

## Prologue.

From high on the Down above the valley floor, Sussex had never looked so beautiful. The rain that had stopped at lunchtime, just as I got to Pulborough, had washed the atmosphere clean, and now the far horizon stood pin-sharp against the pale late March sky. Next week it would be Easter. If the weather held, all the roads to the Coast would be one huge traffic jam as Basingstoke and Reading families took their first trip of the year to the seaside at Wittering and Hayling Island. I wouldn't be with them.

Winter had been kind. Spring, probably a false one, was early, and the countryside was awakening. The hedges dividing the irregular fields of green and brown were spattered with white patches of blackthorn and wild cherry blossom, but the woods were dark, still with no promise of the green that would appear in a month or so. A pine plantation looked almost black, the monotone only relieved by the light brown of the few larches at its margins. In a month or less the hawthorn blossom would be out, the bluebells would be carpeting the beech woods and passing noses would wrinkle to the reek of wild garlic. I knew all those woods, all those hedges, all those fields. Through the corner of the windscreen I looked down into the hayfield from where the farmer had chased Kerry Watson and I when we'd been jumping the riding-school ponies over his hay-bales. They were small bales then; only Pegasus could clear the great monster round things that litter the fields all Winter nowadays.

I couldn't see the village of my childhood; it was over to the left, hidden by the trees and the slope of the Down where it swung South. Nor could I see, away to the East, the town where Grandma sat in the Care Home, in the leaden grip of Alzheimer's. She wouldn't miss me, or even know that I wouldn't be coming to see her any more. Perhaps I was the lucky one, after all. She wasn't the person that I remembered, the tough, cheerful, sensible optimist who spat in the eye of village opinion to bring up me and my little brother after Mum died having Jeremy, daring anyone to mention that her only daughter

had been a Sixties flower-child drop-out, and that neither Jeremy nor I would ever know who our fathers were. As for Jeremy, the last I'd heard was that he was HIV positive but on a methadone programme, so perhaps he might have a chance, with all the modern drugs they're developing nowadays.

The sun was very low now. The shadows of the hedges were reaching far into the fields, the predominant colour now grey as a mist started to form. It was chilly, both in and out of the car. I'd parked at the far end of the car-park, beyond a clump of trees, out of sight of the road. If a courting couple came up here, they'd see my car and go somewhere else; it was private enough. In what was left of the daylight, I looked at the neat rows of tablets arranged on a plastic bag on the passenger seat; I'd popped them all out ready. It'd been so easy to get them, a pack of thirty-two paracetamol tablets, one each from Boots, Lloyds and Moss'.

"Have you taken these before?" asked the girls behind the counter. "Not more than two at a time, or eight per day."

"Oh yes," I'd replied, "they're just for occasional use, you know."

Well, this was an occasion. I knew that sixteen could be fatal. Ninety-six should be more than enough; I'd even bought easy-to-swallow ones. The plastic bag would go over my head, so I'd pass out while they were doing their work.

It was almost dark now. I could just make out the shapes of the trees beside the car. A solitary pheasant called as he went to roost, then there was total silence. I shivered, then unscrewed the cap of the water bottle. Sorry, Grandma. Sorry, Jean-Claude.

The door to eternity was open, waiting. All I had to do was to crawl through it, into the darkness.

## Chapter 1.

There was a double thump, and the car rocked. Water spurted from the bottle as a loud "Woof" exploded in my ear.

My head snapped round and I screamed at the sight of two saucer-sized paws against the window, framing the hairy, anxious face of a big Alsatian. "Woof!" he barked once more, then the car rocked again as he dropped down, whirled and raced back into the gloom, barking as he went. There came the sound of running feet, and a woman was looking through the glass at me.

"Are you all right?" she asked, then horror flooded her face as she spotted the tablets on the seat, with the carton I'd carelessly left beside them.

"No!" she shouted. "Don't! Please don't! Please open the door! I won't harm you! Please just talk to me!"

Angry, impotent tears welled up. No-one ever comes here! Why did she have to come, now of all times? I can't face tomorrow, I just can't!

"Go away!" I shouted. "Go away and leave me alone! Forget you saw me! It's my business--nobody else's! Just go away!"

"I can't," she yelled back, "not now I've seen you! I can't just walk away, not now! Please open the door! Please let me help you! Please! Omar, sit!"--this to the dog, who dropped obediently to his haunches, his gaze still locked on me.

"You don't understand," I shouted through the misting window, "I've got to do this. Everything's got so hopeless. I've no other way, so please just go away and let me get on with it. You never saw me before. If you'd not come along, you wouldn't even have known I existed."

"But I did," she insisted, "and now I do! Please open the door, and let's talk. It wasn't even me who found you, it was Omar here."

The dog's tail thumped at the mention of his name.

"He started getting on edge about a mile back," she went on. "I thought he wanted a pee and stopped, then he ran off and I heard him barking, and here I am, and a good job too. Please open the door and let's talk."

"You're only trying to keep me talking," I sobbed, lifting the water bottle and reaching for the tablets. "I've got to do this, so leave me alone!"

Her face set and she produced a mobile phone.

"OK," she said firmly, "if that's the way you want it. I'm going to dial 999. It'll take at least twenty minutes for an ambulance to get here. Then I'll find something to break the window and drag you out, but I think you should know that you won't die straight away. They'll pump you out in hospital, but your liver will be so damaged that you'll most probably die in three months, and it'll be horrible. Believe me, I used to be a doctor's receptionist, and we had two cases like that when I was there, and the families have never recovered. Now, what's it to be?"

I leaned forward and rested my head on the steering wheel. The bottle slipped from my grasp and fell into the footwell, splashing water into my shoe. I'd heard of that, but I'd been relying on being undisturbed, and the bag suffocating me. Even if I only had three months they'd track me down and I'd have to face what I'd done. Damn her, damn her, damn her! I looked at her through the glass, the phone in her hand, her face tense but expectant, and my hand reached out to raise the locking catch.

The bitch had beaten me.

She moved round the car to the passenger door, reached in, scooped up the tablets, tipped them into the bag, stowing it in her pocket before slipping in beside me. She was tall, so that she had to curl to fit in, her knees jammed against the dashboard.

"Any water in that bottle?" she asked.

I fished it from by my feet and handed it to her. There was still a little left, and she lifted it to her lips to swallow thirstily, then passed it back, her hand shaking.

"How do you know it's not poison?" I asked bitterly.

She spluttered, and her horrified look made me feel a little better.

"God, I never thought of that!" she gasped. "Still, it tasted all right, and you'd call 999

for me, wouldn't you?"

"Would I?" I asked resentfully. "After what you've done for me tonight?"

She looked at me, her face concerned. In the gloom it seemed the sort of face you see framed in a Hermes headscarf in the better-class shops in country towns. An Alsatian didn't seem her sort of dog; she seemed more of a Black

Labrador person, in her green quilted anorak and twill slacks. The dog in question had followed her round the car, and had now sat down, his eyes on his mistress.

“What’s the matter?” she asked gently. “Can I help? Is there anyone you’d like me to call?”

I shook my head miserably. I knew I’d have to tell them sometime, but just now I couldn’t face it. In the morning, I supposed, but God knows how. I’d left everything, cards, cheque-book, everything except enough cash to pay for some petrol and the paracetamol when I’d run away. I knew I wasn’t coming back.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Again, I shook my head. They’d be at me soon enough, the massed phalanxes of the Pro-Lifers, the God Squad and the rest, plus, of course, the Media, drooling to see the end of the witch hunt that they’d started--perhaps even Jean-Claude, if his ogre of a father hadn’t ordered him to ditch me. The best the witch could hope for, if they didn’t lynch her first, was being locked up in the loony-bin for the rest of her life.

“OK,” she said, “perhaps not now. Where do you live?”

“London,” I answered.

“That’s too far for you to drive tonight, especially in your state,” she said, her voice concerned. “Is there anyone closer you could stay with? I’ll call them for you, if you like.”

I didn’t answer. Where could I go? I had neither friend nor relation, kith nor kin; the flat would be under siege. It looked as if my only course was to go creeping back to Jean-Claude and his family, my tail between my legs like a whipped dog, to have my nose rubbed in it.

“Would you like to stay with me tonight?” she asked. “I only live in the village down

there, and I’ve stacks of room. Please say yes. I’d never sleep if I thought you were driving back in the dark. I’ll even tell Omar not to snore.”

I considered. I felt oh, so tired, so drained! Do all failed suicides feel this way? Anyway, I was past decision-making, and if I said no and drove off, she’d only dial 999 and have me stopped by the cops.

“But won’t your husband object?” I asked.

She laughed. “Don’t worry about that, I haven’t got one; just a poor old widow woman, me! My name’s Georgie Bowman, by the way.”

“Madeleine, er--” I started to prevaricate.

“Don’t worry,” she cut in, “Madeleine’ll do for now. Do you feel well enough to drive? I’d take you in my car, but it wouldn’t be a good idea to leave yours up here, not if you wanted a full set of tyres tomorrow.”

The waves of fatigue would drown me soon, so there was only one thing to do. I said yes, and drove behind her down into the village.

We turned into a drive with a Bed-and-Breakfast sign at the gate. I remembered it as a ramshackle farm tenanted by a grumpy old man and his grumpier wife who, I supposed, scraped a living, although even as a child I could see it was a pretty rotten farm. Grandma used to say that the best-dressed thing on the place was the scarecrow, and if people ate thistles, he’d have been a millionaire. I’d heard that she’d died and he’d retired and that the house had been sold to an Army officer and his wife; that was ages ago, though, and this woman seemed quite young. I parked my car next to hers and walked unsteadily to where she stood waiting by the open front door.

“Come on,” she said, smiling and kindly, “you look done in. The kitchen’s through there. Would you like tea, or there’s cocoa if you’d prefer?”

In the warm, inviting kitchen a kitten jumped out of the dog’s basket and came to rub against her legs.

“Hello, Sammy, I hope you’ve been a good boy,” she said. The dog dropped his massive head to good-naturedly nose it, and the kitten rose on hind legs, paws swatting the big

muzzle, before scooting behind an armchair, its little face peering out, ready to play. Somewhere deep inside me rose the first stirrings of a smile. It was a glimmer of normality, and somehow my existence didn’t seem quite as hopeless.

I looked around the room. One wall held a green baize notice-board bearing menus, wants lists, memos etc. This was a business establishment, and my heart sank further as I realised that, for the moment at least, I was penniless.

“I can’t pay you, you know,” I said miserably, “at least not now. I can send you the money later, if that’s all right.”

“Wouldn’t hear of it,” she answered, “and at least you’re thinking of later, which has got to be a good sign. Sit down. I’ve got herbal tea if you like.”

The warmth of the Aga enveloped me like a cloak as I sat at the pine table. I felt very weak.

"I suppose I'd better ask," she said, her tone serious, "but you didn't actually take any of those tablets, did you? Because if you did, I really think you need a doctor."

I shook my head. It had been so close! I knew I was in shock, and I knew I couldn't face anybody, at least not yet; in the morning would be quite soon enough.

"No, I'm OK," I answered. "I didn't take any. Count them if you don't believe me. I bought three packets, and there are no more. You found me before I could start taking them. I suppose I ought to thank you."

Before she could reply, there was the sound of a car engine, and I jumped.

"Excuse me a minute," she said, putting a mug of tea and a plate of biscuits in front of me. "Don't worry, but I'd better see to my other guests. They're Japanese, so I don't suppose it'll be a long conversation. If I've got it right, they want an early breakfast, as they're heading for Cornwall, God help them. I don't think they've seen a real British motorway snarl-up yet."

She went out, and I considered bolting. But where to, I wondered miserably? It was cold and dark outside, and I was so tired. I drank some tea and ate another biscuit. I'd only

fall asleep at the wheel if I tried to drive anywhere, and hurt somebody else. Perhaps it would be better to stay here and see what sort of a mess tomorrow brings.

When she returned, the plate was empty, and she shot me a sharp look.

"When did you last eat?" she demanded.

I considered the question.

"I--can't remember," I said lamely, "but it's all right, really. I don't want to put you to any trouble."

She laughed. "If I wasn't a Parish Councillor, and forbidden from using naughty words, I'd say bollocks. I always find something sweet is best when things are going badly, so what's it to be? I know!"

She produced a saucepan, and within minutes a bowl of porridge appeared in front of me, with--oh, heaven!--a tin of golden syrup. Was she psychic?

"Refill?" she asked, after I'd wolfed the first bowl, "or there's some apple pie if you like?"

"This is wonderful," I said as she refilled the bowl. "I haven't had that since I was a kid."

"Well it never seems to have done the Scots any harm," she said, smiling, "although I must admit I couldn't fancy it with salt."

She seated herself opposite, allowing me to study her. I'd had her as young, about my age, but closer examination put her nearer fifty than forty. The face, its skin clear and still taut, had high cheekbones and a patrician nose, but if there were crows' feet round

the kindly blue eyes, and the lines round the wide, humorous mouth were deeper than they'd been twenty years ago, they couldn't mask a bone-deep beauty that would last till they put her in the coffin. The hands wrapped around her mug, with their short, unvarnished nails, sunburnt, working hands, gave more clue to her age than her face, and the blonde hair in its pony-tail showed only the odd grey strand. I found myself wondering how long she'd been widowed, and why weren't strings of admirers beating a path to her door? Are men blind?

Across the table from her sat a brunette of thirty-five, and I knew too well, looking ten years older. I'd last had my hair done before I'd tried to escape to England, before--. I'd put on some make-up to go to the lawyers', but that was two days ago, so God knew what it looked like now. Not that it mattered; all the make-up in the world couldn't hide the fear, tension, shame and despair weighing me down. Five feet five and overweight, still wearing the charcoal skirt, blouse, tights (now laddered) and court shoes I'd left the flat in, I looked, I knew too well, like an unmade bed.

She reached out and switched on the portable TV on the bench behind her.

"I need to catch the weather forecast," she said. "I might get some idea of how many people I can expect tomorrow night. I've two couples booked and I don't really want any more, what with Martine, who helps me, at her mother's, but it'll be a help to know."

I started, and she looked at me curiously. That couldn't be Martine Soames, could it? I'd been at school with her.

She'd been OK then, usually taking my side when the others picked on someone who hadn't a Mum or Dad, but I still didn't want to meet her and find out.

It was the tail end of the news, and I listened dully to the usual catalogue of doom until I heard--  
“Police are concerned to learn the whereabouts of a woman last seen leaving her home in London yesterday. She has been the focus of intense media speculation----“ The screen changed to show a mob around the door of a house in a suburban street, a woman in dark glasses trying to fight her way through the crowd, stumbling, nearly falling, being scooped up by the police and bundled into a squad car, the car speeding off, the crowd dissolving as they rushed to pursue--

The TV screen had expanded to fill my entire vision, and the sound thundered in my ears. I was back there! I could see with crystal vision the brandished placards with their messages “Abortion is Murder!” and “Life Begins at Conception!”. I could hear every hate-filled scream of “Baby-killer!”, “Rich Bitch!” and “Get Her!” I didn’t wait to hear the rest. Panic, worse than anything I’d experienced since leaving the clinic, welled up in me, closely followed by the porridge. Retching, I lurched to my feet, the toppling chair just missing the kitten who bolted for cover. I saw the alarm on her face, then she was rushing for the door, flinging it open and scooting ahead of me to the downstairs loo. “In there!” she cried, and I blundered inside to vomit until I could vomit no more, before collapsing to my knees, head on the toilet basin, totally drained, unable even to sob.

Eventually I dragged myself to my feet, wiped the puke-stains off my skirt and blouse, rinsed my mouth with cold water, washed my face and hands, then went out to face the music.  
“Sorry,” I said; there didn’t seem much else to say.  
She led me to an armchair, pulled up a stool opposite and took my hand.  
“Feeling better?” she asked, looking into my face. “Don’t worry about that, it’ll not take a minute to clean up. Are you sure I can’t get you a doctor?”  
I shook my head. “No, I’m OK!” I cried. “I just felt a bit sick, that’s all. Thank you for everything, but now I really must be going.”  
She made no move to get out of my way, but sat there, still looking into my face, still holding my hand.  
“That was you, wasn’t it,” she stated quietly, “on the news just now? Oh my God, what a situation for anybody to be in! No wonder you--. Good old Omar!”  
I’d started crying again, and could only nod dumbly.  
“Well, now you know,” I snuffled when I could form words. “I don’t suppose you’ll even want me in your house, not after what everyone’s saying about me. Thanks again, but now I’ll be on my way.”  
I made to get up, but a hand on my shoulder held me back.  
“There’s only one place you’re going tonight, Madeleine,” she said, gently but firmly, “and that’s bed. It strikes me that you’ve had more in the last few days than any one person should be made to bear in a lifetime. Where would you go? Back up on the Downs? I promised you a bed for the night, didn’t I? We can talk about it, or not, in the morning, just as you like, but either way we’ll sort something out. Come on, now. It’ll get better, you’ll see.”

I could hear Grandma’s voice thing as I followed her to the white-walled, oak beamed bedroom with its bright curtains, rug and bedspread. She brought me a nightie, clean knickers and a packet of sanitary towels, and as I laid my head on the lavender-scented pillow I sensed that tonight, at least, I would be safe. The kitten had come to check us out, and my last thought before falling into exhausted sleep was that it seemed he wasn’t the only one around here being adopted.