CHAPTER ONE

They found the body at the foot of Beachy Head, crimson-splattered across the beautiful white chalk boulders piled up against the base of the cliff.

One elephant, two elephants, three elephants, four elephants, five elephants. There, now you know. That's what five seconds feels like, the time it takes for your body to fall five hundred feet and hit the rocks and end your life. The same time it takes to begin your life, as it happens, for it also takes five seconds to fertilize an egg: four for the orgasm and one for the sperm to hit the ovum. Not very long, you say? Ah, but time is relative, didn't you know that? Not to say elastic in this sort of situation where five seconds is enough to go over all the key moments of your existence to explain why you are currently approaching terminal velocity.

That's not what they told me of course. They just said there'd been an accident: Daddy had been hit by a car and had died on the way to the hospital. They wouldn't even let me go to the funeral, although I was able to persuade Mummy to take Daddy the gray elephant Grandma had knitted for me when I was a baby with black buttons for eyes and a slash of red wool for the mouth for Daddy to hug now it was his turn to sit on Uncle Mac's lap. I thought I would never stop crying for the rest of my life.

I only found out what really happened a few weeks later. I was looking through Daddy and Mummy's bedroom for something – for anything – that might explain why God had taken Daddy from me, when I found it. It was hidden in the back of one of the drawers in Mummy's dressing table underneath some old postcards: a clipping from the local newspaper that described in detail what was said at the Coroner's Hearing.

Daddy hadn't been run over by a car. It hadn't been an accident. It had been something much, much worse.

The newspaper article made it all so clear I can recreate the whole scene in my mind as vividly as if I'd been sitting in the Eastbourne Law Courts myself. There aren't many people in attendance: just Mummy and my big brother Lucien, who's rushed home from his ghastly boarding school; the reporter from the Herald; a police

constable; the coroner's officer; the manager and barman of the Beachy Head Hotel, Mr. Teddy Charlton; and lastly the great hulking figure of poor Billy Welford, the hotel's chief cook and bottle-washer as Mr. Charlton always called him, although he wouldn't have let him near a stove if his life depended on it, because Billy wasn't quite right in the head.

They all rise as the coroner enters in his black robe and sits down beneath the magistrate's seal.

The inquest begins with a reading by the coroner's officer of the forensic pathologist's report, which is typical of what happens to a soft human body when it collides with an immovable object at a hundred and fifty miles an hour: "severe head, chest, arm, leg and intestinal injuries, with multiple rib fractures and copious bleeding."

Does it hurt? You won't feel a thing. Once you exceed a hundred and twenty miles an hour, you're traveling faster than the pain signals can reach your brain.

Then it's the turn of the constable who'd inspected the body after the volunteer coast guards had winched it up to the top of the cliff: estimated time of death, approximately four p.m., according to the coroner's autopsy. P.C. Warner found the following personal effects on the deceased: two pounds, fifteen shillings and nine pence ha'penny, a ration book and a small envelope labeled "On His Majesty's Service" and stamped 13 Jun 1921. Inside was a cardboard dog tag embossed with the name Farrington C.E., 54195 LON REG, and two dull brass medals with faded rainbow striped ribbons that I'd look at again and again when daddy was out: one of them saying "The Great War for Civilization, 1914-1919," and the other "GEORGIUS V BRITT OMN REX ET IND IMP" circling the King's head like a Christmas wreath.

The constable concludes by stating that the deceased's vehicle was found parked near the Beachy Head Hotel, which is located a few hundred yards from the cliffs.

Mr. Charlton steps up next and attests that he saw Mr. Farrington's car still up there at 3:30 p.m., but didn't think any more about it since Mr. F. often left it there after a particularly liquid lunch when it was more prudent to go home by taxi.

"Did anyone report seeing a man walking about on the Downs who answered to the description of the deceased – tall, balding, early fifties with a pronounced paunch – " says the coroner.

"I know Mr. Farrington quite well by sight, your honor," interrupts Mr. Charlton, "'e was a regular in the bar you might say. Very regular. But no one reported seein' him after 'e left the bar." He sighed. "If only someone 'ad…"

"Was anyone else seen up there that afternoon after the bar closed?"

Mr. Charlton shakes his head. "Not that I know of. Although the rain 'ad let up like, everything was very muddy. It was 'ardly the weather for going for a stroll, your honor."

The coroner smiles. "You don't have to keep calling me 'your honor,' Mr. Charlton, that's reserved for judges. If you must call me something, call me 'sir.'"

"Yes, sir," says Mr. Charlton.

"How about your good wife, Mrs. Charlton?" The coroner looks round the courtroom. "She helps out in the bar, does she not? Might she have seen anything?"

"The missus was feeling poorly that day, your hon – sir, so I didn't think to bring 'er along today."

The coroner sighs. "How about, Mr. Welford," he indicates Billy, "did he perhaps see something?"

"Billy," says Mr. Charlton. "'ave you anythink to say?"

There is no reply. Billy must have been going through one of his catatonic phases for he only stares at P.C. Warner. There's something about uniforms that really bothers him, I don't know why, perhaps he spent time in a home for the retarded and was frightened by someone in uniform there. But he only stares. Pity, for if there was anyone in the world who could have remembered everything that happened that day, it was Billy Welford. But not now, not when for once everybody wants to know what Billy knows. Which is a lot, for his giant head is an overgrown rolodex, a photographic memory, Daddy said. Funny how someone who can remember everything, every cricket and football score, every racing result – whether it was the "horsies" as he always says in his high slow voice or the "doggies" or the "boaties" – can just as suddenly remember nothing, as if the spinning reference cards had

jammed, the photograph never been developed. But there you are, that's Billy for you. "Autism," I think they call it.

"May I add somethink else, sir?" says Mr. Charlton.

"Certainly," replies the coroner.

"Well, Mr. Farrington did drink even more than usual that lunchtime…" He hesitates.

"Go on."

"Well, sir, 'e seemed to be particularly depressed that day."

"What made you draw that conclusion?"

"'e hardly said a word the 'ole time, from when the bar opened at twelve noon until it closed at two thirty." Mr. Charlton gives a sad shrug. "'ardly said a word… just stared into 'is beer." He shakes his head again. "I should have said somethink to him, 'e 'ad all the signs, I should have known, such a famous suicide spot, but 'e was such a familiar figure, you see, sir, it never crossed me mind."

"You shouldn't blame yourself, Mr. Charlton. You had no reason to suspect Mr. Farrington's intentions."

The coroner pauses before giving his summation. He clears his throat. "From the evidence presented, and given Mr. Farrington's state of inebriation, and what was apparently his state of mind, it would seem likely that, after leaving the bar, he made straight for the cliff edge and deliberately jumped." He shook his head. "He certainly wouldn't be the first."

At this point, the man from the Herald noted that Mummy started to get to her feet "as if she had just seen her widow's annuity go out the window" and was only restrained by her son.

"However," says the coroner, clearing his throat again as he glances at her, "in order to cite suicide as the cause of death, the law requires that a clear expression of intent be proved beyond a reasonable doubt, which in turn requires at least one of the following: a suicide note, an oral threat, or an eyewitness. In the absence of any of these, the court returns a verdict of…" I could picture him shooting another look at Mummy … "accidental death."

I wanted to die as well, every time I thought about what Daddy had done, which was all the time. Why, why, why would my Daddy kill himself?

Was it my fault? If I'd never opened the door that night,

perhaps the policeman would have gone on to the next house, and then the next, and then the next, like the doodlebug bombs, until someone opened their door, and their Daddy killed himself. Mummy had tried to warn me, but I hadn't listened, I was too busy getting ready for Children's Hour. I remember every detail of that evening, at least from the time I shushed Mummy. It's funny, I can't remember much from that day before five o'clock, but every detail from then on, leading up to that knock on the door.

…"Shh, Mummy, shh, it's nearly five o'clock." I'd arrived home just in time to get out of my clothes and put on my red and white striped pajamas and gray dressing gown with the collar turned up for Children's Hour and *The Box of Delights* before Mummy came home from shopping. Now she was asking me something, but not now, not now, I can't think of anything else now, for here it comes: first, the soft sighing of the sad violin, yearning for a past it can never quite remember, that never quite existed, just like me, if only… if only… Then the harp, tinkling like a tiny bell on tiny feet as they try to take you in by skipping along on their tippy-toes as regular as little clockwork mice, all toy-tinny and mechanical. But they can't fool me, I know it's a machine you can't stop, I know it just goes on and on, whatever you do. *Da diddly da diddly da di da da, da diddly da diddly da di da da.* It's frightening and exciting all at the same time as more and more sad violins start to sing

The first Noël the angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds
in fields as they lay,
In fields where they lay
keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night
that was so deep.
Noël Noël Noël Noël!
Born is the King of Israel!

and the soft snow floats down in the dark wood and the creepy voice I dread and long for says the words I can never help whispering myself: "The Wolves are Running." I want to run away from the tinkling wolves and I want to run with them. They're creeping up on me, with their unstoppable tinkly feet, getting

nearer and nearer. Light as fairies, heavy as hags. I don't want them but I want them. I don't know which way to go, which way to run. Then the violins begin to wrap their song around me like a flurry of angels, diving and soaring, up and down, round and round, a flying shuttle of snow-white wings weaving its cocoon around me. The voices of those violins are purity itself, like the perfect voices of the choirboys at King's College Cambridge, which we listen to on the wireless every Christmas. The nearest living human beings ever get to Heaven, Daddy says, the "angel age" between nine and thirteen, before their voices break and "all hell breaks out in their bodies."

I never tire of my *Box of Delights*, even though this is its second broadcast, the first being in 1941, when I was six. Even though I'm thirteen now and big and strong for my age, I'm six again when that music starts.

Even now after all these years I'm still six the moment the first violin starts to play on my CD and I screw up my eyes to stop the tears as my heart swells with the *Andante quasi lento e cantabile* movement of Victor Hely-Hutchinson's Carol Symphony. Every single time. It never fails, vibrating through my entire body, my equivalent of Proust's "*petite phrase*" from the non-existent sonata by the non-existent Vinteuil in the author's endless journey in search of lost time. Except that my *petite phrase* is real. And it tears my heart out.

It's all right, it's all right, everything's going to be all right, sings the heavenly choir of violins and cellos, clarinets and oboes, trumpets and French horns and booming tympani drowning out the horrid tinkly bells, smothering the wolves under a warm brown blanket of sound, as brown and cozy as Marmite butter, as brown and cozy as Uncle Mac's voice, and I know I really am going to be all right. I am going to snuggle down into his lap forever and ever – even when the bells start tinkling again for "one last great wickedness" as that other, creepy voice always says at the end. For whatever the creepiness, Uncle Mac will always come to my rescue: Uncle Mac, who is also Captain Brass and Dennis the Dachshund in *Toytown* and the very best friend of Winnie the Pooh, the lovely golden funny old teddy bear I love almost as much as I love my Uncle Mac.

I wasn't the only one to have fallen under Uncle Mac's spell – or rather Derek McCullock's spell, the BBC presenter who played

him. During the War, McCullock's voice had become the second most beloved voice in England, even though he had only one lung and one leg as a result of the Battle of the Somme and a terrible car accident. But the most beloved voice of all of course was Winston Churchill and the three famous speeches he made to the House of Commons in 1940: "blood, toil, tears and sweat"; "their finest hour" about the young pilots in their Hurricanes and Spitfires; and my favorite, to celebrate the heroic rescue of half the British Army from the beaches of Dunkirk by the small boats of England, "we shall fight on the beaches." I'd learned it by heart:

> *We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.*

It was only many years later some revisionist historians claimed that because the House of Commons wasn't wired for sound recording at the time, the voice we heard on the wireless giving the three famous speeches wasn't Churchill at all; it was the voice of Derek McCullock's friend at the BBC, Norman Shelley, the actor who played Winnie the Pooh. If that was true, Winnie played Winnie, and my lovely golden funny old teddy bear won the war.

"Sorry, Mummy, what did you say?" Uncle Mac had said his "Good evening children, everywhere" and was now summarizing last week's episode, so I could respond at last.

"I said," said Mummy, easing her long legs up from the fireplace and brushing back her golden hair as she shook the slice of Hovis off the toasting fork onto my plate and I mixed the tiny

dollops of dark-brown Marmite and golden butter (the war was three years over and you could now get two ounces a week on your ration book), "although I might as well have been talking to myself – I said, did you hear that car coming up the street?"

"Daddy's home!"

Uncle Mac was all very well, but Daddy was Daddy. I ran out of the room, spilling my toast and Marmite butter across the carpet, *The Box of Delights* forgotten.

But it wasn't the lovingly restored little pale blue British Daimler with the walnut panels and pale blue leather seats and pre-selector gearbox Daddy had let me play with one day *What could go wrong?* until I pre-selected the wrong gear and drove it into the back of the garage, breaking its headlamps and Daddy's heart. In fact, there wasn't a car of any kind out on the street – I could see through the little window beside the front door – maybe the Daimler had conked out and Daddy had had to walk home.

I was about to unlock the front door, when there was a knock on it. Daddy must have forgotten his keys. I turned the key and opened the door.

"Is your Mummy in?" said the policeman.

Where was Uncle Mac? Where were the lovely, lonely violins to stop the wolves from running? And above all why, why, why? The same refrain had run through my head again and again.

They said Beachy Head got an average of one jumper a month and ranked number four on the "World's Most Popular Suicide Destinations" charts after Mount Fuji, the Golden Gate Bridge and Niagara Falls. They'd even named its local watering hole the Last Chance Pub: the place to get a little Dutch Courage for the leap. I don't know what it was, but something about this particular cliff edge was irresistible to people. Even Eastbourne's most famous visitor, Friedrich Engels, who worked on the world-shaking Communist Manifesto in the 1840s when this "Empress of Watering Places" was still a placid little town of three thousand souls, fell so thoroughly under the spell of Beachy Head he stipulated in his Will that his ashes be scattered from these cliffs. Other people wanted to scatter themselves while they were still alive.

But *Daddy*? How could he have done it? What awful thing in Daddy's life could have driven him to give it up?

Since I was only thirteen when he died, I didn't have all that much to go on growing up, just a handful of indelible scenes from my childhood memories of him like little strips of old nitrate-based film stock that had somehow survived the dreaded vinegar effect, which had crusted and smeared the rest of the movie.