

Chapter 1

Flesh and nail. Or was it nails only?

Sam Clayton had been playing classical guitar for so long that he couldn't really explain how his fingers obtained that sound from a string. He didn't usually think about technique. But today, nothing was going smoothly. With head slightly bowed, he was practising a tremolo which refused to flow evenly from his fingertips. He'd hoped his music in the stillness of his living room would clear his head. The students in the house next door were silent for once. Most weekends the wall was practically bouncing with the sound of heavy metal.

"Come on," he said out loud. Maybe it was just the wrong day to pick the *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. He set down the guitar and picked up another score from a pile on the carpet. Flicking through it, he didn't even recognise his own pencil markings. His mind kept returning to the churchyard.

They'd been on the national news after the discovery of a shallow grave just inside the stone wall of the village church, three days after Jimmy Spratley was reported missing on the local marshes. The boy was only eight years old, and the little body had been mutilated, his heart torn out.

In the couple of years he'd worked for Anglian Constabulary, the most serious incident reported in the North Norfolk villages had been the theft of an outboard motor. Now there was a child killer on the loose, in Glaveny of all places.

The images of the open jacket, the ripped T-shirt and the hole gouged out where that small heart had throbbed, had haunted Clayton's dreams ever since. The officers who watched them dig up the body, though used to the sight of mangled car crash victims, had returned to their cars and vomited onto the tarmac. Some had needed counselling.

Clayton had informed the parents himself, taking with him a detective sergeant with a background in child protection. The family liaison officer was already at the house and let them in, her eyes flashing a warning.

The father stood behind her. "Couldn't you have done something to save our Jimmy?" He had jabbed his finger at them, his wife, silent on the sofa beside him, twisting and twisting her hands. In a flamingo pink mini-skirt and matching drop earrings she wasn't dressed for tragedy. Families never were.

"We did everything we could. The whole village came out to join the search, you know that, Mr Spratley," said Clayton.

He knew he sounded defensive, but what more could he tell them? In the milky pall of the mist, they'd combed every footpath, scoured every muddy channel, searched every bird hide as far as the Pelham windmill and beyond, startling the tourists out for the half term holiday with their children. They'd taken out boats from Branstable Quay to the seal colony on Glaveny Point, peering through binoculars at the dappled shapes on the shingle, their almost human moans clinging to the breeze.

When the mist cleared, they'd sent people with sticks through the reed beds, back into the village and along alleyways lined with empty flint cottages, where they peered through the windows. They'd searched abandoned boats washed up by surge tides on the marsh and the old Lifeboat House used by the nature reserve wardens.

The vicar had rung the police after spotting a fresh mound of soil loosely covered by turf in the graveyard. He'd ranted on about "an illegal burial" on hallowed ground.

The boy's father had yelled at them. "But what does it mean? What are we supposed to do now? He was our only child!" A row of family photographs stood on the window ledge. One was a group shot of a child with seaweed for hair, being hugged by his parents.

"We're following up leads, Mr Spratley, we've got the whole force on the case. That's why we were called in," Clayton had said. Anglian Constabulary, based outside Norwich, handled all serious crimes in the outlying areas. He reached up to straighten his tie, his neck felt constricted. If only we had something to go on, he thought, watching a vein pulsating down the side of Spratley's forehead.

"What kind of sicko would do a thing like that?" Spratley reached for his wife who crumpled, shuddering with sobs, against his shoulder. Her eyes were closed tight as though she was trying to shut out the horror.

The two detectives had left a few minutes later, seeing themselves to the door.

"I want you to get that bastard!" Spratley had called out as they made their way out. Clayton gestured to the liaison officer to stay behind with the bereaved couple.

As they drove off, the first TV crew was heading to the bungalow. Bloody journalists, thought Clayton. HQ wouldn't even have had time to appeal for privacy.

Spratley's question had resonated with Clayton ever since. What sort of monster would abduct a young boy, carve out his heart and then bury him where he was certain to be found?

So far forensics hadn't come up with DNA clues and they hadn't found the murder weapon as yet. It had to be some kind of hunting knife.

The villagers they'd interviewed had been no help. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Keeping to themselves, even after one of their own children had been murdered.

Clayton shook his head and kicked aside his footstool. Jimmy Spratley probably knew his killer, he thought. We'll have to go back and knock on more doors. But not today. It was his first day off in almost two weeks. He sighed and picked up his mug of cold coffee from the carpet. He took it into the kitchen and dropped it on the counter where it clinked against two other coffee-stained mugs.

What was the significance of the heart? They could only speculate. A satanic ritual? Some kind of perverted message from the killer?

The remains of Jimmy's heart had been discovered by a birder who'd heard the news about the murder. He'd noticed a clatter of seagulls circling over the marsh near the car park at Glaveny Point. He'd described to police how he'd looked through his binoculars at shreds torn from a chunk of blackened muscle the size of a fist. An animal, probably a dog judging from the teeth-marks, must have retrieved it from under a clump of samphire. Forensics had brought the whole lot back to the lab like a trophy. It didn't take them long to establish a match with Jimmy.

Clayton stepped over his guitar and tugged open a curtain by the French windows. The grass in the back garden glistened with fresh rain and his rusting lawnmower stood among weeds by the fence. He heard the muffled sound of his phone, which he traced to a pile of newspapers. He scattered them over the carpet with one hand.

It was the office. "What's up, Blake?"

"It's another missing person in Glaveny. A waitress from the Point Hotel."

Chapter 2

Clayton pressed the phone hard against his ear and shut his eyes. "What've we got?"

"Woman called Emma Dawson. She's not been seen since yesterday afternoon. She worked the lunchtime shift but didn't go back in the evening."

"Shit."

"The mist has come in again in Glaveny."

In North Norfolk the mist didn't descend from the sky, it rolled in from the sea, smothering the shingle and sliding across the marshland, its tongue licking the watery channels. Sometimes it could become blindingly thick in minutes, taking walkers by surprise. It often vanished just as quickly.

"Who told us?"

"Next door neighbour. Emma Dawson leaves her little boy with her. He's friendly with the Berrys' son. But she never showed up to collect him. The neighbour, Becky Berry, called us this morning."

Clayton looked at his watch.

"Where's the lad now?"

"Still next door. They're just off the main road."

"This is too much of a coincidence. I'm coming in. Make sure we've got as many uniforms out there as possible."

So much for his Sunday off.

He belched, picked up his half-eaten microwaved lasagne from the coffee table and stowed the guitar in its case. He dumped the food carton in the kitchen rubbish bin, pitching the fork into the sink where it disappeared into grease-stained water. His T-shirt felt taut over his belly. Ever since Claire had left, which was over a year ago now, he'd struggled to keep his weight down. Work kept getting in the way, just like it had got in the way of their marriage. Despite his resolve to run off the excess weight, his paunch was as solid as ever.

As he went upstairs to change, he heard pounding through the wall. The students must be there after all. He brushed his teeth, combed the fluff of his receding hair and ran downstairs.

He strapped himself into the VW and searched the glovebox for a CD. He debated whether to ring Julie Everett, the detective sergeant who'd accompanied him to see the Spratleys. She would probably hold it against him if he didn't call, even on her day off. She was chippy. She'll get over it, he thought, and rang DS Neil Pringle. Sometimes he just felt more comfortable with a male colleague.

* * *

An hour later, they stood outside a flint terraced cottage on a cul-de-sac that backed onto the Glaveny marsh. The mist had begun to recede, revealing a red-tinged carpet of samphire. A steady, fine drizzle dampened their macs. A family from the house opposite piled into a Range Rover and drove towards the main road.

A woman opened the cottage door, pulling her loose jumper down over her jeans. She looked to be in her early thirties.

"Ms Berry? Detective Inspector Clayton and Detective Sergeant Pringle, Anglian Constabulary," Clayton said. He always felt self-conscious reciting the name. It had been foisted on them following the merger of the Norfolk and Suffolk forces which had put an end to any pretence of friendly cooperation.

"You from Norwich?" She said it to rhyme with porridge in the local way.

Clayton nodded.

"Come in out of the rain." She spoke slowly and her eyes were glassy.

"Sorry, it's a bit of a mess." In the small room plastic toys formed a network of obstacles across a threadbare carpet. "The boys are upstairs."

"So Eddie's still with you?"

"That's right. He came round yesterday afternoon and has been here with my Jack ever since."

"Can we see him?"

"I guess. He's been crying. He's not his usual self at all. In fact he's not said anything since I called the police. Not a word."

Clayton wondered whether he should have called Julie after all. She did have a way with kids. They responded to her touchy-feeliness.

"He's usually as chatty as anything. Talks to himself all the time."

"And what made you worried about Emma Dawson?"

Becky Berry told him she took care of Eddie in return for the waitress taking her son to school every morning.

"On weekends as well?" Neil said. He looked up from his notebook.

Neil on a new case was like a Labrador puppy. He looked ready to roll on the carpet with his legs in the air every time they had a lead. A missing person so soon after a murder in the same village had him almost barking.

"Of course. She has to work weekends. But she's devoted to him. It's the first time she's not picked him up on time, even when she goes to the pub after."

"So why did you wait until today before calling the police?" said Clayton.

Becky was leaning heavily against the kitchen counter. "I called the hotel manager last night to find out where she was, but he said she hadn't turned up. He sounded more annoyed than worried. I thought there must be an explanation, and that she'd show up. Eddie bedded down with us last night but when there was still no sign of her this morning, we got really worried."

"Is Ms Dawson a reliable person?"

"Very. I'd trust her with my life. They love her at the hotel. She gets lots of tips."

"What about visitors? Boyfriends?"

"Emma came back to Glaveny after breaking up with her husband. She doesn't talk much about boyfriends and the like, she's quite private," she said. "I sometimes see the husband come to pick up Eddie." She paused. "But yes, there's been this Frenchman skulking around for the past few days."

A Frenchman? Skulking? Clayton stopped his note-taking. "How do you know he's French?"

"I saw him myself. I was behind him in the queue at the bakery. There's no mistaking that accent." She straightened herself against the counter. "A bit of exotica you might say. Makes a change in Glaveny."

"Who is he? A customer from the hotel?"

"I don't think so. Well, I don't actually know, but Eddie might."

"Can we see him? It won't take long."

Becky went upstairs slowly, holding tight to the banister and swaying slightly. She came down leading Eddie by the hand. He was a slight child with big eyes. His small face was puffy, the cheeks reddened and streaked with tears.

"Hello, Eddie. We're going to find your mummy, don't you worry about that," said Clayton, patting him on the shoulder. Eddie gripped his mother's hand, his dark cartoonish eyes staring up at Clayton.

"Did you see her with anyone yesterday?"

The boy looked up at his mother as though for approval. Becky squeezed his hand. "You can tell them. They're here to help."

The boy screwed up his face, then turned away from them, clinging to the folds of Becky's jumper, his fists clenched. Clayton and Neil looked at each other.

"It's alright, Eddie," said Clayton. "Can you just remember what time it was when you last saw your mum?"

The boy squirmed but still said nothing. He put his thumb in his mouth and sucked in his cheeks.

"Just try to remember," Clayton said gently. He definitely should have brought Julie. There were strict rules about interviewing children. "We know how much you love your mum. Were you out with her yesterday? Maybe walking on the marsh?"

"How about Friday?" Neil said. "Did you go out trick or treating?"

Becky answered. "Yes, they did, but they only went down our street. Eddie had a flashing light sabre and a cloak. It was great, wasn't it? They were both tucked up in bed by nine."

"Where? Here?" Neil said.

"No, Eddie went home, didn't you? His mum's off on Fridays." She stroked the boy's untidy curls. "There, there, never mind. Do you want to go back up with Jack?"

He didn't need asking twice. He picked up a red-and-yellow lorry from the floor, wedged it under his arm and ran upstairs.

Clayton turned to Becky. "You say Ms Dawson came back to Glaveny?"

"Yes, she was brought up here. But there's not much work, so when she left school she got a job waitressing in Norwich after her parents moved there."

"You got a key to next door?"

"Sure." She opened a kitchen drawer and handed him two keys with labels marked *Emma*. "You have to fiddle with it a bit in the lock then push hard to open the door. The other one's the back door."

"And did Emma go out much on the marsh?" Clayton asked.

"Oh yes. We all do. We love it. Before poor Jimmy died we let the kids go there all the time."

Neil was flicking through his notes. "What about the neighbours opposite?"

"City folk. London, I think," she said.

"And are you married, Ms Berry?"

"Yes."

"Your husband's not here though."

"No, he's a fisherman. Comes and goes with the tide." She gave a thin smile, and closed the door behind them.

* * *

They walked towards Emma Dawson's cottage next door. "What do you think, Sam?" Neil asked him.

"I don't like the sound of it." Emma Dawson had been missing for twenty-four hours already. Clayton thought of Jimmy Spratley, the last person reported missing in that village.

"That kid's traumatised," Neil said. "What if he knows something? And what's she on?" he added, with a nod in the direction of Becky Berry's.

But Clayton was bending down to examine the cottage's low sash windows, their paint peeling from the salt air. On the windowsill was a small violet in a pot, and a pumpkin looked out at them with a toothless grin. Above the front door, a sign announced that the cottage belonged to the village housing society.

"Let's just have a quick look round," said Clayton, pushing open the front door. It opened into a small living room separated from the kitchen by a counter. A mirror image of the Berrys'.

Switching on the light, they could see a box of toys on the carpet, and a television in the corner next to a stack of plastic chairs. The shabby covers of two armchairs were scarred with cat scratches. A low round table sat in the middle of the room. Clayton bent down to study a photograph of Eddie on his mother's knee, both of them looking straight into the camera. The boy was giggling. Was she tickling him? He didn't seem anything like the withdrawn child he'd just met.

He noticed two mugs on the counter beside a kettle, ready to be poured.

A couple of crayoned drawings were pinned to the wall. The first, of a blue sky, yellow sun and spiky green marsh grasses with two stick figures in the foreground, was signed in capital letters, EDY. The second, a picture of a brontosaurus in a swamp, must have been done more recently. Eddie's name was spelled correctly, and was surrounded by gold stars.

They went into the kitchen, trying not to touch or disturb anything. There were two small bowls on the floor, licked clean of their contents.

"Is it me or is it cold in here?" said Clayton, stepping back into the living room. He felt a clammy draught swirling around him. It seemed to pass from the room up the stairs.

"It's probably just the damp," Neil said. "We're right by the marsh, remember."

"I'm going up."

"Shall I look outside?" Neil held out his hand for the back door key.

Clayton went up the stairs two at a time. One room, with curtains open, was the child's bedroom, decorated with more pictures. Clayton could hear a faint scratching noise coming from inside the other upstairs room. He threw open the door and stepped back. "Jesus Christ!"

The cat must have been shut in the bedroom since the previous day. A furry black shape streaked past him, down the stairs and out of the front door.

Clayton found the light switch and peered inside the bedroom. The air felt as moist as his mildew-coated shower.

He jumped. A skull stared straight at him through baleful eye sockets.

Neil came up beside him. "Why would anyone keep a skull in their bedroom? This place is starting to give me the creeps."

Clayton inspected the object, which sat on top of a chest of drawers. It was carved from wood and hollow inside. He could see the grease of a nightlight at the base, and imagined it flickering in the dark, throwing shadows.

He heard a creaking noise coming from downstairs.

"Did you shut the back door?"

"I thought so. I'll go down again and check." Neil's boots echoed on the wooden stairs. Clayton took a last look round the bedroom, where condensation had formed on the window. Downstairs, he found Neil locking the back door.

"I could have sworn I closed it behind me," he said.

"What about outside? Anything there?" Clayton asked.

"An old pushchair in the yard. There's a shed but I couldn't see through the window. We'll have to come back."

A tap dripped over the kitchen sink. Neil turned it off.

Clayton tugged the front door closed behind them, and looked down the street. The cat was sitting on Becky Berry's window ledge, licking its fur with a pink tongue. It watched them through yellow slits as they went back to their car.

Neil opened his phone to call the office, but it was Clayton's that rang. He listened in silence, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Okay, we'll be right over. Get me forensics." He turned to Neil. "They've found a body in a boat at Branstable."

Chapter 3

They had a meeting with the DCI in ten minutes. Meanwhile, Clayton was in the office giving the wastepaper basket a good kicking. Screwed up balls of paper jumped about like fireworks. He heard a sound and looked round. Julie was standing by his desk with arms folded and an accusing look on her face.

"Thanks for the phone call yesterday."

"Don't you start. I thought you deserved a day off."

She held her ground. Her blonde hair was tied in a bun as tight as her features. "Just so long as you know who's supposed to be the child specialist round here."

"Come off it, Julie. How were we to know that we'd end up interviewing the son of a dead waitress? You weren't down to work anyway."

She watched in silence while he collected the discarded papers and dropped them back in the bin.

"Come on, let's pick up Neil and get this over with," he said, grabbing his notebook.

Detective Chief Inspector Charlotte Bligh always looked as if she had a stomach ache. She was sitting on her desk with her feet swinging, waiting for them.

She gestured to the chairs, slightly below her level. "Congratulations on making Anglian Constabulary a national laughing stock."

Neil stroked a large plaster at the base of his thumb. Julie looked at the floor.

"First we have a dead boy, attracting nationwide media coverage, and now a young woman found strangled to death in the same village. Don't you think this is starting to look a little bit out of control?"

Clayton opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off, tapping her pen on the desk. "What are the leads? First of all, the boy. Do we know whether he was tampered with?"

"Forensics said there was nothing to indicate sexual assault, no, ma'am."

"That's a relief. A child abuse case would be radioactive in Norfolk."

"We've gone through the sex offenders register, of course."

"And?"

Clayton turned to Neil.

"Just one in the neighbourhood. In his seventies. And he's got dementia."

"Most murderers are known to their victims. Let's not forget that.

What did they say at the school?"

"The headmistress at Jimmy Spratley's school has gone through the CVs of all her staff, just to be on the safe side," Julie said.

"So as things stand, we've pretty well ruled out sexual motivation, ma'am," said Clayton.

Bligh paused, looking down at her shoes. "What about the woman?"

Clayton opened his notebook. "We've not got all the tests back yet. Here's what we know so far. A dog walker at Branstable Quay noticed strands of hair peeking out from under the tarpaulin of a small boat hauled onto the bank of the creek, while his dog was peeing against it. When he got closer, he saw smudges of what looked like blood on the side. He called us after seeing a shape under the tarpaulin. We found Emma Dawson's body in the boat, her clothes drenched in blood. Strangled with barbed wire."

"And the boat owner?"

"A guy from London. Not used the boat since the summer."

"Do we think the two killings are linked?"

"We don't know yet, ma'am. The only link is that they both occurred in the same village."

"So what do we have so far?"

Clayton leaned forward in his chair. "We've got footprints. Boot prints in the mud where the body was heaved into the boat."

"What size?"

"Nines."

The DCI nodded. "Tyre treads?"

"Not by the boat, no. The car park is right there though."

"And that's useful — or not?"

"No. Not with all the comings and goings."

Bligh sighed. "That's what I thought."

Clayton hesitated. "She's got a tattoo on her ankle."

"A tattoo? What sort of tattoo?"

"A daisy. Well, a flower anyway. Looks like a daisy to me."

Bligh laughed. "Doesn't everyone under forty have a tattoo these days?"

"Of course. But we don't know the significance of it yet."

"It seems that you haven't figured out the significance of very much at all. What about the woman's child? Any clues there?"

"He's been struck dumb. He's not said anything since his mother disappeared. But the next door neighbour said she'd been seen around with a Frenchman."

Bligh raised an eyebrow. "Okay. Get me an update on the French connection as soon as possible. God help us if this turns into an international manhunt. I presume we're checking out the drugs angle on this. Whoever killed the child in that way must have been high as a bloody kite." She retreated behind her desk and faced her computer. But she wasn't quite finished with him.

"Sam," she said in a low voice, as he got up to follow the others out.

"You should have taken Julie with you. You know the rules."

"Yes, I'll take her with me today," he said. Had Julie complained behind his back? "Sorry, but it was the weekend." It sounded as lame as what he said next. "We'll need help on this, by the way."

* * *

Charlotte Bligh raised her hands and eyes towards heaven. Clayton knew the financial pressures as well as she did. They both also knew that soon she'd have to make recommendations about where to make cuts in the investigation team. If Bligh worked on the basis of last in, first out, it would have to be Julie Everett. She was the most recent addition to the Norwich team. But she had a reputation as an effective and canny detective who'd persist with cases after her other colleagues had given up. So perhaps Neil Pringle would have to go.

So Bligh's strategy for now was to put the screws on Clayton, although she knew he lashed out under pressure. Bligh reasoned that if they were successful in their investigation, they would be less likely to be sacrificed. But who could predict what would happen to policing across the country? Maybe they'd all end up being outsourced and privatised.

"Politicians," she sighed.

* * *

Julie pointed at Neil's hand. "Wife gone for you with the carving knife again?" "Jealous?" he answered.

Julie flushed. Her jokes never seemed to work.

"Actually, you're not too far off," Neil said. "Except it was me with the carving knife. My thumb got in the way of a leg of lamb yesterday lunchtime. Didn't have time to enjoy it, mind, as I got called out to Glaveny."

"I know," she said, pointedly.

Clayton sat down and stretched his feet out on his desk. "Well, no pressure then."

"Bligh's bark's worse than her bite," Neil said.

"Do you know something we don't?" said Clayton. "Three wives not enough for you?"

Julie didn't smile.

Neil grimaced. "Not my type, actually. Bit too butch for me." He checked his watch and walked out. The others knew that moments later he'd be back with three cups of coffee from the dispenser.

Neil handed round the drinks. "So, do you want me to see the hotel manager?"

"Thanks. Yes. See about family history. We'll get an officer to follow up on the drugs. Julie and I will talk to the dad and Eddie." Clayton paused. He hated tears. There'd been plenty of those when Claire left, and most of them had been his. She'd walked out of his life so coldly, as if he was a shop that no longer stocked her favourite product. In their jobs they both had to keep their emotions under control. But Claire had always had the edge. Nursing was tough.

He picked up a pen and returned to his list. They'd have to start all over again with the same locals who'd been questioned after Jimmy Spratley's death. They all seemed to have something to hide. Farmers feared police investigations into illegally hired migrant workers. And then there was the one-eyed hermit of Pelham-next-the-Marsh who looked like a villain straight out of central casting. Too obvious.

Clayton looked up at Neil. "Oh, and get whatever you can from the hotel manager on this Frenchman. In Glaveny he'd stand out like a fart in a lift."

"Might be more fragrant than that," Neil said. "Don't they all wear eau de cologne?"

Julie said nothing. She never joined in their boys' banter. "It strikes me that both murders have one thing in common. They weren't murdered on the spot, right? The boy was already dead when he was taken to the churchyard. And the waitress was killed before being taken to the boat."

Clayton twisted round in his chair. "That's what forensics said. It was after she'd finished her lunchtime shift. But what are you driving at?"

"Just wondering whether there might be some connection. It was Halloween. Do you remember that satanist sect that was broken up?" Julie couldn't help noticing that Neil didn't look at her. His eyes were on Clayton when she spoke.

"Those guys who desecrated the graves? Weren't they just some drunken yobs?"

"Yes, but Halloween was only three days ago. A woman dies just days after this killer or killers ripped out a little boy's heart. What if it was some sort of human sacrifice?" Julie said.

"In Glaveny? Don't be ridiculous," Neil said. He was the only one of them to come from Norfolk. Clayton had been promoted to DI from Lancashire and Julie had moved from Ipswich. Neil loved showing off his local knowledge and never missed an opportunity to do so.

Julie pulled a face. "Just saying."

Clayton scratched the back of his ear with his pen. "Okay, never mind the satanists. Let's try good old-fashioned police work. Logic, not superstition." He tried to think. Were both murders carried out on the marsh? Maybe they had that in common. Were they both premeditated, or was Emma Dawson's killing an opportunistic attack? Either way, he was beginning to think that the child and the waitress were the victims of the same sick killer.