

1



Tuesday 13 May, 9.15 a.m.

Hanbridge High School playing field

I knew Mr Baynton was dead as soon as Daniel opened the trunk in the sports equipment shed. We were only in there looking for a football to play with while we waited for the PE teacher.

And there he was.

Dead.

Kids aren't supposed to find bodies. Bodies are just for Sunday evening murder-mystery TV shows, and bedtime reading (as long as Mum doesn't catch me nicking one of Dad's blood-and-guts thrillers).

So all in all, my second week at Hanbridge High was a memorable one. Just not in a good way. But

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me explain how I got in this mess in the first place.

When Mum dropped the bombshell, that Sunday in January, I'd been sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by my homework and moaning about my DT project getting squashed on the Grensham school bus.

'Well, Jonathan,' she'd said. 'You won't much longer have to put up with all this inconvenience.' Mum's native language is Swiss German, so she sometimes says things in English in a confusing order (she speaks Italian, Spanish and Hungarian too, meaning she can tell me off in *many* different ways). 'Soon you'll be beginning a new school, because we're moving to Nanna Rosie's old house in Hanbridge.'

Well, obviously I didn't believe her. Not until she laid it all out.

'Last week your father applied for a promotion at the Bristol branch of the undertaker's.' (Yes, my Dad's a mortician. Yes, it's a bit weird, but I also think it's kind of cool.) 'And if he gets it, then you will start at a new school in May, and we will be moving finally into our own home!' She leaned over

the table and touched my hand. ‘You always loved staying in Nanna Rosie’s old house. You and Maximilian will finally have a garden to play in, and you shall feel like you are on holiday all the time! Nanna and you would always be talking about her murder-mystery books – they will all be there too.’

I thumped my hands down on the table, either side of my half-eaten cinnamon roll. ‘That’s ridiculous! Cos Nanna’s not around any more, is she? I’ve only been in Year Seven at Grensham for a term, and *all* my friends are here, the basketball team, the band . . . moving is just not an option, Mum. No way.’

Mum folded her arms in that terrifying way that she does. ‘Jonathan. You must try and think about someone other than yourself for one minute! Nanna wanted us to inherit her house. There’ll be no rent to pay, and no horrible landlord like Mr Franklin making all of the decisions. We are very, very grateful to Nanna for her kindness to us.’

‘Holy . . . crud, Mum. You actually mean it.’

Mum covered Max’s ears as he sat squidging Play-Doh on his highchair. ‘*Tsk, tsk, tsk*. You must not say these words, Jonathan! You must think about the impression you will be making at your

new school. No one will want to be friends with such a potty-mouth.'

I spent the rest of the day in a daze. I kept thinking, *When Dad gets back from work, he'll see sense and blow the whole plan apart.* But when he got home, he was all flushed. He picked Mum up and swung her around and kissed her like I wasn't even looking.

'I got it!' he shouted, and they both did a weird jumpy dance around the kitchen.

'So what?' I said.

Mum looked at Dad and shrugged. 'He is not so happy with this plan as we hoped.' She squeezed my cheek. 'Can you not see that your father is pleased to be going back home where he grew up, Jonathan? You are spoiling the excitement of all of us.'

That was the point. And as far as I was concerned, their excitement could stay spoiled.

Mum and Dad might move us to Hanbridge, but there was no way we were going to stay there long.

Looking down at Mr Baynton in that big plastic box felt like the next disaster in a recent string of

catastrophes in my life. I grabbed the lid off Daniel and shut the trunk again, quick.

I turned away but I could still see the image when I shut my eyes. Sometimes I wish I didn't notice everything all the time.

Daniel gagged and staggered out of the shed to be sick in the hedge, just missing Tyler Jenkins's Adidas trainers. Tyler was not pleased.

'Oi! W-what do you think you're doing? You'll be a deader if you've got even *one* spot of spew on my new shoes!'

Lydia Strong came running when she heard Tyler's howl of fury.

'Why's Daniel puking? What's in the shed?'

The other students smelled trouble, literally. They started crowding round Daniel, making me feel a bit small and lonely.

I decided to make myself useful by standing in front of the shed door, to preserve the crime scene until the police turned up. I'd read enough murder mysteries and seen enough crime dramas to know how important it was to protect the evidence. I was sweating and feeling a bit sick myself, but it helped ease the quease to concentrate on keeping the rest of the class out of the way. And most importantly to

consider the facts of the case: why, what, where, when and who.

Tyler turned away from the crowd and got right up into my face.

‘C’mon, new boy, t-tell us what’s going on,’ he growled. At the sniff of a potential fight, the others left Daniel’s side and jostled towards me.

Tyler Jenkins was trouble. I knew that after only one week at Hanbridge High. He was scarily huge for a Year Seven, with an Adam’s apple and razor burn – he made the rest of us look like toddlers. And no one ever mentioned his stammer. I suspected the last person who’d made fun of Tyler had ended upside down in a dumpster. I groaned inside, but I stayed where I was and tried to look like I knew what I was doing.

Meanwhile Lydia, stuck behind the group, had started jumping up and down to try and see through the window instead. It didn’t work.

‘Daniel only chucks up at icky stuff, so there’s got to be a reason,’ she called over. ‘Come on. Spill the tea.’

She squirmed her way through the pack and leaned hopefully against the open door right next to me. Tyler loomed, Lydia stared, everyone else shoved.

I didn't cave in. You don't see Inspector Morse² giving a tour of the crime scene to passers-by. I gave the lot of them my best scowl, and kept the door blocked when Lydia tried her best to slip past me.

'Someone go and tell a teacher – get them to ring nine-nine-nine!' I shouted over the noise.

No one moved.

Daniel finally stopped spewing and stood on the edge of the crowd, looking at me all wide-eyed, pasty and confused. He wasn't my idea of back-up, but he'd have to do.

'Daniel! Call the police!' I yelled again, over the horde. He nodded weakly and set off shakily towards the office.

It took ages for anyone to come.

I was barely holding out against the crush when Mr Scouter, the headteacher, finally came puffing across the field, red-faced and breathless.

'Get away from there!' he roared at the mob. 'Yes, you lot! What on earth do you think you're playing at?'

2 Inspector Morse is a TV legend, a fictional god of detection. He's Detective Chief Inspector for the Oxford police and solves stuff practically in his sleep, with his trusty assistant Lewis. Nanna Rosie used to record every episode because she *definitely* had a crush on him.

As they backed off, he marched up to me and grasped me by the shoulder.

‘Good grief, boy, are you all right?’ His face was round and worried, with the size of moustache I’ve only ever seen on *Magnum PI*.³ ‘Go and sit down over there until the police arrive; they might want to question you.’ He turned round. ‘The rest of you, get to the hall and wait for Mr Frantock. He’ll give you some work to do until next period.’

The rest of the class groaned and moped off, Lydia and Tyler shooting me looks as they passed. I could tell Mr Scouter wanted to look at the crime scene without me there, so I walked a few metres away from the shed and flopped down on to the ground, steering well clear of Daniel’s sick spot.

For the millionth time I wished I was back in Grensham with my old mates – Jayden, Kinsey and the rest of the gang – having a *normal* sort of morning. All we did was hang out and play basketball and practise epic rock riffs on our guitars, but it was great fun. Our band, The Boomerangs, was really starting to get noticed.

³ Nanna Rosie fancied Magnum too. He was brilliant, a mega-glam 1980s American TV detective, who solved crimes in Hawaii.

They'd probably be looking for a new lead guitarist by now.

As I carried on sitting there, I started thinking about poor Mr Baynton, and what could have happened for him to end up like that. After a few minutes Daniel came back from the school office, and Mr Scouter made him sit down next to me. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. His eyelids were pink and he was lightly quivering. I kept my face steady, ready to answer any questions.

I didn't really know Daniel, or anyone else around here for that matter. He was in a couple of my classes; a bit of a brain but not Mr Perfect. He was late for tutor group sometimes in the mornings, and I'd seen him get told off for looking at his phone in the corridors. I was glad Tyler had already gone in. He saw solitary types like Daniel as easy meat, and I didn't want to be labelled as prey by association.

The police finally arrived, along with an ambulance and a white van with 'Forensic Services' on the side. A tall, plain-clothed policeman cornered Mr Scouter at once.

'You're the headteacher? I'm DS Norman, Avon and Somerset Police. Do you mind answering a few questions?' As he flipped open his notepad, I casually

leaned forward from my seated position, pretending to pick at the grass, so I could listen in.⁴

‘Can you confirm the identity of the deceased, Sir?’

‘Oh, yes. It’s Ollie Baynton, one of our PE teachers.’ Mr Scouter paused solemnly. ‘A horrible shock.’

‘I see. And what time was the school locked up last night?’

‘Hmm. The governors’ meeting yesterday evening lasted until around eight thirty. There were a couple of stragglers – the vicar wanted a somewhat premature chat about Harvest Festival – but I made sure everyone was off the premises by around nine p.m.’ Mr Scouter rubbed his moustache, leaving it all rumped.

I wondered if I should be taking notes. Columbo⁵ definitely would.

‘So would Mr Baynton have been in school until then?’

⁴ Don’t judge me, you’d have listened too. Anyone who likes to solve a good mystery would.

⁵ Another of Nanna’s favourite TV detectives from the 70s. Famous for his cigar and pulled-through-a-hedge-backwards appearance. Solved crimes by basically pestering suspects until they confessed. Mum seems to like using this technique on me.

‘Let’s check you over, boys,’ one of the medics said, blocking my view of this interesting conversation. Mr Scouter and the police officer moved into the shed, and out of earshot. The medic took our blood pressure and made Daniel put his head between his knees for a bit, wrapping him in a crinkly silver blanket.

Daniel and I sat quietly for ages. I didn’t wonder at the time what he was thinking about, but as it turned out he had plenty to mull over.

2



Tuesday 13 May, 10.20 a.m.

Hanbridge High School playing field

A loud noise broke our quiet when an old Volvo drove across the school field. A middle-aged man got out and started to pull on a white paper onesie. Then he lifted a heavy leather holdall out of the car.

‘In the shed, is it?’ he asked us cheerfully. His hair was curly and brown and he strolled over to us like he was out for a jolly walk in the country.

‘Yeah – the police are in there already,’ I said.

‘Dr Jeffery Hinton, County Pathologist.’ He shook my hand; his was warm and very strong. ‘Here to determine cause of death. I deduce by your presence that you are involved?’

‘Me and Daniel – we found him.’

‘Ah, and Daniel. Pleased to meet you.’ Dr Hinton reached out and shook the silent Daniel by the hand too. ‘Well, I’d better examine your corpse! See what I make of outward appearances.’ The doctor tramped off into the shed, hailing his police colleagues merrily.

Dr Hinton came out again after a few minutes and lit up a cigarette. ‘Apologies. Filthy habit,’ he remarked as he saw me looking. ‘You found the deceased? Bad business. You don’t look too shocked, though. Objectionable chap, was he?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I mean was he an unpleasant piece of work? A lot of my PE teachers were.’

I tried to remember what Mr Baynton was like. I’d only had one of his lessons so far.

‘Well – he was OK. He looked as if he liked to show off a bit.’

Daniel spoke up for the first time. ‘He *does* like to show off. He’s all shiny black designer joggers and expensive trainers. And he has this personalized silver whistle that he wears on a chain round his neck.’

My insides twisted. *Don’t think about his neck.*

But as soon as Daniel spoke, I realized what had been missing.

‘I see. And did you notice anything else, observant children?’

I knew he was teasing us, trying to make us squirm. Perhaps *you* shouldn’t read the next bit, actually, if you’ve got a weak stomach.

Because I had noticed a thing or two. Nanna’s detective novels were usually pretty tame, but when your dad’s a mortician you tend to find a lot of interesting textbooks left lying around the house to do with dead bodies. Not to mention the mortuary supplies catalogues. Mum had been horrified when she’d found a couple of the more gruesome ones hidden under my bed for light reading. Dad called it my ‘morbid curiosity’.

‘He was strangled,’ I said, remembering the bruised marks round Mr Baynton’s neck.

‘Aha! An expert. How very precocious.’ Dr Hinton’s grin was smug. ‘But did you see his hand?’ The pathologist held out his own in a tight fist.

‘No . . .’ I shook my head. As much as I enjoyed reading Dad’s catalogues, in real life I hadn’t seen a real body, not before that first glimpse of Mr Baynton’s.

‘Classic cadaveric spasm! Clutching a bit of paper, I think. Not seen such a nice example of that in ages. I look forward to breaking the proximal interphalangeal joints later to get it out.’

Dr Hinton’s laughter made my stomach churn like I was riding the Big One at Blackpool. Daniel got up and stomped off down the field. He didn’t come back again until Dr Hinton had gone.

Little did we know, then, that we would get more and more mixed up in Mr Baynton’s case.

This was just the beginning.

3



Tuesday 13 May, 10.45 a.m.

Hanbridge High School playing field

The police and the scene-of-crime people were poking around inside the shed for ages while we just sat there, missing our food technology class. Daniel and I didn't speak. I was desperate to get my phone out and message the old gang, tell them what was going down, but Mr Scouter was keeping an eye on us while he talked to the police officer again.

‘As I said, Detective, I would have expected Mr Baynton to be on his way home no later than about six. We don't expect our teachers to work excessive hours here at Hanbridge High,’ Mr Scouter explained.

‘And he definitely couldn’t have gained access to the school after it was locked up?’ DS Norman asked.

‘Not with just a teacher’s pass. Myself and the *senior* staff, plus a couple of reputable local-community members who run evening classes here, all have authorization, but the majority of the regular staff – no. They’d set the alarms off if they tried.’

‘Very well, sir. That’s all for now, but we might need to follow up on some of this again later.’

DS Norman came over to talk to us next.

‘Hello, lads,’ he said. He crouched down so he didn’t loom over us, with his leather notepad open and a pen in his huge hand.

I looked around. Weren’t they going to ask an adult to supervise while they interrogated us? Maybe there were enough other officers nearby to make it OK.

An older-looking police officer came and stood next to the DS, planting her feet sturdily on the grass and clasping her hands behind her. ‘Yes, hello to you both. I’m Detective Inspector Meek, and this is my sergeant, DS Norman. Mr Scouter tells me that you protected the crime scene for us, Jonathan.

Thank you very much for that. Just wanted to ask if you spotted anything in the shed or outside it before you found the body? I mean, ahem, Mr Baynton. Did you pick up any litter, or paper or anything?’

I shook my head, still trying not to think too hard about it. But I clocked the question, just the same.

‘No,’ Daniel said. ‘We weren’t really noticing anything, and then we noticed too much.’ He took a shaky breath.

‘OK. Is the shed normally open, do you know?’

Daniel looked over at me and I shrugged. I’d only been there two weeks; how would I know?

‘I think it’s normally locked until the teacher gets here. It was open when we found . . . him,’ he said.

The police didn’t have anything else to ask. They gave us each a card with the Crimestoppers number on it, in case we remembered anything, and told us to take it easy.

After they’d gone, Daniel touched my arm.

‘They’ll be shutting school for the rest of today, I expect. Do you think one of your parents would give me a lift home?’ He looked at me with big Labrador eyes.

‘I doubt if mine will be able to come and get me.’ I shrugged. ‘Mum’s at the office all day, and it’s her first week so I don’t think she’ll be able to get away.’

I didn’t mention Dad, who’d be at the funeral director’s. I couldn’t see him asking for time off from a brand-new job either, but especially not just because his son had seen a dead person. Dad’s well used to seeing bodies. He collects corpses from the hospital mortuaries all the time. They use this fake trolley that looks like a freshly made bed, and the body is hidden in a secret compartment under the sheets so it doesn’t freak out all the hospital patients. And the van is labelled ‘Private Ambulance’ instead of ‘Death Wagon’, for obvious reasons.

But I kept those details to myself, because for some reason people get weird when I tell them about this sort of stuff.

Not knowing what to do next, we trudged over to the school office.

Mrs Fustemann, the school secretary, was busy answering the phones in reception. She seemed flustered; perhaps they hadn’t had much practice with stuff like this? I suppose it’s not every day you find a dead body on school grounds, though she

didn't look like the type to offer up a hot, sweet cuppa and a supportive hug, anyway.

She was on the phone when we walked in, her long shiny nails tapping anxiously on the desk.

It turned out she was talking about me.

'No, Mr Archer, Jonathan is not able to stay here today. The whole school is closed to students and your son will need to find somewhere else to go if neither you nor your wife are able to leave work. Yes, I *know* he needs to be supervised.' She glanced up at us with flinty eyes. 'Would you be willing to let him go to another pupil's house for the day? He has just come in with a classmate, Daniel Horsefell.'

She put her hand over the phone. 'Daniel, would it be OK if Jonathan came home with you today?'

Daniel looked at me, unsure.

'My mum ... she's a little poorly at the moment ...' he muttered.

'Mr Archer? I've arranged for Jonathan to go to his friend Daniel's house for the rest of the day. Yes, I'll get him to text you with an address. That's all right, Mr Archer. Goodbye.'

Trust Dad to abandon me to the care of total strangers.

‘Right! That’s settled. But before you go, Mr Scouter would like to talk to you both,’ Mrs Fustemann said after she put down the receiver. ‘Go through into the office and wait – he’s at an emergency meeting in the staffroom at the moment, but that should be over soon.’

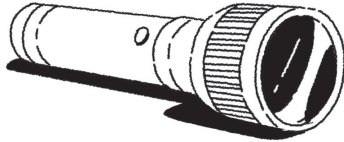
Mrs Fustemann buzzed the door open for us as we passed through reception and into the school foyer.

I moved to the right to wait outside the headmaster’s office door, but Daniel had the opposite instinct, so we nearly body-slammed into each other.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked.

‘*Shhh!*’ he hissed, beckoning me over to the closed staffroom door, as the noise of an intense conversation drifted into the corridor.

4



Tuesday 13 May, 10.55 a.m.

Hanbridge High School office

‘Did you hear that?’ Daniel whispered, all big-eyed and alert like a puppy who’d heard the word ‘walkies’.

‘Did I hear what?’ I hadn’t been paying much attention, my mind on my dad not bothering to come get me, but Daniel’s tone made me want to put my ear to the door too. As it happened, I’d been doing quite a bit of eavesdropping at home over the past few weeks, unwilling to let Mum and Dad spring any further surprises on me.

Daniel put his ear to the keyhole to hear better. I looked all around; there was no one about to pay any attention to what we were doing. All the other pupils