

Book Manuscript: Outline

THE CROOKED BOOKSHOP

Where the shelves are cradled with both tales and the restless spectres of hidden truths

by

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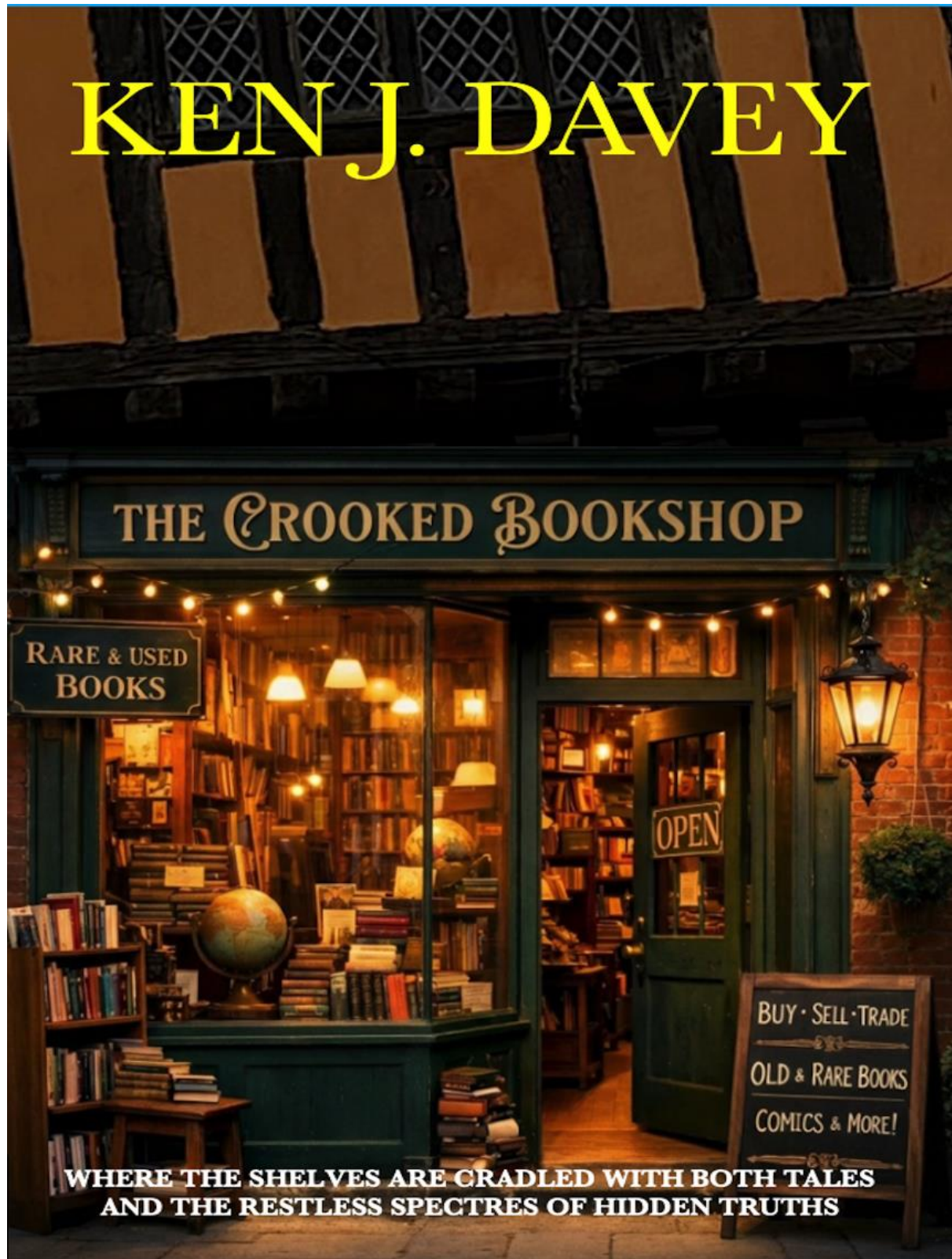
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Front Cover



Epigraph

“Despite how entertaining certain stories were, at the bottom of every item of gossip there was someone getting hurt.”

Author's Note

The name Swanbeck is most likely derived from Suanebec, a location recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. It is generally believed to have Old English origins and to have been a settlement with agricultural activity.

The suggested meaning of the name can be broken down as follows:

- Suan: This may be derived from the Old English word for “swan”, possibly indicating a connection to water or a feature related to swans in the local area.
- Bec: This component typically means “brook” or “stream”. In many place names, it references a watercourse or small river.

Therefore, Suanebec could be interpreted as “stream frequented by swans,” or “the brook of swans”, or “the swan stream,” suggesting a geographic feature characterised by a water source frequented by swans. Place names like this often reflect the area’s natural landscape and local fauna.

Prologue

Scene 0

A moment in time

The rain struck the windows with relentless force, driven sideways by a gale that rattled every loose slate and the gutter outside. Thunder rolled across the sky before dawn in long, shuddering waves, while the old building settled and creaked under the storm's weight.

Inside, only one room was lit. A shaded desk lamp cast a warm pool of light across a scarred writing desk. Beyond its reach, the room's corners dissolved into shadow. Shelves crowded with books climbed the walls. Framed photographs hung between them; their faces were impossible to make out in the gloom. A mantel clock marked each passing second with patient certainty.

A lone figure lowered a fountain pen. The nib hovered above the final page for several moments before moving with deliberate slowness until the pen came to rest.

Silence lingered.

The figure flexed stiff fingers and read the closing sentence once more. Outside, lightning flashed, bleaching the room white for an instant before darkness reclaimed it.

'It is finished,' the figure said quietly.

No answer came; only the wind pressing against the old glass.

A neat stack of handwritten pages lay beside the blotter. Every sheet had been numbered with meticulous care. The figure tapped the edges until they aligned perfectly, then tied them together with dark green ribbon.

A fresh sheet of cream writing paper was drawn from a drawer.

Unlike the manuscript, this letter was written without hesitation.

The pen flowed steadily across the page. It began with "Dear Martha" and ended with "Lots of Love", followed by two x's.

The letter was folded with careful precision.

The manuscript followed.

Both disappeared into a large, grey envelope.

The figure pressed the seal firmly into place before writing a single name on the front.

Mrs Martha Woodhouse

The Crooked Bookshop, Swanbeck-near-the-Sea

Another flash lit the room.

The clock chimed six. Sunrise had been nearly an hour ago, but the storm clouds kept the room in an eerie darkness.

‘Time,’ the figure murmured.

The lamp clicked off.

The storm showed no sign of easing.

Sheets of rain swept across the road outside, where a white courier van idled with its engine running. Its headlights dissolved into the curtain of water.

The transport driver pulled the collar of a waterproof jacket higher.

‘Morning,’ the driver said as the building door opened.

The figure handed the package to the driver, who slipped it into a clear plastic jacket for protection from the rain.

‘Busy day ahead,’ the driver said with a tired smile.

‘It will be delivered today, won’t it?’

‘It will,’ the driver said, making his way back to his van and placing the package in the back along with several others.

‘Drive carefully.’

‘I always do,’ the driver replied.

The van doors slammed shut.

The engine growled.

Water sprayed from the tyres as the vehicle pulled away into the storm.

At the first sharp bend, the rear doors jolted violently.

The unsecured envelope slipped through the narrow gap before the doors settled closed again.

It landed in the flooded roadside with a muted splash.

The van disappeared into the rain.

For several minutes, the envelope remained where it had fallen.

Rain hammered its protective plastic sleeve.

Water streamed along the gutter, carrying leaves and broken twigs around it.

Footsteps approached.

An umbrella fought a losing battle against the wind.

The bystander stopped.

‘Well now,’ the stranger said.

The large, grey envelope looked expensive.

More importantly, it looked important.

The stranger bent, lifted it clear of the flowing water and brushed away droplets with their sleeve.

The envelope inside remained intact – the name and destination clearly visible.

Rain continued to lash the empty road.

The stranger stared into the distance where the courier had disappeared.

Sheltering under a nearby tree, the stranger broke the seal on the plastic sleeve and removed the large, grey envelope. After breaking the envelope’s seal, the stranger pulled out the letter... and gasped.

The stranger **smiled**.

It was neither warm nor pleasant.

It was the smile of someone who had recognised an unexpected opportunity.

Turning away from the road, the stranger disappeared into the storm, carrying secrets that had never been intended for anyone except Martha Woodhouse, already calculating how such a remarkable discovery might best be used.

PART 1

Whispered village gossip and rumours

Chapter 1

Scene 1

Bright sunlight washed across Dorset's Jurassic Coast, softening the scars left by the previous night's storm. The sea glittered beneath a pale blue sky, while white clouds drifted lazily towards the horizon. Fresh rainwater clung to hedgerows, and the air carried the mingled scents of salt, wet earth, and wildflowers.

Swanbeck-near-the-Sea stirred gently into another summer morning.

The village possessed the quiet confidence of a place that had endured for centuries without surrendering its character. Honey-stone cottages stood shoulder to shoulder along winding lanes, polished smooth by generations of footsteps. Hanging baskets overflowed with colour beneath leaded windows, while climbing roses reached eagerly across ancient walls. Narrow streets curved unexpectedly between cottages before opening onto views of rolling green hills that fell towards the glittering English Channel.

Visitors often arrived expecting little more than another picturesque Dorset village.

They seldom left thinking that.

Beyond the cottages stood the weathered remains of an eleventh-century abbey, its broken arches and worn stone columns speaking silently of monks whose prayers had once echoed through its cloisters. Children now played among the ruins, their laughter replacing chants sung nearly a thousand years before.

Not far beyond, carefully tended subtropical gardens flourished in the unusually mild coastal climate. Palm trees and exotic blooms appeared strangely at home beside ancient oaks, creating a landscape that surprised newcomers every season.

Closer to the water, elegant white swans drifted across sheltered pools. Their descendants had inhabited the area for centuries, forming one of the oldest swan colonies in the world. Visitors gathered with cameras each morning, while long-time residents barely glanced their way.

'Morning,' an elderly man said, lifting two fingers from his cap as another villager passed.

'Morning,' the woman replied. 'Looks as though the storm has finally spent itself.'

'Aye. About time.'

Life resumed its familiar rhythm.

The baker's ovens were already warm.

The village shop welcomed its first customers.

Garden gates opened.

Windows were flung wide to admit fresh sea air.

From the outside, Swanbeck-near-the-Sea seemed to possess an effortless harmony.

Appearances, however, often concealed more than they revealed.

Like every close-knit community, news travelled quickly. A careless remark at breakfast might become accepted fact before evening. Kindness and curiosity coexisted, though curiosity often lingered longer than kindness.

Yet certain people resisted that temptation.

Among them was Derek Rhodes.

The forty-nine-year-old Anglican vicar crossed the churchyard with measured steps, pausing now and then to straighten a flower disturbed by the previous night's wind. The parish church stood at the heart of the village, both physically and spiritually, its ancient tower overlooking rooftops that had changed remarkably little over the centuries. Inside, cool air carried the faint fragrance of polished wood and old stone.

Derek knelt briefly, then rose to arrange hymn books left untidily on a pew.

The heavy church door creaked open behind him.

'Good morning, Vicar,' an elderly parishioner said.

'Good morning, Margaret,' Derek replied with a calm smile. 'You are out early.'

'I thought I would help where I can.'

'Your help is always appreciated.'

She hesitated.

'I suppose you have heard about young Peter arguing with his father yesterday?'

Derek looked up from the books.

'I have heard nothing,' he said.

Margaret appeared unconvinced.

'Really?'

'Really.'

She gave a slight shrug.

'Everyone else seems to know.'

'Then everyone else has enough knowledge for both of us,' Derek replied.

She chuckled.

‘You always say that.’

‘Because it remains true.’

Margaret smiled, then collected fresh flowers from a bucket near the door.

Derek returned to his work.

People often assumed that a parish priest knew every secret in the village. Some secrets were indeed entrusted to him, spoken quietly beneath the seal of confession or shared in moments of profound personal difficulty.

Those confidences remained exactly where they belonged.

He refused to let what he heard in trust mingle with the rumours exchanged over garden fences or whispered across café tables. To do otherwise would diminish both the office he held and the people who sought his guidance.

His principles were unwavering.

His private life, however, was less certain.

As he arranged the final hymn book, an unexpected thought entered his mind.

He pushed it away almost immediately.

There was work to be done.

Outside, the church bell marked the quarter hour.

Across the village, Doctor Victor Pearson, who turned forty-eight a month ago, finished reading the first patient’s notes and placed the file neatly on his desk. The surgery was already filling.

The receptionist glanced around the waiting room.

‘Your nine o’clock has arrived,’ she said.

‘Thank you,’ Victor replied.

The consultation passed without hurry.

An elderly farmer described aching joints.

A young mother sought advice for her son.

Victor listened carefully to each concern before offering measured reassurance.

‘Take these for another week,’ he said to the farmer, sliding a prescription across the desk.

‘Will I be fit for harvest?’

‘I believe you will, provided you allow yourself proper rest.’

The farmer chuckled.

‘You have never met a farmer who rests.’

‘I live in hope,’ Victor replied.

Both men smiled.

After the patient departed, Victor closed the file before reaching for another.

His work demanded discretion every hour of every day.

Medical records revealed fears that patients seldom shared, even with their families. Illnesses, anxieties, addictions, and private struggles all passed across his desk. They remained protected by professional duty as firmly as if secured within a locked vault.

Trust formed the foundation of every consultation.

Without it, medicine became impossible.

Victor valued that trust above almost everything.

Yet one aspect of his own life threatened to undermine it entirely.

As his hand paused above the next file, another face entered his thoughts.

A few doors along, Irene Dixon, the village store owner, greeted customers each morning with a warmth that seemed entirely genuine. She remembered birthdays, asked after poorly relatives, and always found a sweet lollipop for well-behaved children in her store.

She appeared every inch the devoted mother and generous neighbour.

Meanwhile, neither Derek nor Victor knew that the other shared moments with the same woman.

Neither man considered himself dishonest.

Neither wished to betray the trust placed in him.

Yet both had crossed boundaries they once believed immovable.

Outside, Swanbeck-near-the-Sea basked peacefully beneath bright summer skies.

Within its quiet streets, unseen cracks had already begun to spread beneath carefully maintained respectability.

The village simply had not noticed them.

Not yet.

About the Author



Ken J. Davey, MBA, FCMA, CGMA, is a new author. Drawing on his experience and meticulous research, Ken offers readers compelling stories that can expand a reader's knowledge and awareness.

His career has been with Big Four professional services firms, Blue-Chip companies, and several owner-managed SMEs. He has held sales, commercial, and financial roles and has over twenty years of international sales and delivery experience, twelve of which were with KPMG.

As an author of several fiction and non-fiction books, Ken lives in London, where he has regularly worked as a mentor with the British Library and University College London.

Also by Ken J. Davey

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Back Cover



Swanbeck-near-the-Sea is an attractive village on Dorset's Jurassic Coast, where history and character blend seamlessly amid the peaceful charm of honey-stone cottages nestled along narrow, winding lanes. At the edge of the village stands The Crooked Bookshop, a timber-framed building from the nineteenth century, renowned for its twisted, contorted, and notably crooked upper floors. Martha Woodhouse, an enchanting woman in her late sixties who has lived in the building for the past five years, runs a bookshop on the ground floor, which has become the centre of whispered village gossip and rumours. But beyond the idle chatter lie dark secrets, and the restless spectres of hidden truths have remained concealed... until now.

Ken J. Davey is a new author. Drawing on his experience and meticulous research, Ken offers readers compelling stories that can expand a reader's knowledge and awareness. Ken lives in London where he has regularly worked as a mentor with the British Library and University College London.

