



The
Tinker

“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

— Kurt Vonnegut

Chapter One

"More tea, dear?" said Denise Colesley, offering the china tea pot and hovering it over her husband's cup.

"What...? Oh, yes, thank you," replied her husband, the Reverend John Colesley, momentarily disturbed from reading through his notes for his forthcoming sermon.

"I don't know why you spend all that time on those, dear, no-one listens. How many were in church last week? What was it, twenty?" she replied, filling her husband's cup and applying the milk.

He took his reading glasses off momentarily and looked at his wife. "That's not the point," he said, not sharply but in an understanding way. "People do get a great deal of comfort from church," he said raising the brimming cup to his lips and sipping gently.

He returned his spectacles and continued scanning the three A5 pages. Fairly short this week; ten minutes would be plenty.

Sunday morning, last week in May 1986 and the village looked immaculate. Drayburn, the small Cotswold hamlet nestling in a basin surrounded by spectacular hills, resembled a picture you might see on a 1950's toffee tin. It was as though some giant hand had scooped away the earth and gently lowered the houses into place. All made of typical Cotswold stone, properties were expensive and much sought after; several were second homes providing bolt holes for London Executives and at least one celebrity, none of whom would be in today's congregation. The small population, shy of fifteen hundred nearly all worked outside the village, Bristol, Cheltenham even Bath; commuting back every evening.

There was naturally a pub, The White Hart, on prime position at the top of the High Street which doubled as a hotel with fifteen so-called luxury rooms with guests happy to pay premium prices particularly at this time of year. Opposite the pub was a hairdressing salon and next to that the village store and Post Office which catered for most everyday needs. The larger weekly shop would mean a trip to the supermarket in Stonington - a small town ten miles to the north, the other side of the hill. There were a few other, boutique-style shops supplying arts and crafts and local produce as well as a couple of typically English Tea Shoppes.

The village school which catered for fifty or so 5 - 9 year olds was a short distance from the church, aptly named St James' Primary School, it had served the community for over a hundred years with four or even five generations of local pupils passing through its doors.

St James Church however dominated the village but not in an obtrusive way; it completed the scene. A quintessential English village without its church would just not compute.

The fifty-eight year old parish priest said farewell to his wife and left the vicarage to make the short walk to the medieval edifice. He never tired of this brief journey; past the row of three seventeenth century cottages to the right resplendent with their climbing roses clambering their way up the walls making a feature of the front porches; the small gardens, carefully tended, rich with the abundance of flowers. The early sun glinted off the pristine windows. In front of him Vicarage Road led towards the centre of the village, flanked each side by beautiful three story Georgian terraced houses in their typical Cotswold stone grey/ochre livery. Many had attic rooms which, it was recorded, used to be weavers' workshops.

Drayburn is from a bygone age; in fact the only nod towards the modern era are the ubiquitous double yellow lines. It is a popular tourist destination and visitors regularly clog the narrow streets; the one car-park, the other side of the village, is regularly full. Out-door TV aerials are banned by local by-laws to retain its olde-world feel.

The vicar's passage did not require him to follow the road; the church was immediately to his left and it was a fifty yard walk to reach the low stone boundary wall of the church yard. In the warming sun he had dispensed with the need of a coat over his gown which fluttered behind him as he walked. Just gone seven thirty and with his first service, Holy Communion, at eight o'clock he would be in good time to open up and prepare the church for his early parishioners.

He stopped for a moment and looked up at the impressive spire; the sun in the east hidden behind it causing its rays to shoot either side. Earliest records suggested the church was built around 1182 although the spire was added much later. It is steeped in history with important references to the English Civil War and other conflicts.

Through the stone gateway and along the yew tree-lined path to the front porch passing the ancient

grave-stones and chest tombs with inscriptions that had been erased by the ravages of time. Grass and wild flowers - the last of the blue bells, daisies of every description and poppies, gave added colour to the backdrop of the churchyard.

He was met at the door by the vergers who were sweeping around the frontage trying to remove the vestiges of the previous day's wedding.

"I don't know why I bother," he said to the approaching figure who was viewing his labours with interest. "It'll all be back again next week."

"I'm sorry Jack," said the vicar. "I do remind them, but they just take no notice."

"It's just typical. Youngsters these days, got no respect." Jack Fleming a sprightly seventy year old spoke in the soft Gloucestershire brogue but with an edge that reflected his annoyance.

Weddings did however play an important role in the economy of the church; people came from across the county and beyond to get married in its beautiful setting and the financial contribution they brought was essential to its continued upkeep.

Two more figures approached and the vicar greeted them warmly.

"Hello Ted, Deidre." Mr and Mrs Lane, the first of the six bell-ringers and serious campanologists having rung the changes at the church for over fifteen years. They were quickly joined by the rest of the team and after a quick catch up they made their way into the church and took up their positions.

The vicar entered the church leaving the vergers to his labours and started preparing for the service. He could hear the familiar tolls emanating from the bell tower alerting the village to the impending service. He reminisced for a moment and considered his good fortune. There is nowhere like this anywhere in the world, he thought.

By eight o'clock the first five rows were reasonably full with the congregation; the remaining sixteen rows were empty. The resident organist, Maisie Dailey who had been providing musical accompaniment for over forty years, played a gentle refrain. As the vicar now dressed in his white over-gown entered the nave from the vestry and walked to his position in front of the congregation the bells stopped and the

minister started his service, welcoming the parishioners and visitors to St James'.

By quarter to nine the service had finished and the vicar was at the front door talking to the regulars and a couple of visitors who were staying at the White Hart. Everyone was given a warm welcome as befitting the Christian spirit. Major Blandforth, wealthy landowner and an important benefactor to the church, dressed in his familiar shooting jacket and plus fours and looking the very essence of the landed gentry was quickly to him. "Nice service Reverend, what. Will you be dropping by the Manor later?"

The vicar looked confused.

"Pick up the pheasants," clarified the Major seeing the disconnect.

"Yes, yes, of course. About three ok? Sundays do tend to be pretty busy," replied the vicar without any hint of sarcasm.

"Quite so, Reverend, quite so. Yes, that'll be fine I'll get Frank to bring a brace up to the house."

Frank Johnson was the Major's gamekeeper.

"Thank you, Denise will be very pleased," replied the vicar.

The Major walked away towards his Jaguar which was parked in one of the reserved spots at the end of the churchyard footpath. It took another twenty minutes of social discourse before the vicar was able to make his excuses and head back.

Down the footpath, out of the churchyard and a sharp right almost back on himself and the vicarage was in front of him. He was passing the three cottages to his left, deep in thought contemplating his next sermon when he was disturbed by one of his neighbours, Molly Ford, another of the many septuagenarians in Drayburn. She was standing at the front door of her cottage dressed smartly ready for the next service in a two piece suit; an ornate hat strategically placed on her grey hair.

"Hello vicar, have you heard anything from Michael?" she called. "Will he be visiting this year?"

The vicar looked at her and knew straight away the target of her request.

"No, Molly, nothing yet but if he is coming this year then I guess it should be any day," he replied.

"Oh that's good. I have several jobs for him. You must let me know as soon as he arrives before he gets booked up," she said.

"Of course, Molly," replied the vicar. She walked back into her cottage and the vicar continued his short walk.

The vicarage was a substantial property also on three floors with leaded square windows giving it periodic character. It too was old, dating back to the eighteenth century. There was a large entrance hall with a room to the right which Reverend Colesley used as an office and also a meeting room with parishioners. There were three other rooms downstairs, lounge, dining room and a substantial kitchen to the left of the entrance hall. Upstairs there were two large bedrooms with en-suite plus a bathroom and two smaller bedrooms in the attic which were the children's; well actually they were young adults now. There was also a small four-roomed self contained bungalow at the back of the vicarage they called 'the Lodge'.

The vicar used the side gate which led to the kitchen. The large lawned garden looked immaculate.

"Hello dear," said his wife as he walked in.

Just two years younger than her husband, she had dressed casually but smart, her natural dark auburn hair worn up, now flecked with a tinge of grey; she was attending a boiling kettle.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Oh, very well. I counted forty which is up on last week," he said. "I think the fine weather helped; it's a glorious morning."

"The village will be packed with visitors later," she said.

The vicar went to the ancient wooden kitchen table and picked up the Sunday paper. John Colesley was a tall man around six foot one and there were parts of the house where low beams were a potential hazard; the kitchen pantry was one and he rarely ventured in there. Having filled the kettle, his wife brought out a tin of biscuits and put two on a plate beside him. The vicar looked up and smiled in acknowledgement.

"Spoke to Major Blandforth earlier; he's got a brace of pheasants for us. Said I would pick them up

after lunch," he said as his wife handed him a mug of coffee.

"Oh that's lovely, we can have them when the children join us. You haven't forgotten have you, dear?"

"Goodness no. Friday isn't it? It will be good to see them again. It seems so quiet when they're away," said the vicar as he drank his coffee.

"Yes, I do so miss them," said his wife. She continued. "William should be here by lunchtime. His train gets into the station in Bristol around eleven. The bus leaves... just a minute, I've got it here somewhere," and she rummaged through a pile of papers next to the bread bin. She picked up a dog-eared envelope with writing on it. "Yes here it is... 11.30 to Cheltenham arrives in Drayburn at... 12.45."

"I could have picked him up from Temple Meads," said the vicar.

"I told him that but he said he was fine," said his wife. "Didn't want to trouble you."

"It would have been no trouble," he replied. "What about Daniella?"

"She will be a little later. The bus leaves Bath about two I think she said, so it will be after three I expect."

Denise took a drink of her coffee and stared wistfully. "I'm so proud of them you know," she continued. "Both at University, who'd have thought it; and doing so well."

"Yes, they've both worked hard. They deserve some success," said the vicar and started reading his newspaper.

After glancing the first page, he looked up. "Spoke to Molly Ford earlier. Wanted to know whether Michael will be coming this year."

"Oh I do hope so," said his wife. "I have a few jobs for him and I expect you'll need him to for the churchyard; the grass could definitely do with cutting back."

She got up and went to the sink and started washing her mug under the tap. "I've aired the Lodge and made up the bed just in case," she added.

"Yes, you're right about the churchyard," said the vicar. "Jack does his best but he's not as young as he

was and to be honest I think it's starting to get too much for him." He continued to read his paper.

There were three services at St James on a regular Sunday - Holy Communion at eight; family communion at eleven and Evensong at 6.00. Given the attendance at the early service the vicar was upbeat that the numbers would be an improvement on the previous week. The parishioners were on the whole wealthy and generous at collection time but the vicar knew he couldn't be complacent; the upkeep of the church was very expensive.

After the brief break the vicar was back in church for the next service and this time the pews were well-populated; at least seventy the vergers confirmed later. The vicar was buoyed by the congregation and the hymns were sung with increased gusto. The small choir had joined the worshippers for the family service adding harmonies and depth to the tunes while Maisie extracted every ounce of sound from the ancient organ pipes. The sun sent shards of light through the stain-glass windows; memorials to fallen heroes suddenly brought back to life.

The Reverend Colesley surveyed the scene. All was good; all was good.

After the service the vicar again mingled with the congregation as they left the church. Most were regulars but again there were some visitors from the White Hart who were taking in some spiritual refreshment before continuing their weekend retreat. Having satisfied his social responsibilities the vicar went back into the church and made his way to the vestry where the vergers were counting and bagging the collection.

"One hundred and five pounds and some pence," the vergers said to the vicar's enquiry.

"Thanks Jack. Can you see to the money and bank it tomorrow as usual. I don't want to risk leaving it in the church over night?" he said.

The money would be paid into the Parochial Church Council's account at the bank in Stonington.

"Of course, Reverend." He looked at the vicar. "You know I can't understand society today. I remember when we could leave our doors open, but now... It's such a shame."

"Yes, you're right Jack. I'm afraid true Christian values are a thing of the past."

The vicar watched as Jack put the money into a cloth coin bag and then into an innocuous looking supermarket carrier bag. "Can't be too careful," said the verger noticing his boss's interest.

"Right Jack, I'm off for some lunch, I'll see you this evening. Let's hope for another good turnout. Don't forget to lock up," he said with a grin.

The main church would of course remain open with residents and visitors wanting to look inside; some seeking the solitude for personal prayer away from the organised ritual of the morning service. There was a box just inside the entrance for donations. The vestry and office would however be denied to visitors.

The vicar walked through the nave and into the bright sunshine. As he reached the end of the path onto the small private car-park allocated for church-goers he noticed a yellow sports car driving towards him. He recognised the driver straight away. It stopped and a woman in her late thirties got out, leaving the engine running. She was casually dressed in cut-off jeans and a tight tee shirt. The obligatory designer sunglasses were perched on her nose.

"Hello Tina," said the vicar. "Lovely to see you again."

"Hello vicar," said the woman. "Glad I spotted you. Just wondered if you'd heard anything from that Michael chap at all. He did a great job servicing my boiler last year. Wondered if he would be around to help out again."

"Not heard anything but if he does come I'm sure he will. If he can spare the time that is. Seems like he's going to be very busy. I've had several enquiries already," replied the vicar.

"Oh...? Well, I'm sure he'll want to look after me," she said, hardly disguising the innuendo.

"Well if he turns up I'll mention you were enquiring," replied the vicar.

"Thanks," she said and smiled before returning to her car. The vicar watched as she manoeuvred herself into the driver's seat. She waved as the Triumph Spitfire turned around and went back up Vicarage Road. The vicar could hear the noise of the engine long after it had gone from sight, echoing along the narrow streets.

Back in the house and Denise was preparing lunch, a light meal; the main Sunday dinner would be later

after Even Song. It had been tradition since the Reverend Colesley was given his first parish over twenty years ago in Cheltenham. It had been ten years since he took over at Drayburn; his predecessor was in his seventies when ill health forced his retirement and prompted John's appointment.

He had done much for the local community; the work of the local vicar was far more than just conducting church services. He was on numerous committees including the Parish Council and various ventures linked to the less well-off as well as Christian charities in Africa. Every October he volunteered to go to Uganda to work on an educational project helping to fund community schooling. The over-used term 'pillar of society' was deserved in the case of the Reverend John Colesley.

"Hello dear." His wife greeted him as he came into the kitchen. She spoke in a 'jolly-hockey-sticks' kind of way; posh/academia would be another description.

"You'll never guess who I've been talking to," he said, a rhetorical question he knew she could not answer.

"Who's that, dear?" she replied as she poured out two bowls of home-made mushroom soup.

The vicar sat at the kitchen table and started buttering a bread roll.

"Tina Ashworth," he replied.

"Oh yes. And what did she want?" she replied.

"Wanted to know if Michael was about. Something about servicing her boiler," he replied.

"Oh yes and a bit more besides, I'll warrant, a real man-eater that one. Is it her third marriage that just broke down I read in the paper?" she said.

"Must be. Let me see there was that film producer, then the director... What was his name?" he said.

"Lionel Fellows," offered his wife.

"Yes that's right and she's just split up with that young actor," he said. "So yes, three. Oh dear whatever happened to 'death do us part'?" he added.

"Well it's even worse nowadays with these... what are they called? Pre-nups. I mean it doesn't bode well

if you have to sign a contract to say what will happen when you split up," she replied. "Where's the commitment in that?"

The vicar started drinking his tea. "Hmmm," he said.

"Well I haven't seen much of her on TV since she left that soap opera. What was it she said? Something about new challenges," said Denise.

"Yes, I remember that?" said the vicar.

"She was on that series about the doctors last month, I noticed," she said. "Mind you they don't like her in the village. I was speaking to Mrs Audley in the hairdressers, called her a 'stuck-up so-and-so'. Happy to have her hair washed there apparently but goes into Cheltenham to have it styled and cut, something about not trusting amateurs. Right upset, Mrs Audley was."

But the career and goings-on of the village's TV celebrity had lost its interest with the vicar and he changed the subject.

"Do you need any shopping while I'm out later, dear? I can call in at the store if you like," he asked.

"No, thanks. We had the delivery yesterday. It should see us through until the children arrive. You've just reminded me though, I must phone Brian at the store and warn him we'll need extra for the weekend," she said.

The delivery service offered by the village store was a boon to the locals many of whom were either house-bound or didn't own cars and given the twenty mile round trip to the supermarket a large proportion of the residents relied on this resource. Brian Davies, the proprietor, was more than happy to oblige; almost half his turnover came from his delivery service. He had even been known to drop off a packet of toilet rolls to needy customers.

Just before three o'clock the vicar backed his five year old Ford Escort out of the adjoining stone-built garage and headed towards Major Blandforth's magnificent house. Known appropriately as 'The Manor' it was about a mile from the edge of the village, on a very narrow back road about ten minutes by car from the vicarage. The vicar negotiated his way through the crowded streets; as his wife had said, tourists were

everywhere and the village store seemed to be doing a roaring trade with their ice creams.

There was a dirt parking area in front of the iron gates that led to the house and the vicar edged his Escort adjacent to the wall. He walked up to the two stone pillars that marked the entrance and through the opened wrought-iron gates. With a full time gardener the lawns and borders were immaculate and the old house appeared to gaze down on the vista with a deal of satisfaction.

The vicar made his way along the gravel path, a good fifty yards to the front of the house. It is a substantial property, eight bedrooms three bathrooms, large kitchen, four reception rooms set in grounds of at least ten acres. There was also a good size trout lake surrounded by woodland. The vicar looked up at the slate roof and its four magnificent stone chimneys with their terracotta flues. There was no smoke, fires would not be needed today.

The front door was open and the vicar rang the bell. Dogs barked from inside and the Major appeared holding onto two golden retrievers.

"Hello Reverend, come in," said the Major. "Hang on while I put the dogs into the sitting room," he added, and he momentarily left the vicar in the hallway while he ushered the retrievers into the room on the right hand side and shut the door. The dogs barked in annoyance for a few moments at being denied their freedom to roam the house before settling down.

The Major led the vicar into the kitchen where two dead cock pheasants were presented on the rustic oak table.

"How will these do?" he said, admiring the birds. "Frank shot them yesterday. You'll need to hang them for a few days but they look superb."

"They certainly do," said the vicar. "We are very grateful."

"My pleasure," said the Major and lifted up the birds and handed them to the vicar. "Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee, something cold? The memsahib has made some fresh lemonade."

The vicar chuckled to himself at the nomenclature the Major had used for his wife whom he knew came from Cardiff and had no connection whatsoever with the Sub-Continent. The vicar had little detailed

knowledge of the Major's former military history but he had served in India around the time of the partition which would probably account for the rather unusual address. The Major was renowned for his story telling and could keep guests entertained for hours if he was allowed.

"That's most kind, thank you, a lemonade will be fine. Never refuse the opportunity to sample one of your good lady's lemonades." said the vicar.

The Major went to the fridge and took out a large jug of greeny/grey juice and poured measures into two cut-glass tumblers which were waiting on the kitchen worktop. The vicar received the glass with gratitude and only politeness stopped him from downing the drink in one go; it was delicious.

"That's really excellent," said the vicar after his first taste.

"Yes," said the Major. "She makes a very good lemonade. Learned it out in India, don't you know, forty seven, eight. Didn't like it out there though, she didn't, can't stand the heat. She's upstairs now locked herself away in her studio, painting supposedly."

"I didn't realise your wife was a painter," said the vicar taking another sip from the refreshing drink.

"She's not," said the Major, and chuckled to himself. "But you have to indulge them in their fantasies don't you?"

The vicar watched the Major as he seemed suddenly locked away in a private moment as he too relished the thirst-quenching liquid. In his early eighties now but energetic and distinguished. With his white handle-bar moustache, ruddy cheeks and silver wisps of hair, he looked every part the typical Indian Army Major and was one of those people who by their mere presence appeared to command respect. It was almost as if he had been cloned; probably the breeding, the vicar thought. His father, the previous Lord of the Manor was a Viscount but Major Blandforth had not inherited the title on his death; it had gone to an elder brother who was also a land-owner, in Derbyshire. "He got the title, I got the manor," the Major had told him on several occasions. It was clear he thought he had got the best of the deal.

The Major re-focussed from his distraction and saw the vicar had emptied his glass. "Top-up, Reverend?" said the Major.

"I don't mind if I do, thank you. It's very warm this afternoon," replied the vicar.

"Humidity's up, storm later, if I'm not mistaken," said the Major, replenishing the vicar's tumbler.

The Major suddenly changed the subject.

"Wanted to ask, have you heard anything from that Michael fellow who comes to you in the summer?" he asked.

"No, nothing," said the vicar. "I never know whether he will show or not."

"How long has he been coming to Drayburn now?" asked the Major.

"This will be his sixth year. If he turns up," the vicar added.

"A strange state of affairs. Chap turns up, works for three months then disappears again without a bye or leave," said the Major.

"Yes, very strange. Do you know I don't even know his second name? 'Just call me Michael,' he says. Very handy to have here in the village mind you, does great work around the church. Jack Fleming's not as young as he was and I think he's finding it a bit difficult. Mind you he would never admit it," said the vicar.

"Quite so, quite so," replied the Major. "Done some fine work here as well. The Memsahib has been on at me for weeks wanting to know when he'll be back. Got a list of jobs as long as your arm," he added. "You know it's so difficult to get tradesmen in when you need them and they charge you a fortune. They think just because you live in the village we're made of money, what." The Major was starting to go red.

"I know what you mean," said the vicar and he looked at his watch.

"Is that the time?" he said. "I should get back. The village is full of visitors and it may take longer than usual."

"Right you are, Reverend," said the Major.

He led the vicar back into the entrance porch. It was west-facing and the warm afternoon sun bathed the frontage.

"Glorious day," said the Major. "Mind you there will be a storm later, you mark my words. I can feel it in the air. I can always tell," he added, emphasising the word 'will' to demonstrate his certainty.

The vicar watched the Major looking at the sky examining the very heavens.

"Well thank you again, Major," he said and shook him warmly by the hand.

"Think nothing of it," said the Major. "Oh, and you won't forget to let me know if that Michael fellow turns up now will you? Plenty here to keep him busy here," he added.

"Will do, and thanks again," said the vicar and walked back up the path to the car carrying the two pheasants by the string binding their feet together. He heard the sound of dogs barking coming from the house.

Again the journey back to the vicarage was beset with delays as visitors negotiated the narrow streets. He saw the queues outside Betsy's Tea Shop and was pleased that the local economy was doing so well on this glorious day.

He arrived back at the vicarage and his wife was in the kitchen.

"Hello dear, how did you get on?" she asked.

"Very well," replied the vicar and he held up the two pheasants.

"Oh they're lovely," she said. "I'll hang them in the pantry. They should be ready by the weekend. We can have them next Sunday dinner with the children," she added.

By six o'clock, the vicar was back in church conducting his final service of the day and this time St James was almost full with more visitors having swelled the numbers. The vicar was elated and the service was a huge success with everyone saying how much they had enjoyed it. The temperature had thankfully started to fall but had been replaced by a very heavy atmosphere and the vicar spotted several people in the congregation fanning themselves with the order of service.

As he mingled in front of the church with his parishioners he too noticed a change in the skies; a wind had got up and large clouds were forming in the distance to the north, Stonington way.