



A Dirty Death

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Chapter One

It had already been a spring laden with mortality. News reports were full of mutating killer viruses, terrorist bombings, earthquakes and floods. Both God and man, in equal measure, seemed intent on eradicating the human race. There had, too, been smaller tragedies at home: the family dog had died only a few weeks before, and a whole herd of prime beef animals had been wasted on the altar of BSE-phobia, despite the farmer's confidence in his organic status.

So it was with a strange momentary lack of surprise that Lilah found her father, early that morning, half-submerged face-down in the slurry pit. She looked at his back, at the familiar mustard-coloured milking coat which had in any case always been stained with splashes of cow muck, slowly sinking into the stuff. All around him the crust was broken, stirred up by what she supposed had been his frantic thrashings, his struggle to live. Fresh streaks of muck spattered the sides of the pit and dotted the concrete which led to the edge. In those first few clear seconds, she supposed he must have somehow skidded over the brink,

on the side which had no protective fence – and landed with a great splash.

Against her will, she visualised what must have come next. Everyone knew how treacherous slurry could be, with its sucking quicksand effect, and almost no hope of gaining a foothold. Full from a winter of mucking-out, and no chance yet to get out in the fields with the spreader, the pit was perhaps four and a half feet deep. A man on his knees could not have kept his head above the surface.

An unbearable conflict gripped her. She should get him out – of course she should. But then she might drown in it too. The pit had always been so strictly forbidden, and Guy was so very obviously beyond all help, that she spent two or three long minutes simply hovering, helpless.

At last she called Sam, her voice unnaturally shrill. She knew that, as always at this time, he would be across the yard in the outside lavatory, performing his essential morning defecation. But he was at her side in seconds, struggling with the orange bale string which held up his moleskins, his cheeks flushed with effort and embarrassment. Now that Lilah was twenty and no longer his little helper, he knew she was too old for such casual intimacies.

‘Oh,’ he said, and made as if to jump into the pit immediately. Then he stopped himself. ‘He’ll be dead, by the look of it.’ Lilah noticed how wrong it felt for Sam to be using ordinary English words to describe something so entirely cataclysmic. There ought to be a special language reserved for moments like this.

‘We’ll have to get him out of there,’ Sam added, swallowing something nasty in his throat, twisting his face in disgust. At

the sudden vivid picture of what the farmer would look like when turned over, slurry in his mouth and nose, down inside his clothes, Lilah was abruptly sick, her morning cereal and toast slithering over the sloping edge of the pit to join her father.

‘Go and get your brother. And your Mum—’ he heaved a brief sigh of anguish before continuing ‘—and then phone 999.’

By this time, they were both shaking with the shock; severe, uncontrollable shivering, as if they were out in a blizzard with no coats on. Lilah looked down at her own hands, dancing and jittering of their own accord, and clenched her fists hard. Jerkily, she turned and tried to run back to the house. It was like running in a dream.

Dad was dead. Drowned in slurry – wet, brown, stinking, lethal slurry. How often had his children been warned of its dangers, *told* and *told* to keep away from the pit? How often had they joked about what an awful way it would be to die? *Dad was dead*. Like a cloud of attacking bees, the implications of this began to descend upon her. Tears ran down her face, fogging her vision when she tried to telephone.

‘Emergency. Which service do you require?’ said a ludicrously calm voice.

‘Police. Ambulance. My dad – he fell in the slurry – he’s dead.’ Her voice came in breathless gasps; she couldn’t believe she was saying the words. She wondered if she had said them correctly, or had she just gibbered? The woman asked for her address and phone number, and then requested a precise spelling of the farm’s name, twice. ‘*Redstone*, for God’s sake,’ screamed Lilah. ‘How many ways can you spell that?’

‘Please try to keep calm, madam,’ said the woman, and Lilah hated her with horrifying ferocity, as she was promised immediate

co-operation. There were no policemen or ambulances nearer than ten miles. There would inevitably be a wait.

She went up to Roddy's room then, knowing she should hurry, but reluctant to involve him, to have to bring him such distress and deal with his shock.

Roddy slept like an Egyptian mummy, wound tightly in his sheet. It had been a warm night, making the duvet superfluous. Lilah paused a moment, then laid a hand on his thick black hair, and he came instantly awake.

'Something's happened,' she whispered. It wrung her with a bitter pain, having to force him outside to witness the horror, but if she didn't do it, Sam would, and Sam was not always gentle with Roddy. 'You've got to come and help Sam. I warn you, you'll probably be sick. I was.'

'*Sick?*' He looked alarmed. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'It's Dad. He's in the slurry. You'll have to help fish him out.' Roddy swallowed a small giggle, looking hopefully at his sister, wanting to be told she was playing some horrible joke on him. But her face convinced him otherwise. 'You're crying,' he said, in real shock.

She put a hand to her face, surprised. 'He's dead, you see,' she explained. 'Drowned in slurry.' The last word broke up on the loud sob she could not prevent. 'It's awful, Rod. Terrible. Now get dressed. Wear something old. I'll have to tell Mum.'

Miranda Beardon was lying cosily in the big double bed, stretched diagonally across it, occupying all available space. A small transistor radio, tuned to the local station, whispered in her ear. She looked up at her daughter, displaying some

resentment at the disturbance. Lilah expected that a mere glance at her would be enough to denote tragedy, but her mother just sighed.

‘What’s happened now? I could hear there was some kind of goings-on out there. Noisy lot. I suppose the cows are in the road again?’

‘No—’ *The cows! They’d be waiting to be milked. The tanker would come at ten, and there’d be nothing ready. Dad’d be livid . . . Oh, God!*

‘No, Mum. It’s much worse than that. Dad’s—’ She couldn’t say it. A great black cloth wrapped itself around her tongue, and she couldn’t say the word. More tears fell, and her mother finally grasped that this was much bigger trouble than she had bargained for. She sat up in the bed, naked, urgency suddenly gripping her.

‘What? Lilah, tell me. What’s happened?’

‘Dad’s drowned. In the slurry pit. Sam and Roddy are getting him out. The police will be here soon. And an ambulance, I suppose.’

‘No! He wouldn’t fall in the slurry. He wouldn’t be such a fool. Are you sure it’s him?’

Lilah nodded, then turned to leave the room. Her mother’s nakedness offended her. This was no way to receive the news that you’d been widowed.

‘Lilah? What am I going to do?’

‘Put some clothes on, and come down. I’m going back to help Sam.’

The policeman, when he arrived, was familiar to Lilah. His long smooth cheeks and sand-coloured hair hadn’t changed in

seven years. She had last known him as Bus Prefect on the daily trip to and from school. He had been in the first-year sixth when she started at the comprehensive, and for two years they had wordlessly shared transport for over an hour each day.

He knew exactly who she was, of course: the Beardons had farmed Redstone for the past fourteen years. Nevertheless, he had to do things properly.

‘Miss Beardon?’ he enquired, as she walked up to his car in the yard. She nodded, confused as to how to address him. The ‘Miss’ seemed strange, coming from him. It made her feel she was no longer herself.

But then, she *was* no longer herself, of course. She was fatherless now. A half-orphan. It made sense that this status should acquire a new unfriendly title.

Denholm Cooper, the policeman was called. Den, for short. She had always identified with him in having to explain his name. People thought Den was for Dennis just as they assumed Lilah was really *Delilah*, and she had felt a bond with him accordingly – enough of a bond, at twelve years old, for a brief but profound schoolgirl crush to blossom. Looking at him now, she remembered it all, and blushed.

Human beings adjusted very rapidly to calamity, it seemed. Lilah had already assumed that she would have to make special efforts to put people at their ease, so that they wouldn’t shy away from her – tainted as she now was by the death of a loved one. She must not cry or vomit in front of anyone. She must act naturally, observe the normal rules of social intercourse. Den, however, already seemed unperturbed by what had happened. She had taken a step to one side, to allow him to leap eagerly from his car and run

with urgency to the scene of the tragedy. Instead, he remained sitting where he was for a full minute, which hinted to Lilah of arrogance. What if Dad hadn't quite drowned, but needed instant resuscitation? How strange that the woman on the telephone hadn't questioned her more closely when she had said her father was dead.

'Your Mum at home, is she?' asked Den, calmly.

Lilah waved towards the house. Then she looked across the yard to where Sam was clumping towards them. Slurry had splashed him extensively, and he held his hands out stiffly from his sides, as if unable to abide himself. Suddenly decisive, the policeman unfolded his legs from the car, standing over them, taller than anyone Lilah had ever before stood close to. Perhaps that was why he stayed so long in the vehicle, she thought; his height intimidates people. An hysterical urge to say 'Goodness, you've grown,' seized her, but she fought it down.

'Got him out, did you?' said Den. 'I'd better come and have a look, then.' They walked the thirty yards to the pit and stood motionless for a moment. 'You shouldn't really have done that.'

Sam looked mutinous. 'Couldn't leave him in there,' he stated flatly. 'How would you like it?'

The farmer was covered with a sheet of black plastic, lying near the spot where Lilah assumed he had first slipped. The splashes of muck were no longer visible, and she gave them no further thought. 'I washed him off a bit,' said Sam, as he pulled the sheet back. No one tried to keep Lilah away. She stared down at the face, splotched in nostrils and eye sockets with the khaki-coloured manure. The mouth, too, was open and muck

had got into it. That was the worst. She had been kissed by that mouth, every night and every morning of her life.

Then Roddy and her mother were standing beside her. Mum gave a strangled cry, but no words came from her. *This is the language of catastrophe*, Lilah thought. *This is how we ought to be communicating – in sobs and groans and muffled shrieks*. Roddy's face was bilious, his lips drawn back in a terrible grimace. Den nodded to Sam in a silent instruction to re-cover the body. His own face was a poor colour, and he put a hand to his mouth.

'Right,' he said, very quietly. 'Right. Well . . .' Like a man looking for escape, he strode back to his car and reached in for the phone. They heard him, across the silent yard, saying, 'Send the duty doctor out, will you? ASAP. Then ask the undertaker's men to fetch him. No need for an ambulance. Yes, a p.m., definitely. It's not nice, Jim. Not nice at all.'

Time passed in a whole new way. Another two policemen arrived, and with Den they fastened white tape around two sides of the pit, looking helplessly at each other when the roll ran out. 'Nobody is to come past this point,' they ordered the huddled family.

A middle-aged doctor with a loud voice turned up and made a mysterious sequence of examinations, glancing disapprovingly at Lilah and Miranda, clearly wishing someone would remove them. Not long afterwards, two black-coated men arrived in a big estate car and took the body away, making surreptitious and somehow comical attempts to avoid touching any of the muck. Lilah noticed a large moist dollop fall onto one man's shoe; he kicked his foot frantically, trying to get it off.

Den explained about the coroner and the delay in getting a death certificate. He produced a notepad and asked who had found the body, what time, how long since anyone last saw him alive, whether there had been any odd circumstances. Lilah tried to tell him the whole story; how she'd searched for him, wondering why he wasn't in the milking parlour; how she had eventually gone to the slurry pit and glanced in, never for a second expecting to find what she did. Den wrote carefully on his pad, repeating details in unfeeling interruptions of her tale.

When he had finished, he cast an eye around the yard. 'Must have been an accident,' he said. 'Don't you think?'

She couldn't answer. Following his glance, she scanned the unfenced edge of the pit as if searching for an action replay of what had happened to her father. There was an uncoiled hosepipe lying close by, which Sam had used to clean away some of the muck, and a stack of rotting timber which had once been a derelict shed, recently demolished. The concrete close to the pit was slippery and sloped downwards.

'He could have skidded on a wet patch,' continued Den. 'Or is there a dog, perhaps, that might have accidentally pushed him in?'

'The dog's dead,' said Roddy, harshly.

Den didn't react. He told them there would be a further police visit, questions, more formalities. Then he drove away.

Lilah looked after him, wondering at the vivid memories he had aroused in her. It seemed almost shameful that she could think about a childish passion at a time like this. His face stayed in her mind – she had known those flat stretches from his cheekbone to his jaw in intimate detail after so many journeys spent watching him in the bus driver's mirror. His seat had been

at the back, of course, and she was down near the front. The random coincidence of images in the mirror had seemed to her to prove that Fate had intended them for each other. But, when he left school, she had forgotten all about him.

Sam attended to the cows, with distracted help from Lilah and Roddy. The widow, Miranda Beardon, forty-five and now the head of the house, telephoned her mother, and wept down the line for a long time. Two policemen came back, with a long tape measure and a camera, but their examinations were brief. Lilah heard one say ‘Weird way to top yourself,’ and for the first time the possibility of suicide hit her, only to be brushed impatiently away again. No one who had known her dad could imagine such a thing.

Through the rest of that day Lilah struggled to make sense of what had happened. *Dad has drowned in the slurry. He’s dead. He fell into the pit.* And finally, as if it had been waiting quietly to pounce, came the most obvious question: *How?* How in the world had a fit man, not yet sixty, in the bright summer morning light, managed to succumb to such a stupid accident? She tried to imagine how it would be to fall in. The stuff was slippery, of course, and it might prove difficult to get any sort of purchase. But surely, a person could lift his face out, enough to avoid drowning? The pit was deep – the whole winter’s worth of muck, waiting to be spread on the fields this very week. Too deep to be able to get up on hands and knees and hold your face clear. You’d have to stand up, and that may well be impossible. It was even conceivable that the sheer horror and panic of being in such a thoroughly grim situation would kill you before you actually drowned.

Very deliberately, Lilah forced herself to think it all through. If she didn't do it now, while already immersed unavoidably in the facts of the situation, she doubted if she could ever persuade herself to come back to it again.

There was some small nub of self-satisfaction in the process, too. *See, she told herself, how much tougher and braver you are than your mother! All she can do is cry and moan. She never was any good in a crisis. You, however, have risen to the occasion splendidly. After this, life is going to be pretty smooth sailing. Nothing as bad as this can ever befall you again.*

But she cried bitterly into her pillow that night. After supper she'd gone for a short walk with Roddy, needing to talk to him, and to find out how he was enduring. At sixteen, her brother was a handsome adolescent, his dark skin free of blemish, his preoccupations transparently wholesome. Lilah had always liked him and admired his straightforward nature. From toddlerhood, they had both been closely involved in the farmwork, and took turns in less demanding aspects of the work.

They walked up the slope behind the farm buildings, where the fields rapidly became steep and less fertile. The hill rose to thick woodland, belonging to the neighbouring farm – a large estate owned by Jonathan Maberley. Though only a mile from the centre of the village, Redstone felt isolated in its folds of hills crossed by crooked narrow lanes. Farmhouses seemed to rise at random from the ground, some on hillsides, some hidden deep in natural hollows. Redstone was one of the latter, its buildings and yard fitted snugly into the bottom of a shallow bowl, with all the land around it sloping uphill. It was an ancient land, barely scratched by humankind: the nearest major road was six miles away, and the sound of traffic was

no more than an occasional swoosh as a single vehicle used one of the lanes. Lilah had not yet even tried to escape from this rural life into a faster, more exciting, more urban setting. One day, she told herself, she might give it a try. But the necessary courage was a long time coming.

As he strode unseeingly in a straight line up the hillside, Roddy fought his tears, choosing rage over grief. He smacked one fist into his palm, over and over, emitting tight phrases of fury. 'It's *stupid*, Lilah. A stupid way to die. Why wasn't he more careful? What are we supposed to do now? Everything's ruined. What a mess. Oh sod it. Fucking sod the stupid fool.' A few hot tears shook themselves free, but he viciously swept them away without acknowledgement. He hardly seemed the same boy who had slept so safely in the embrace of his sheet that morning.

Lilah was shocked by his anger. Somehow, it seemed almost wicked, and entirely inappropriate. Then she remembered Tamsin, the half-breed collie they'd had when she was younger. She had been prone to chasing cars, and finally one had come too close and run over her leg. Lilah had witnessed the whole incident. As the tyre had cracked Tamsin's bone, the dog had bitten and snarled furiously at it, fighting the enemy that was hurting her. Bravely she had tried to take on the thing that was so much bigger and stronger than herself. Roddy seemed to Lilah like Tamsin, now – snarling at Death, shaking his fist defiantly at the most powerful adversary of them all.