower blocks. That rough estate. As if he didn't have a good home of his own. He's living with some tart, apparently.'

Annie knew where Lane meant. The East Side Estate was the oldest and roughest housing estate in town. She ought to be able to find Mick Lane there easily enough. 'He's living with a woman?'

'So he said.'

'Who?'

'Dunno. He hasn't exactly brought her home for tea. But if she's living in a council flat, it stands to reason she's a slapper, doesn't it?'

Annie knew the East Side Estate and some of its denizens, but that didn't mean she agreed with Lane's opinion. 'Do you still see Mick at all?'

'He drops by from time to time.'

'Does he own a car?'

'A used Peugeot. Falling to bits.'

'When was the last time he came here?'

'About two weeks ago.'

'Does he have a job?' Annie asked.

'Hasn't mentioned one.'

'Any particular skills?'

'Well, he weren't much use around the farm, that's for sure. Oh, he was all right with the manual labour, and he was good with the sheep, shearing and all. But he hasn't it in him to be a real farmer. Too lazy. He can draw and paint, I'll give him that, for all the use it is.'

Annie was just about getting to the end of her tether with Frank Lane. Her father Ray was an artist, and drawing and painting had been a lot of use to him. Annie sketched and painted herself, though only as a hobby, like Beddoes farmed. 'How do you manage without your wife and son, up here all alone?'

'I get by. I don't mind being alone. I get plenty of peace and quiet. But I have to pay for help when I need it, don't I? Cuts into the savings, what's left of them. This isn't a one-man job, you know, especially when you get to harvest time, or planting, or sheep shearing. Or lambing.'

'It sounds like a hard life.'

Lane grunted and lit another cigarette.

Annie coughed. He didn't react. 'How do you get on with John Beddoes?' she asked.

For the first time, Lane seemed to think for some time before answering. 'Beddoes is all right, I suppose,' he said grudgingly. 'For an amateur, that is. He's a bit full of himself,

but there's nowt I can really fault him on. Or that wife of his. Patricia. Been good to me, they have, since Katie left. Not their fault they had more advantages in life.'

'What do you mean?'

'Incomers, aren't they? City folk. Only been here seven years.' He rubbed his thumb and index finger together. 'Gentleman farmer. Hobbyist. Got a chip on his shoulder about it, too. Thinks we look down on him. Mebbe we do. I were raised to it. This farm was my father's, and his father's before him. Go back as long as you like. John Beddoes bought his farm off Ned Fairbairn when it got too much for him to manage by himsen. Nowt wrong in that. Things change. And it meant a bit of extra land for me at a good price when I needed it. But it helps when you've got money behind you, doesn't it?'

'What money?'

'Beddoes were something big in t'City. Banking or stockbroking or whatever they do down there. Big finance. All a bunch of thieves, if you ask me. He paid me well enough for taking care of his farm, and I can use the money. I'm sorry about his tractor, but there really was nowt I could do short of stand guard over his yard all week. A fancy Kraut tractor and all. Asking for trouble around here, that is. God knows what he thinks he needs it for.' He pointed a fat finger at Annie. 'It's you lot should be paying more attention to crime around these parts. How often do we get a patrol car up here?'

'We do our best, Mr Lane,' said Annie. 'But it's a bit like farming – good help's thin on the ground these days, and there's a lot of territory to cover.'

'Aye, well . . . summat ought to be done.'

'Do the Beddoes have any children?' Annie asked.

'Not as they've ever mentioned.'

There didn't seem much more to say. Wilson put away his

notebook and they walked to the door. Lane remained motionless in his armchair, smoking and staring into space. He didn't say goodbye.

'Well, that was fun,' said Annie as the car lurched back down the track to the road. Then she noticed something she hadn't seen on the way in: what looked like several rows of dead mice nailed to the wooden fence. At second glance, they seemed too large to be mice, she thought, and she gave a little shudder. Rats, perhaps?

'What the hell are those?' she asked Wilson, a well-known expert on all things Yorkshire.

'Moles,' he said, turning to grin at her. 'The mole-catcher nails them there.'

'Good Lord. Why?'

'To show he's doing his job,' said Wilson. 'And as a warning, of course.'

'A warning to who?'

'Other moles.'

Terry Gilchrist lived in an old farm labourer's cottage about a hundred yards west of the village of Drewick, from which he was separated by a patchwork field of allotments dotted with greenhouses and potting sheds. Gilchrist had his own garden, which Winsome could see through the window was well tended, even though everything was drooping under the weight of the rain, or bent by the wind. Beyond the allotments, apart from the square-towered Norman church and a couple of limestone and millstone manor houses, Drewick was almost entirely a post-war village with a few shops, a community hall and a pub, about halfway between Northallerton and Thirsk. Most of the houses were red brick, with red pantile roofs, and consisted mostly of bungalows and semis, with a few short terraces running off at right angles from the high street. The house was only a mile or so

from the hangar, and she had thought it best to take him back home for a quick chat rather than stand out in the wind and rain. She had detailed the patrol car officers to guard the scene until Gerry and Jasminder arrived.

Gilchrist took her coat and offered her a cup of tea, which Winsome gratefully accepted. She could see him grimace with pain as he stood, and she offered to help. 'Can I do it?'

'No. I'm used to it, thank you. Back in a jiffy.'

Winsome took out her notebook and prepared some questions while he was away. He soon came back with the teapot and mugs, and as he poured Winsome studied him more closely. She realised that he was much younger than his injury made him seem. War had aged him. The Blair Folly started in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq, and the Afghanistan fiasco had been going on even longer. If Gilchrist had been a young lad when he started out in, say, 2000, he could easily be somewhere between thirty and forty now. It was impossible to tell. He had a fine head of fair hair, a strong jaw and clear blue eyes. He was even taller than Winsome, and he had a soldier's bearing, but he also had a slight stoop, and the limp, of course. Though he seemed a little shy, there was something solid and dependable about his presence and Winsome felt safe in his company. Not that she normally felt unsafe, but it was a definite feeling, and one she wasn't used to. She found herself wondering whether the wound embarrassed him, if that was what made him appear awkward and shy. After a sip of Earl Grey, she got down to business. 'Have you ever noticed anything odd about the hangar before?

Gilchrist patted his dog. 'I didn't even notice anything this time. Peaches was off the leash and wouldn't come back. That seemed unusual, so I went to get her.'

'That's never happened before?'

'No.'

'How long have you lived here?'

Gilchrist gazed around the room. 'I grew up here. This house belonged to my parents. They died while I was overseas. Car crash. Ironic, isn't it? There am I dodging bullets and they get killed by a drunk driver who walks away without a scratch.' He shrugged. 'Anyway, I'm an only child. The mortgage was paid off. I inherited.'

There seemed both anger and resignation in Gilchrist's sense of irony. Winsome had known one or two soldiers whose experience of combat had isolated them from their fellow man, but Gilchrist didn't seem like that – just wounded and angry. She picked up the threads of the conversation. 'How long have you been back from . . .'

'Afghanistan. Helmand Province. It's OK to say it. Little over a year.'

'How often do you take Peaches walking there, by the airfield?'

'Every now and then, maybe once a week or so.'

'You knew about the hole in the wire, then?'

'Yes. I think it's always been there. I used to play there myself, and I've seen the local kids crawling in and out. But kids can usually find a way to get in anywhere, can't they? They're all right. They don't do any harm. The younger ones play cricket and footie, and the older ones maybe down a few cans of cheap lager, kiss and cuddle with their girlfriends. They've nowhere else to go, poor sods. Where's the harm?'

'Was there anything else going on out there that you know of? I mean kids might get into fights, might even organise them. What about cockfighting, that sort of thing?'

Gilchrist shook his head. 'I've never seen anything or heard any rumours of anything like that. I've seen lorries coming and going once or twice. Other than that, nothing.'

'Lorries? Since when?'

'Just the past year or so. Since I've been here alone.'

'How often?'

Gilchrist thought for a moment. 'Maybe three or four times over the year. It's not a regular thing.'

Gerry Masterson could always check on what companies had the use of the place, if any, Winsome thought. If it came to that. 'You said you think the government owns the land.'

'Just a wild guess. I've no idea, really. It's been like that as long as I can remember. All I know is it was used as an air-force base in the last war. Nice and flat around here, see, edge of the Vale of Mowbray, and most of the trees weren't here back then. They were planted when Drewick was built in the fifties, to shelter it from the railway, I suppose. There was talk of building more houses on the airfield land a few years ago, but nothing ever came of that, and now it's supposed to become a shopping centre. You ask me, people don't want to live that close to the train tracks. It's a busy line these days. London or the West Country to Scotland. And you can't go wrong with a shopping centre, can you?'

Winsome had used the East Coast train line often enough. Plenty of people lived close to the railway lines, she thought, remembering gazing dreamily over backyards with their rabbit hutches, dilapidated brick outhouses, washing hanging on lines and old tyres hanging from tree branches on train rides she had taken over the past few years. But perhaps Gilchrist was right, and such sites were becoming less popular for housing estates these days. A shopping centre would make more sense. Out of the way, background noise no problem.

She couldn't think of anything else to ask Gilchrist for the moment, not until she had a better idea about what might have happened in the hangar. She stayed and chatted for a while longer, finishing her tea, then said she had better get

back to the airfield to meet her colleagues. Gilchrist helped her on with her coat, and as she slipped her arms easily in the sleeves, she thought how pleasant it was to have someone do that for her.