

Prologue

Gabby Nichols gave a deep sigh of relief. She had been starting to think that Wayne was never going to stop crying. Watching him now, curled up in the blankets of his cot, silent and content, it was difficult to believe that this was the same red-faced, screaming baby that she had been carrying around the house for the last hour.

Not for the first time that evening, Gabby wished that her husband were here. Wayne always seemed to go to sleep more quickly in the arms of his father. Roy Nichols was part of the team building the new high-speed rail link between London and the South West. It had meant relocating from their house in Manchester and renting one down here in Wiltshire, but it was a seven-year contract, and it paid well. The downside was that Roy was doing a lot of shift work. Gabby had barely seen him over the last three nights.

She gave another sigh. At least he was going to be back at the weekend. In the meantime she had promised herself that as soon as Wayne was asleep she was going

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to treat herself to a couple of hours in front of the TV with the DVD box set of *Call the Midwife* and a glass of wine.

Turning on the baby monitor, she closed the door to Wayne's room and started to make her way downstairs. As on every other night that she had been here alone, Gabby was struck by how utterly silent their new house was. She had been brought up in Manchester, and had lived in cities all her life. She was used to the constant background hum of traffic and aircraft, and the constant yellow glow of streetlights. Here the silence was total and the nights... Gabby had never know such a complete darkness, or seen so many stars in the night sky.

As her thoughts drifted back to the house that she had left behind, Gabby felt the same pang of uncertainty that had plagued her ever since they had arrived in Ringstone. It wasn't that they hadn't been made welcome. On the contrary, the villagers had gone out of their way to make them feel at home. Their cottage on the edge of the village green was huge compared to their old house, and the children were going to be able to grow up in clean air and beautiful surroundings. Her daughter, Emily, was already starting to drop unsubtle hints about wanting a pony.

It was just... a feeling, a sense of unease that Gabby found herself unable to escape.

She shook her head, telling herself not to be stupid. It was just going to take her time to get used to a new home and a new routine, that was all. When Roy got back at the

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weekend they would go out, explore the area a bit. Try and get to know some of the neighbours.

Taking a clean wine glass from the dishwasher, Gabby opened the fridge and poured herself a large glass of Pinot Grigio. As she was raising the glass to her lips a shrill voice rang out from upstairs.

'Mummy!'

Gabby gave a groan of despair. Her daughter was 3, and prone to being very loud if she wanted attention. If she woke up Wayne...

'Mummy! Come quickly!'

Gabby frowned. There was a note of panic in her daughter's voice. Placing her wine glass down on the kitchen table, she hurried up the stairs.

'Emily?' She pushed open the door to her daughter's room. 'What is it, baby? Are you all right?'

Emily was pressed tight against the wall. Her eyes were wide with fear. She ran to her mother, hugging against her legs.

Gabby felt a jolt of panic. She had never seen her daughter so frightened. She lifted Emily into her arms. 'What's wrong?'

Emily had her face buried in her mother's shoulder. 'There's a huge daddy longlegs in my room.'

Gabby almost sobbed in relief, angry with herself for becoming so spooked. 'You're going to have to get used to that, sweetie.' She stroked her daughter's hair. 'We're in the countryside now. There's lots of insects here.'

'It's over there! It came through the window.'

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Emily was still tucked tight against her. From the other side of the room Gabby could hear the paper-like rustling of the insect as it fluttered against the glass behind the curtains.

‘Well, I’ll just get rid of it and then we can get you back into bed.’

Gabby pulled the curtains back from the window and the breath caught in her throat as she caught sight of what was there.

Then she started to scream.

Alan Travers drained the last mouthful of his pint and shrugged into his heavy jacket. It was nearly the first day of spring but there was still a chill in the air at night and he had a long walk home.

‘Sure you’ll not stay for another, Alan?’

The tiny public bar of the Wheatsheaf was busy with its usual weekday mix of locals and tourists. Brian Cartwright was at the bar, a £20 note in his hand.

Alan shook his head. ‘As unusual as it is to see you buying a round, I’m afraid I’m going to pass. I’ve got an early start in the morning, even if you layabouts don’t. I’ll see you gentlemen tomorrow.’

Pulling on his hat, Alan threaded his way through the jostling drinkers towards the door.

‘Well you just be careful cutting through that science park!’ Brian called after him. ‘You know they’re breeding monsters in there!’

As the door swung shut behind him, Alan could hear

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laughter ring out through the pub. That joke had been a regular one ever since the park had been built on the edge of the village. Alan gave a snort of derision. Bio-fuels and GM crops. As far as he was concerned that was almost the same as breeding monsters.

Pulling up the collar of his jacket, he set off through the pub car park towards the industrial estate. It was a clear night, and a distant moon was casting a pale glow across the fields. Alan shivered. He should have had a coffee instead of that last beer. He lived in the next village over, and even cutting through the science park it was a good twenty-minute walk to get home.

The footpath around the village was accessed by a stile in the corner of the car park. He clambered over it unsteadily, almost losing his balance as he landed on the well-trodden path on the other side. He definitely shouldn't have had that final pint. He breathed in deeply, taking in a good lungful of the cool night air, then set off along the path.

As he approached the underpass that cut beneath the railway line, a tall shape suddenly loomed up from the darkness, making him start. With a barking laugh he realised that he'd been startled by one of the standing stones that formed the circle in the field close to the pub. In the moonlight the monolith could almost have been a hunched figure. Alan walked over to it, running his fingers over the swirls and patterns carved into the ancient rock.

Alan had always liked the stones. He liked that they

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were a reminder of the natural world, not the clean, clinical science that dominated modern life. It had been the stones that had nearly scuppered the plans for the science park altogether. When the plans had first been published, there had been a huge public outcry at the desecration of an ancient site. Even though no burial ground had ever been found associated with the stones, public pressure had forced the development of the park to be moved to the other side of the railway line.

Alan couldn't understand why Ringstone had been chosen as a site for the park anyway. It wasn't exactly convenient. That in turn had started all the rumours about it concealing something untoward. That, and the fact that the businessman behind it had some kind of facial disfigurement. Poor beggar had to wear some kind of plastic surgical mask.

Patting the stone with approval, Alan set off along the path towards the underpass. Clouds had started to crawl across the face of the moon and Alan was beginning to regret not bringing a torch.

As he entered the tunnel, something brushed his face. With a cry Alan swiped at it with his hand, then immediately berated himself for being so jumpy. It was just a spider's web.

He wiped his hand on his jacket. The stuff was sticky, and strong. As he tried to brush off the strands, his arm caught in more of it. He pulled, but his arm was caught fast. He tugged hard at the web. He could barely break it.

Alan heaved with all his strength. There was a tearing

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noise and the stitching on his jacket ripped at the sleeve. Suddenly free of the sticky grip, Alan lost his footing and stumbled backwards, falling into something soft and clinging. It was yet more of the web, great clumps of it clinging to the wall and ceiling of the underpass. Alarmed now, he tried to get back onto his feet, but the web held him fast. Alan started to panic, but the more he struggled to free himself the more of the strands tangled around him.

A sudden scrape from the end of the tunnel made him start. A shadow flickered across the far entrance.

'Is someone there?' Alan called out. 'I could do with some help!'

To his annoyance there was no reply, just the rustle of something brushing through the undergrowth.

'Come on, I'm not mucking about, I'm stuck here!'

The shadow started to move towards him, but as it came closer Alan realised with a sudden chill that the shape casting it was not remotely human. He became aware of a low rasping breathing, and the scratch of something harsh and bristly against the tiled walls of the underpass. The shape filled the tunnel.

As the patchy moonlight revealed what it was that had found him, Alan felt his heart give out.

Kevin Alpertone woke with a jolt. For several moments he lay there in the dark, listening to the familiar sounds of the house, trying to determine what had woken him. He had been dreaming about ice cream. He'd been on

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a nice warm beach, with no school to think about, no teachers pestering him, nothing but sand and the distant swoosh of the sea on pebbles. That soothing noise had turned into something harsh and piercing, cutting into his dream and bringing him back to reality with a start.

He glanced over at his clock. It was gone eleven. Chances were that his parents were still up. It must have been them moving around downstairs that had woken him.

As he rolled over and tried to get himself comfortable again, a horrible howling shriek cut through the silence. The noise was like a cross between a wailing cat and a crying baby. It made the hairs on the back of Kevin's neck stand on end.

He groaned.

Foxes.

Every spring it was the same. As soon as it got dark and the roads were free of people then the latest batch of fox cubs came out to explore. When they were youngsters they were quite cute, but as soon as they got older they were a menace; pulling over bins, rummaging through compost piles and keeping half the village awake with their incessant howling.

Kevin buried his head in the pillow as the piercing sound rang out again, but he knew that it was pointless. Once they started, they would only stop if he scared them away.

Yawning, Kevin threw back his *Godzilla* duvet and hauled himself out of bed. After the sleepless nights that

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he had put up with last summer he had taken to leaving a 'Super Soaker' water pistol on his bedroom windowsill. He had wanted to use his catapult but his mum had told him that was cruel and dangerous and confiscated it.

As he neared the window, the howling cry came again, but this time there was something about the pitch, the level of the sound, that made Kevin's blood run cold. This wasn't the usual noise that he had heard before. This was a sound of pure primal fear and pain.

Nervously, Kevin pulled back the curtains and peered out of his bedroom window. The cloud-shrouded moon had turned the back garden into a patchwork of shadows, but in the centre of the lawn Kevin could just make out a writhing shape. It was a fox all right, but there seemed to be something wrong with it. Kevin pressed his nose to the glass, straining to see clearly. The fox seemed to be rolling on the scrubby grass, snapping and biting at its fur, whining and growling as it did so.

As Kevin tried to work out what on earth was going on, the moon suddenly emerged into a patch of clear sky and milky white light illuminated dozens of hard black shapes swarming over the stricken fox.

As Kevin jumped back from the window in alarm, there was a final desperate howl from outside, and then silence descended once more.

Kevin stood in the dark quiet of his room for a moment, unsure as to what he had just witnessed, and not sure if he wanted to look again. For a second he wondered if he should go downstairs and tell his parents what he had

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seen, but the thought of the withering look that he knew his father would give him made him think better of it.

Clambering back into his bed, Kevin tried to put the terrible sounds out of his head, but when he finally did get back to sleep, his dreams were no longer of ice cream and beaches, but of glistening black shapes, and terrible, doomed cries.

Chapter One

The fields surrounding Ringstone were wreathed with mist as the morning sun slowly started to inch its way above the crow-filled trees. Abruptly, the chattering birds were sent spiralling into the air, cawing in annoyance as a grating, grinding rasp shattered the peace of the English countryside, and the bulky, blue shape of the TARDIS slowly faded into existence.

The instant it had fully materialised, the door was snatched open and the Doctor poked his head out into the morning air. In this incarnation the Doctor was a tall, thin-faced man with a tousled mop of silver-grey hair and intense eyes framed by unruly, expressive eyebrows.

Satisfied that he was in the right place, he stepped from the TARDIS, allowing a young, elfin-faced woman to follow him out.

‘Where’s this then?’ asked Clara, looked around with mistrust. ‘Distant past? Far-flung future? Alien planet that just happens to look like the English countryside?’

The Doctor glared at her. ‘Wiltshire.’

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‘Wiltshire?’ Clara gave him a nod of mock approval. ‘You really *are* showing me the exotic corners of the universe.’

‘Not entirely my choice,’ said the Doctor turning slowly around on the spot as he tried to get his bearings. ‘The TARDIS picked up some ley-line disturbance. Not much, but enough to warrant a brief investigation.’

‘Ley lines?’ Clara stared at him in disbelief. ‘Please don’t tell me that you’ve regenerated into a hippie.’

‘I’ll have you know that my tambourine solo was one of the highlights of Woodstock. Ah, There we are...’ The Doctor was squinting through the clearing mist at a distant church spire. ‘So, that should mean...’ He traced an imaginary line in the air from the spire to the TARDIS then onwards to the far side of the field. ‘This way.’

He set off through the mist, arm held out in front of him like some suited and booted scarecrow. With a sigh of weary resignation Clara pulled the TARDIS door shut and set off after him.

As soon as it was light, Kevin hurried downstairs and, pulling wellingtons on over his pyjamas, unlocked the back door and cautiously made his way over to where he had seen the fox.

Secretly he was hoping that there would be nothing to see, that he could dismiss what he had caught a glimpse of last night as nothing more than the result of an overactive imagination, but as he approached the end of the garden he could see a bundle of reddish-brown fur

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lying in the flowerbed.

Nervously, Kevin approached the remains of the dead fox. It looked strange – shrunken somehow. Picking up a discarded bamboo cane from his dad's vegetable patch, he prodded at the corpse. As he did so the fox seemed to collapse in on itself. To Kevin's horror he realised that there was nothing left of the flesh of the animal; it had all been eaten away by something. All that was left was skin and bone, a shell.

As Kevin knelt down to get a closer look, something rustled in the shrubbery, and he caught a glimpse of something black and shiny scuttling along the bottom of the fence that bordered next door's garden. Gripping his stick, Kevin pushed aside the branches, trying to get a better look at whatever the creature was.

With a sudden burst of speed, it vanished into a burrow in the earth. Kevin poked his stick into the hole. It was about the size of a rabbit burrow, but whatever had made this was no rabbit. In the darkness of the earth Kevin was certain he could see shapes moving. Wet, black shapes.

He leaned forward.

'Kevin?'

He jumped as his mum's voice rang out from the kitchen doorway. 'What are you doing out there in your pyjamas? You're going to be late for school again. Get back inside this instant!'

'I'm coming.' With a final poke into the hole, Kevin abandoned the bamboo cane and hurried back indoors.

As the door slammed shut something black and shiny

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poked its head from the burrow, long antennae twitching in the morning air.

Clara wandered along the well-worn footpath through the field, enjoying the quiet stillness that was peculiar to early morning in the English countryside. It was rare that she had the opportunity to enjoy such moments of calm. Life with the Doctor – and life with the pupils of Coal Hill School for that matter – tended to be a lot more frantic.

She stopped, closing her eyes for a moment, listening to the hum of bees in the wild flowers, the cawing of the circling crows and the distant drone of a tractor. Shoreditch was never this tranquil. She wondered if Danny Pink would like the countryside. He didn't strike her as a country boy, but then Danny was always surprising her. Perhaps when she got back she should suggest a trip out somewhere, do a nice walk, and find a pub garden to have lunch in.

Aware that she was starting to daydream, Clara set off along the path once more. When she finally caught up with the Doctor, he was squatting in the centre of a wide circle of standing stones, peering at readings on his sonic screwdriver.

There were about a dozen or so of the stones, some no more than stubs of rock, others taller than she was. Each of them was inscribed with swirling, Celtic-looking patterns, the grooves in the stone worn shallow from hundreds of years of British weather.

'OK,' she muttered to herself. 'Ley lines it is, then.'

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The Doctor had risen to his feet and was using his sonic screwdriver to scan the air above his head.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Checking to see whether there’s a trapped spacecraft hovering in the hyperspatial dimension above the circle or not.’

‘And... that happens a lot does it?’

‘More often than you might think. But not this time.’ He snapped the screwdriver closed and slipped it into his jacket pocket. ‘This was the source of the energy reading that the TARDIS picked up, all right.’ He waved an arm expansively around the circle. ‘But the old girl has got her timing out a bit. This is totally dormant. Has been for years.’

‘And you can tell that because...?’

‘One of the stones is missing.’ The Doctor pointed to where a stumpy bollard plugged a gap in the circle.

There was a small plaque bolted to the concrete with a short history of the site. Clara wandered over to it and started to read: ‘The King’s Guards is a Bronze Age monument located within the boundary of Ringstone Village in Wiltshire. Whilst its exact purpose remains unknown, the most likely explanation is that the stones form some kind of astrological calendar. The circle was damaged during a German bombing raid during the Second World War.’

Clara frowned. ‘What on earth would the Germans be doing bombing a sleepy Wiltshire village?’

The Doctor’s expression darkened. ‘When did the

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armed forces ever need a good reason to bomb anything?’

Clara mentally kicked herself. Since his regeneration, the Doctor had become decidedly prickly in his dealings with anything remotely military. That in itself might not have been a problem if it wasn't for the fact that her new boyfriend – her *potential* new boyfriend – was an ex-soldier.

She changed the subject. ‘So, are we going to wander into the village? See if we can find somewhere to get some breakfast?’

‘You go ahead; I'd like to see if I can work out what the real purpose of this circle was. If I can just recreate whatever pictogram was on this missing stone...’

The Doctor rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a stub of chalk. With quick, deliberate strokes he started drawing swirling Celtic patterns onto the concrete bollard.

‘That's vandalism,’ said Clara sternly.

The Doctor just glared at her.

‘Suit yourself.’ Clara shrugged. ‘But don't blame me if you get locked up by the local police.’

‘Then I shall rely on you to give me an exemplary character reference.’ The Doctor started to dart from stone to stone, peering at the different symbols for a moment, then returning to his bollard, scrubbing out some chalk lines with his sleeve and adding new ones in their place.

Clara opened her mouth to retort that providing a character reference for a man who had recently changed

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his entire character might prove to be a little tricky, but then thought better of it. She was still getting used to this version of the Doctor. She had always known where she stood with *her* Doctor, always knew the boundaries of their relationship. This new one, however...

It was just going to take a bit of time, that was all.

Leaving the Doctor to his scribbling, Clara set off along the path towards the village.

Kevin checked his watch anxiously. He had now been waiting at the village bus stop for nearly twenty minutes. He was going to be late for school. Again.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't as though it was his fault this time. He had arrived at the bus stop with plenty of time to spare; the bus just hadn't turned up. Not that his teachers or his parents would be interested in hearing any excuses. It had been made quite plain that they wouldn't tolerate him being late again, no matter what the reason was.

The school was a good fifteen-minute walk away. If he set off now, he might just make it in time and save himself yet another evening of detention.

Kevin took one final look down the road to ensure that the bus wasn't coming. It would be just his luck for it to arrive just as he had decided to walk.

It suddenly struck Kevin that he hadn't seen *any* traffic on the road whatsoever. You couldn't exactly describe Ringstone as having a rush hour as such, but there was usually *some* traffic.

Kevin shrugged. Perhaps there had been an accident.

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There were always lambs in the road at this time of year. The young ones didn't seem to have any road sense, and it was common for cars swerving to avoid them to end up in a ditch somewhere.

Consoling himself with the thought that if the road through the village was blocked then some of the other kids might be late as well, Kevin set off at a brisk pace. As he walked, he found himself thinking back to the remains of the fox that he had found in the garden. It was horrible. It had to have something to do with the black shape that he had seen in the burrow. He was certain that it had been an insect of some kind, but it was huge. Kevin was certain that there were no insects that big native to Britain.

A low, droning noise made him look up in alarm. Surely that wasn't the bus? As he did, something large buzzed past his head, making him duck. Kevin spun around to see what it was that had almost collided with him.

His eyes opened wide in astonishment. Sitting on a fencepost was a mosquito. But it was vast! It was easily as big as his hand. The creature tipped its head on one side, compound eyes regarding Kevin coldly, wings twitching. Fascinated and repulsed in equal measure, Kevin edged forward to get a closer look. As he did so, the huge insect launched itself into the air, its wings thrumming noisily.

Kevin stumbled backwards, swiping out in panic as the creature flew straight at him. He felt his hand connect with the spindly body and it crashed down onto the tarmac in an untidy tangle of legs.

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Heart hammering in his chest, Kevin started to back away. The insect writhed on the roadway, trying to right itself. He looked around frantically for something to defend himself with. A flash of colour in the hedgerow caught his eye. It was a garish floral umbrella, probably discarded during the recent storm. Kevin grabbed the handle, struggling to pull it free. The metal ribs were bent and twisted, catching in the tightly-packed branches.

From behind him he could hear the deep bass humming of the mosquito's wings as it took flight once more. Not daring to look around Kevin pulled at the umbrella with all his might until, with a rip of fabric, it tore free.

Screaming with fear, Kevin spun around, lashing out with the improvised weapon. The mosquito was right behind him. Insect and umbrella collided with a sickening crunch. Caught up in the flapping fabric, the struggling insect wrenched the umbrella from Kevin's hand, and the entire tangled mess crashed to the ground.

Kevin didn't hesitate. Running forward, he stamped on the heaving, fluttering lump that thrashed under the fabric until the terrifying buzzing finally stopped.

Breathless and shaking, he stood back as thick yellow liquid started to ooze from under the brightly patterned umbrella. Then, from the fields around him, came more of the terrible noise, and half a dozen spindly shapes started to rise from the long grass.

Kevin turned and fled.

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Clara followed the path from the stone circle along the side of a railway embankment. A wooden footpath sign indicated 'Ringstone Village Centre' in one direction, and 'Wyndham 3 miles' in the other. She was about to make her way down into the village when she caught sight of an underpass along the path in the other direction. There seemed to be something hanging just inside the entranceway. It looked like something wrapped in a sheet.

Puzzled, Clara started towards it. As she got closer she realised with a sudden chill that she had been horribly mistaken. It wasn't a sheet that billowed around the entrance of the tunnel. It was a web.

And there was a body in it.

Chapter

Two

Veterinary Surgeon Angela Drabble was just unlocking the door to her practice when she heard her name being called out and the sound of a baby crying.

She turned to see Gabby Nichols hurrying across the village green. She had her son in one arm, and something bundled up in a tea cloth in the other. Her daughter was following along behind, dragging her feet and wearing the petulant pout that all 3-year-olds seemed to have when being asked to do something that they'd rather not do.

'Morning, Gabby.' Angela looked at the bundled tea cloth. 'Not another injured blackbird, is it?'

'Not this time, Ang. I didn't know where else to bring it.'

Angela could see that Gabby was flustered and scared. She frowned. That wasn't like her. In the short time that Angela had known Gabby, she had struck her as being a very together young woman, one not easily panicked.

'Well, you'd better come inside and show me what

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you've got.' Taking the bundle from her, Angela ushered Gabby and Emily into the surgery.

Once inside, she placed the bundle down on one of the examination tables and spent the next few minutes making sure that Emily was suitably entertained with a *Shaun the Sheep* book and a mug of squash. There were always kids in the surgery insisting that they had to stay near their pets, and Angela always made sure that she had plenty of material to distract them.

Leaving Emily in the waiting room, Angela closed the door to the examination room and started to unwrap the teacloth.

'Now, let's see what we have...'

As the last flap of fabric fell away she gave a sharp intake of breath.

'Oh, my God.'

Doing his best to avoid contact with the sticky web, the Doctor made a quick examination of the body. It was a man, and he'd been dead for some time. The Doctor ran his sonic screwdriver over the two massive puncture wounds in the man's shoulder. The flesh around the injury was green and diseased-looking, but that wasn't what had killed him. As far as the Doctor could tell, he'd died of a massive heart attack, and then something had dragged him here and cocooned him.

It was the 'something' that really worried the Doctor.

He tapped a finger lightly against one of the strands of web that held the corpse to the ceiling. Even with the

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lightest of touches it took considerable effort to pull his finger free.

The underpass was full of it. It had been the perfect place to trap prey.

He stepped back out into the daylight, mind racing. Somewhere in this peaceful-looking countryside there was a very, very big spider. Clara stood some distance away, chewing nervously on her fingernails. The Doctor couldn't blame her. The corpse wasn't a pretty sight. Visible through the veil of web, the man's face was contorted in fear and pain, lips drawn back in an awful grimace.

He walked back over to where she was waiting,

'Is he...?'

'Yes. Very.' The Doctor placed a hand on her shoulder and gently led her away from the underpass.

'Surely we aren't just going to leave him hanging there?'

'That web is incredibly strong, and I really don't fancy being caught up in it when whatever spun it returns.'

Clara looked around nervously. 'You think it's still around here somewhere?'

'It's possible,' admitted the Doctor. 'And on this occasion I'm not going to suggest that we just deal with it ourselves. We need to go into the village and get help.'

Clara nodded. 'All right.' She gave the Doctor a weak smile. 'I'm never going to complain about you taking me somewhere dull again.'

The two of them made their way down the footpath

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into the village. Ringstone was picture-postcard pretty. Stone cottages, some with deep, thatched roofs, lined both sides of a wide, open village green dotted with trees and benches. In the centre was a tall limestone monument, a war memorial of some kind. A bright red telephone box stood outside a tiny village store, low stone walls bordered gardens brimming with flowers, and in the distance the stocky, stone tower of a Norman church poked up above the rooftops.

The Doctor looked around, quickly taking in his surroundings. ‘Nothing here’, he muttered to himself. ‘There’s nothing here...’

‘That’s a good thing, though. Right?’ Clara was getting worried now. ‘I mean it’s got to be better for a giant spider to be here rather than in the middle of some heaving city centre, hasn’t it?’

‘That rather depends on what we’re going to be able to find here to help us stop it,’ said the Doctor ruefully. ‘I can’t exactly see the village store being equipped to handle a giant spider invasion, can you?’

The sound of a car door being unlocked made the Doctor look around. Not far away a woman had opened up the back of a Range Rover and was loading a large metal tray into the boot.

‘Come on,’ said the Doctor, ‘We’d better break the bad news to the locals.’

Angela’s head was still reeling with the implications of the creature that Gabby had brought into the surgery. She

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had quite reasonably assumed that she had been brought some bird or rodent that had made its way into the house or been hit by a car; a not uncommon occurrence in these parts. Nothing had prepared her for what had been inside the tea towel.

It was a common-or-garden crane fly – a daddy longlegs – but it was massive, nearly forty centimetres from wingtip to wingtip. Unfortunately, it had been quite badly mangled by Gabby in her panicked efforts to kill it. Even so, there was enough of it left for Angela to conduct a reasonably thorough examination.

Promising Gabby that she would let her know as soon as she had any more information, she had bundled the young woman and her children out of the surgery. Gabby was terrified that there might be more of the things in her house, but Angela had assured her that this had to be a fluke of some kind. There was no chance of there being more of them.

Only partially reassured, Gabby had headed off to wait for the hardware store to open, intending to buy as many cans of insect repellent as she could lay her hands on.

As soon as she had gone, Angela had discarded the tea cloth and laid out the remains of the giant insect on a stainless steel tray on the examination table. After a good half an hour dissecting and probing she had to admit that she was stumped. As far as she had been able to tell, everything about the insect was normal – everything except for its size.

Realising that there was a limit to how much of

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an investigation she could make into the creature's origins on her own, she had decided to take it over to Dr Goodchild at the cottage hospital in Chippenham. With luck he would be able to help her perform some proper tests, possibly even using their ultrasound scanner. She had decided not to phone ahead and tell him she was coming. If she started to talk about giant insects he was liable to think that she was losing her marbles. It was better to just present him with the monstrous thing face to face.

She was loading the tray into the back of her car when she became aware of two figures – a man and a woman – walking towards her.

'Good morning.' The man had a Scottish twang to his voice.

Angela carefully pulled a cloth over the insect in the boot.

'Good morning.'

'Can you tell me if there's a police station in the village?'

'No. The nearest one is in Wyndham. But Charlie Bevan, the local constable, lives just across the green.' Angela frowned. 'Is everything all right? Has there been an accident?'

'Not exactly...' The man and the woman glanced at each other. 'You might have a slight insect problem.'

Angela felt the blood drain from her face. 'Oh, no. Please don't tell me there are more...'

The man's bushy eyebrows rose quizzically. 'More?'

'You'd better have a look at this.' Angela lifted the

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cloth from the steel tray. 'I doubt that you'll ever see a bigger insect.'

Clara perched on a stool in the corner of the vet's surgery watching as the Doctor and Angela bent over the examination table, peering at the huge insect lying under the bright lights.

It never ceased to amaze her just how quickly the Doctor managed to completely take control of a situation, whether it be on an alien planet or in an English country village.

As soon as Angela had revealed the insect, the Doctor had started firing off all kinds of scientific, biological questions, half of which Clara couldn't even begin to understand. Angela's relief at the realisation that she had someone to share her concerns with had been tangible. They had taken the mangled body back inside and the Doctor had listened as she had talked non-stop for nearly ten minutes about theories of mutations and chemical contamination.

Only when he had her complete trust did the Doctor finally – gently – break the news about the body that they had found in the underpass.

Angela went very quiet and pale. It took Clara a few moments to realise that in a community this small it was inevitable that the dead man would be someone that she knew, and probably knew well.

'I'm sorry.' The Doctor placed a hand on her shoulder. 'If it helps, I don't think it was the spider that killed him.'

DOCTOR WHO

As far as I can make out he died of a heart attack.'

Angela just nodded. 'I think that I'd better get Constable Bevan.' She pulled on her jacket, shivering despite the warm spring day. 'Would you mind waiting here?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Of course.' As soon as Angela had gone, he pulled the sonic screwdriver from his jacket and started examining the dead insect once more.

Clara slipped off her stool and peered over the Doctor's shoulder. 'So, is she right?'

'Right?' The Doctor didn't look up. 'Right about what?'
'Mutations.'

He straightened, peering at the readings on his screwdriver. 'Yes and no.'

Clara folded her arms and glared at him. 'Well, that's a great help.'

The Doctor fixed her with a piercing stare. 'It is a mutation. But it's not a natural one. Someone has taken a great deal of time, and used a lot of very expensive equipment, to engineer this creature.'

'Engineer it?' Clara stared at him incredulously. 'You mean these things have been built?'

'Modified. The basic physiognomy would appear to be a naturally occurring species, but there are traces of recombinant DNA, growth hormones, synaptic enhancers.'

'But why? Why would anyone want to create these... things?'

The Doctor tapped the sonic screwdriver against his lips. 'I'm not sure...'

THE CRAWLING TERROR

Their conversation was interrupted as Angela hurried back into the surgery, followed by a stocky, red-haired man in a police uniform.

‘Doctor, Clara, this is Constable Bevan.’

Any doubts and questions that Charlie Bevan might have had died in his throat as he caught a glimpse of the daddy longlegs on the table.

‘Oh, my good Lord. I thought... I thought this was some kind of...’

He pulled a large, white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the sweat beading on his forehead. ‘I think you’d better show me where you found this body, don’t you?’