Prologue

Trevor Keen dumped a pile of books on the hall table. Home, tired and sweating, he made for the kitchen. No beer in the fridge, and the sun trapped in the new classroom built on to Garton South Primary and Secondary School held the heat. To think he'd been pleased when it was allocated to him, senior teacher of his year group. The original thick old walls and high windows defied whatever the weather threw at them. He swore and slammed the fridge door.

His dumpy wife appeared from the front room. 'Fordham Supermarket substituted three items in this morning's delivery.'

'And one of them was my Heineken, I suppose. What did they send, Nicole?'

'Oh, the same brand, but it was alcohol free. I sent it back. Go to the off-licence and get me cheese and chilly chutney crisps while you're there.'

If the lazy bitch had walked to the corner shop, his beer would be cold by now. Oh no. They lived in the poorest part of the borough, but he was the only one with a steady wage. Childless, despite him wanting kids, Nicole was free to work, but she never stuck at a job more than a few weeks, days sometimes, or hurried to look for another.

Stamping fury into the pavement, he clenched sweating hands. How much longer would Nicole's blasted uncle last? Grant Ledbetter was over ninety! *He* lived in a huge house in Garton North and the last time he'd checked its current value on Zoopla, it was worth millions. Could he hasten the old dodderer's end so Nicole got her inheritance before he lost his rag and she rebelled, grabbed the house, and left him paying the mortgage? Knowing her, she'd "make up" until she was pregnant to be sure of it. No chance to be a real dad, but stuck with child maintenance.

Cool it, Trevor. He'd invested five years of his life in marriage to Nicole after she got tipsy down The Dog and Duck one Friday night and showed him a copy of her uncle's will. And he'd persuaded her into a prenup that gave each of them a half share of their combined money if they divorced. Essential! Only thirty-two, tall, with a full head of dark, curly hair… Decent looking judging by the school secretary's flirting, and wealthy, he could do better than Nicole – he couldn't do worse!

Home, he showered while his beer cooled and settled on the sofa with the kids' books. They'd be happy if he lost them, but their parents wouldn't. Or those that took an interest, anyway. Come parent/teacher meetings, they expected to see ticks and crosses, *and* notes he'd made about remedial action.

'Trevor, there's post for you.'

Bills. Sure to be. 'Open them…' *Careful, Trevor.* Upsetting her prematurely could cost him a fortune. 'Please, Nicole.'

She plonked herself beside him, crunching. 'Phone – gas and electric… Oh, my God! This one's for me.'

Nicole had no friends – never received birthday cards except the one he bought religiously along with a gift – and her only relative was Grant Ledbetter! 'Give it here.'

Hall and Schieman Solicitors
29 Primrose Parade
Garton North

Garton Borough
London

Dear Mrs Keen

We are writing to inform you of a bequest made to you by your late uncle, Mr Grant Ledbetter. Namely, the sum of fifty thousand pounds (£50,000).
We would be obliged if you would make an appointment at this office to settle the matter. Please bring with you proof of identity and your address.
Suitable documents are a passport or driving licence, and a utility bill in your name. We can also accept a rental or loan agreement, or a bank statement.

Kind regards,
Simon Smith
Mr S Smith, Clerk

Nicole pointed at the third paragraph and shrieked. 'I don't have *any* of those papers. Everything is in your name, Trevor.'

He'd barely read beyond fifty thousand pounds. The will in his bedside cabinet floated before his eyes. "*The whole of my residuary estate to my niece Nicole Ledbetter.*" He'd checked, and it meant the lot after any debts and funeral expenses were paid.

"A bequest" sounded like money a man might leave to a housekeeper. Grant Ledbetter must have changed his will but who benefited? School books swept to the floor, he Googled on his mobile. After probate, which must be sorted or the solicitor wouldn't have contacted Nicole, wills were made public, and anybody could get a copy, so he could find out.

He'd researched everything he could think of before he'd said, "I take you, Nicole, to be my wedded wife" and the rest of the crap the registrar needed to declare the marriage legal. A blood relation had first claim on an estate, and he'd pay what he must to help Nocole challenge Grant Ledbetter's will. The greedy bitch would do exactly as he told her.

Glowering at the discarded bills, sweat soaked him again. Every penny he earned was already spent. He had none to pay a lawyer, or any way to borrow it. Most of the mortgage was still owed to the bank. If Nicole had a relative she hadn't told him about, the beneficiary was living their last days. He'd *earned* this money living with his useless slut of a wife, and he'd kill to get it.

Kill who? A man or woman must already be living in the house scattering dough left right and centre on luxuries, and he or she would have relatives entitled to inherit. He pushed wandering bits of curls out of his eyes. There was no way he could get his hands on millions, but fifty thousand was more than he earned in a year!

Nicole was still wittering on about papers she didn't have, crisp crumbs flying. 'Fifty thousand pounds would stop you nagging me to get a job, Trevor, and it's *your* fault I can't claim it. I haven't even got a bank account.'

Why would she? When she did work, she was paid in cash she spent on herself. *Calm down and think Trevor. '*You've got birth and marriage certificates. I'd come with you and bring the rest. Them being in my name wouldn't matter.'

She squinted at the letter. 'How do I make an appointment?'

He pointed at the fancy heading above the typed letter – names of the partners and their qualifications – website – email address – telephone number. 'Phone would be quickest. I'll do it for you if you like.'

Nicole did like. Two days later, convinced by their combined presence and the papers, Simon Smith handed over a cheque.

Thrusting it into her bag, Nicole practically dragged him to the bank, asked the cashier for instructions, and pushed it at him. ‘I’ve signed it over to you, like this man said. Pay it in and get me a hundred in cash, Trevor.’

‘It takes time for a cheque to clear, Nicole, and I’ve got bills to pay.’

‘How long?’

The cashier leaned towards the glass screen. ‘I see you don’t have an agreed overdraft, Mr Keen. Allow a week or you might end paying interest if you overdraw.’

Nicole scowled, but it suited him very well. He needed time to find out which of his colleagues owned the rusty old Suzuki Carry van he’d seen parked near the school. The hundred quid would cover filling the tank with petrol before he returned it – the tempter he intended to use for the loan of the keys overnight.

Exactly a week later, as the summer darkness fell, he parked the van on the drive. He’d already hurled stones at the three nearest streetlights, so all that drew attention to it was the brightly lit hall behind Nicole when she appeared. ‘Have you got my hundred pounds?’

He patted his pocket as he walked in and closed the door. ‘Of course, I promised.’

‘I want it now. The corner shop stays open until midnight.’

If he gave it to her, she’d barge past him, and goodness knows how much she’d spend. Cigarettes – anything edible she fancied… ‘After dinner, Nicole. I went to the bank in my lunch break. I’m starving.’

‘Fordham Supermarket had a three-for-two offer on frozen chips. Turn the oven on and I’ll stick them in.’

Chips were all he was getting? Most of them would be piled on Nicole’s plate and stuffing them would add to her rolls of surplus fat. She’d been attractive at nineteen, but now – she’d had her wedding ring cut off when the GP told her it was so tight she’d end having the finger amputated, and even her fair hair was an unwashed mess. Dropping his case full of books awaiting marking, he closed his hands around her pudgy neck and squeezed. Flailing arms and kicks did her no good: he held on and gripped until she went limp.

Before he opened the front door, he switched off the lights in the front room and the hall. Outside, he listened. A couple of cars passed, but there were no approaching footsteps. Dragging Nicole’s dead weight strained muscles his sedentary job gave no exercise, and heaving her into the van was worse.

Done!

Wiping sweat from his forehead he went to the kitchen. Hand hovering over a cold beer, he paused. Being stopped and breathalysed would spell disaster. He slurped water from the running tap and eyed the kettle. Coffee – could wait.

They – *he* had no garden, just a tiny back yard. He wrapped the axe he used to chop wood, and the spade he used to shovel coal, in sacking and lodged them in the passenger footwell where the long handles stuck up over the seat. They were covered and handy, and he could hear a group of people coming, probably on their way home from The Dog and Duck.

Why had Nicole, who came from money, been in a Garton South pub? Driving, he shrugged it off. Fifty thousand wasn't the life-changing amount he'd waited five long years to get his hands on, but it was all his.

When he reached the wasteland that edged the wealthier part of Garton Central, he drove slowly past tracks that crisscrossed it until he found one that was quiet. No teenagers who might stop snorting crack or having sex long enough to see him.

Three feet down, the spade hit rock wherever he prodded. It would have to do; he still had to drag Nicole from the van, roll her in, and shovel the soil over her, and dawn came early in summer.

He was shaking with exhaustion when he'd finished. One. Last. Effort. He uprooted a small shrub and carefully replanted it – tough, it was likely to grow, not die, like the rest of the trees and bushes that crowded the area. *His footprints were everywhere.* A broken branch swept around, and then behind him, as he backed off removed the tracks. He reversed to the road and did the same with the van's tyre marks.

Done. Another hour's driving and he could put his feet up with a beer and plan his future as a wealthy man. By Garton South standards, he was rolling in money, and he had no Nicole nagging about how she wanted it spent. Friendless – jobless – rarely seen in the corner shop thanks to Fordham Supermarket deliveries. Nobody would miss her.

Two And A Half Years Later

Christine 1 – NOVEMBER

Christine Tomas peeped into Aileen's bedroom. Her three-year-old daughter was just visible under the giant pink teddy, and she was fast asleep. A light glowed from Melissa's room, and soft sounds gave away that she was watching Cinderella on her iPad.

'No more tonight, Melissa. School tomorrow.'

Red curls like her own tossed. 'Mum, you said I could stay up later now I'm a big girl, and I've done my homework.'

'Nine o'clock is later!'

'Dad hasn't come to say goodnight yet.'

'He's working late. Ask him for two kisses in the morning.'

Melissa closed her iPad and snuggled down. 'Okay. Night, Mum.'

Harvey was working late more and more often. Their three-bedroom semi-detached house was nice, but it was rented. When they were first married, they'd planned a family when they had the deposit for a home of their own. Two years later Harvey had changed his mind. "*You're nearly thirty, Chris, and Gran says conception gets less likely the longer you wait.*" And he'd got his way with flattery. "*Imagine a little girl with your enchanting green eyes.*"

A coffee might wake her up a bit – 'Mum, can I have a drink of water?'

She plodded back upstairs. If Melissa came down, she'd beg to wait up for Dad and she couldn't face endless "how much longer". She'd had more energy when she was working at Willett and Bladen Estate Agents, stimulated by the company of colleagues and showing people around properties for sale. Clinching a deal had been a thrill – and earned her a bonus if she got the full asking price.

Melissa settled, she checked Harvey's dinner. Two hours in a warm oven had dried it to inedible. She scraped the meat and vegetables into the dog's bowl.

The cockerpoo gobbled, tail wagging.

'Don't expect this again, Polly. From now on, I'm cooking dinner for ten o'clock, so Harvey and I can sit down together like civilised people. I can wait if I have a snack when the girls eat at six.'

Patting her concave stomach, she planned a cup of tea, and perhaps scones. It was as if she'd never been pregnant, and walking Polly kept them all fit – except Harvey who worked through the weekends though he must skive out to the gym pretty often to look so good at thirty-seven. Even taller than her, with fair hair and blue eyes, and a sense of fun – she hadn't hesitated to say yes when he proposed.

He'd been promoted twice since he landed a job with one of the biggest businesses in Garton Borough. Foreperson, under-manager, and now manager at the Garton Central branch. It wasn't the biggest of the three. Fordham Supermarket ran a delivery service from Garton South, but there was only one more upmarket, and that was in Garton North, the wealthy part of the London Borough where she'd worked.

Harvey was a success, and their dream of a four-bedroomed detached house with a decent-sized garden was only months away. Time, with luck, to get exactly what they wanted on a small new estate on what had been wasteland that was still at the pegging-out plots stage. She

knew from experience what would happen next – the instant a show house was erected and furnished, the company would start selling, and a deposit would secure…

The growl of Harvey's BMW on the drive reminded her he'd be hungry. Steak was quick, and she had mushrooms. She shuddered as she hurried to the kitchen. He'd expect fried onions, and his breath would smell when they went to bed – he deserved a treat.

Bang, Thump.

'Chris, have you seen my golf balls? I filled my caddy last weekend, I'm certain, but the compartment's empty.'

He'd only started playing a few months ago and probably lost count of those he couldn't find. 'Never mind that now, Harvey. You like steak rare, and the trimmings won't take long.'

'Why are you cooking, for goodness sake? I told you I'd be away until Monday.'

She turned down the heat under the frying pan. 'You said it was a weekend conference, and it's only Thursday.'

'The social side, including golf, happens the days before and after in winter. Where the *hell* are my new set of balls? If that dog's had them…'

'Of course, Polly hasn't. They came in a box, and I put it in the loo under the stairs.'

'Got them. See you Monday night – unless I'm needed at the store, and I crash there for a few hours.'

Four days. Possibly five, and all the company she'd have were two small girls and even Aileen would start asking questions. '*Harvey*.'

The front door slammed, and gravel rattled on the windows as the BMW shot off dangerously fast. No kiss, no hug… A year ago, he'd have been reluctant to leave her and the children he'd wanted so much. Harvey had been stressed and in a hurry. He must be driving to Wales tonight to be at his boss's country house first thing.

Stamping towards the lounge and a boring evening watching television alone, she turned abruptly into what should be the dining room. Harvey had commandeered it for a home office, but she was the one who needed stimulation of some sort, or she'd be braindead, unfit to work when Aileen was old enough for kindergarten. She had a degree in English, so perhaps proofreading from home might be possible.

The window, shielded from passers-by with blinds, was to her left. Harvey's desk and swivel chair faced the wall. Above it, hung his grandmother's gift: a framed professional photograph of her dead daughter's son and his bride – her. Mrs Martha Tomas, widow, had gone on endlessly about how a granddaughter-in-law-to-be who had no living parents relied on her as if she couldn't think for herself.

"*I, Harvey, take you, Christine, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy law. In the presence of God I make this vow.*"

Neither of them was religious, but Gran attended church twice every Sunday, and she'd paid for everything – Harvey's morning suit, her white lace designer gown and bouquet, the minister, the choir, a peal of bells, and a lavish reception at Primrose Court Hotel.

The photograph flooded her mind with memories. Harvey in grey, his glossy fair hair and eyes shining when he slipped the ring on her finger… The warmth of his lips on hers… He'd meant "until death us do part", and so had she.

Did he still mean it? Had he even told her the truth before he rushed out? It was November and the evenings were drawing in, but Harvey had gone on about his wealthy boss having a private nine-hole golf course that was lit.

Her hand stretched out and grasped the hilt of the paperknife laid beside the unmarked blotter placed centrally on the dusty wood. Harvey was *hers*, Melissa and Aileen's dad. If Harvey spent his weekends and nights when he "worked late" with another woman, she'd find out who she was and stab her through the heart.