

CHAPTER 1

THE TOWER STOOD IN AN EMPTY WATER MEADOW by the edge of the sea, its ancient brickwork silhouetted against a sky that shone like liquid gold under drifting clouds the colour of wisteria. It was a round tower and formidably well built, topped by a white beehive cap, and four storeys high, with long deep-set windows, a studded oak door, and right at the summit, a glass-fronted gallery overlooking the sea. To Gwen MacIvor's dazzled eyes it looked wilful, like a huge, in-your-face act of defiance, uncompromising and untamed. She knew at once that it was exactly the sort of place she would like to live in. Then she saw the For Sale notice propped against the landward wall and knew, in the same unreasonable, instinctive way, that she was going buy it, even though the idea was totally out of character and battered her mind with surprise, for she wasn't the sort of woman who went around buying derelict properties she'd only just seen. She was Mrs Gwendoline MacIvor who lived in Fulham and had been quietly married for the past thirty-six years, and had two grown-up daughters, and was the sort of middle-aged woman nobody noticed, the sort who never put a foot out of line. Or at least she had been until that afternoon.

When she'd left her house a mere two and a half hours ago, her emotions had been in such a tangle she hadn't even known where she was going. She'd just finished eating her usual quiet sandwich with her usual well-sweetened mug of tea and she was facing the fact that she would have to go back to work again on Monday now that the funeral was over. Not that there was any rush, because it was only a part-time job helping out in the local newsagents four afternoons a week, but over the years

they'd come to depend on her and she didn't like to let them down. And at that moment she became aware of the clocks.

The noise they were making seemed to be getting louder and louder – ticketty-ticketty-ticketty from the tin contraption in the kitchen, clunk-clunk-clunk from the wall clock in the hall, a rising chorus of mutterings and scratchings and whirrings and clickings from every room in the house. Her irritation grew with the noise. There were so many of the damned things and none of them were any good. Never had been. Couldn't even tell the real time, which was hardly a surprise given the way he would keep tinkering with them. Now they just sat on the shelves and the walls, making stupid noises, sounding off the minutes of her life in their hateful, uncaring, mechanical, crushing way. And without any warning, her feelings suddenly boiled over in a rush of frustration and anger. She seized the kitchen clock and hurled it into the garden, where it lay on the lawn, trembling but still ticking, then she snatched up her bag, ran from the house, tumbled into her car and drove, heading south because any other direction would have taken her into the thick of the London traffic, but without knowing where she was actually going, sure of one thing and one thing only, that she had to get away – from the house and her life in it, from clocks, calendars, porridge-coloured walls, dull food, out-of-date clothes and boring television, from endless chores and the clutter of all her husband's useless 'collections', milk bottles, Toby jugs, cigarette cards, clocks, clocks, clocks, from the deadening, stultifying sameness of the life she'd lived for the past thirty-six years and couldn't bear to live another ticking second.

After a few miles, when she'd carved up yet another driver in her haste and been given the finger and a mouthful of abuse, her first sharp outburst of revulsion began to calm a little and she realised that she was driving to the danger of other road users and must think what she was doing, but by then she knew she couldn't stop until she'd got there – wherever there was. It

was a glorious summer day, just what she'd expect for mid-July, blue skies heaped with cotton-wool clouds, windscreens sparkling, girls in pretty dresses, tin-hatted builders stripped to the waist, babies in sunhats and Rastas in berets, curled cats sunning themselves on window sills, every tree heavy with foliage in perfect summer green. Enjoy it, she told herself. Just be alive and enjoy it. You've got nothing else to do. There's no invalid to be looked after now, no funeral guests to feed, no housework that won't wait, no urgency. The day's your own. You can do whatever you like with it.

So she drove to the sea.

After an hour or so she realised that she was heading for Worthing and decided against it because it was a town and she wanted solitude; she took the next road west because it was a simple turn; admired Arundel as she passed below it but didn't stop there; noted that she was passing Chichester but didn't stop there either. Then an approaching road sign caught her eye and her attention. 'Seal Island' it said in its high, clear print. The words lifted her into remembered delight. Seals, she thought, and instantly saw them, lying on the rocks of her childhood sunning themselves, their dry fur mink-brown, scratching their heads languidly with their flippers, gazing about them with those great liquid eyes of theirs, lolloping over the rocks to slide into the sea, softly and easily, as though their bodies became water at the moment of contact. Seals. Naturally she followed the sign.

Within minutes she was in a wide flat landscape driving slowly south along winding roads towards the blaze of the sun and feeling quite extraordinarily happy, eased and pleased by everything she saw, here a flint house crouched under thatch and a long slate-roofed barn standing sideways to the road, there a herd of black and white cows browsing in their gentle untroubled way, there a row of greenhouses glinting like green water in the afternoon sun. Even the trees provoked her fellow

feeling, for they'd all grown into distorted shapes, pushed sideways by the force of the prevailing south-west wind and that's just like me, she thought, pushed into his life-style all these years.

Presently the road narrowed to cross a short causeway with water on either side, a lagoon shimmering with waves and sunlight to her left, a shallow pool shining on her right, so she assumed she must have reached the island. Minutes later she was driving, very slowly, through the main street of a small village labelled Sutton, where holidaying families ambled from store to store with their kids trailing after them, licking ice creams. Then the village was left behind and the road was lined with Edwardian houses and she knew she was heading for the sea, for there were gulls wheeling overhead and she could smell the tang of salt.

There was a narrow promenade at the end of the road, and a gravelled space facing the beach where people parked their cars. She found a corner, eased into it, and got out to have a look round.

The sea was a joy to the eye, peacock green and summertime calm, sending ripples gently in to shore where half a dozen children splashed and squealed and tried to swim with their rubber rings haloed above seal-wet heads. There was a cheerful family directly below her, sitting on rugs eating sandwiches from Tupperware boxes and balancing thermos flasks among the pebbles, and a few yards further along the beach, three old ladies sprawled in deck chairs, either asleep or sunning their faces. Down at her feet the promenade was littered with tarred pebbles and shards of blackened weed and above her head the gulls soared and protested, their legs like scarlet threads against plump white breasts. It was all so exactly what she needed that she felt as though she'd come home. I'll take a stroll along the beach, she thought. Why not?

Which was how she found the tower. She'd walked until she had the beach to herself and had reached the point where the narrow promenade stopped and the pebbled beach sloped towards a marshy field, and suddenly there it was, looming up before her, so immediate and dominating that she simply had to go and take a closer look. She scrambled up the pebbles and strolled into the field, singing as she went.

As she drew closer, she could see that it was deserted and that it stood in a large walled garden, which had obviously been neglected too and for a very long time, for the weeds were waist high, the paths cushioned with moss and lichen, and there were two chipped trowels and a fork with a single prong rusting against the corner of some sort of outhouse. The garden wall was made of flint and almost low enough for her to climb over but, on the landward side next to the outhouse, there was a gap where a gate had been so she simply walked in, a little surprised at her daring but too full of curiosity not to go on.

The outhouse was made of brick and flint and thatched like the village houses, but it was little more than a ruin, all the windows broken, the thatch grey and sagging and growing grass, the one room inside full of rubbish – rusting tools, old shoes, broken flowerpots filled with spiders' webs as thick as old socks, and crates full of empty bottles, mostly cheap gin and whisky. The sight of it made her shudder. But the ground was good, even if it had been neglected. You could grow vegetables out here, she thought, picking up a clod of earth to crumble it in her fingers, and soft fruits. Clear those weeds, make a compost heap, double-dig. I'll bet it was a lovely garden once.

But it was the tower she'd really come to look at, that extraordinary defiant tower. She began to walk round it, peering in at the windows, and giving the door handle a pull in case it was open. Like the outhouse, it was very run down, the windows smeared with grime and the single room inside empty except for a scattering of old papers, a chipped butler sink and a

broken chair lying on its side. But oddly its dereliction made it all the more attractive. It had such possibilities. Like the garden. She began to imagine how she could rescue it and turn it into a home – flowers on a table set to catch the sun, a new plaster and a colour wash on those chipped walls, a sofa with lots of cushions, part of the curved wall shelved for books, no clocks.

Then she took three more steps and saw the For Sale sign. The frisson of shock, delight and realisation closed her throat. I shall buy it, she thought, resting her hands on the cold stone of the sill. It's meant to be. I shall buy it and live here. With one half of her mind she knew she was being ridiculous, but a contrary tide was running in her too, carrying her into a new possibility, a new way of thinking, a new single life. I shall buy it.

The estate agent's was easy to find, being in the main street like everything else in the village. There were three desks in the office, but only one agent, a fair-haired young man who was sprawled in his chair, drinking a cup of coffee.

But he set his cup aside at once, straightened his tie and stood up to greet her, rapidly assessing her potential as a client – classy diamond on her finger (good), hair severe and old-fashioned in a sort of bun (dubious), dress from Marks and Spencer's (middling), expensive handbag and sandals (good), car middle of the range and five years old (not promising). 'Good afternoon,' he said. 'How may I help you?'

Her answer was a surprise.

Being local, with a reputation for fair trading to maintain, he told her that the asking price was £100,000 and added, 'But you'll probably need twice as much again to make it habitable. It does have its drawbacks.'

He was impressed to see that the figure didn't throw her and waited while she thought about it. In fact to a woman used to London prices, £100,000 sounded reasonable and possible. The Fulham house had to be worth three or four times that, at least. 'I'd like to see it,' she said.

'No problem,' he said and introduced himself as he reached for his car keys. 'My name's Tom, by the way.'

'Gwen MacIvor.'

'Right then Mrs MacIvor. Shall we go?' And he led her out to his nice classy Volvo and was pleased to see that that didn't impress her either. So she's either used to money or an eccentric.

'It was a corn mill to start with,' he explained as he drove her to the site, 'but I expect you saw that. There used to be dozens of mills round here in the old days, tide mills most of them. The last miller in this one went bust and they turned it into a watchtower. Napoleonic War and smugglers and things like that. For the last few years it's belonged to an old feller, which is why it's run down. This is an executor's sale. He was a bit of an eccentric, to be truthful. Kept himself to himself.'

'I've seen the outhouse,' she told him.

'Right,' he said, thinking, she doesn't miss much, and adding, 'There's no main drainage. I'd better tell you that. He had a septic tank. Might need some attention. They don't last for ever. There's electricity of course and he had the gas laid on some years back, I believe. But drainage could be a problem. I don't want to put you off or anything because it's a super position and a good price – all things considered – but you'd better know the worst.'

Difficulties could be overcome. She hadn't expected it would be easy. 'It's not that far from the village,' she said. It might be possible to get connected.

'Not as the crow flies, no,' he agreed encouragingly. 'It's an easy walk along the footpath. Anyway, here we are. Let me show you round.'

There were four floors, as she expected, getting progressively smaller as they rose, and the wooden staircase was rickety and would need repair. But the view from the top was so stunning, even through dirty glass, that it lifted her into breathless delight.

It was like being a bird, flying high and wild and free in a huge expanse of clear blue air and wondrously multicoloured cloud, lilac, apricot, smoke blue, layer on layer of it. Below her, the Isle of Wight stretched like some mystic creature risen from the sea, still for the moment but poised to swim away, the sunshine glossy on the slopes of its green hills, its beaches ochre above the peacock green of the sea. To her left, the distant tower blocks of Southsea rose white on the western horizon and there were more ships than she could count, for as she now realised, she was looking down on the shipping lanes of the Solent, and they were full of tankers and cargo ships and white ferries, all following their appointed routes until they were mere black silhouettes against a far-distant apricot sky. As she watched, a ferry passed immediately below her. She could see right down onto the deck where the passengers were walking about and leaning over the rail, could watch the long lacy pattern of the wash foaming out behind it, white and straight in waters striped by sand and sunshine. If there had been any doubt in her mind it was melted away by the sheer joy of this view.

‘It was a look-out post,’ Tom explained.

‘It still is,’ she said. Imagine getting up in the morning to enjoy a panorama like that. My own look-out.

But the words brought an uncomfortable echo into her mind, for that was what her daughters said to one another when they were arguing – ‘All right then. Go ahead. It’s your own lookout,’ – and until that moment she hadn’t thought about them. They won’t approve of this, she thought, and quailed a little. They’ll think I’ve lost my senses. And I suppose I have in a way. Or come to them. But the thought was fleeting. Her decision had been made, there and then, at first sight, like falling in love, and now she was being driven by it.

The estate agent was waiting, being patient.

‘I shall buy it,’ she told him.

‘Yes madam.’

'I shall have to arrange for a structural survey to be done. Do you know a reputable firm?'

He most certainly did.

'My capital's all tied up in my London property at the moment,' she said, pleased to think that her property-buying neighbours had inadvertently taught her the language to use. 'I assume you'll need a 10% deposit to secure this?'

He'd never made such a simple sale. By the time she left his office for her drive back to Fulham, the survey had been arranged, she'd promised to send him a cheque for £10,000 'as soon as it can be made available' and the matter was as good as settled.

As she crossed the little causeway, her common sense returned to sober her and she knew it was going to be difficult to explain what she'd done to Eleanor and Lucy. Perhaps it would be better not to tell them just yet. After all, it might not come off and there was no point in worrying them about something that might never happen. She knew it was a cowardly decision, but comforted herself that there was good reason for it. She didn't want them to be upset. She'd never wanted them to be upset. Never. She loved them both too much. Although of course they often had been. And this would upset them. She knew it would. It was bound to, a change as sudden as this. No, she decided, I'll wait until it's all signed and settled. I can tell them then and it'll give me a bit of time to think out exactly what to say. There's no rush. I've got to sell the house first and that could take months. The property market's very unpredictable. And I'll have to wait for the survey to be done. That could put the mockers on it.

But it wouldn't. She knew it wouldn't. The place was as good as hers. I'll get a few local builders to give me an estimate for the stairs and the plastering, she thought, and then I'll make enquiries about the drainage. I must be practical. But she wasn't being practical. She was being rash, for the first time in her life,

and she was high with the shock and delight of it. No amount of cold-water conscience could bring her down. Inside her head she was singing with the joy of deliverance. Now, and at last, she could begin to live her own life in her own way. She could hardly believe her behaviour or her luck.