

# ABIDING EVIL

*An Excerpt*

Alison Buck



An Alnpete Book

## **Abiding Evil**

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# 1

Wind whistled through the shack's bleached and broken clapboard walls, chilling to the bone. The lamp's hissing flame, the only source of light, flared and guttered behind its dirty glass, an erratic dance of shadows leaping across the darkened walls.

All in black, sharp face pale in the weak light, a crouching insect of a man sat hunched over a table. With a low grunt of pleasure he leant back and smiled, lifting a small object up into the light. He turned it over and over with his long, bony fingers, silently admiring his own workmanship. It was ready.

Now the game could begin again.

The doll of roughly carved pinewood stared blankly back at him, its eyes, scratched hollows, gouged across the grain. Its wood felt warm in his icy fingers and, as he turned it over, he heard its voice whispering to him,

"Come and catch me. I'm waiting."

The man gasped with pleasure. His black eyes glittered and his thin face creased into a grotesque grimace of greedy anticipation.

# 2

Emerging from the unbroken dark of rural night, the bus rattled into the slumbering town of Drovers Creek. With a complaining hiss and a shriek of the brakes, it pulled over outside the disused grain depot. Inside, as the engine grumbled and the bus shuddered to an idling halt, sleepy travellers were shaken back to consciousness. They yawned and stretched, rubbing sleep from eyes creased closed, reluctant to open. Moving stiffly, pulling cuffs down to protect their hands, they wiped condensation from the cold windows to peer out into the early morning half-light. Most read the name on the rusting sign and gratefully returned to sleep, shuffling and stretching in their cramped seats. Two, a slightly-built woman in her early twenties and a small boy, both now muffled in layers of thick clothing, dragged their heavy bags to the front of the bus and staggered down its steps.

Leaving the warm, sleepy fug of the bus, they gasped at the sudden chill of the outside air and hugged their coats tighter, trying to still the sudden, violent trembling of their limbs. The driver glanced down at them briefly, disinterested. He said nothing, but grunted at the effort as he wrenched the door shut in their faces. With a hoarse growl and a belch of black smoke, the engine coughed back into life and the bus lumbered off, leaving the two

small figures shivering in its wake, alone at the side of the road. The steamy interior lights of the bus, now fading into the distance, were the only sign of warmth in the bleak landscape, a small cocoon of comfort fast receding, soon to be swallowed up by the dark.

Now there was absolute stillness. The woman and child could hear nothing save the ragged harshness of their own breathing. The weak, pre-dawn lightening of the sky gave little illumination to their surroundings. Sufficient though, for it to be clear that there was no life here. The few buildings discernible, darker shapes against the cold sky, had been the grain stores of an agricultural depot, now deserted, dark and empty, padlocked chains hanging loosely across battered, rusting gates.

Without a word, the woman took a tighter grip on the heavy bags, crossed the road and marched off down a dirt track which led across the fields. Also silent, the boy followed. He trudged in his mother's wake, watching as each rasping breath clouded around her head before trailing, swirling, behind her. As she strode on ahead, she seemed to him to move like a powerful steam train rolling down the line, wheels held to the tracks, locked on their predetermined path. And the boy knew that, just like the train, his mother would not deviate from her path, look back, or make a detour for anything. Or anyone. Sighing, he lowered his head and plodded after her, thrusting mittened hands deep into the pockets of his oversized coat.

With the uneven path frozen hard, ridged with sudden ruts and littered with stone-hard clods of soil, the pair made slow and faltering progress. The dull clomping of their stumbling boots and the gasping intakes of icy breath through damp scarves were the only sounds. On all sides, brittle stumps of blackened corn stretched away in rows, disappearing into the gloom; a mist sinking low

over the cold, dark earth.

The child's fringe was soon dripping into his eyes. He blinked the sweat away and looked up, straining to see the fading figure ahead. He was anxious, falling behind, but he didn't call out for his mother to slow down; he knew from experience that she would only be spurred on to move more quickly away. He knew that now, as always, he was an inconvenience to her; she never made any effort to hide her feelings towards him. He had never known from her the comfort of a hug or the tenderness of a goodnight kiss. She was simply a part of the pattern of his life as he was of hers. There had never been a love between them so, having never known her affection, the boy had no expectation of it; he accepted the situation without any sense of loss or regret. Their relationship was what it always had been and, for him, it represented normality. So he stumbled on, breathing hard, trying to catch up with her, the only familiar element in this icy, wasted landscape.

It seemed to the boy that the mist cleared suddenly and he all but ran into his mother. She had stopped and was talking to someone. The boy cowered behind her. He knew the routine; keep quiet and keep out of sight. But on this occasion, uniquely, his mother turned and pulled him forward to meet the stranger, an old woman.

"His name's Jon," she said, pulling the scarf from around Jon's head.

Jon recognised the look that flashed over the old woman's face. The instant, instinctive response was always the same; the gasp and the wide, shocked eyes. Most women additionally put their hands to their mouths, but this one reacted as men usually did; setting her jaw and swallowing hard. Jon had produced such reactions for as long as he could remember so he no longer gave it

much thought. It was just the way things were. His mother however did still care. This reaction of strangers towards her son never ceased to hurt her, not because it evoked in her any sense of empathy or tenderness towards him, but rather because it reflected so negatively on her. Their shocked reaction was, she believed, an implicit criticism of her for having produced such a malformed child. She hated the criticism and she hated Jon for being its cause.

“You gonna let us in, or what?” she snapped.

With her eyes still fixed on Jon, the old woman grunted assent and stepped to one side, allowing the boy and his mother to pass. Making no move to help lift the bags, the old woman stood watching, frowning, her hands stuffed into the pockets of her oversized dungarees. Scowling, Jon’s mother did not ask for help, but grunted as she lifted the heavy bags clear of the ground then struggled, the bags banging heavily into the risers, to climb the steps to the door of a small farmhouse.

Once inside, she dumped the bags and threw herself down into the threadbare armchair. Apparently forgotten, Jon now stood by the door and stared about him. The single armchair was close to a wood stove, which stood against the one stone-built wall. The floor, ceiling and remaining walls were all of rough pinewood, as were the table and chairs that stood over by the window. The table, and the floor below it, were littered with the discarded remains of the old woman’s meals. But, apart from these scattered leftovers, there was none of the everyday clutter that would suggest that someone lived here; that the room was a part of someone’s home. It was a functional, bare and comfortless space and the low-powered lamp gave out little light. The room looked and smelt dusty; neglected. In this respect at least, it was similar to all the rooms in all the many run-down

apartment buildings that Jon had ever known. The boy felt at home.

The old woman had followed them in and now stood, hands still in her pockets, looking from Jon to his mother.

“Is he normal?” she asked.

Jon’s mother looked up, disbelief on her face.

“You tell me Ma. He look normal to you, huh?”

“No, no, I mean in the head. Is he like a retard?”

Jon’s mother shrugged.

“He don’t say much and he ain’t never been to school or nothing, but he mostly does what you tell him.”

The old woman gave Jon an appraising stare, then nodded as if satisfied. She turned to her daughter.

“So what are you doing? You coming back here now?”

“Well gee, thanks for the welcome home Ma. It’s just great to be back.”

“I asked you a question, Jeannie.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said, her face sullen.

“Jeannie? Why? What’s wrong with that? It’s your name ain’t it?”

“Not any more. I left that godawful name behind me when I left this dump -”

“And now you’re back,” the old woman interrupted.

“Yeah,” her daughter muttered, crestfallen, “now I’m back.”

She turned away, staring into nowhere. Behind her, the old woman chewed her lip, not knowing what to say. She had never been good at talking to people, even her own flesh and blood: especially her own flesh and blood.

She shrugged.

“So what d’they call you now?”

“As if you care.”

“Suit yourself.”

Her daughter had always been like this, wayward,



moody; downright ornery. The old woman turned her attention back to the boy.

“You hungry, boy?”

Jon said nothing, but looked up at this woman, his grandmother, with pleading eyes. The old woman knew that look.

“Starving huh? OK, go see if there’s some bread in the kitchen there. Can you do that?”

Jon nodded and plodded into the tiny kitchen. The old woman was still watching him, fascinated, unconvinced that the boy would be able to do something even as simple as finding and eating a hunk of bread. But find it he did and, squatting down on the grimy linoleum, he ate it, breaking it into manageable pieces before noisily sucking it in through his ragged tear of a mouth.

“How the hell d’he get like that?”

The younger woman sighed.

“He was born kinda odd-looking, and then he fell out the window when he was a baby. Cut his head right open to the bone,” she traced a finger across her own face from ear to chin, “They stitched his face back up like that, but they said there weren’t nothing more they could do.”

“And his father?”

She shook her head.

The old woman nodded.

“Well I gotta go see to the traps. I’ll be back at noon. Guess you know where things are. Help yourself.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Ma,” The younger woman paused a moment, hesitating, then added, “It’s Gina, with a G. They call me Gina now. It’s like a stage name.”

The old woman nodded again, then took up her gun and left without saying another word.

When she came back to the house, the old woman was half expecting her daughter to be gone. But Gina was still

there. She had unbuttoned her coat but had not taken it off and she was fidgeting, restless with impatience, but she was there. She looked up as the old woman came in and, straight away, just from that look, her mother knew that she wanted something from her. The old woman waited to see what the something was. Money? Or a place to stay a while?

“Ma?” Gina began cautiously, “I got something to ask you.”

The old woman nodded but said nothing. She began to skin the rabbits she had just dumped on the table.

Gina winced with disgust. This is why she had left this place, with its primitive ways and dirt and lack of any ambition beyond simply getting through another day. She looked away, trying to block out the ripping, sliding sounds of skin parting from flesh.

“I’ve had an offer to try out for a part in a movie. It’s such a big break for me, Ma. I’m real lucky they’re even considering me for it.”

She paused, trying to gauge her mother’s reaction, but the old woman merely continued skinning the rabbits. The world of actors and film-making were so far removed from her everyday experience that her daughter might as well have been describing the workings of another planet. The old woman listened, but could make little sense of what Gina was telling her.

“Thing is, Ma, it’s a two month shoot, out in California, can you believe it? And see, the thing is, I’m gonna be busy the whole time.”

Her mother began to understand. Gina continued,

“I couldn’t take Jon with me. I’d love to, naturally, but it just wouldn’t be fair on the boy.”

The old woman stopped her work and prepared herself. Gina took a deep breath before making her final pitch.

“So I was wondering if he could maybe just stay here with you. Just for two months, three at the very most. I really, really need the work and you could get to know your grandson. He’s really no trouble at all. What d’ya say?”

Even having had a few moment’s warning of the request, the old woman was unable to find the words to reply and, delighted, Gina took her mother’s silence for agreement. She was thrilled; barely able to believe how easy it had been. Her spirits soared. In an instant the dark and heavy shutters that had obscured the way ahead, the way to her deserved success, had fallen clean away. An incredible world of unlimited possibilities opened up for her, a world without that goddamn boy dragging her down, holding her back. After years of demeaning struggle and failure, the prospect of freedom was almost too wonderful and Gina had to work desperately to conceal her sudden exhilaration; to stop herself jumping for sheer joy and relief. She lowered her head and, with apparent concentration, repeatedly smoothed the creases from her skirt while she fought to chase the smile from her face. Eventually she was able to raise her head and speak in a voice that was cheerful and bright, but gave no hint of the wild euphoria she was actually feeling.

“Oh, thank you, Ma, thank you so much. You don’t know how much this means to me. This is the break I’ve been waiting for all these years. I’m gonna make it big, Ma, you’ll see.”

Her mother continued to stare down at the bloodied carcasses on the table, as if in a dream.

Standing, Gina rebuttoned her coat and began to pull on her gloves.

“His clothes and such are in there,” she nodded towards one of the bags. “Thank you so much, Ma. I won’t ever forget this.”

She came over to her mother and nearly surprised them both by giving her a hug, but the sight of the plump, pale, skinless bodies on the table brought her back to reality in a hurry. Hug this filthy, vile-smelling old woman with her slimy, blood covered hands? Hell no! What had she been thinking? Now with a look of thinly concealed disgust, Gina turned away and picked up her bag.

“You ain’t going right now?” the old woman asked, suddenly coming to life, realising what was happening.

“I got to, Ma. Filming starts next week and the bus leaves town at three.”

The old woman shook her head, trying to clear her confusion.

“But Jeannie, you...er...you got money for a ticket?”

“Got my ticket right here,” Gina smiled, patting her handbag. The old woman knew that the matter was decided. Discussion was over.

Gina walked to the door, a spring in her step; so nearly free.

“Ain’t you forgetting something?”

Her mother’s sharp tone cut through Gina’s sense of elation. She stiffened, frozen, her hand already grasping the door handle. There was panic on her face; she was so close to freedom, just seconds away from the start of a new life. Please God, don’t let it go wrong now. Slowly, she turned.

Her mother nodded towards Jon who was huddled in the corner of the room.

“Ain’t you planning on saying goodbye to the boy?”

Gina suddenly relaxed, a look of relief sweeping her face.

“Sure I am. Why, what sort of mother do you take me for?”

“Come here boy,” ordered the old woman.

Jon came over to her, but kept his eyes down, fixed on

the shiny lilac of his mother's skirt. He knew her: this was not going to be a tearful parting. He had watched as Gina played the role of delicate, vulnerable ingénue more times than he could count, but he was also more than familiar with the desperate and self-centred individual who existed just beneath the veneer of vulnerability.

Gina walked over to her son and stiffly patted him on the head.

"Be good for your grandma. And do like I told you; stay out of sight, away from people. You understand? Good. And don't you worry; I'll be back for you, soon as I can."

All three knew this for the lie it was, but nothing was said to challenge it. Jon had to stand mutely beside this stranger, watching his mother as she walked down the steps, away across the fields and out of his life forever.

For the next ten years Jon lived with his grandmother on the farm, hidden away from the rest of the world. No one in Drovers Creek, or the nearby town of Losien, ever knew of his existence and, living in the remote farmstead at the end of a mile-long dirt track, Jon saw no one but the old woman. In all the time since his mother's departure, no visitors had ever come to the farm and his grandmother, knowing what reception the boy would have been given by the people in the town, determined instead to give the boy the means by which to live as independently as she had herself.

All her life she been a hard-working woman, well used to the demands of farming and, as the oldest girl in a large family, she had been a second mother to her six brothers and sisters. Escaping at barely nineteen from the numbing drudgery at home, she had married and travelled across the country with her new husband to this farmstead where she had spent the rest of her life. Her

husband had been a powerful and upright man with clear ideas on the behaviour properly befitting a wife. He would not tolerate being crossed and had once beaten her to the floor for daring to express an opinion in disagreement with his own. She soon learned to keep her opinions to herself and subsequently enjoyed a few years of measured contentment, until the day when her husband dropped dead out in the corn field, leaving her with a farm to run and a child to raise.

Several men from the town had visited the farm in those early days, looking to marry the young widow or to get their hands on her land by some other means. They had sympathised with her, poor Lizzie Benson, a young widow woman without a man to care for her. How could she hope to manage a farm alone? They made offers to buy her land, 'As a kindness, so she could make a new start for herself and her daughter back East'. But Lizzie was nobody's fool and she saw clean through their weasel smiles. And while she may not have had much education, she knew enough to judge that they were offering far too little for the land. So Lizzie got down her husband's old shotgun and ran them off her property, every last one of them. She would never remarry: she would live her own life and speak her own opinions as often and as loud as she liked. And she would work the farm herself, or die in the trying.

Over the years, Lizzie acquired a fearsome reputation as something of a wild woman. She had little time for niceties and dressed in dungarees and heavy working boots. Long days spent working in both the withering heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter soon aged her. Occasionally, at the end of another cruelly exhausting day, bone weary she would allow herself a fortifying swig from her dead husband's stash of Jack Daniels. And when, eventually, the last bottle gave out,

she scandalised old man Carney by marching into his liquor store and buying another bottle, the biggest he had. Lizzie no longer had to care what behaviour was fitting for a woman; through sheer hard work and grim determination, she had established herself as a tough-talking, hard-dealing farmer in her own right.

Years later, she realised that this hard-won acceptance had perhaps come at too high a price. Her daughter, Jeannie, had grown up with no father and seeing little of her mother. Jeannie resented her mother's strangeness; her scruffy appearance and her blunt talking. She wanted a soft, womanly mother, like the other kids had. She wanted a mother who fixed her hair, baked cookies and dressed in pretty clothes.

Jeannie's own clothes were always ill-fitting, bought as an afterthought on the rare trips into town for supplies. Everything was bought big to last longer. Her mother always said she would grow into them, but Jeannie was a small kid, and she stayed small. In her long dresses and oversized boots, she was the butt of every joke in the school. The other kids pinched at her. They jeered at her. Some even threw stones and shouted that her mother was an ugly old witch.

For all of this, Jeannie blamed her mother; hating her even though she knew something of the many hardships Lizzie had to endure. Looking to her own future, Jeannie wanted more for herself. She wanted out. And soon after her fourteenth birthday she made her escape, heading off to the city with an itinerant farmhand.

Driven off his own family's land down south by the drought and the dust storms, he had wandered north looking for work. He came to Lizzie's farm offering to help with the harvest. But he left with Jeannie and forty dollars that he stole from her mother.

In the years following Jeannie's leaving, Lizzie became

even more reclusive. She despised and distrusted the townsfolk and they returned the sentiment in full, leaving Lizzie in the total isolation she demanded. It was to be nearly ten years before she saw her daughter again and, now that Jeannie had finally returned, with her new name, and her malformed son, Lizzie saw no reason to break that isolation and invite the scorn of the townsfolk on to the boy.

So Jon never took the school bus he glimpsed far in the distance, away across the fields. He never had a day's formal education, but Lizzie taught him how to set traps and find clean water. She showed him how to make and mend his clothes and cook his own food. She worked Jon hard as a labourer around the farm and taught him how to fend for himself. Between the two of them, they grew or trapped almost everything they needed and, every three months or so, Lizzie would go into town and barter for the remainder. Jon roamed his grandmother's land and trapped and hunted in the vast ancient forest that surrounded its fields and stretched for hundreds of square miles to the mountains in the next State.

Lizzie accepted the responsibility to care for her grandson, but she was not a woman given to gentleness and was quick to threaten a whipping if he defied her. Yet, despite this, Jon respected her and, if there was little love between them, there was at least a closeness. They each knew the boundaries of contact between them and, within these limitations, they shared a sort of gruff affection, the one for the other. The old woman gave Jon a stability that he had never known during his early nomadic years on the road with Gina. He and his grandmother got along together well enough and Jon at last felt he had his place in the world, even if he was not always made to feel so very welcome in it.



Jon's mother had never told him in what year or on what day he had been born, but, looking back later, he guessed he must have been about sixteen years old when his world again changed irrevocably.

It was a warm evening, in early June. Jon came back to the farm after a few days' hunting to find his grandmother sitting, rigid at the table. He took the old woman's hand to rouse her, but she was already cold. The once rheumy blue eyes were dry and partially closed. The thin-lipped mouth had sagged open and the head lolled to one side, dirty grey hair in disarray.

Jon was almost certain that Lizzie was dead, but he had no idea what he should do now. She had always acted as if she would live forever, never admitting to any weakness. It was almost impossible to believe that this indomitable spirit could have ended. It was as if Lizzie's fiery determination and raw, hard work should have guaranteed her endless life and vitality. And yet, here she was, dead, while, around her, everything else had continued, unconcerned.

Death was a part of the life of the fields and forest all around them, yet Lizzie and Jon had never discussed this eventuality. When her old mongrel had died, Lizzie had dealt with its disposal alone. By the time Jon had returned from his day's hunting, the dog was simply no longer there. So, with no experience of funeral parlours or chapels, Jon had an understanding of the handling of death drawn solely from his time spent in the forest. If an animal was dead and it was good, you ate it. If an animal was dead but diseased or decayed, it was not good, you left it to rot and maybe some other animal would eat it.

Neither option seemed appropriate for his grandmother.

Jon didn't like looking at that face, somehow unfamiliar now the life had left it, so he took the sheet

from his grandmother's bed and covered her with it. He stood for a moment, undecided, hands rammed into his pockets, just as his grandmother so often had. Then, with a shrug, he went off to his own bed as usual.

By the next morning the body had slumped forward onto the table. Jon skirted around it as he prepared his breakfast before a normal day's work, but he was concerned. Was the body supposed to be able to move like that? Was that right? He had no idea. He lifted the sheet, reached out and touched the old woman's hand. At the cold, unnatural waxiness of her skin, he reflexively pulled his hand from hers. He couldn't bear to lift her head and look again into those dry eyes, but he felt there was no need to; she had to be dead. Moved or no, she had to be dead. So, what was he to do? What should he do? Still unsure, he decided to go hunting. He should have been working in the vegetable patch near the house that day but, under the circumstances, he reasoned that Lizzie was unlikely to raise an objection to his change of routine.

Jon spent the whole day out in the forest. Here he felt comfortable. He had everything he needed and the trees provided a soothing shade from the warm summer sun. He stayed away until late in the evening.

By now, his grandmother's body had started to smell. It was unmistakable and hit Jon as he opened the door. He winced, but was relieved. At least now he could be absolutely sure that Lizzie was dead; he knew the smell of decay. Gathering up his blanket and a lamp, he prepared to spend the night in the barn.

The next morning he moved his few personal possessions and all the tinned foodstuffs, hunting knives, gun and cooking utensils and so on, out into the barn. Then he spent the next few days tending the vegetable

patch and avoiding the house altogether. He tried not to think of his grandmother sitting there at the table. He couldn't help but feel that he should do something special with her body; but what? Stirring the embers of his fire on his third evening living in the barn, he had an idea that he could perhaps burn the body, but he couldn't be sure that was the right thing to do. The problem was gnawing away at him.

He decided to get away for a long hunting trip and put the worry behind him. Having packed some gear he trekked for eight or ten miles into an unfamiliar area of forest before making camp in a small cave above a clear running stream. The weight of worry soon dissipated and he spent several days as happy as he had ever been. He felt an acceptance here in the forest and found solace in the peace surrounding him. He was relaxed; at home here, not in a house.

And not in a barn.

With that, his thoughts went back to the farm, and his sense of duty decided him to go back. He ate, then packed his bag with a heavy heart.

Jon knew something was wrong while he was still some way off. There was a dark rectangle where the farm door should have been. He discarded his gear and ran the last few hundred yards to the house, leaping the steps to the door in one bound. The door was swinging open and he had an immediate impression of the room being in disarray. Then, disturbed by his sudden appearance, a cloud of flies rose up and buzzed around him. He stopped dead. Near his foot, on the floor just inside the door, was a scrap of his grandmother's shirt. It had a mass of something brown and fibrous on it.

Flesh.

Swatting at the flies that were obscuring everything

with their constant movement, Jon forced himself to go over to the table. His hand trembled as he grabbed at the sheet and he had to swallow hard to quell his stomach when he pulled it away. What remained of his grandmother's body was shocking. An animal, or animals, had partially dismembered it, removing many areas of flesh and gnawing at the exposed bones. Jon was appalled. He swayed slightly.

Some of the flies had now settled, making it easier for Jon to see the rest of the room. Dried up trails of blood laced the floor, linking larger stains where something had presumably ripped apart pieces of his grandmother's body. Jon could take no more. He had to get out.

Retching, he slumped down outside the barn; unable to think clearly. The buzzing foulness of the room stayed at the forefront of his mind and its stinking air still filled his lungs. He shook his head. His grandmother should not have ended like this. No matter how fierce her outbursts of anger had been, or how harsh her occasional beatings, Lizzie had deserved better than this. And Jon knew it was his fault. He could not have shut the door properly when he went on the hunting trip. But, even if he had secured the house, he knew it had been wrong to go off, leaving her body like that. He should have done something. But what? What should he have done?

The horror of the room now decided his actions for him. He certainly could never live in that house again. He would return to the welcoming safety of his forest cave and make his home there.

Soon he was making the first of many trips into the forest, carrying supplies and utensils, clothes and tools from the farmstead. He had to be thorough, taking everything he might need, because he knew he would never be coming back. He stashed everything in a hollow about a half mile into the trees, covering it all with a

tarpaulin. He would move everything to the cave by the stream, once his task here was completed.

He made his final journey back to the farm and climbed the steps to the door, but he did not go in this last time. He had earlier poured kerosene around the room, soaking it into the armchair. Now he made a silent farewell to the old woman, opened the door and hastily threw in the lighted rag. With a dull ‘woomp’, like something heavy being dropped into a sack of flour, the fire took hold, immediately engulfing the room. With sudden roaring ferocity, a wave of hot air forced Jon back down the steps.

He retreated and watched from the edge of the trees as the house burnt, quickly leaving no more than a few charred fingers smoking into the appropriately blood red sky. In the distance, lit orange by the setting sun, Jon saw puffs of dust rising from the farm track. Someone from town must have noticed the smoke and come to check on the wild old woman. But Jon didn’t wait. These people were nothing to do with him. His time spent on the edge of their world was ended. From this point on he would live in the forest and he fully expected never to have to deal with another human being ever again.



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## Female Line

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Angela sits in the darkened kitchen, the knife in her hands. Looking down at the blade, she feels nothing. She absently reads the name on the cold metal and then closes her eyes again, lost in thought.

He'll be back soon.

But, for the moment, the silence of the flat is unbroken.

She carefully touches the side of her face. Her teeth are jarred and sore, but she looks down again at the blade and still she feels nothing.

He won't be long now.

As Angela waits, she dreams. She is, in this moment, detached from all of this; from her life with him, from the pain, from the failure of all her dreams, from life itself. This is not revenge. It's too cold for revenge. It's an ending, that's all.

A key rattles in the lock.

He is home...

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*a Peter White mystery*

Simon Buck

A simple birthday present, an old book. *The Works of Virgil* translated by John Dryden, 1730 edition. Peter White already has a copy, yet he becomes fascinated when he notices that all the illustrations have been replaced with subtly altered versions. Examining the differences he uncovers a secret text written by Leonardo da Vinci describing a highly effective cryptographic technique. Intrigued, not only by the text itself, but by why it had been hidden in this book, Peter pursues its provenance and finds himself drawn into two different worlds through two very different manuscripts both protected by this code.

One, described in a diary penned by Leonardo himself, charts the genius' descent into despair and disillusionment as he strives to fulfil a commission from a powerful cardinal, all the while struggling with spiritual and philosophical challenges to his beliefs.

The other, a lost Jacobite manifesto from the '45 Rising, presents a confession from Queen Anne revealing a scandal that undermines the Act of Settlement and hence the very legitimacy of the British Monarchy, even today.

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## **About the author**

Throughout a science-biased education and subsequent years employed in graphic design and web site development, Alison Buck has all the while been scribbling away, committing her stories to disc. Although, as a rule, she concerns herself with apparently quite normal, everyday characters, populating what appear to be quite normal and everyday surroundings, the events and dangers they encounter are rarely commonplace; Alison's can be very dark, unsettling tales.

But whatever the origin of these often menacing undercurrents in her stories, Alison assures us that they are completely at odds with the happy and relatively menace-free family life she enjoys with her husband, son and daughter in Kent.