

Slippery When Wet

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Thunder crashed through the chambers of the stately home, cradling Maggie's four-poster within its sound. As rains lashed the windows and coated the sweep of lawns, she didn't wake.

The tip of her tongue moistened her lips though, which then smiled. She felt sexy in her dreams.

Maggie's telephone was hooked to a private line. She gave the number to nobody. The instrument, a large black Bakelite, squatted on her bedside table.

Its ring was loud. Down pillows absorbed the jerk of her head as she jolted awake. She knocked the receiver off the hook, then picked it up to lay it on the pillow beside her ear.

'Hello,' a voice said. A thin voice of a woman.

Maggie felt no urge to respond.

'Mrs Mawsby?' the thin voice squeaked, both proud and scared to be so demanding. A village woman. Maggie knew the type. 'I know you're there, Mrs Mawsby. I can hear you breathing. This is Miss Dirkin. Angela Dirkin. I've got your husband here.'

Wherever her husband was, it was no news to Maggie. News has to be interesting. She was not interested in her husband.

'Your husband, Mrs Mawsby. He's with me. He's in my bed.'

Maggie let the silence reign so long, she realised it was her turn to speak.

'What do you want? Congratulations or sympathy?'

'He's dead, Mrs Mawsby. Chumpers is dead.'

'Chumpers?' Maggie snorted, gripped the phone, and started to sit up. How absurd that he should let a village woman use his pet name.

'You're laughing, Mrs Mawsby. Laughing at your husband's death.'

'No, my dear.' It was too early to banter etiquette with the village slut. Time to gather the facts and conclude the conversation. 'So Charles has died?'

'In the night.'

'When, exactly?'

'There was a storm. A crack of thunder. I think it shocked him.'

Maggie looked through her bedroom window. The sky was blue, yet so clear that the news of a storm in the night made sense. The day had been washed clean.

'You must come around, Mrs Mawsby. Come and collect him. His body can't be discovered here. It simply wouldn't do.'

Maggie would not tolerate being told what to do by such a woman. She replaced the receiver. Then took it off its hook so it would not ring again.

This was a rare morning worth leaving bed to discover. Rain perfumed the air. Maggie walked the driveway breathing in scents from the trees. It was years since

she'd come this way on foot. Normally she used the Peugeot runabout for brief excursions into the village. Windows up, doors locked, engine running, she was glad of the protection of the car's tin casing. If people waved she nodded in response, like a nervous tick, and kept both hands on the wheel. She was used to winding the car around the small pits in the driveway. Now the broken surface pressed through the soles of her feet and she felt connected. Weeds had pierced the thin spikes of new leaves through the asphalt. How brave. How reckless we are, to think we can ever hold back nature.

She didn't stop at the front gate, pillars topped with real cannonballs edging the mass of wrought iron that always stood open nowadays, but continued straight out of the estate. The grass on the far side of the road was long. It licked itself around her legs and soaked her shoes. She walked through it as far as the stream. Its waters ran fast. She stood for some minutes then walked upstream. It was good to be moving beside the flow. The rush of its energy filled her.

The toe of her right shoe caught against the ground.

She kicked with her toes to unearth a stick. Its bark was dark and shiny. Taking hold of its cloven end, she ran her fingers around its smooth tip. It made her laugh. Poor, silly, phallic stick.

With a gentle swing of her arm she threw it into the stream.

It leapt like a salmon then darted forward like a pike, its sudden vigour surprising her. She found herself running to keep up, till it became stuck behind some rocks where it whirled around and around.

Out on the country road a car ground into low gear to take a bend.

Crows cawed and cackled into flight, a grating sound that chased across the morning.

The car backfired.

Maggie jumped at the noise. She turned from the stream to look down the road. Her granddaughter's yellow Mini Minor came into view. Climbing from the grass of the verge Maggie intercepted the car before it could turn in through the gates.

'Good morning, Flick,' she said, as the girl wound down her window.

The girl's hair was lank, as though wet. Her eyes blinked round and slow within the circle of her face.

Maggie watched her mouth open to speak.

My granddaughter's like a creature of the sea, she thought. A creature of the sea bed. Her yellow car is a shell she has outgrown. She needs to leave it for something larger.

'What are you doing out here, Gran?'

Maggie watched the mouth move, without listening to the words. She pressed the button on the handle and pulled the car door open.

'Come on out, Flick. I've got something to show you.'

The girl swelled out of the car while her grandmother stepped back.

'Let me take you for a little walk.' Maggie led the way. 'You must still be dull from your London, Flick. Breathe as we go. Smell the earth. The sky fell down on it last night. It's excited. Come and see what the storm has done to the stream.'

They walked the road, then cut in to where Maggie had found the stick.

'There was a stick,' she said. 'Caught in the ground, just here. It made me laugh. Looked like a black man's penis. I picked it up and threw it in...'

She mirrored the stick's flight with her hand, and spread her fingers wide to show how it splashed into the stream. Her hand then pointed out the stick's route as she led the way along the bank.

'It tore itself from the clutches of those weeds...' she told, and heard the drama in her voice. A tale told with such effect needed an ending. She hoped she could find one. '.... knocked against the roots of that tree... span off between the stones... surged along this straight bit thinking all was going well... then tumbled down the waterfall.'

The stream was full, but it was just a stream. Flick ambled along, taking one step to every two of her grandmother's, and wondered what the fuss was about. The 'waterfall' was only six inches deep. Then they came upon the stick.

It was about a foot long, one end slightly forked like a fish's tail. It had dropped into a small pool, a whirl of water behind rocks that took up a narrow section of the stream. The stick kept spiralling round, racing an ever broader circle till it seemed about to be flung free. The end reached out of the whirlpool, closer and closer to a boulder that stood at its side. Then one brief tap, wood upon stone, and the stick was tipped from the edge and sucked back into the centre.

With nothing else to point to, Maggie let her hands drop to her sides.

'It's just a stick,' she said.

Flick knew as much. Her grandmother's excitement puzzled her, but that her story simply tailed off was no surprise. Flick found people's excitement often evaporated in her company.

'Don't you see, it's just a stick,' Maggie insisted, and her excitement was back. In this simple fact her story had found its conclusion at last. 'I thought it had the secret at first. I watched it go with the flow. But it's only a stick. It's been caught up like that for an hour now.'

They watched it get knocked back from a few more escape attempts.

'Look and learn, Flick. Look and learn. People tell us nowadays that we should go with the flow. This is proof that going with the flow is not enough. That stick needs arms. And maybe legs. It needs to be able to kick out on its own.'

Maggie turned from the scene, tired of it suddenly, and stepped back to the road.

'Sometimes it requires an effort of our own. If we're not to get stuck.'

A tractor had been working out of sight. Now it carried its noise over the hill, and drew fresh lines with its plough as it drove toward them. A white band of seagulls streamed out in its wake, brilliant against the brown.

'Stupid birds!' Maggie was dazzled by the sight, but turned away in annoyance. 'They've got webbed feet yet they paddle about the countryside.'

'The plough's turning up food for them,' Flick explained. 'Worms and things.'

Maggie regarded the girl.

'I know what the birds are doing,' she said. 'They're searching for scraps. When all the oceans could be theirs, I simply wonder why.'

Flick looked at her grandmother, and saw tears seep from her eyes.

'What's the matter?' she asked. 'Is something wrong?'

Maggie blinked back her response. After an absence, the sight of her granddaughter always stupefied her. She felt herself shrink before the girl's size. She once tried to understand the phenomenon by imagining an acorn being filled with earth, first by the pinch and then the shovel-full, thrusting itself downwards and upwards as roots and branches till it was filled out as an oak tree.

'It's your grandfather,' she said. 'He's left me.'

'Left you?'

'In the night. I had a call. Your grandfather's dead.'

The girl gaped.

'I'm off there now. Off to see him.'

Maggie started to walk.

'How?' Flick asked as she hurried to catch up. 'How did it happen?'

'Happen? Death just happens. We do what we can then death takes over.'

She let the thought hang around her for a moment, then took hold of her skirt by its pleats and held it out to the sides. It had hidden in her closet for years. The dress was pleasantly loose about her neck and gathered in folds around her body. The folds dropped extra patterns of light and shadow upon the material, a dark blue silk which swished above her skin when she moved.

It was fun to walk in.

'I'll walk, if you don't mind. You can follow me in your little car.'

'Back up to the house?'

Flick could see through the gates to a distant corner of Mawsby Hall, standing at an angle to the avenue of trees.

Maggie kept her back to the sight.

'Oh no.' The words were spoken quietly as Maggie's head shivered from side to side. 'Your grandfather's in the village. The first house on the left. I'll see you there.'

Maggie tried to give the girl a smile, but didn't know if it showed. She felt nothing of it herself but its ache in her cheeks.

Flick watched the woman turn. The dress was askew on her shoulders, narrow shoulders with skin that was close to the bone. The white strands of the woman's hair were pinned to her scalp by combs, as though fixed while being blown in a high wind. It left her neck bare, and her ears sticking out like a lamb's.

Flick watched the figure walk the country road till it grew tiny, then climbed into her car and followed.