SUE FOR MERCY chapter l

It wasn’t safe to go on driving. I was crying so hard I could hardly see the road through the sleet of the January storm.

I turned off the main road, looking for a quiet place in which to park while I blew my nose and cleaned my glasses. I told myself that I was tired, that it was late, and that it wasn’t my fault that I was short-sighted and had to wear glasses. Even if I was a trifle overweight, there had been no need for that horrible man at the party to make jokes at my expense. One day I would meet someone who didn’t mind that my bust was slightly too big for current fashions; my skin was clear and my eyes a reasonable size.

‘That cow!’ the man had said.

A sports car came up behind me, its headlights dazzling my already blurred eyesight. I slowed, refusing to panic.

We were traveling along a winding, sparsely-lit road of detached houses. The driver of the sports car leant on his horn, which was no only bad manners, but also illegal after midnight. He closed up on me, which showed poor road sense on a winding road. No doubt he and his passenger were swearing at me for being an over-cautious woman driver.

A second car came up behind the first, also with its headlights full on. It lit up the interior of the sports car, throwing the figures of the driver and passenger into silhouette.

I signalled, slowed and turned left into someone’s private driveway so as to allow them to pass. At the same time I hoped, uncharitably, that one or other of the road hogs might come to grief on the sharp bend in the road which lay just ahead.

By the time U had blown my nose, cleaned my gasses and resumed my journey, the road ahead ought to have been dark, but it wasn’t. I could see the lights of the cars even before I rounded the corner and I guessed what I should see even though I hadn’t heard the crash.

Sure enough, the sports car had mounted the opposite pavement and come to rest with one wing crumpled against someone’s garden wall. The lights were on inside the car, and from the driver’s seat a rag doll of a body spilled head down onto the wet pavement.

The second car had pulled up some twenty-five yards further on, and at first I thought the situation was under control – until I realised that the man and the woman were running away from, and not towards the scene of the accident. Even as I watched, they climbed into the back of the second car and it drove away, rear lights winking.

I braked, slushily. Sleet drummed against the wind-screen. I was used to dealing with emergencies, being in charge of the typing pool at Murchison’s Chemical Works, a position usually held by a much older woman, but I wasn’t used to dealing with dead bodies, and I assumed that the victim of the car accident was dead, or the people from the second car wouldn’t have left him lying there, half in and half out of his car.

And what about the woman who had been his passenger? She must have abandoned him, too.

Cowards! I thought. They might at least have pushed him back into the car out of the rain and surely one of them could have stayed with him while the others went for help.

Then something about the body caught my attention; dead men don’t bleed, and the young man’s hand was turning from white to dark red as I looked at it.

I fished out my headscarf and tied it on, buttoning my raincoat high before stepping out into the storm. The car which had crashed was a dark blue, almost new MGB. It had been well cared for, and recently cleaned. It looked as if the wing was only slightly dented, but the driver must have tried to jump clear at the moment of impact to explain his injuries. If he’d stayed put, he’d probably have got away with a bumped forehead, and if he’d been wear4ing his seat belt, he’d not have been hurt at all.

As it was . . .

Drunk! I thought.

He was wearing a white shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, no tie, grey slacks, black shoes and socks. His eyes were closed and there was blood on his bright hair. Blood was also trickling down from one corner of his mouth. His legs were twisted; maybe he’d caught a foot under a pedal in his leap for safety. He looked about twenty-five years old and was exceedingly handsome.

I could feel his heart beat draggingly against my fingers through the soaked rag of his shirt. His hair was losing its brightness and beginning to curl in tendrils close tohis head. The handkerchief which had been wound round his left hand fell away as I tried to life him back into the car, revealing fingers covered with blood. Also, his thumb looked out of joint. I sniffed and recoiled, for he stank of whisky.

Sleet chilled my face and legs. I hesitated. The fool deserved all he got, driving round these badly-lit roads in an inconsiderate manner, drunk. . .

Stop – hold everything! This wasn’t the man who had been driving the sports car!