

Chapter one

Alice Tanner crossed the field, picking her way between the puddles and piles of horse droppings and headed towards the river. If the football was kicked over the fence again, the children would have to find something else to play, even if they did moan. She reached the footpath, covered with groundsel and the remains of the summer's poppies. The ball teetered on the edge of the river bank. Further along, part had crumbled away as if some huge animal had taken a bite. She picked up the ball and was about to go back when she noticed another round, white shape embedded above the water line.

'The little devils,' she said under her breath. If the children had sneaked a second ball onto the playground, there'd be trouble. She crouched down and stretched out one hand. Her fingers touched something spongy. She leapt back, her fists curled, and she clutched her stomach to stop the contents from spewing out. It was not a ball. It was a skull attached to a series of small bones. This time, she did nothing to prevent the retching that preceded the vomiting. She wiped her mouth with a tissue and made herself look again. Sightless eye sockets stared out as the bank crumbled and everything was buried again in damp soil.

Alice moved closer, expecting to see something. The water eddied in the shallows and fragments of bulrushes with spears of brown velvet dipped over the surface like a guard of honour. Clumps of dark green pond weed and small branches bucked and tossed in the swollen flood water. There was nothing else. What was she going to do?

'Do you need a hand, Miss Tanner?' She looked back at the school. A small figure waved. It was Ruby Allen. Her purple jumper stood out against the whirling red sweat-shirted bodies on the playground.

'Please,' Alice shouted back, and beckoned. If there was one person she could rely on not to gossip, it was Ruby.

She waited as Ruby disappeared from the playground. A whistle blew and the bodies stood still before lining up in the correct places, smallest closest to their classroom and the oldest ready to disappear out of view to the classrooms on the other side of the hall. Alice allowed herself a faint smile. At least one of her changes was being followed. The memory of the skeleton flipped back into her brain. There must be a logical explanation. Or perhaps she had imagined it? When she'd gone to see her parents in the Chapel of Rest, they'd looked as if they were asleep. Was that different? She shuddered and held the tissue over her mouth again.

'What's up, Alice?' Ruby's face was a mask of concern. She ran a hand through the short black hair and brushed aside the purple feather attached to one long tendril.

'Be careful where you stand.' Alice indicated the circle of vomit on the grass.

'Shit.' Ruby stepped back. 'Yours?'

Alice nodded and moved away. 'I think I've seen a skull.'

'What the...?' Ruby looked around her.

'Stuck in the bank. You can't see it now,' Alice said and gestured to the river.

'Bloody hell.' Ruby bent down, ignoring the damp grass, and peered into the water.

'It was a small one, like a child.'

Ruby's face drained of colour and her voice trembled as she spoke. 'Are you sure?'

'No,' Alice said and shook her head. 'That's the trouble. I'm certain I saw a skull before the earth collapsed and it disappeared from view.'

'Could it have been a doll?'

'When anyone loses a doll, it's usually dressed. This was more bone than...' Her voice faded. 'Substance, if you know what I mean?'

Ruby stared at the water. Only the cawing of a lone crow and the tumbling of the water as it surged past on its way to the estuary broke the silence of the September morning. 'Much as I hate to say it, you'll have to call the police.' She stood up.

'That's the last thing I want to do,' Alice said. 'I'll have hysterical kids, upset parents. Everyone will think there's a killer on the loose.' She stopped. She shouldn't have been thinking of herself and her job. What about the poor person who had once been skin and flesh like her? She pushed aside the guilt. Ruby was right.

'If it was a skeleton, I bet it was a long time ago. There was a Roman camp near the estuary and they found a Saxon burial place along the Bristol Road.' Ruby could always see a different side. It was one of the reasons Alice liked her.

'Yes. There's probably a rational explanation. Or I made a mistake. I'll go back to the school and call Jim.'

'Use my phone.' Ruby handed hers over.

Alice said, 'What if you need it for an emergency?'

'I've got the landline and I can borrow Echo's if I'm desperate. Call whoever you need. I'll head up to the shop and garden centre to start deflecting any gossip that comes my way.' She curled Alice's fingers over the phone. 'The sight of a police car anywhere near the school will set off the doom and gloom gang. Give it back tonight when you fill me in on all the gory details.' She placed her hand on Alice's shoulder. 'It'll be something very mundane.'

Alice watched as Ruby ran back to the school. She was becoming more than an ally; she was like a friend. The call was straightforward. For some reason, the authorities always took notice of a headteacher. She walked back to the school. The playground was silent. Her senior teacher, Sue Lloyd's, dark head peered above the butterfly pictures stuck on the windows. 'Everything OK?' she mouthed.

'Tell you later,' Alice said out loud and put her head round the office door. 'I'm expecting PC Carter any minute. I'll wait for him on the playground. If anyone wants me, tell them I'm busy and will get back to them.' The less she said to her secretary, the better. She leaked like a sieve when anything happened. Alice was stuck with her, though. It was hard enough to get staff and like Ruby, she knew all the gossip and which parents were likely to be trouble and those that certainly were trouble.

Alice stood close to the tall railings that separated the play area and the entrance from the rest of the world. The sad piping of the starlings perched on the roof of the school filtered through her thoughts. Was she about to make a fool of herself? She could hear the comments behind her back, never to her face. That would have required too much courage. 'Fancy an old townie spooked by a football. I said we needed someone experienced, a local person, used to our ways. She won't last. It's a tough job at the best of times and she's got no one to talk things over with.'

What if she wasn't up to the job? Should she have stayed where she was? Brazened it through? Each question further drained her confidence, like a helium balloon the day after the party droops from its rainbow-coloured strings. No. What she had touched was not a football. She shuddered. What could it have been?

'Alright, Alice?'

The voice jolted her back. 'Sorry, Jim. I was miles away.' She tapped in the code and the metal gate swung open. He'd been to see her early on and she had appreciated his interest in the village and the school. 'Don't take any notice of them misery guts round here,' he'd told her. 'Some people won't even change their pants without a fight.' He'd make sense of it all.

Jim, his stomach preceding him like a liner dwarfing a tug boat lumbered onto the playground. 'What's all this about a skeleton?'

'Do you want a coffee or tea first?' Alice said and willed him to say no. She wanted a rational explanation so that her life could get back to normal or to what she hoped was going to be normal.

'No ta. Just tell me what you saw and where.' He pulled out a small tablet and tapped away.

She finished her story, half expecting him to close up the tablet and say it was nothing to worry about. Old skeletons were always turning up all along the river as stories of Roman camps and long barrows were replayed. Or it was part of a fancy-dress costume from Halloween. Except that was a few weeks away. Jim shook his head. The lines on his forehead wrinkled into deep furrows. 'Can you point out where you think, I mean, where you saw the body? We can't get too close; forensics won't want our feet messing up their clues. I'd still like to check it out myself, first. Just in case.'

Just in case I'm seeing things, Alice wanted to say. Without another word, she took him along the path she had trodden earlier. She stopped on the gravel pathway and pointed to the swollen water. 'It was on this side of the bank about three metres further upstream.'

Jim screwed up his face. 'On this side?'

'Yes. Could it be Roman remains?'

He sniffed. 'I doubt it. This place has been searched by every darn treasure seeker for a hundred miles since they found the Roman camp way back in the '70s.'

'Oh.' She couldn't disguise the disappointment, and yet she'd known it all along. Whatever she'd stumbled on was significant. How she didn't understand yet and didn't want to find out.

'We won't go any closer.' Jim spoke into the phone attached to his sweater. 'Chief? We've got a bit of an unusual situation here. Can I get backup and...?' He bent his head so his words were muffled. Her eyes

were drawn to the water. At least Jim didn't think she was imagining things. Although it might have been better if it was her imagination.

Jim turned back to her. 'You can return to the school. I'll stay here until the team arrives.'

'Team?'

'Can't be too careful. Especially if it could be a child.'

'Will you tell me what you find? I don't want the rumour mill to frighten everyone,' Alice said.

'I'll do what I can.' He grimaced. 'Once it's police business, that means procedures must be followed.' He patted her arm. 'I promise you'll be the first to know when any news is allowed out.' Alice had to be content with that and hurried back to the school to find the place running smoothly.

Within half an hour, a cordon had been established around the site. Within forty minutes, the shop had news that an ancient skeleton had been found. Within an hour, the press had arrived. By lunchtime, Alice had been phoned by three sets of parents who wanted to take their children away because there was a murderer in the vicinity. By the start of afternoon school, the children were careering from the front of the playground to the back, bumping into each other and picking imaginary fights as excitement fuelled their frenzy. Alice was patrolling the playground with the midday staff. An extra pair of hands was needed to cope with all the grazed knees, arguments, and disputed rules of imaginary games when her phone buzzed. It was a text message from Ruby.

Can you pop in straight after school? My spies have news.

She texted back.

Your spies had better be more informative than the local police.

The reply was interesting. *They are, believe me.*

By the end of lunchtime, there was still no word from Jim. The staff's constant reassurances that the divers and the helicopter were part of everyday police life had no effect as the children hung onto the railings, screaming at every new development. Alice had told the staff what she thought she had seen and insisted they leave as soon as possible after school ended. It was better to get everyone back in their own homes and in safety, just in case.

At three-thirty, Alice set the intruder alarm and locked the main door. She glanced at the hoarding advertising the new development of houses on the field where she'd walked that morning. Would it happen? New children were desperately needed. With eighteen leaving and only two due to enter, she'd never balance the budget. Someone would have to be made redundant or the school might close.

She crossed the road to the semi-circle of 1950s houses set around a patch of mud that had once been grass. She walked up the path of number three, pushing past the overgrown lavender bushes and ancient roses. As she approached the door, it swung inwards and a girl, still in school uniform with a chunk of bread and jam in one hand, stood there. 'Mum says to come in.'

'Thank you, Echo,' Alice said and was rewarded with a smile.

'Alice, in here,' Ruby called out. 'Echo, go upstairs and look after your brother.'

'Can we play a game?' There was no mistaking her excitement.

'For half an hour, no more.' Echo raised her eyes in the direction of Alice, turned, and her feet thumped up the painted wooden stairs. Within seconds, the air was punctuated with bangs and crashes as yet more aliens were obliterated on a silver screen.

Alice went into the front room. It had once been two. Someone had removed the dividing wall so that it ran the width of the house. Double doors opened onto the patio at one end, where a line of washing flapped in the breeze. A collection of mismatched sofas and chairs festooned with knitted and crocheted cushions were scattered throughout the room. Patchworks and embroideries hung from the walls. Their colours and fabrics dazzled against the cream paintwork. Ruby jumped up. 'I'm opening a bottle of wine and you can join me in a glass. I think you will need it.' Each word was spoken slowly. She went into the kitchen area that overlooked the back garden and returned with two glasses of red wine.

Alice looked at her watch. 'I really don't think I should.'

'Sod the time. Think of it as a late lunch.' Ruby handed her a glass and pointed to a seat. 'If you're feeling guilty, I can throw in a bag of crisps and a cheese sandwich?'

'No. You're all right.' Alice sat down. 'Just tell me what is going on?'

Ruby sat back. 'It was a skeleton.' She paused. 'There's more than one.' She leaned forward, her face pink with excitement. 'I said it was likely to be a burial ground.'

Alice took a sip of the wine. It was good. She'd expected supermarket plonk. 'How come you know more than me?'

Ruby shrugged. 'I took a walk this afternoon. The forensics were taking out two body bags. The plod was still prowling through the water with sticks. I reckon there could be more.'

As Ruby spoke, Alice looked at one of the tapestries. Amongst the blacks and whites were the words *Class War* spelt out in red. 'Did Jim tell you anything?'

Ruby tapped the side of her nose. 'I don't need him. I watch and listen and call in a few favours from time to time. You'd be surprised what people give away.'

'What's the next step?' Alice wouldn't have been surprised if Ruby had given her a full rundown on police procedure.

'The forensics will tell us dates. I reckon you might have a dig on your hands before long.'

'Well, that's a relief.' Alice allowed herself to sink back into the cushions. 'I daren't think what I'd have done if it had been anything else.'

'It couldn't be better. It'll hold up the development and give us more time to make sure they include some cheaper houses for the villagers.' Ruby's eyes glittered and her mouth curved into a wide grin.

Alice nodded. 'As long as it doesn't stop it altogether.' Without a fresh injection of large families in the village, she might be the one to look for a new job soon, whether she wanted to go or not.

'Can *you* afford a place here?'

Alice didn't want to say the worst thing she could think of was never being able to get away from the prying eyes of pupils and parents. Once she'd made the mistake of shopping locally. A child in her class had attached himself to her trolley until he had been prised away by his parents. She'd felt so embarrassed she hadn't bought any wine. Mark had teased her for weeks. She swallowed hard. Mark was probably with his latest. Another of his secretaries. This one had not been easy to get rid of. 'I'd prefer to live out of the village,' she said.

'At least you should get the choice.' Ruby took a sip of wine. 'There's another thing.' She held up the glass and swirled the red liquid. 'It'll upset the Carlyle family. My old gran reckoned there had never been a Carlyle born with a decent streak.' She tilted the glass as if to toast the words she was about to say. 'Here's to the dead souls whose bodies have lain undisturbed for so long. They have no idea what they have unleashed.'