

## *Chapter One*

Some three weeks after Anisha's attendance at the British Hydrological Society's lecture on groundwater contamination, it was that matriarch of the village community, Dorothy Frampton, who found her evening routine unpleasantly disrupted by a power cut. Dorothy had been watching the evening news on television and she made a note of the time, as she always did on such occasions, eleven minutes past six on Wednesday the fourteenth of April, in case the power cut went on long enough to claim a refund from the Regulator. She had once claimed £108.00, after much travail waiting on the telephone and filling in the details on the website. It had certainly been worth it for Dorothy had been out of the country at the time and the food in her freezer must have melted; when she got back the food had re-frozen and appeared perfectly edible - she was still alive to prove it - but it was perfectly legitimate to claim, she reasoned, the same as her neighbours had done on the grounds that the heating had been off for three days in her absence and, although the temperature had not actually been below freezing, the point was that it could have been. And apart from the obvious danger of frozen pipes, her house-plants, which had the benefit of an electrical element embedded in the soil, and which she tended with devotion over the winter months, could have frozen solid and would have been a complete write-off; and Dorothy had to admit she was not at all clear about her insurance position as far as house-plants were concerned. But that had been in February. April was an odd time of year for power cuts and this one was particularly annoying, coming as it did in the middle of an item in the six o'clock news which had provoked Dorothy into exclaiming out loud, 'I don't believe it!' and then, as the television went black, 'Oh Sh..... Sugar!' And although Dorothy was not at all given to swearing, this time she really meant it.

The item which had caught Dorothy's attention and provoked her outburst when cut short was headlined 'Fracking comes to the Southeast'. The announcer had started his report by saying 'Large amounts of shale gas and oil could be lurking just beneath the towns and countryside of Hampshire, Sussex and....' And then, nothing but a black screen! It didn't take much for Dorothy to guess that her own county of Kent was the next in geographical line. She rose from her chair and, glancing out of the window where it was still quite light - the clocks having gone forward a couple of weeks before - paced three times around the perimeter of her sitting room and dining room before going into the kitchen to note the time and check on the supply of candles in case the power cut went on for any length of time. After that she returned to the sitting room where the telephone was at her elbow and sat down to think this thing through.

First she must be sure of her facts and for that reason she hoped the light would come on in time to catch the ten o'clock news. After that, if the facts turned out to be grim and the village and surrounding area threatened by an army of scientists, engineers, tanker lorries and construction crews, digging up roads and inflicting untold harm to the local way of life, then Dorothy would lead the counter-attack. For that she must make lists. Her mind had run ahead and with a mixture of alarm and adrenalin at the thought of the challenge ahead, she took pen and paper and began to write.

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Less than a mile away on the outskirts of the village Sandra Lewis was seated at the kitchen table as the light began to fade. Sandra preferred to get her news by radio and the one in the kitchen of Green Farm ran on batteries so the power cut was hardly noticed by her until some time later when she opened the fridge and the light failed to come on. She went to switch on the light by the back door and found it too wasn't working. There was no way of checking if the neighbours' lights were off because there were none nearer to Green Farm than Ellie Mansfield who lived some distance away, round the corner and up the farm track and well out of sight. If this power cut went on for long Sandra decided she would go up there to make sure she was alright; Ellie was nearly ninety but very spry and, having lived in the village for so many years she would be sure to have the necessary candles, and probably a paraffin stove as well, in case of power cuts which, to be honest, were becoming increasingly rare. Since Sandra had come to the village some five years ago there had only been one or two and Ellie was probably better-prepared for them than Sandra; which reminded her that she really must buy candles next time she shopped.

Sandra's mind being occupied with these thoughts it was some time before she remembered the news bulletin and the item that had caught her attention. How had it gone? 'Fracking comes to the Southeast!' Yes, that was it and then something about large amounts of shale gas and oil lying beneath Hampshire, Sussex and Kent. To Sandra that sounded ominous; she had put all her efforts into making her little farm – all six acres of it – as eco-friendly as she could: solar panels and a small wind-turbine made the house and the outhouses almost self-sufficient in energy and if she could harness the power of the stream that ran through the woods she might yet have the whole thing tied up. The outlay had been considerable but with government incentives to mitigate the expense and the hope of a return on her investments over the next few years, thanks to that levy on the big electricity companies (Sandra had hardened her heart for them, and for their customers who complained that it put their bills up), she hoped that she would be none the worse – indeed maybe even better off in ten years' time.

Unlike Dorothy, Sandra had heard the full report which explained that there could be large quantities of gas and oil right under the ground where they stood. As she sat in the gathering dusk she tried to work out just what she felt about that possibility.

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The 'Lightning Bolt' was one of two pubs in the village and candles were already lit for the group of drinkers clustered around the bar. One of the company had just paid for a round of pints, which was fortunate since the power cut meant that the pumps would not work and, if the lights didn't come on again soon the landlord would have to shut up shop for the evening.

'Bloody power cuts!' remarked one of the group. 'I thought we'd done with all that crap!'

‘I reckon it’s a disgrace!’ Added another. ‘Astronomical bills and what do you get?’ His question went unanswered as the drinkers made the most of what might be their last pint for the evening. After a thoughtful silence another of their number contributed his thoughts to the circle.

‘Seems like we could be getting a slice of the action round here quite soon.’

‘In what way is that now Geoff? - You know something that we don’t?’

‘Just happened to have the news on as I was driving. It seems they think there’s oil and gas under them there green acres.’

‘And which green acres might those be?’

‘Southeast generally, as far as I can see; could be anywhere from Hampshire to the Straits of Dover!’

‘Hmm, my back garden would be ideal! Not that I get lucky in that kind of a way. If it’s a raffle ticket you can bet what you like I get the number that’s one down from the winner. It happens all the time!’

‘Well, someone’s got to get lucky!’

‘What’s the betting it will be the Hadley Estate that strikes it rich; ‘to them as has shall be given’ – if I remember rightly.’

‘You’re right and there won’t be much in it for your actual grass-roots folk; the deserving poor, as I like to call us.’

‘Speak for yourself mate; not sure that I agree with the deserving – or for the poor for that matter: having noticed the BMW parked outside your house recently.’

‘BMW’s the wife’s; mine’s the beaten up Vauxhall,’ was the reply and then, returning to the subject in hand, ‘Still, if it helps to stop the lights going out, that can’t be a bad thing!’

‘Not frackin’ likely! It’s got nothing to do with stopping the lights going out, my friend; it’ll all be shipped out to Europe if I’m not mistaken.’

‘Don’t get me started on Europe!’

The discussion continued centred around what exactly the output of fracking was and what it would be used for until, with a splutter and a whirr the lights came on and the fruit machine in the corner emptied itself of its contents in a rattling explosion.

‘Steady on there!’ exclaimed the landlord, ‘Hands off – that machine’s had an aberration; thank you gentlemen: all mine I think!’

As he scrambled around collecting the hoard his place behind the bar was taken by Jacqui who had arrived with the last bus from the town where she was studying design at the college. The lights were on again and more pints were once more a possibility.