

Chapter I by Lois Harbinson

The storm breaks just before midnight. Nick's face has been punched by hot, angry gusts of wind since he turned off the main road on his way back from a party and now thunder echoes round the hills. He is unfamiliar with the dark of country roads and the tiny speck of light from the torch on his key ring died ten minutes ago. The sky cracks open with a vicious light and slow, heavy rain falls, then gathers speed and weight until he feels hammered to the ground, hair plastered to his head, shirt fused to his body. He is no longer sure where he is. The next flash lights the earth for several seconds of stuttering neon and illuminates glistening roof tiles through the trees. He turns up a wide track, hoping for shelter. The track, deeply rutted and running with water, brings him to a five-

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bar gate and then to a small white one set in low railings. He pushes it and walks up a flagstone path towards a large building. The neon flares again and briefly lights the squat tower of a church, seemingly in the middle of a field. Balls of lightning ricochet round the churchyard, hovering and flickering over tilted tombstones. The porch gapes bleakly but at least offers sanctuary. Nick creeps inside and leans shivering against the wall.

A voice comes out of the blackness.

“Ah, you’ m come then.”

Nick spins round and steps quickly back into the rain. He grips the cold stone and peers into the dark.

“Allus a good place to shelter, a church porch,” the voice continues calmly. “Plenty o’ room inside.”

Nick resumes his position.

“You were caught out too,” he says, struggling to speak steadily.

“No, I got here first. I knew she were comin’.”

A match sparks at the back of the porch and Nick sees a lined, weathered face and sharp eyes glinting under the brim of a baseball cap. The match goes out.

“You want to wait awhile,” the man advises. “She’s some energy in ’er yet.”

“Right,” says Nick, “I’m not sure where I am anyway.”

“Hornblotton Church,” the man informs him. “You’re not far from home.”

Nick wonders how he knows.

“I don’t fancy going out there anyway at the moment. The lightning seems trapped between the gravestones.”

“No,” the man replies. “It’s Punkies.”

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“What?” Nick laughs.

“Punkies,” the man repeats. “They do say as how they’re the souls of unbaptised children, wandering till Doomsday. Mostly you’ll see them on Midsummer’s Eve, and sometimes during a storm.”

“Right,” says Nick politely, “and what do they look like?”

“Who knows? I’ve heard they’m like great white moths.”

Nick lets it go and stands silently watching the rain bounce off the graves.

At last it slackens and the rumbles of thunder fade into the distance.

“You can go now,” the man says, dismissing him. “Down to the end of the track, then left and follow yer nose. ’Tis just five minutes.”

Nick, unnerved by the man's uncanny knowledge, murmurs his thanks and dives out of the porch. He swerves to avoid the ball of light that is, apparently, a Punky, catches his foot on a knot of grass and crashes in to the sludge of a grave, his head narrowly missing the stone cross. His mobile, clutched as always in his left hand, slips from his grasp. He is immediately lifted and set on his feet. Yet the man stands no higher than Nick's shoulder, his face shadowed by the cap.

“There's a pity,” he says, wiping the mobile on the inside of his long coat and handing it back. “I think it's gone inside. You'll have to watch that. Be seeing yer.”

He walks off and vanishes behind a yew tree.

Nick wakes to thunder, this time on the bedroom door, and the thud of an object landing on his pillow.

“You left this on the kitchen table,” says Josh, with whom he rents the cottage. “Is that squawk a ring tone? It’s gross.”

Nick shuts the thing off.

“It’s probably got a cold. I dropped it on a wet grave last night.” Josh’s left eyebrow shoots up to meet the tangle of his eternally unbrushed hair.

“OK,” laughs Nick, “I got caught in that storm and lost my way.”

“Right. I’m working the morning shift today. What are you up to?” Josh spends half his time shifting goods for the local supermarket and the other half in a cramped outhouse he calls his studio, creating ceramics that he is beginning to market.

Nick remembers that he is due in Weston-super-Mare at 11am for an introductory day at the company where he is to start his first job in web design in August. He rolls out of bed and wonders if he has any clean clothes. Josh's face appears upside down round the bathroom door.

“You in tonight? Right, I'll pick up some stuff.” They save quite a bit on Josh's discount.

Before he leaves, Nick checks his calls. On the mobile's screen an alien image appears; an insect's head, beak-like mouth opening and shutting, antennae frantically waving, enormous oval eyes staring blackly. He curses Josh's sense of humour. No matter which button he punches he cannot shift it. He tries all the functions and they work, but the insect will not go away. Time is running out and he gives up in frustration, stuffs the phone in his pocket and locks the front door.

Nick leaves the office in Weston at 6pm. It has been a day packed with information and new faces, and he needs to wind down. The clear summer evening tempts him to take the long way back and explore his new surroundings. He punches a random destination in the sat-nav and sets off along the Bridgwater Road. The high-pitched, droning voice direction gets on his nerves and is not what he recalls when he installed it last week. He goes to turn it off, then remembers that the Somerset map is somewhere on his bedroom floor. He stays with it and the voice turns him off the main road and winds him through narrow roads that sometimes stand proud from flat fields with great ditches either side and sometimes seem to ripple beneath the wheels. He crosses two rivers

and threads through the tight streets of several small villages. The voice direction's whiny dirge becomes mesmerising and he loses track of time. A hard left turn takes him up a narrow track with grass sprouting through cracks of crumbling Tarmac and brings him to an abrupt halt at the bank of a river. The voice releases a long sigh and the sat-nav and engine shut down. Nick gazes unfocused through the windscreen and his stomach rumbles. He rummages hopefully through the glovebox and digs out a piece of chocolate welded to the paper and coated in fluff. He eats it, gets out of the car and leans against the bonnet. His head feels hot and fuzzy.

The sun is sinking. Nick's head slowly clears and he is aware of the intense turquoise sky and a remarkable copper light slanting across the level fields, touching the irises that fringe the river bank

and a heron motionless in the water. As he watches, a head rises from the bank and a young woman scrambles out of the undergrowth.

“Hi,” she says and wipes a muddy hand across her nose, leaving a smudge. “Are you lost?”

Nick knows he is staring. Tawny hair flows down her back and drifts about her tanned face. The wide green eyes, generous smile and agile figure in grubby shorts and T-shirt present the ‘fittest’ girl he has ever seen. He opens his mouth to reply when a familiar voice says, “That’s all right, Lena. Ee’s with me,” and he turns to see the little man from the night before with a bleached sunhat pulled over his ears.

“Hi, Dag. Wondered when I’d see you,” the girl responds.

“Well, I’ve brought ’im. Lena, this is Nick. Nick, Lena. They call me Dag, short fer Dagonet*.” They extend hands and Nick automatically shakes them. He is held by Dag’s grip and disturbed by his penetrating blue eyes.

“Well then, my purdy.” Dag stands with Lena on the bank and studies the river. “What a’ yer findings today?”

“It’s worse,” replies Lena. “More patches are appearing every day.”

“Now Nick’s ’ere, you’d better explain it all to him. I know ’ee’s’ a furriner, but I chose ’im fer ’is clear ’ead.”

Lena sits and pulls Nick down beside her.

“Somerset, land of the summer people,” she begins. “These are the Levels, drained marsh land and we’re sitting beside King’s Sedgemoor Drain.”

* Dagonet was King Arthur’s court jester

“That explains all the ditches,” interrupts Nick.

“Rhynes,” corrects Lena. “We call them rhynes. I live over there in Westonzoyland,” and she points to a cluster of roofs picked out by the setting sun. “Did you know we’re only about eight metres above sea level?”

Nick does not, but he enjoys sitting next to her.

“Is that important?” he asks.

“Yes,” Lena replies sombrely. “If the Levels were polluted by salt water then everything would die.” She is silent for a moment and then says very softly, “The herons and the marsh marigolds and the otters.”

Nick is touched by her sad face and asks more seriously, “How do you know all this? Is it likely to happen?”

“I’ve lived here all my life and yes, it could happen. What with drought and high temperatures, the clay ridge on the coast that keeps the sea out could sink. But something else is happening, something strange that no one can explain—the dead patches. They started two months ago, just the odd one, but now they are everywhere. They’re always the same, regular size and they’re beginning to join up. Everyone dismisses it as just global warming, but Dag and I are not so sure. It seems... purposeful, deliberate, as if someone’s systematically poisoning the land.”

“They do say,” Dag interrupts, “that when King Arthur died, Merlin threw away his staff in his sorrow and it stuck fast somewhere on Sedgemoor Plain. They say that if it’s ever removed the Levels will die.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Nick scorns, but Dag continues in an even tone—“Course, when the land’s dead and nothing’ll grow then you might as well build on it—houses, malls, motorways, anything concrete.”

Lena snorts. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Take yer pick,” replies Dag and they sit in silence and look across to where the sun is slipping beyond the horizon, silhouetting a flock of homing birds.

“I love this place,” Lena whispers and Nick can see what she means.

“Do you think that’s possible?” Nick turns to Dag. “Someone deliberately poisoning the land?”

“Anythin’ is possible. It’s your job to find out and do somethin’ about it.”

“Me!” Nick is on his feet.

“Why not?” Dag towers on the bank above Nick, fixes him with his piercing eyes and thunders. “You’ve got nothin’ better to do before the first week in August, have you? Must we stand about and watch destruction while good people do nothin’?” A coil of fear twists in Nick’s belly.

“We must do something,” Lena says quietly and Dag shrinks back to his usual size.

“What?” asks Nick. “Aren’t there environmental people who deal with this sort of thing?”

“I’ve tried,” says Lena. “They know what’s happening, but say it’s natural and there’s nothing they can do.”

“There are dark forces at work in the county,” adds Dag, ignoring Nick’s sceptical look. “We’ve gathered The Five. You, Nick,” he answers Nick’s unspoken question, “are a wizard—computer, that

is, and think logical. Lena knows the land and yer friend Josh is a local lad. What's more he's a sense of humour, which, by the look on yer face, we could do with. We'll search from Portishead to Marshalsea 'til we've found some answers."

"Five?" Nick disputes.

"Ah, yes, well, I must admit the fifth was a bit of a mistake when you tripped in the churchyard. I wasn't concentratin'. The Punky's in yer technology now and you won't get rid of 'er. She's a bit crusty, I'll allow, and they can be a bit mischievous if you don't treat 'em right. Still, she got you 'ere, so that's encouragin'. Just give 'er a name and don't argue. Right, that's settled then."

Nick's not sure he wants to be drawn into all this, then realises that it will mean spending time with Lena. He nods agreement.

“Now,” commands Dag, “Exchange mobile numbers, or whatever it is you do and we can get started.”

“What about you?” Nick asks him.

“Oh, I’ll be around, don’t fret.” Nick believes him.

It is now almost dark and a mist, tinted by the fading rays of the sun, rises swiftly, blurring then blotting out the landscape. Nick is certain he can hear the distant pounding of hoof beats, jingling of harness and moans of human pain. He looks at Lena to see if she hears it too. She nods.

“Sixth of July,” she whispers. “At dimmet you hear the sounds of an old battle. And look, Dag, there!” She points excitedly into the mist. “There are some of those men in dark uniforms I told you about. They’ve got dogs with them.”

Nick peers into the murk, but can see nothing.

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“Yeth hounds,” mutters Dag. “The hunting dogs of the devil. Be seeing yer.”

He disappears along the rhyne bank, leaving Nick and Lena to the swirling mist.