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Shudder

THE TERRIFYING NEW NOVEL

A A Prideaux

Shudder



Vanguard Press

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A A Prideaux

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For my son, Richard Paganus Prideaux.
He knows why.

The Old Mill was the place in Mill Town where most people worked. Years passed and the Mill closed. Something remained inside it. When Lydia Prix returned to the Town she has no choice but to face the demons of her past and ultimately discover the truth.

If you are frightened of going down to the woods today, you may also end up being frightened of tunnels, hospitals, churches and friends and families...

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PROLOGUE

When Lydia left Mill Town she did so with no intention of returning.

It didn't matter that her parents, grandparents and siblings and all the generations prior had lived there. That meant nothing to her.

Escaping with the hope of saving herself and her family from the threat of harm had been the only sensible move at the time. She had been told often enough that mentioning to anyone what had happened to her, would ensure her loved ones would be hurt. Lydia believed and feared these threats.

But, by the time she left, her spirit had been so exhausted she couldn't think about whether he hurt other people or not. Her thoughts had turned so far inwards that the outside world meant very little. She could be easily led anywhere.

That could be the only explanation for marrying that old idiot Mr Wrinkles Pollack. He was more than happy to take home a pretty young bride from Mill Town who would clean and cook for him. But soon after they arrived at Seaside, he was back sailing across the bay to catch fish to sell in the surrounding market towns. Mr Pollack didn't mind leaving Lydia to her own devices so long as food and tidy clothes were available on his return.

Nothing else was demanded of her and for that she was eternally grateful, if a little bored.

But Lydia loved the harbour-side cottage they lived in. Inside she felt safe and warm, cuddled by the old stone walls. Although

the place had been untidy and dark when she arrived as the newest possession of her husband, it had taken her exactly one week.

One week, to clean, decorate the cottage in pale blue, white and green, mirroring the sea she quickly grew to love. She painted an old rowing boat white and propped it on its side against the wall. It acted as a seat with the bow providing a roof under which Lydia spent many hours meditating out to sea watching the ships and listening to the seabirds and the waves.

Baskets of seaweed hung from brackets at the front of the house and it was possible to see the harbour from every room. All the furniture was made from carved driftwood and her style was envied and copied by her neighbours.

Mr Pollack announced one evening that he thought it was time for them to become keepers and wanted her to come with him and collect a child from the Finders Hospital. He hadn't known about Lydia's decision taken only one day after their marriage, never to become a keeper with him. She instead dreamt of the day she would be able to find some children with someone else.

When Mr Pollack returned from long voyages he told tales of monsters and mermaids and dragons in the sky. The fish he brought back were huge and tasty and in great demand. On his short trips he brought back small fish and crabs and then sailed out again on the same tide.

Lydia hardly had a relationship with her husband. He was not interested in decoration or gardens, or tales of her walks along the cliff. When he left on the tide, he usually did so without a wave.

But the coastguard was a different matter. He visited her in the evening and shortened the time available before sleep. He accompanied her on cliff walks where they created ideas to increase her fortune through his side line of profitable smuggling.

He required a hiding place and Lydia's occupation of a harbour-side cottage with a cellar leading to an underground cave, suited both parties well.

But now she was returning home ready to face her demons. Time had dulled the memories of her youth and she wondered whether perhaps she had imagined some of it. Sometimes she wasn't sure what her reality was.

It was true that no one else ever talked about anything similar happening to them, so it could be possible that she had mixed up horror stories told by her friends and exaggerated the content and included it in her own childhood memories.

She stared out of the coach window onto the moors which were grey with mist. Seeing the few trees painted like black sticks against rocky outcrops, she felt a familiar childhood shiver.

"Do I recognise you dear?" asked an old lady who sat opposite her. This lady had boarded at the beginning of the moor over which they now travelled.

"I don't know," replied Lydia honestly. "I am travelling from Seaside back to Mill Town."

"Back to Mill Town?" The old lady seemed interested. "I thought there weren't many who left Mill Town unless it's back to you know where..." she tailed off, a little embarrassed.

"Yes, back to Mill Town." Lydia wasn't going to get irritated. She didn't remember this old lady and to be frank didn't care what she thought. Since marrying and moving to Seaside, Lydia had become arrogant. So her husband told her.

Lydia preferred to see herself as confident. After those early experiences, she had vowed never to let anyone make decisions of any kind on her behalf. She let no one into her secret thoughts and memories. They belonged to her alone.

"Did you used to live there then dear?" The old lady was as interested in gossip as anyone in Mill Town.

Lydia looked at her companion and tried to remember to keep a smile on her face. She knew that her face fell into a natural position of sternness and either scared or angered the person in

whose direction her face was pointing. So here it was, the smiley face arriving in response to her thoughts.

“I did used to live there, but I left to get married and have lived at Seaside with my husband for years now.”

“Couldn’t you find a husband amongst your own kind? There are plenty of nice young men here. Your family must have been so disappointed that you chose a mixed marriage. No children? Mind you, Finders would have difficulty with a mule baby, I don’t think there are any about these days.”

Lydia dropped her smiley face pretence and retorted, “I would prefer that you didn’t talk to me like that. I find it disgusting.”

“Please yourself dear. But perhaps you should have thought about your poor family’s feelings before you married a foreigner.” The old lady triumphantly folded her arms across her chest, content in the knowledge she had upset her travelling companion.

Lydia stopped pretending to be sociable and looked out of the window at the moor again. Her mind went back to the day she left Mill Town and she shivered involuntarily at the recollection. She continued to stare out of the window, wanting no further contact with the odious woman with whom she shared the carriage.

Lydia relaxed against the background noise of the trotting goats which pulled their carriage. She had recently heard that some people were starting to use ponies instead of goats, as they were apparently far more versatile.

Lydia had always hated living in Mill Town. To be honest she had always hated living.

It hadn’t been that much fun trying to find interesting ways to get through the days of her girlhood. The lovely blackness of sleep and loneliness had often been preferable to the frightening brightness of the day.

Her keepers, though harmless enough, appeared to have had little idea of how to raise their brood of six. Finders Hospital, from where everyone came, had no problems with sending baby after

baby to the Prix household. There were no reports of ill treatment and the children were all clean and polite and healthy. On the surface at least.

Lydia closed her eyes and immediately held a picture of Uncle Cal in her mind. She opened her eyes again quickly and sat forward, feeling sick and anxious. The old woman looked at her with interest, a smug expression arriving upon her face when she saw how unsettled the young woman now was.

Lydia breathed rapidly, surprised that Cal could make her feel so bad after so long. She hadn't thought about him much since leaving Mill Town. Perhaps her mind was going a bit addled now she was coming home.

Home.

Shouldn't Seaside be home? She had been married for, how many years was it? It seemed a long time. But it was soon all to be over, finished. As soon as she arrived in Mill Town, she would see the Lawyer and get a divorce.

Then she intended to face her past and make Cal pay for the evil things he had done. She must clear her past. It was the only way to get on with the rest of her life. She had no idea how she was going to achieve this, but she had a definite faith that a solution would turn up at the right time. Her Grandfather Treen had promised her that it was so.

She hadn't told Treen about her Uncle. That part of her life was kept secret, sometimes even from herself. No one else would be interested anyway. The one time she had complained, she was forced to endure a prolonged stay at the Doctor's hospital, ensuring that she didn't complain again.

But it wasn't just Cal, there was something else. Lydia leaned back in her seat, closed her eyes and allowed her mind to wander back to the first time she had encountered the creature.

CHAPTER ONE

THE OLD MILL

“Why do you cheat when you are playing ball with us, David?”

Lydia was good at taking charge, even though she was only eleven years old. Her father said that she was bossy, but she did not care. She was a girl who needed to be in control. It was imperative.

“I don’t cheat. I am the only one playing by the rules. You lot don’t understand rules,” he answered petulantly.

“That’s because no one cares about rules, there’s only six of us playing!” Lydia answered, not to be outdone.

The other children remained quiet during arguments such as this. The arguments happened a lot.

Lydia’s two youngest sisters, who had arrived from Finders on the same day often tagged along with Lydia and her best friend David. The other two children, Betty and Jimmy, lived next door but one to Lydia and had been encouraged to come along to make up numbers for the game. They hadn’t really wanted to come, but did as they were told.

“Is someone shouting you?”

The children looked over to the row of houses which separated the field from the road but could not see anyone. It was usual at about this time of the evening for at least one of their keepers to shout them to come in. The group stared at the cottages and remained silent. They were used to being suddenly summoned back home. Tonight there was no one shouting, so the children carried on with their game.

The field was on a steep slope and gave a spectacular view across a valley to the moors beyond. It was part of the once sparsely populated moors on this side of the valley. But more cottages had been built during recent years and the houses at the top of the hill were now almost touching the houses by the river.

The playing field remained safe from the builders, because it belonged to the mill next door. This huge building had been producing beautiful cloth and employment for the town since the middle of the last century. Occupants of the cottages, young and old had been employed there since it opened.

The mill, now called the old mill, stood grey and silent on the horizon. Grey building next to grey building, each a separate unit joined only by steps and alleys. There was a huge chimney in the middle, soaring to the sky. Where does the sky go and does the chimney reach it? Lydia had asked her parents. She never received a satisfactory answer.

The noise inside the mill was very loud and all the workers learned the art of lip reading. The heat was almost unbearable and the air thick with fibres and dust. No worker cared, because the money they earned at the mill was better than could be earned working in one of the town shops. Plus, everyone who worked at the old mill knew each other. It was a home away from home.

Breakfast, lunch and tea was served by a team of little ladies scurrying from floor to floor, pushing trolleys full to the brim with tea, cakes and toast. Then it all stopped. The red cheeked, smiley tea ladies lost their jobs. The hard working girls, experts with the looms which made cloth for the City ladies, were told not to come into work anymore. No more were they able to sneak out pieces of gold cloth and coloured weaves. They returned to their cottages and houses and boiled cabbage and rhubarb to feed their families.

The wonderfully moustachioed men who ran from grey building to grey building, fixing looms and mending machinery had

to go home and persuade the donkeys and goats to work the land so they could grow the cabbage and rhubarb.

The mill owner, Mr Snooty had decided to invest in the City banks. He wanted to make money in a tidy way and shop for clothes in the City. The Snootys still lived at the big house, in full view of the old mill and they often discussed knocking it down or turning it into a zoo.

This mattered not to the group of children playing ball in the field. They could not remember the mill being open and had become used to the high-wired fences with notices informing them in huge writing:

‘KEEP OUT’

So they did.

No one entered the mill or the grounds and when a ball was inadvertently kicked over the fencing, the children stood silent and looked at the ball. When it did not hurl itself back over the fence, they would return home and fetch another ball during a telling off from one of the keepers as they searched in the sheds amongst cages and discarded toys.

“What is that?” asked a little sister, pointing at the buildings.

They all looked up at the mill and saw a light moving from one window to another. The light was dim at first as if it were deep inside the building. Then the light brightened as it came towards the window and moved along slowly, lighting first one window then the next.

“Who is in there, do you think?” asked another sister.

“I don’t know,” answered her twin.

“Let’s go in and see,” said David, still feeling bruised from the cheating accusation. He needed to prove his dominance of the group.

“Are you mental?” Lydia had no intention of letting the pressure drop on her friend.

“Probably, I play with you often enough.” Nerves were getting the better of him.

The rest of the group looked scared and the two neighbours’ children announced they would be returning home. The afternoon had taken a turn they could not cope with. They scampered across the field, over the fence and disappeared into a cottage. The little cloud of dust which followed each child as they ran, met a slammed door and not knowing what to do next, disintegrated.

Now there were four.

“Come on, let’s go and see what is going on. My mother said she used to work there when she was a girl and they used to have cake,” said David.

This information brightened the mood of the others and they agreed that they would at least go and look through the gate.

Evening was descending upon them and although the sky had darkened and closed in, the children had not noticed. They made their way up the field and towards the gate of the old mill grounds. The track they met originated from the side of the cottages and came to a halt outside the mill, stopping suddenly at the gates. These metal gates possessed the beauty the craftsman intended.

Gold and black metal entwined to form the word ‘**Mill**’. But the sign telling all onlookers to ‘**Keep Out, Move Away and Don’t Come Back**’ rather spoilt the effect.

The gate opened with a push from Lydia and the group crept in. The light in the sky faded and the sun fell down behind the chimney. Still the children moved towards the main door as if in a trance. The light inside the building had stopped in front of one window, casting flickering shadows against the coloured glass.

“I have changed my mind,” said Alice, the youngest twin.

“Me too, I am going home,” said Janey the oldest twin. If you are a twin you know how important this distinction is.

“No you are not. You are both coming in with us,” David informed them, “and you will be in more danger if you try and go back now. The yard and field are in darkness, so you will have to wait for us to take you back. Anything could happen to you there.”

The two little ones thought about the problem for a moment, put thumbs in their mouths and held hands. They followed the elder two children to the door.

The big wooden doors opened against the combined weight of the children and swung noisily to one side revealing a large reception area. This had been the entrance used by all the workers back in the days of exciting business. A little office to the right had been the home of the caretaker doorman for many years. It was his decision whether a visitor would be let in or not. Now, the little office with its trumpet telephone and notice board, housed only mice and spiders and bats.

Even David and Lydia were feeling nervous, but neither wanted to show the other how scared they were. They had come too far now to back down. After all what was the worst that could happen?

Chances were that the light was being held by someone they knew, another child perhaps who was camping out in the mill or someone looking for something to steal.

“I think the light has gone.” David offered this information hopefully. Perhaps Lydia would rise to the bait and agree that they may as well go home now after all.

Nothing doing.

She marched forward, emboldened by the weakness shown by her friend and reached the door to the main factory floor. Inside they heard a shuffling sound and one of the smaller children screamed. They all jumped in fear and anticipation and ran back to the main door.

“Stop it!” Lydia was breathing heavily, almost tempted to leave and drag the others with her.

“I can’t help it,” cried Janey. “What was that noise?”

“Probably a bat or something, I expect. Are we going to do this?” Lydia looked across at David. They had come too far really. Why had they not just gone straight home? Why come into the mill at all?

“Yes let’s go in. We shall have something to tell the others at school tomorrow. No one else has done this, we shall be heroes.” The thought made David pull back his shoulders and stand straight, in contrast to his previous crouching stance.

So they moved back towards the inner door and carefully opened it.

The factory floor had a different feel to the reception hall. Although it was now almost completely dark outside, the moon was reflecting on the gold and silver machinery and created a gloomy glow to the area. The space was huge and the children felt very tiny. Even the four of them together hardly filled half the space of the doormat on which they stood. They huddled together for warmth and comfort.

The light was at the other side of the floor and only visible as a glow. It was impossible to see who or what was holding it and apart from some flickering of the flame, nothing else was obvious. Lydia strained her eyes against the semi darkness and hoped for a realisation that the light was merely a firefly or a reflection of the moon. But they weren’t to be appeased so easily. The light came from some sort of lamp with an unusually large flame and was being held by someone. Or something. And this something made no noise.

“I think we have proved that we are not scared. We can leave now,” Lydia informed her companions.

“I agree,” David answered. “We can leave now, I should say.”

The little ones looked up at the older two with grateful expressions. They wanted to go now. They wanted to go home to their keepers.

Suddenly David decided to give it another shot.

“Hello!” he shouted. “Who are you?”

There was no answer and so David tried again.

“We are not scared of you. Make yourself known to us or you will be in serious trouble.”

“What sort of serious trouble?” asked Lydia.

“I don’t know,” he answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

They both giggled at the silliness of the statement. They felt close at that moment, good friends again.

Suddenly, there was a loud scurrying noise and looking back, they saw that the light was now in the middle of the room. Still no one was visible and Lydia was conscious that the outside door was a long way away. There was no movement from the direction of the lamp, just a glow and a flickering flame. Lydia was afraid.

“Why did we do this?” she asked David.

“I don’t know really, but I am never doing it again,” he answered.

The door banged shut behind them and they screamed in unison. Lydia noticed that the light was now only a few feet away from them. This horror was too much for the little ones and they turned on their heels and tried to open the door, pulling in vain on the brass handle which held the door shut. David and Lydia tried to help them with the handle and keep an eye on the trouble which was coming their way. There was an increased amount of energy amongst the group now and they were perilously close to panic.

The handle freed and the two youngest ran out into the hall, when suddenly the door slammed shut. Only now they had their backs to the lamp. They tried in vain to open the door, uttering little whimpers of terror. The door was firmly jammed shut.

“Run and fetch help!” Lydia shouted through the door to the little girls.

David and Lydia reached for each other’s hand and held on tightly. They were as scared as it was possible to be.

Time seemed to slow and then almost stop. Their senses heightened and their breath came in short gasps. The two friends turned slowly around to face the demon. They were not quick enough.

Long bony fingers grabbed the children by the shoulders and swiftly turned them around to face the door again. They could see a reflection of a tall figure standing behind them in the glass above the doors.

Looking down to her shoulder, Lydia saw the pale hand which held her in a vice like grip. She noted the long fingers which ended in long nails. These nails were blue and sharply pointed. Lydia knew that she must remember every detail so that she could tell her father and Policeman Gles as soon they could get out of the place. She tried to look a bit further up and noticed that his arm was thin and bony and sort of spiky. She shook involuntarily because she was vaguely reminded of something. A memory which came into her mind briefly and then floated away just out of reach. It was not a nice memory and she was not entirely sure that she wanted to remember it.

David gripped her hand tightly and she stopped looking at the creature's arms and turned to her friend. He smiled tensely at her and she felt moved as she noticed the tears on his cheeks.

"Don't be frightened," she said. "You will be alright."

"Let go of her!" David said to the creature. It was not a shout, he had tried to make it a command. But there was no response.

Where was that vibrating coming from? Lydia thought that she could feel shaking passing from his arm to her shoulder. Then, one of the fingers rose slowly. The hand was rigid, but it managed to stroke the side of her face.

The upward stroke was not soft or gentle, it was similar to sticky leather against her young skin. As he moved his finger downwards there was some sort of resistance, as though his skin was covered in scales. Lydia heard a moaning coming from the

thing, man, whatever it was. She was so frightened and knew that this was a precursor to something even more terrible and she could not quite remember what it was. If she could remember it now, it must have happened to her before, mustn't it?

"Are you alright David?" she said quietly. Her eyes had been tightly clenched but now she opened them again. There was a smell coming from the creature which she thought she recognised from somewhere else. A hot room, an old man. Trapped.

"I think so," he said. They were talking as though the man thing was not there. If only it would talk or let them know what it intended to do.

"What are you going to do to us?" asked David. "You must let us go. Our keepers will be looking for us."

The vibrating began again and David was rewarded for his question with stroking on his face too.

"Why are you shaking? Are you laughing at us?" David was conscious of his tears and although he was not crying out loud, he knew that Lydia had seen his tears and he felt a little ashamed. Lydia would never mention the tears to anyone else, not ever.

"He isn't laughing David. He's shuddering."

Lydia raised her eyes to the door which led to the outside hall and safety. In the bulls-eye pane of glass, she could see the distorted reflection of her tormentor. She screamed long and loud.

The two little sisters ran out in to the entrance hall and as they did, the door slammed loudly behind them. They stood frozen to the spot in the middle of the reception hall. They felt far more vulnerable than if they had been standing at any edge of the room. Standing in the middle was terrifying. They felt very alone and sick with fear because they could no longer see David and Lydia. They were unable to move.

Suddenly there was a crash of falling glass to their left and a jar fell to the floor. It seemed to have been thrown but no one was

there. The little girls screamed and the energy of the scream seemed to give feelings to their legs and they scabbled their way out of the main door.

Half falling, half running down the stone steps they arrived in the dark yard and felt the same terrible sensation of being in the centre of a deserted space, too scared to go forward and petrified of going back. Anything could be waiting for them in the shadows.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Alice.

“Should we go back and see what is happening to David and Lydia? They must be in terrible danger.”

“We can’t do anything for them except fetch a keeper or the policeman.”

They looked back at the windows of the old mill and saw the glow of the lamp against the glass. Then they heard a scream.

“That was Lydia!” Alice said, alarm in her voice.

“Let’s go now and fetch help!” Janey pulled at her sister’s arm and as she did so, she noticed that the light in the mill had gone out.

They ran out of the gates, down the lane and past the old air raid shelters.

These shelters had been used for protection by the mill workers during the bombings from the other Country. Now they were overgrown with brambles and nettles and creepers of all sorts. Foxes and badgers and rabbits and weasels lived amongst the undergrowth. As a general rule the girls would have been worried about going past the buildings, especially in the dark, but tonight was different. There was no old weasel which could match the scariness of all they had just seen.

The narrow lane met the main road and the girls stopped again. The road was deserted except for the old couple from up the road, who were making their way back from the shops. It was no good asking them for help, they would be useless.

They turned left and ran to the second gate, the gate to their home. The gate was already open and the girls ran through it

gratefully and up the path. They crashed through the door and tumbled into the kitchen.

“Mother, Father, come quickly, we need help!” they shouted. But no one was there to hear, the kitchen was empty. The flames in the fire grate created dancing shadows on the wall. The kettle was whistling merrily upon the fire. The girls ran into the sitting room, but no one was there. They ran upstairs and still no one there.

“Where is everyone?” asked Alice.

“I don’t know. You don’t think anything has happened to them do you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Alice felt brave now that she was on familiar ground.

“Perhaps they are outside. Perhaps they are looking for us,” she added hopefully. Their keepers were not as a rule bothered unduly whether the girls were at home or not.

There was a note on the table and Janey read it:

Girls, we have gone out. Feed yourselves.

The instructions were clear and succinct. There was bread and cheese and some rhubarb pie on the table next to the note. Janey began to eat some bread.

“What are you doing?” asked Alice incredulously.

“Eating, what does it look like?” Janey answered tetchily.

“We are supposed to be getting help.”

Janey had the decency to look ashamed. In her hunger, she had forgotten the immediate problem.

“Who shall we ask then?”

“Follow me,” said Alice, for she had an idea.

They were not to speak to the people next door, or the people next door but one. The girls did not know why that was, but their training had been thorough so they did not entertain that prospect.

That left them to choose between the last cottage on the row and the house over the road.

The end cottage housed their mother's sister, Auntie Cal and her husband. The house opposite was the home of the Doctor and his sisters. The driver of a goat cart shouted at them as he swerved to avoid the pair. The lamps he had hanging from brackets on the front of the cart swung violently from side to side, but they all managed to pass each other without mishap. The girls ran through the entrance gates of the grand old stone house. The winding drive led them to the yellow front door of Doctor Catapult, a lovely friendly man who gave them sweets and lollipops whenever they visited. Children never needed to make an appointment to see him. Lots of young children came here and played in the woods and the summerhouse.

"Sad he never had children of his own," the other locals said. "Never mind, he looks after everyone else's."

The twins had great faith that Doctor Catapult would help them. They hammered on the familiar yellow door. There was no answer. They tried the big bell pull on the wall next to the door. They did not usually have to use the bell because the door was often wide open when the Doctor saw children coming down the drive.

"How long should we knock for?" asked Alice.

"One more knock and then we must go somewhere else."

One more knock produced only sore knuckles and the children turned and walked back down the drive. Alice looked back briefly because she thought she saw the curtains moving. But she was mistaken and the girls went back to the road.

They stood on the pavement.

"There is no alternative Janey."

"I know. But I really don't want to."

"We have to help them. It may be too late already."

There was nothing else to be done. The two girls held hands and crossed the road towards the end cottage. This cottage had been built at the same time as the other cottages, but looked different. It was darker and colder and had a wobbly path. Well, not really a wobbly path, it was just that whenever the girls walked down the path, their legs wobbled. Lydia told their mother about the wobbly path, but she would not listen.

“You just go down and visit your Uncle, you know how much he looks forward to seeing you,” Mother would say.

Tonight, the girls walked up the wobbly path and climbed the steps to the door. The cottages were built upon the steep hill which led down to the river at the bottom and backed onto the field in front of the old mill. Because of the slope this was the only cottage that needed steps.

They knocked at the back door and it was opened swiftly by their Aunt.

“What do you two want at this time of night? You should be at home, your mother will be worried.” She spat the words at them.

“Mother is not at home,” began Janey.

“Get off home anyway. She won’t be long, she’s only gone to the inn with your dad and the other kids. Go on clear off.” She started to close the door.

“No Auntie, we need your help. Lydia and David are in trouble!”

“What sort of trouble?” She was suspicious now.

Auntie Cal was a fat, unsavoury woman with a big round red face. Her husband, their Uncle, was tall and as skinny as she was fat. They hated each other.

“There is a monster in the mill and it tried to get us and we ran away and it’s still got Lydia and David and we think it is going to kill them both.” The girls pleaded with the Aunt.

Their Aunt looked at the two of them, shivering on the steps, white faced and frightened in the dark night.

“Get off home you bad girls,” she said and slammed the door shut.

The girls sat down on the top step and looked over the valley to the little cottages on the other side. Twinkling lights shone from the windows and it was easy to imagine the normal life going on behind the walls. They thought about the children happily eating supper with their keepers and talking about their day. Janey and Alice felt very lonely.

“What now?” asked Alice.

“We are going to have to go back and help them. I don’t know what we can do though.”

“We have got to do something.”

Janey had an idea. She led her sister, younger by ten minutes, out onto the road and they went back to their own house.

“We will get Father’s gun and go and shoot it. That is all we can do.”

“No, we are not allowed!” said Alice.

As they arrived at the gate of their house they noticed some people walking towards them down Mill Lane.

“Who are you?” Janey said quietly, afraid of the answer.

There was no answer.

“Who is that?” Alice was getting fed up of this, although she still held tightly on to her sister’s hand.

“It’s me stupid. It’s me.” Lydia ran towards her sisters and began to cry. She was shaking uncontrollably. David stood next to her and did not speak. He seemed unable to.

“We were trying to get help, but no one was in and the Cals wouldn’t come and help and we tried so hard.” Janey was crying too.

“We were just coming back to get Father’s gun and we were coming to the mill again. I am so sorry it took us so long, but no one would help you see.” Alice felt the urgent need to let her big sister know that they had not forgotten her.

“It’s alright, it’s all over now.” Lydia hugged her little sisters, but she looked over their shoulders into the face of her friend David and her face froze into an expression of sadness that she thought would never leave her again.

By the time the keepers arrived home, the drama appeared to have passed. David went home and the sisters ate the food Mother had left out for them. The keepers had come back from the inn with the other three children who had been staying at Gran’s.

The keepers were in a very good mood, humming and singing and did not notice the tense atmosphere in the little kitchen. Mother potted about getting things ready for school the next day and smoking her pipe. It was the same as every other evening.

Much to the surprise of the little girls, David and Lydia had made them agree to say nothing.

“It turned out to be not much in the end,” said Lydia.

“Yea, it was just a tramp that used to work there years ago and wanted a place to stay,” added David.

“Why didn’t he say anything then?” asked Alice.

“He couldn’t talk,” Lydia answered quickly.

“How did you find out that he used to work there then?” asked Janey.

“He wrote it down,” David said quickly.

“He wrote it down!” Alice said. “I might be only eight, but I am not an idiot.”

Lydia looked at David as though he was an idiot.

“Look, it will be easier not to tell anyone else about what happened,” Lydia said reasonably. “We will just keep it to ourselves and say no more about it. They won’t let us play out again if they think there is going to be trouble.”

The girls reluctantly agreed.

Lydia went with David to the door.

“We can’t keep quiet for ever Lydia,” he said.

“We can,” she answered. “We have to.”

The night was extra cold now, winter would be upon them soon. The eleven-year-olds hugged each other.

Nothing would be the same again.

CHAPTER TWO

LAWYERS

The cart stopped and there was a knock on the roof.

“Mill Town!” shouted the driver.

Lydia stretched and then gathered her possessions together. The old woman was nowhere to be seen and Lydia assumed that she must have got out of the cart as soon as they stopped.

A few moments later, she stood on the pavement on the high street of Mill Town. This was the place she had gone to dances, school and shopped. Mill Village on the outskirts of the town was where she had lived and where the old mill was located. The town became bigger at the expense of the village after the mill closed.

There were few people about, most having finished their work for the day and gone home. Shoppers never hung around much when dusk began to fall, there being too many jobs to do at home.

Lydia picked up the large case, which the cart driver had thrown onto the ground and made her way over to the inn.

She pushed open the front door of the ‘Rat and Handbag’ and went in. Lydia had no intention of going to her parents, as she still felt a good deal of resentment towards them. There had been few letters passing between them since her marriage and no visits.

Lydia was appalled at the way they had been so pleased to see the back of her and almost thrown her into the marriage. It was difficult to forget.

She pushed open the door and was met with the pungent smell of pipe smoke mixed with smoke from the lamps and the fire. She

blinked, but refrained from rubbing her eyes so that she didn't spoil her face. Lydia had forgotten how clean the air was at Seaside compared to her home town. There everyone who smoked did so in front of their harbour side cottages and the smoke from that hobby blew straight up the steep road which ran from the harbour to the cliffs behind, then up and over the moors beyond.

Struggling with her bags, she made her way to the bar.

After booking a room for two nights, she gratefully accepted assistance with her luggage and followed the young man out of the bar and up the narrow winding staircases and corridors, until her room was reached. It was a small room, but the view was of the main street and she could see all the shops and offices there.

"Thank you. Please bring my meal up to me here would you?" she said to the young man who had brought in the cases for her. He left the room with raised eyebrows, not being used to orders from strangers. Lydia looked outside.

The familiar sights made her smile. The shops had lamps in the windows, the better to view inside. Some parts of Mill Town she had missed.

As the journey had been so tiring and she had an appointment with the Lawyer tomorrow afternoon she decided to remain in her room and go straight to sleep after eating.

She unpacked her belongings and made ready for the evening.

Lydia stood at the window, looking out at the park on the opposite side of the road. Autumn in the town was a miserable affair, grey and boring. Today was market day and usually would offer some colour from the canopies which covered the stalls and the wide array of fruit and vegetables and foods and clothes.

Everyone from the surrounding villages would descend on the town and meet for coffee and gossip. They would dress in their best clothes in order to impress their neighbours and speak in voices that

would not be recognised at home. That was the way of it, everyone did it and no one minded.

On every other Wednesday in the history of the town, the streets were busy and the scurrying of shoppers caused the pigeons to stay on their roosts up high on the roofs of the shops. To scamper about on the streets as they usually did, was very dangerous and they only came down when the stalls had been cleared up. Then they enjoyed sharing the leavings, sometimes after fighting with weasels and rats. Happy times.

Today was different, for there had been a murder. Yes, a murder and there had never been a murder known of in the history of the Mill Town, way back in the days of their great-great-grand-keepers. So Inspector Glees had told everyone that they must not meet in large groups and had banned the market until Friday, which caused a great deal of trouble for everyone. For Friday was the day of the coffee morning for the ladies in the town, so what were they to do now? Have the coffee morning and then come to market?

Such a lot of trouble for the inn keepers too as they were now not going to enjoy sales of rhubarb wine and cabbage salads which went down so well on market day.

This was what the inn keeper's wife had been trying to tell Lydia this morning, but she had been too arrogant to listen.

"Mrs Pollack, I am afraid that Mr Scriber will be a little late. He has some unforeseen business to deal with, but should be with you in another ten minutes."

The secretary at the town lawyer's did not look unduly worried about the delay the client would have to endure.

The secretary was a needle-nosed woman with black hair piled high on her head and glasses which turned up at the corners. She dressed in a beige top and skirt and finished off the look with a large black belt around her middle. This style may suit a chic woman from City, but the secretary could not carry off the look, as she was the shape of an egg.

“Not to worry, I shall wait,” Lydia said.

Lydia felt slow and tired today. After her meal last night she had slept like a dead thing. Perhaps she had expected the market noises to wake her but nothing had. It was as though she had been drugged. But when the inn keeper’s wife had knocked on her door at lunchtime saying, “I was a bit worried about you dearie. Not waking up and coming down for your food. What with all the goings on... I was worried.”

“Oh I’m fine, just very tired I think. I shall get dressed and come down for lunch now.” Lydia wasn’t in the mood for gossip, a favourite pastime of everyone it seemed. She was not going to ask about goings on.

After bathing and dressing she came downstairs in order to eat a light lunch before her appointment. She spoke to no one.

The walk from the inn had failed to clear her head and she wondered if she was sickening for something. Lydia walked in to the lawyer’s office and confirmed her appointment with the receptionist, who told her to wait.

Lydia turned again to the window and looked out at the park. The windows, small with leaded panes gave a good view of the street and its inhabitants. The shops and offices were built higgledy-piggledy next to each other. These shop fronts had the same leaded panes as the lawyer’s office and front doors with colours such as yellow, green, red and blue.

Signs above the doors gave such information as **MEAT**, **BREAD**, and **GREEN THINGS** and so on. The sign outside this office stated, **LAWYER**.

Each business passed down a family line and so it was not necessary to write the name of the shopkeeper, for everyone already knew their name. Of course, they also knew what business was conducted within each establishment, but some Council official had passed a law which said that the nature of the business

conducted within must be made clear to everyone. For, what if a stranger did not know where to go?

“A stranger? A stranger?” it was said. “What do we care about a stranger coming to Mill Town? We don’t want any stranger to know what is going on here. It is none of his business!”

But the law was passed.

The Council was made up of members of the Snooty family and others of their society. The ordinary folk held few positions of authority.

The one and only policeman, Inspector Glees, recently promoted, dealt with every problem that might happen. There was little evidence of crime, apart from some missing children and a few burglaries.

Goat carts carried people from the villages to the Town Street. There was talk that Archie Gribble was inventing some sort of machine which would carry many people from one place to another without using goats at all. He lit a fire under a bowl of water and made it drive the wheels of the cart. He had set fire to three carts so far and it seemed unlikely that it would ever take off as a scheme.

Lydia noticed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to see the park due to the heavy rain which had begun to fall. The few people on the street were putting up umbrellas and bashing into each other, for it was difficult to see through them.

“I should invent a see through umbrella,” said Lydia, apparently out loud, for she heard in reply.

“What’s that my dear?”

“See through umbrellas,” she repeated.

“I see. I think it is a good idea, and then I could see trouble coming.”

A little old lady was sitting in the seat next to the window. Lydia had not heard her enter and wondered vaguely where she had seen her before. Then she thought she heard someone tapping at the window and looked outside. Dusk was falling and Lydia noticed

how early that was happening just lately. Autumn seemed to come very quickly once it started.

Suddenly, over by the park gates she thought she saw a figure, a shape, something horrible which brought back memories long batted down in her box of a mind.

Terror, terror!

Lydia was aware of the rapid beating of her heart and she felt sweaty and faint. The office and the window and all her senses seemed to fall over an edge in her mind. She staggered back and her hand went to her mouth. She thought she was going to be sick.

“Are you alright my dear?” asked the old lady. She had left her seat and was now standing next to Lydia, putting her hand around her waist. Even when standing the lady was only as tall as Lydia’s breast, but her sweet little face was upturned and full of concern.

“Yes, no, oh I don’t know. I thought I saw something, someone outside. I was frightened.” She gabbled out the words.

“What did you see my dear? Did you see the murderer?”

“What? The murderer? What murderer?” Lydia looked at the old lady, confused. What a question to ask. What she had seen was not a murderer, he was worse than that.

“Mr Scriber will see you now, Mrs Pollack,” announced the secretary. “You can go straight in.”

Lydia picked up her bag and jacket and then dropped them both. Everything fell from her bag on to the carpet and the old lady helped her pick it all up. A clay pipe, a lid from a bottle, a purse full of pentacles, some notes and a large key.

“Thank you very much,” she said to the lady. “You have been very kind.”

“It was nothing my dear,” she replied.

Lydia made her way towards the office door of the solicitor, feeling very weak and vulnerable. She knocked on the big cherry wood door and was invited in.

Mr Scriber was sitting at his desk and writing in a large red journal. Without looking up he asked Lydia to sit down. Lydia obeyed, although she felt that lawyers were as rude as doctors in the way they did not acknowledge the presence of another person.

She waited patiently until he had finished writing, glad in truth, for the few moments to get her thoughts together after the shock. She looked around the office, noticing the paintings of men who looked similar to the lawyer.

“Apologies for asking you to wait Mrs Pollack, but I have been dealing with the murder and that has rather taken priority over everything.” He looked at her as though expecting a barrage of questions. Lydia asked none, feeling that the lawyer ought to be a little more discreet.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I want to divorce my husband,” she said quickly. There, it was out in the open and there would be no going back now. He had said that she would not dare to divorce him, but here she was arranging to do just that.

“I see,” said the lawyer. “Why do you want to do that? You need to have a good reason.”

Lydia was aware that a wife needed to have good reasons, but of course a husband did not. This was another wonderful rule from the Council people. She had a good reason however.

“He tries to steal my money. I earned it through honest work and he waits until I am asleep or away from the house and tries to find it and steal it. I want a divorce.”

Theft of money from either party was indeed a good reason. People of this land were allowed to earn anything they could and were entitled to keep it and give it away to whoever they wished. Theft was punishable even within marriage. No one could take away your money or jewels, no one. The coastguard had helped her come up with this untruthful story.

“Well, that is a good reason. Do you have proof of this?”

Lydia handed over a signed document from the coastguard at Seaside. The lawyer read through it solemnly and returned it to her.

“We can get you a divorce within a month, if that suits.”

“That suits me admirably,” she said with gratitude.

As the lawyer began to fill in the necessary documents, Lydia thought of her marriage. She had not realised how boring life would be with the fisherman. He spent much of his time at sea and when he came home, he smelt of fish. He was rarely out of his fishing clothes and two years into the marriage had grown a beard, which now was very bushy. Mr Pollack’s beard did not grow towards the ground, it grew outwards and was tightly curled. Sometimes, Lydia was sure that she could see seahorses and barnacles in it. He had also become rounder and rounder as the years went on. In his yellow shiny coat, he looked like a beach ball.

“Now Mrs Pollack, just sign here and here and just here.”

Lydia obeyed.

“Now we just have to send a messenger with this to Mr Pollack, have him sign and that will be that. Apart from the Town Hall Ceremony of course.”

Yes, the Town Hall Ceremony. That would be something to look forward to.

“Where shall you be staying from now on?” he asked.

“I hope to be staying here in Mill Town at my Gran’s until I find a cottage of my own,” she replied. Lydia hoped to find a house near Gran and start her own business and enjoy life for once. It had been a long time since she had enjoyed her life. About twenty years.

She sighed.

“Well, I shall send this off tomorrow and will contact you as soon as I get a reply. Then you must come straight back and finalise everything.”

Lydia thanked him, got her belongings together and left the office. She went to the secretary's desk and waited for her to find a pen and a suitable form to fill in. She looked idly about the room.

"Oh, the nice old lady has gone then," she said, for the sake of something to say.

"What old lady?" replied the secretary, as she filled in details of Gran's cottage.

"The one who was in here with me, before," Lydia said crossly.

"I didn't see her." The secretary gave her a funny look. She had already decided that this Mrs Pollack was a bit foreign and odd, living at Seaside and being here in Mill Town getting divorced. She did not approve.

"Oh." Lydia thought that she had better say nothing more. She wanted to get back to her room and have some food and a sleep. Tomorrow was another busy day.

She went out into the street where the rain was still falling heavily. It was also quite dark and the street was deserted. As she looked right and left, getting her bearings, her eyes fell directly on the entrance of the park. No, no, no, don't look there Lydia, you must not look there.

But of course, she did look there and saw the stone pillars where the great park gates hung on huge hinges. They were black and made from iron and the metal had been bent into the word **'PARK'** at the top of the gates.

Well, in truth, one gate said **'PA'** and the other said **'RK'**.

What was that shadow against the pillar? No, don't be ridiculous, there was no shadow, just the flickering lights which hung from holders fixed into the stone.

Lydia shook with cold and as the rain began to fall faster, she walked quickly towards the inn. A tall man dressed in black walked towards her and said, "What are you doing Miss?"

It was Inspector Gleeves, the tallest man in Mill Town. This post did not pass from father to son, but was offered by the Council to the tallest man when the last policeman died. Each policeman held the position to the end of his life, even if the last years meant that he could only travel in a sedan chair.

“I am going to the Rat and Handbag Inn,” she told him.

“Well, you be careful Miss, there is a murderer about you know,” he informed her unnecessarily. She had not thought about that and was now quite unnerved.

“Will you walk me to the inn?” she found herself asking him.

“Now then, you are funny. You must be a stranger! Off you go to the inn and don’t you get yourself murdered!” he added helpfully.

Lydia pulled her coat tight around her body and marched more purposefully towards her goal. She knew she was the only one on the street now as she could hear her footsteps echoing against the shop fronts. Clip, clip, clip, clip, they went. Lydia felt cold again, as though ice was being thrown over her. It seemed to be taking far too long to get to the inn.

Clip, clip, clip, clip. Slap, slap, slap, slap. What was that? Someone else was walking behind her. She looked over her shoulder but saw nothing.

Clip, slap, clip, slap. She moved faster and then into a run. So did the other person. She stopped. So did the other person.

She turned around and saw someone dart into a shop doorway. He was very tall and very thin, a spiky sort of creature.

No! It couldn’t be, not after all this time!

Lydia ran, heart pounding, tears running down her face, vision blurred. She turned into the door of the inn and arrived at the reception desk. The young man from last night looked at her as though she were mad and handed over her key. Lydia caught sight of her face in the mirror behind the reception desk and saw a

frightened, pale woman, hair plastered to her head with wide frightened eyes.

“Are you alright Mrs Pollack? Do you need the doctor?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she answered, then made her way upstairs. Her legs were wobbling and she felt ill. After fumbling with the lock on the door she went in to the room and threw up all over the carpet. She stood there for a moment panting and crying, knowing she would have to clean it up. What was happening?

She went over to the window and looked out. The lamp in her room was not yet lit and she was able to look onto the street from the darkened windows. Her imagination told her that something was standing at the entrance to the alleyway opposite. She quickly drew the curtains, lit the lamp and set about cleaning up the mess.

The thought of going downstairs again to eat filled her with dread and so she took the fish paste ships biscuits from her bag and ate those instead. They certainly settled her stomach and when she washed them down with a bottle of rhubarb juice, she almost felt like her old self. She stood up and went to the window again and looked out. There was no monster man on the street now, just a few people leaving their flats to go to the inn. They were missing the market meeting of today and so came out to see if there was any gossip they could catch up with.

Lydia thought about going down to join them, but after leaving her room and standing in the tiny dark corridor outside the door, she changed her mind.

The old feelings overwhelmed her as the corridor floor began to move and the lamps on the wall blew out. She stood stock still, her senses on red alert, straining to make sense of the sounds on the stairs. She ran back into the room and slammed the door shut.

When Lydia woke the next morning, it took a moment or two before she realised that she was lying on a bed and still in her

clothes from yesterday. She washed and made her way downstairs to breakfast. The innkeeper met her at the bottom of the stairs.

“We missed you last night Mrs Pollack, did you not feel well?”

“No, not really, I had a busy day yesterday, much to do.”

The innkeeper showed her into the little dining room and Lydia sat down to enjoy hot nettle tea and toast. She was now set for another big day.

Debating in her mind during breakfast whether or not to walk or take the cart down to Mill Village, she eventually decided to catch the ten o'clock cart.

Apart from another lady who was taking a piglet back to her cottage, there was only the driver for company. Lydia watched the piglet in its little harness sitting comfortably on its mistress's lap quite oblivious of the fact that his life would not be what he was expecting at the moment. Life never turns out how you expect it to.

The cart made its way down the very steep hill which led into Mill Village. The driver kept applying the brake, so that the cart did not hit the goat, for it did not like that. After a little while they stopped directly outside the entrance to the mill.

Lydia felt her chest tighten as they waited for the other lady to alight.

Looking to her left she could see the mill gates, but there were no air raid shelters to be seen, just heaps of bricks and wood. The sign at the end of the lane took her attention:

FOR SALE – MILL APARTMENTS.

“Excuse me driver, but what does that sign mean?” she asked.

“They have just about finished converting the old mill into flats and they are very expensive, hardly anyone around here can afford them.”

“So did the old mill family sell them?”

“Oh no, they arranged all the building themselves and employed all sorts of villagers in the work, but now they have been sacked again. Just a few finishing off things, they say. They want City people here to bring more money, though I don’t know what they would find to do here.”

Lydia looked at the second cottage, the home of her keepers and the house in which she had grown up. She was not making the first stop here for she wanted to call on her Gran, where her little sisters now also lived. No one knew that she was coming; she wanted it to be a surprise. She hadn’t mentioned it in the few letters sent via the post cart between them all. So they did not yet know that she was returning as a wealthy and independent young woman.

Lydia was surprised to see the curtains still drawn at her old home, but had no time to think about it as her attention was sought by the driver.

“Heard about the murder?” he said.

“Yes, they were talking about it in the inn, but I don’t know who got murdered or where it happened, do you?”

“It was that young man, from around here I believe. In fact come to think of it, he used to live in this road somewhere, I don’t know where though.”

Lydia began to feel frightened again. A young man had been murdered, she may know him. The cart moved off again and Lydia watched the cottages pass by on the left and the Doctor’s stone house on the right.

“Is the Doctor still there?” she said to the driver.

“Oh, knew him did you? Yes Doctor Catapult is still there, but he is an old man now. Not the same as he was, that’s for sure.”

They passed the cottage of her Aunt and Uncle Cal. The place looked as grim as ever and Lydia shivered.

After this final cottage there were fields on both sides. Lydia had a good view of the old mill on her left hand side, tall and grey

behind the field which still separated the cottages from the fence surrounding it.

They used to have some good games in that field, she remembered. Of course she remembered everything else too.

Her mind went back twenty years, to that first night. In a flash she recalled the feelings and the almost unbelievable things which occurred. She closed her eyes.

The things he had done to them and the things he made them do, was beyond comprehension. She remembered it saying that if they ever told anyone, he would find and kill them both. He would also kill their brothers and sisters if they ever breathed a word. He said that no matter how old they got, he would know what they were doing and thinking and he would make them pay, over and over again.

But everyone was safe, Lydia had never told anyone. She had written a diary when she was lonely and fed up at Seaside in order to keep her sane. She burnt the journal in the fire before she left on Tuesday. Then she took her case and left Seaside, intending never to return. The note she left Mr Pollack on the kitchen table would explain all. He wouldn't mind too greatly, she knew. He would soon find comfort with that fat, fair haired June woman from the quayside.

"I only left Mill Town to protect everyone," she said.

"Is that right Miss?" answered the driver.

Lydia blushed, she really must stop talking out loud. It was a dreadful habit she had picked up while spending so many lonely hours during her marriage.

The cart turned left at the bottom of the hill and trotted along Wide Lane passing in front of the old mill. It looked as dark and dreary as ever and it was to be hoped that the new apartments would give the place life. They arrived at a crossroads, where Bell Lane turned left back to Town Street and on the right was Wood Lane and led to, well, the woods.

Gran Prix lived on Wood Lane.

Lydia jumped off the cart at the crossroads and the driver passed down her cases. She intended to stay here for a few nights until she was fixed up in a cottage of her own. The cart went off in the direction of the country and she walked towards the house on the edge of the woods. She could see the chimney first, smoking merrily away and she imagined her Gran busily sorting out lunch and drying washing and caring for the garden. Hopefully her little sisters would be there as well.

Her step quickened, it had been so long since she had seen her family and now she couldn't wait any longer. This time she would stay, she was grown up, nothing could happen now.

As she turned into the gateway, a woman was running out of the front door crying as if she would never stop. It was her sister Marjoram.

"Lydia, Lydia," she cried out. "How did you know?" she said in a startled tone. Her eyes were puffy and swollen.

"Know what, Marjoram?"

"About Michaelmas! He's been killed!"

For the umpteenth time in these past two days, Lydia felt her heart miss a beat. This time, her legs gave way and she fell to the ground.

