

# CHEMICAL SECRET

## CHAPTER ONE

### A new start

'Mr Duncan? Come in please. Mr Wilson will see you now.'

'Thank you.' John Duncan stood up and walked nervously towards the door. He was a tall, thin man, about forty-five years old, in an old grey suit. It was his best suit, but it was ten years old now. He had grey hair and glasses. His face looked sad and tired.

Inside the room, a man stood up to welcome him. 'Mr Duncan? Pleased to meet you. My name's David Wilson. This is one of our chemists, Mary Carter.'

John Duncan shook hands with both of them and sat down. It was a big office, with a thick carpet on the floor and beautiful pictures on the walls. David Wilson was a young man, in an expensive black suit. He had a big gold ring on one finger. He smiled at John.

'I asked Miss Carter to come because she's one of our best chemists. She discovered our wonderful new paint, in fact. When... I mean, if you come to work here, you will work with her.'

'Oh, I see.' John looked at Mary. She was older than Wilson - about thirty-five, perhaps - with short brown hair, and a pretty, friendly face. She was wearing a white coat with a lot of pens in the top pocket. She smiled at him kindly, but John felt miserable.

I'll never get this job, he thought. I'm too old! Employers want younger people these days.

David Wilson was looking at some papers. 'Now, Mr Duncan,' he said, 'I see that you are a very good biologist. You worked at a university... and then for two very famous us companies. But... you stopped working as a biologist nine years ago. Why was that?'

'I've always had two interests in my life,' John said, 'biology and boats. My wife was a famous sailor... Rachel Horsley... Perhaps you remember her. She sailed around the world alone in a small boat.'

'Yes,' said David Wilson, 'I remember her.'

'So we started a business,' said John. 'We made small boats together, and sold them.'

'And did the business go well?' asked Wilson.

'Very well at first. Then we wanted to build bigger, better boats. We borrowed too much money. And then my wife...' John stopped speaking.

'Yes, the Sevens Race. I remember now,' said David Wilson.

Both men were silent for a moment. Wilson remembered the newspaper reports of the storm and the lives lost at sea. He looked at the man who sat sadly in front of him.

'So, after my wife died,' continued John, 'I closed the business. That was five years ago.'

'I see,' said David Wilson. 'It's a hard world, the world of business.' He looked at John's old grey suit. 'So now you want a job as a biologist. Well, this is a chemical company, Mr. Duncan. We make paint. But we need a biologist to make sure that everything in this factory

is safe. We want someone to tell the government that it's safe to work here, and that it's safe to have a paint factory near the town. That's important to us.'

'And if something's not safe, then of course we'll change it,' Mary Carter said. David Wilson looked at her, but he didn't say anything.

'Yes, I see,' John began nervously. 'Well, I think I could do that. I mean, when I worked for Harper Chemicals in London I...' He talked for two or three minutes about his work. David Wilson listened, but he didn't say anything. Then he smiled. It was a cold, hard smile, and it made John feel uncomfortable. He remembered his old suit and grey hair, and he wished he hadn't come.

'You really need this job, don't you, Mr. Duncan?' David Wilson said. 'You need it a lot.'

'Yes, I do,' he said quietly. But he thought: I hate you, Wilson. You're enjoying this. You like making people feel small. I hate people like you.

Wilson's smile grew bigger. He stood up and held out his hand. 'OK,' he said. 'When can you start?'

'What?' John was very surprised. 'What did you say?'

'I said, "When can you start?" Mr. Duncan. We need you in our factory as soon as possible. Will Monday be OK?'

'You mean I've got the job?'

'Of course. Congratulations!' Wilson shook John's hand. 'My secretary will tell you about your pay. You'll have your own office, and a company car, of course. I'd like you to start work with Mary on Monday. Is that OK?'

'I... Yes, yes, of course. That's fine. Thank you, thank you very much.'

## CHAPTER TWO

### At home

'Hi, Dad. Your supper's in the kitchen.'

John's sixteen-year-old daughter, Christine, was sitting at the table doing her homework. His son Andrew, who was thirteen, was watching television.

'Thanks, Christine,' John said. 'I'm sorry I'm late. Is everything OK?'

'Fine, thanks.' Christine gave him a quick smile, then got on with her work. John got his food from the kitchen, Fried fish and chips. The food was dry and didn't taste very good. But he didn't say anything about that. John was not a good cook himself and his children were no better. His wife had been a good cook, he remembered.

John tried to eat the terrible supper and looked around the small, miserable flat. The furniture was twenty years old, the wallpaper and carpets were cheap and dirty. The rooms were all small, and he could see no trees or gardens from the windows - just the lights from hundreds of other flats. And there were hooks, clothes, and newspapers on the floor.

Once, when his wife had been alive, he had had a fine house. A beautiful big house in the country, with a large garden. They had had lots of new furniture, two cars, pensive

holidays - everything they needed. He had have a good job. They hadn't needed to think about money. And then he had started the boat-building company, and his luck had ended.

When Rachel had died, John had been terribly unhappy - much too unhappy to think about business. A few months later his company had closed, and he had lost all his money. John had had to sell his beautiful house in the country, and move to this miserable flat.

And for the last two years, he hadn't had a job at all.

He was a poor man, and an unlucky one, too. He had tried for lots of jobs and got none of them. There were too many bright young biologists. But now that was all going to change. He looked at his daughter and smiled.

'Did you have a good day at school, Christine?' he asked her.

'Oh, all right, I suppose,' she said. She didn't look very happy. 'I've got a letter for you.'

She pushed the letter across the table, and he opened it. It was from her school. One of the teachers was taking the children on a skiing holiday to the mountains in Switzerland. It cost 400 pounds for ten days. Parents who wanted their children to go had to send the money to the school before February 25th.

John's smile grew bigger. 'Do you want to go on this holiday, Christine?' he asked.

She looked at him strangely. 'Of course, I do, Dad,' she said. 'But I can't, can I? We haven't got 400 pounds.'

'NO. I suppose not.' He looked at her carefully through his thick glasses. She was a clever, strong girl - good at her school work, good at sports. But she had never been skiing. John hadn't had enough money.

'Are your Friends going?' he asked her.

'Some of them, yes. Miranda, Jane, Nigel the rich ones, you know. But they often go skiing; it's easy for them. I know I can't go, Dad. Throw the letter away.' John looked at her, and felt his heart beating quickly. 'No, don't do that, Christine,' he said. 'Perhaps you can go, if you want to. Why not?'

Christine laughed. 'What's happened, Dad? Have you robbed a bank or something?'

John stood up. He went into the kitchen and got himself a drink. 'No,' he said, when he came back. 'But something interesting happened today. Put your homework away, Christine and turn that TV off, Andrew. I've got something to tell you.'

'Oh, not now, Dad!' said Andrew. 'This is an exciting story.'

John smiled. 'I've got an exciting story, too, Andrew. Come and listen.'

John Duncan's children lived in an old, untidy flat, they had no money, and they often ate awful food. But they could still talk to their father. So Andrew turned off the TV, and sat down in a big armchair beside his father and Christine.

The story didn't sound very exciting at first. 'I went to a factory today,' John said. 'That paint factory by the river. No, wait, Andrew. Paint factories can be very exciting. They gave me a job there. I'm going to have my own office, a big car, lots of money - in fact, we're going to be rich...!'

## CHAPTER THREE

### Rich man

John Duncan started work on Monday, and Mary Carter showed him round the factory. The most important thing that the company produced was a new paint for cars. It was a very strong, hard paint, which nothing could damage. Mary and her chemists had developed it, and they had tested it all over the world. Neither acid nor salt water could damage it, and cars came back from both the Arctic and the Sahara looking like new.

The company was beginning to make a lot of money from this paint, and it had brought four hundred new jobs to the town.

One day, when he was working with the paint, John spilt some of the waste products on his leg. He cleaned it off quickly, but it left a red, painful place on his skin, which would not go away. It kept him awake at night. He told his doctor what he had spilt on it, and the doctor looked at him strangely.

'So, these chemicals had something to do with the new paint, did they?' the doctor asked carefully.

'Yes, I told you. It was a bottle of the waste products. I was looking at them in my office.'

'I see.' The doctor looked out of the window thoughtfully. His fingers moved quietly on his desk. 'And your company is producing a lot: of these waste products now, I suppose.'

'Yes, of course.' John was in a hurry. He had to meet someone important in ten minutes. 'Look, can you give me something to put on it, or not?'

'Oh yes.' The doctor began to write something on a piece of paper. 'Put this on night and morning, and the pain will go in a day or two. But I'm afraid the skin there will stay red for a year or two. They're nasty chemicals, Mr Duncan, you know.'

'Yes, I know.' John smiled at him. 'But don't worry, Doctor, we're very careful with them in the factory. No one can go near them without special safe clothing. You can come and see if you like.'

'I'm very pleased to hear it,' said the doctor. He gave the piece of paper to John.

'Thank you,' said John. He went towards the door.

'Mr. Duncan?'

'Yes?' John looked back, surprised.

'Where do these waste products go, when the factory has finished with them? Into the river?'

'Well, yes, of course,' said John. 'But it's all right, you know.' He added quickly. 'It's very carefully checked, all the time. It's a big river, and we only produce a few hundred liters of the waste products a day. And we're only two kilometers from the sea, after all.'

'Good,' said the doctor. 'I wouldn't want anyone to drink those waste products, that's all.'

'They won't, Doctor,' said John. 'All the drinking water comes out of the river five kilometres upstream, you know that. Who's going to drink salt water from the river mouth lot

heaven's sake? Chemists from London have checked it, you know, and our company lawyers know all about it. So, it's not dangerous and we're not doing anything wrong. Don't worry about it.'

He went out of the door, and after half an hour he had forgotten the conversation.

He was a very busy man now. All day he had to test different types of paints, and make sure they were safe. He was also busy buying a big, comfortable house for his family, with a large field beside it, where Christine could keep a horse. The house was half a kilometer from the sea, and its gardens went down to the river. There was an empty boathouse there.

'Can we have a boat, Dad?' Andrew asked. 'I mean, not now, of course, but one day - when you've finished paying for the house, perhaps?'

John laughed. His children had been poor for so long. But now he could buy them anything they wanted.

'You can have a boat now, if you want, my son,' he said happily. 'If I can afford a big house like this, I can certainly afford a small boat. We'll go fishing every week, shall we? And I'll teach you both to sail in the evenings. I've always wanted to do that, you know.'

He could not believe how lucky he was. He had a good job at last, a fine home, and his children had everything they wanted. He only wished his wife, Rachel, was alive to enjoy it with him. There was only one thing that he could not give his children now. He could not give them back their mother.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The seals

A few months later, John invited Mary to a meal in the new house. It was a difficult evening. He had never invited anyone to their old flat, and the children's friends never came for meals. The new house was very untidy, and John was nervous about the food. He and Christine cooked a chicken because they thought it was easy. But the chicken was tasteless, and the rice was too soft.

Mary smiled, and pretended not to notice. But the evening went badly. Christine was angry with her because she tidied up the kitchen, and Andrew was angry with her because she didn't want to watch TV. Both the children went to bed early and thought about their mother.

But Mary came again, on a Sunday, and John took them m all our in their new boat. That was much better.

Mary didn't know how to sail, so the children had to tell her what to do. She did what she was told and seemed to be happy. John sat at the back of the boat and watched his children quietly. He felt proud of them, and he thought were proud of him too. The first time Mary and the children laughed together, John felt a big smile come onto his face.

It was a beautiful, sunny day in the middle of May.

There was a good wind, and the sailing was fun. The boat sail fast, over small, white-topped waves. The sky was blue and clear. They sailed down to the mouth of the river, where there were lots of small islands and sandbanks.

'Look, Dad, quick! Over there! What are they?' Andrew pointed excitedly to one of the long, low sandbanks.

'Seals,' said Joint. 'Haven't you seen them before?'

'No,' said Andrew. 'Only in films. Not in real life.' His face was shining, excited, happy. 'Do they really live here?'

'Yes. It's a group of seal families. The mothers come here every year to have their babies.'

They sailed closer to the sandbank, until they were only about twenty meters away from the seals. Wet, shiny seal mothers lifted their heads and looked at them with their blue eyes. The baby seals were drinking milk from their mothers, climbing over them, and playing in the shallow water. Then a big father seal lifted his head and stared angrily at them.

'I think they're beautiful,' said Mary. 'I never knew they lived here, so close to the town. It makes me feel really happy, just to see them.'

'Yes, it does, doesn't it?' said Christine. 'I think nothing can be really wrong with the world, if they can live here, all by themselves, with no one looking after them.'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'And they're really beautiful, too. Look! Did you see that little one, playing on his mother's back? I wish I could do that!'

John smiled, as he watched Mary and his children laughing and talking together. He thought the world was a good place, too.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **The new experiment**

A few days later, John asked Mary to look at another experiment. He took her into a long, quiet room at the back of the factory. The room was full of the noises of small animals.

'I've been testing the waste products,' he said. 'Here, look at this.' He gave her a sheet of paper. 'Some of these rats have had the waste products in their food and drinking water. There's no real problem yet. One or two have become ill, but not many. There's nothing very serious.' Mary read the results carefully. She didn't like this kind of experiment, but she knew it was necessary. And John was right; no rats had died, and not very many were ill. 'So what do you want to show me?' she asked.

'This,' he said. He opened a box by the window. 'These ten rats have had the waste products in their drinking water for two weeks now. I gave them a lot - five parts per million. They're going to have babies today. If the babies are OK, we've got nothing to worry about.'

'Oh, John,' she said. 'What an awful thing to do!'

'I know, I know,' he said. But he wasn't listening. 'Look,' he said excitedly. 'Some of them have been born already!'

He lifted some of the baby rats out of the box and looked at them through a magnifying glass.

'Oh dear,' he said at last, sadly. 'Perhaps there is a problem. Look!'

Mary looked through the magnifying glass. She began to feel ill. There was a long silence.

'There certainly is a problem!' Mary's voice sounded loud and high in the quiet room. She stared at the small animals under the magnifying glass. 'Baby rats with no eyes, no care, six legs! Oh John! John! What have you done?'

He looked at her strangely. 'It's awful, isn't it? But I had to know. And remember, Mary - their mothers have had five parts per million of these chemicals in their drinking water for two weeks. That's a lot - much, much more than we're putting in the river.'

Mary looked away from the rats. She remembered the beautiful afternoon that they had spent with John's children, sailing on the dear blue water. 'John, these waste products are dangerous!' she said. 'We've got to stop putting them in the river!'

'Of course, of course.' John put his hand on her arm. But it was the same hand - the hand that had held the rats. 'Of course, we'll stop it, if we need to, Mary. The company can build machines to clean the waste products. I'll start my report for David Wilson next week.'

'But...' She turned around to face him. His hand fell from her arm. 'Don't you think we should stop making the paint now, John? Perhaps it'll take years to build those machines, and we're putting the chemicals into the river right now!'

A shadow crossed his face. His eyes looked at hers, they away, out of the window.

'I... don't think we need to do that now, Mary. We're putting, very little into the river at the moment. And the company will build those machines, won't they?'

She remembered her long years of work, the hundreds of unsuccessful experiments. She touched his hand and smiled. 'I hope so, John,' she said. 'I really hope so.'

She turned and went quickly out of the room.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **The report**

John's report took longer than he had thought. It was nearly six weeks later when he went to discuss the results with David Wilson.

Mr Wilson wasn't a scientist. He was a businessman. He knew how to run a business, how to make money.

'Thanks for coming, John.' David Wilson came out from behind his desk and shook hands with John. They sat in two big, comfortable armchairs by the window.

David Wilson's office was large, with a thick carpet and beautiful pictures on the walls. From the window, John could see the river, and the woods and fields on the other side. He felt comfortable, happy, safe.

'I've read your report,' Wilson began. Then he stopped, and lit a cigarette. 'Not very good, is it?'

'What?' John stared at him in surprise.

Wilson smiled, and moved his hand through the clouds of smoke. 'No, no, don't worry - I don't mean the report is bad, of course not. You've worked very hard and done your job well. What I mean is, I don't like the ideas at the end of the report.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'They're too expensive.' The two men stared at each other for a moment, and John felt cold and sick in his stomach. Wilson smiled, but it wasn't the kind of smile that John liked.

'Look, John,' he said. 'Your report says that we should build some new machines to clean up the waste products before they go into the river, right? And those machines will cost two million pounds! Where do you think we can find all that? Money doesn't grow on trees, you know!'

'No, of course not.' John's mouth was dry. He took a drink of water, and felt his hand shaking. 'But we're selling a lot of the new paint. We're making millions of pounds every month from that, aren't we?'

'We're doing very well, yes,' said Wilson. 'But if we spend two million pounds to build these new machines, the paint will have to cost more, and we won't sell so much.'

'But - we've got to do it,' said John. 'These waste products are much more dangerous than I'd thought. Didn't you read that in my report? When I put the chemicals in rats' drinking water, some of the baby rats were born without eyes and ears. One didn't have any legs, and one had six.' He shivered. 'And some were born without legs when they drank only two parts per million. We can't put those chemicals in the river.'

'Of course, I read that, John. I read your report very carefully indeed. And your report also says that on most days we put less than two parts per million into the river. No, wait, listen to me for a minute! We both know that no drinking water comes out of this part of the river, don't we? And in two kilometers the river goes out into the sea. So why is it dangerous? Nobody is ever going to drink it, John! We don't need to build these new machines!'

John thought of his children, sailing on the river in their boat. He thought of the seals, and people fishing, and little children playing on the beach and swimming. 'We've got to build them!' he said.

David Wilson looked at him carefully. His voice, when he spoke, was very quiet and hard. 'Listen to me, John. You're a very good scientist, and we're lucky to have you in this company. But you're not a businessman, and I am. Look at this.' He picked up a sheet of paper and held it across the table for John to see. It showed how much money the company had. 'We borrowed ten million pounds last year, and we employed four hundred more people. Think how much that means to a small town like this!'

'I know,' said John. 'But...'

'Just a minute. Listen to me. If we build these cleaning machines of yours, people will lose their jobs - a lot of people! This company can't afford to borrow any more money, John. We just can't do it!'

John stood up. 'And what happens if people get ill because of this? Have you thought of that? What will the newspapers say then?'

'No one will get ill, because no one drinks that water, John. The newspapers will never know about it.'

'They will if I tell them.'

THERE was a long silence. Then David Wilson stood up. He walked past John Duncan, without looking at him, and sat down behind his desk. When he looked up, his |||| were cold and grey, like stones from the beach.

'If you do that, John, I shall say you're a liar. You'll lose your job. You'll have to sell your house and go back to living in a nasty little flat. You'll never get another job, and you'll never have a house or any money again. You'll past be an old man, walking the streets without friends or money. Is that what you want?'

John didn't answer. He stood for a long time, and started at David Wilson, and didn't say a word. After nearly two minutes, Wilson smiled - a thin quiet smile.

But if you stay with us, you will be paid twice as much HIM year. And no one will ever be hurt, because no one will ever drink that water.'

He got up from his desk, came around to the front, and In Id out his hand. John stood still for a long moment. Then he shook hands.

Think about it, John,' said David Wilson.

John Duncan turned and walked slowly towards the door.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Christine and Simon**

Mary talked to Mr Wilson too, but it was no good. She came out looking tired and very sad for many months she argued with David Wilson about the danger of the waste products, but he would not listen to her. And so, eighteen months after John's report, Mary decided to move to another company. She was pleased, because it was a more important job, but that wasn't the reason she was going. She knew that the cleaning machines would never be built.

John was sad to see her go. He had enjoyed working with her, and she had come to his house several times over the last year and a half. His children liked her now. They had never been so friendly with any woman, since their mother had died.

On her last day, Mary and John had lunch in the factory restaurant together.

'You don't have to go, you know, Mary,' John said. 'This company is very successful, and it's growing all the time. Your new paint has meant four hundred new jobs - all because of your discovery! This isn't a poor town any more - it's becoming successful, rich! People will want to move here from other places.'

He talked about the new sports center at Andrew's school, which was built with money from the paint company. There were two big, new shops in the town as well, and a new theatre, and a lot of new houses. 'And it's all because of you,' he said. 'It's wonderful, Mary, don't you think?' He smiled at her across the table and took her hand in his.

She looked at him quietly. He had changed a lot since he had first started working at the factory. For the first six months after he had got the job, he had been really happy and

lively. She had always known where he was in the factory, because he was always laughing, or singing to himself.

But for the last eighteen months he had been much quieter. He was always busy, but he didn't sing or laugh, and he didn't often look Mary in the eyes. And when he was alone, he looked tired and sad.

She took her hand away from his, gently. 'You know why I'm going, John,' she said. 'I know what's going into the liver, and I don't like to think about it. You should leave, too, and get a job in another company.'

'I'm too old.' John stared at her angrily. 'It isn't easy for me to get a new job. And Mary, the company has been making the paint for more than two years now, and no one's been hurt, have they?'

Mary didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, 'Only you.'

What do you mean, only me?'

She looked at him sadly. His head was bald now, and he was beginning to look like an old man. Once, she had wanted to marry him. Now, she was pleased that he hadn't asked her.

'Oh, I just meant your leg, of course.' John still had a painful red place on his leg, and sometimes he walked badly because of it. But that wasn't what Mary meant.

John smiled. 'My leg's nearly better. I'd almost forgotten about it. But Mary, before you go... I wonder if you could help me. It's a family matter.'

'I see. Well, how can I help? I don't know your children very well, you know.'

'No, of course not. But you're a woman, and... well, it's sometimes difficult for me, as a father on my own. Christine's a young woman now, and she hasn't got a mother to discuss things with. I don't always know what to say.'

'No.' Mary looked at him sadly. She often wondered why he didn't ask her to his house more often. She liked him and his children, and she thought he liked her. 'How old is Christine now?'

'Eighteen. And she wants to get married.'

'Already? She's rather young, isn't she?'

John looked unhappy. 'Well, that's what I say. But she had been so angry with me, Mary, really angry.'

Who's the young man?'

'He's called Simon MacDonald. He's a journalist - he works for the local newspaper. He's a nice young man, I suppose. But every time I speak to him, we argue. And then Christine always agrees with him, and I get angry with her, too. I don't want to, Mary, but I do. I feel I'm losing her, you see.'

'What do you argue about?'

'Oh, I don't know. Stupid things, really. He belongs to one of these environmental groups - Green World, I think and he's always talking about it. He thinks only young people are right, and everyone over twenty-five is always wrong!'

Mary looked at John thoughtfully.

'Well, what do you want me to do, John? I'm not a mother and I've never been married.'

'No, but... you could talk to Christine, perhaps? If son came to our house for Sunday lunch...?'

So, Mary went to John's house. Simon was there too. They had a meal and talked about horses and sailing. Everyone was polite, and there were no arguments. Later, Mary went with Christine to look at her horse, and Simon stayed with John. In the field, Mary began to talk about Simon.

'He's a fine young man, Christine. He's very clever and kind. He makes me think of your father.'

'My father! He's nothing like my father! And Dad hates him!'

'I'm sure he doesn't.'

'He does! He says he's too old for me, and I mustn't see him! He thinks I'm still a little girl, Mary! But I'm eighteen! I want to get married!'

'Tell me more about Simon...'

And so, for a long time Mary stood in the quiet, lonely field. She helped Christine give food to her horse and listened to her talk about Simon. Simon, Christine said, was kind, intelligent, very hard-working. He liked sailing and riding, and he wanted to make the world a cleaner, better place. He made her feel important, like an adult, not a child any more. She had met his parents, and they liked her a lot. It was only her father...

'So, what should I do, Mary?' Christine asked.

Mary put her hand on the horse's neck. 'I'm not sure,' she said. 'I think you should marry him, but you don't want to make your father angry, do you? That's not the best way to start your life with Simon.'

'No, but I will if I have to!'

'Would you like me to talk to him? Perhaps he'll listen to me. It's difficult for him - you're his only daughter, and he's probably very worried about it.'

'Oh, would you, Mary? Please. I want Dad to like Simon, really, but he's always nasty to him.'

'I'll do my best, my dear, but I don't know if it'll work.' Mary did try, very hard, before she moved to Scotland for her new job. She spoke to John on the phone, and sometimes they had a cup of coffee together in town. She was surprised how carefully John listened to her, and how grateful he seemed for her help. He's really a very lonely man, she thought. It must be hard for him with two children and no wife. He used to talk to his children a lot, but he doesn't now.

At last John agreed to the marriage. Mary was invited to a special supper because of the good news. Christine was very happy. She kissed Mary when she arrived, and gave her a small, secret present to thank her. It was a pair of pretty ear-rings. At the meal, John seemed a little nervous, but happy too. He tried hard to smile, and thanked Mary, although he didn't think of giving her a present. He watched Christine all through the meal. He seemed to be afraid that he would never see her again, and he was very happy when she smiled at him.

Then Simon stood up to say something.

'Mr Duncan,' he said. 'I'll always remember this night. I know how much you love your daughter, and believe me, sir, I love her too. You've been worried about me because you want

her to have the best husband possible, and I - well, I can't promise anything, but I'm going to try to be that man. You're a rich man, Mr Duncan, and of course, Christine and I won't have a lot of money at first, but I hope we'll manage.' He smiled at Christine. 'And yesterday, Mr Duncan, I spoke to my employer, and he's going to pay me a little more than before!'

John looked surprised. 'Oh really? Why is that?'

'Well, because he's given me a new job. He's asked me to write about the environment for our newspaper. I have to write a full-page article every week on the environment. And this is the first one. Look here!'

He pulled a page of newspaper out of his pocket and held it up in front of them. There were pictures of water, sandbanks, and some seals. The headline read:

SEALS AT RIVER MOUTH HAVE STRANGE DISEASE Four baby seals found dead.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The wedding day

The disease among the seals got worse. Three more baby seals died, and one was born without a tail. Scientists came from London to look at them, and there were long articles in the newspapers, but no one was sure what the reasons were. Some people said that it was a disease that was always in the water; some people said the seals were eating diseased fish; and some people said that it was the paint factory near the river.

There was a sewage works near the river too. The sewage from another small town came to it. One day, in the factory, John Duncan found two young chemists testing samples of water from the river. The water came from two kilometres upstream, near the sewage works.

'Why are you doing that?' he asked, surprised.

'It's a special experiment,' one of them answered.

'David Wilson asked us to do it himself. Didn't he tell you, sir?'

John didn't answer. He watched them quietly for several minutes. 'What are the results?' he asked.

'They're bad, sir,' said the young man. But he didn't look worried; he looked pleased, proud of himself. 'That sewage works is putting a lot of nasty things into the river, you know. I think the newspapers will be very interested.'

'The newspapers?' John asked. The young man smiled.

'Yes, Mr. Duncan, of course. Our company cares about the environment, doesn't it? That's why we're doing this. We want to help those poor seals, if we can.'

As John walked away, he listened for the sound of quiet laughter behind him. But he heard nothing. Perhaps the young man really believed what he said.

Christine and Simon were married on a fine day in June. When they came back from the church, they had a party in the garden at John's house. Everyone seemed very happy. John liked Simon's parents, and talked to them a lot.

'You're very lucky, Mr. Duncan,' Simon's father said. 'You have a beautiful house with a lovely river at the end of the garden.'

'I haven't always been lucky,' John answered. 'People used to say I was a very unlucky man.' He stood still, thinking. He remembered how unhappy he had been in the little flat in the middle of the town. He had been unemployed then, with no money to buy good things for his children. But he had always been able to talk to them. Now he was a rich man, a success, and his children didn't want to talk to him.

He smiled at Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm a very lucky man. I have Simon for my son-in-law. I'm very pleased for my daughter.'

Mrs. MacDonald was pleased. 'We're very pleased to have Christine for our daughter-in-law, too,' she said. And I'm sure Simon will help you with this river, Mr. Duncan. I understand there's a disease in it, which is making the seals ill. Simon told me he's going to work very hard to find the reason for that and clean up the river. I'm sure you're pleased about that, Mr. Duncan.'

'Yes, of course.' John had seen Simon's article in the newspaper last night, about the diseases that came from the sewage works. David Wilson had shown it to him. John didn't want to talk about it.

He saw his daughter laughing with Simon, Andrew and some friends. He had never seen her look so happy. He remembered his own wedding, and the hopes he and Rachel had had.

'Let me get you another drink, Mrs. MacDonald,' he said. 'We must drink to our children's future and wish them luck.'

At the bar in the house he met Mary. She came back to the town sometimes, and twice he had visited her in Scotland.

'This day's been a great success, John,' she said. 'You must be a happy man.'

He touched her arm thoughtfully. 'I'd like to be, Mary,' he said. 'I've tried, you know. I've done my best. But it's their world now. They must do what they can with it.'

## CHAPTER NINE

### **I don't believe you**

'It's not true, Christine. Simon's information is wrong.'

'I don't believe you, Father.'

John and Christine stared at each other angrily. It was a miserable, frightening moment for them both. It was a night three months after the wedding, and Christine had come with some happy news. She had come to tell her father that she was going to have a baby - his first grandchild! For a while they had talked about that, but then Christine had begun to talk about Simon's new job. Simon had found some information about the waste products from the paint factory. His information was dangerous for the company. Simon had written an article in the newspaper, saying that waste products from the paint factory could be killing the baby seals.

David Wilson had written to the newspaper immediately, saying that Simon's article was completely untrue.

And so instead of talking happily about the baby, Christine and her father had argued all evening. John had known for a long time that they would have this argument. And next week in the town there would be a Public Enquiry, when government officials would try to discover the truth. Scientists and lawyers would speak on both sides of the argument. Everyone in the town was talking about the Enquiry - and about Simon's newspaper article.

'Why did David Wilson write to the paper, Father?' Christine asked. 'He's not a scientist, he's just a businessman. Why didn't you write to the paper?'

'I have written to the paper,' said John, sadly. 'You'll probably read my letter tomorrow.'

'Oh. What did you say?' Christine asked.

John felt sad. He hadn't wanted to write the letter. He and David Wilson had had a big argument about it. But in the end, he had agreed. He had agreed to hide many bad things before, so one more didn't make any difference.

'I said that our waste products don't make the river water dangerous. We've tested them very carefully for many years, and if they are diluted in water, they are not dangerous at all. There are usually only one and a half parts per million in the river water, that's all. And the seals aren't in the river. They're out at sea. I wrote that in my letter, and I'll say the same thing at the Enquiry next week.' Christine was watching him carefully as he spoke. She saw how tired and sad his face was. He was looking at his hands most of the time, not at her.

'Father, I want to believe you. But I can't,' she said softly.

He looked up. 'Don't then!' he said angrily. 'You believe Simon, if you want to! He's a journalist, after all - I'm only a biologist, and your father. Why should you believe me?' He stood up angrily, walked to the door, and opened it. 'I'm sorry, Christine. I've had a hard day, I'm tired, and I don't want to sit here listening to my daughter telling me I'm a liar. Go home to Simon. I'm going to bed!'

She got up slowly. 'It's important, Father,' she said slowly. 'It's important for everyone.'

'I know it is, Christine. But the paint factory's important too. It's given a lot to you, and me, and to the people of this town. Try to remember that, and forget about the seals for a while, can't you?'

'There are more important things than money, Father.'

'Are there? You tell that to all the people who work in the company and live in this town. What are they going to live on, when the factory's closed because of Simon's stupid articles? Can they give their children photographs of baby seals to eat?'

Christine looked at him for a long moment before she went out of the door. 'And what about children who play by the river, Father? What if they drink the river water? What then?'

'Nobody drinks water from that part of the river,' he said. 'And I've told you it isn't dangerous to children.' Christine closed the door quietly behind her.

## CHAPTER TEN

### **Green World**

Two days later Christine and Simon arrived at John's house. It was very early - five o'clock in the morning - and they didn't knock at the door or try to wake anyone up. In fact, John wasn't there; Christine knew he had gone to Scotland to see Mary. He was coming back on the morning of the Enquiry.

Christine and Simon walked quietly down to the boathouse by the river. Without talking, they put the boat in the water, and sailed away across the river.

On the other side of the river they met two friends, Peter and Susan. Their friends were wearing white clothes, with Green World written on them. Simon and Christine also put on white clothes. Then they all got into the boat and sailed upstream, towards the paint factory.

It was a windy morning, and the waves on the river were quite big. But Christine was a good sailor, and in about half an hour, they reached the factory. Two photographers stood by the river, taking photos of them.

'OK, Simon, where is it?' shouted Christine.

'Over there, look - in front of that post!' he said. Christine sailed the boat towards the post. When they were near it, they could see under the water. It was the pipe that took the waste products out of the factory.

'OK, here!' shouted Simon. Christine turned the boat towards the wind, and Susan caught hold of the post. Then Simon and Peter climbed out of the boat into the water.

The water was moving fast here, and they had to hold onto the pipe and the boat. Peter then took several strong paper bags out of the boat. The bags were small but very heavy, because they were filled with building cement. Peter passed the bags one at a time to Simon, and Simon went down under the water and pushed each bag into the pipe. A few minutes later the mouth of the pipe was full of bags of cement.

Simon came up out of the water for the last time. 'It's OK!' he shouted. 'We've done it! The cement is wet already, and in a few hours, it'll be as hard as a rock. Nothing can come out of that pipe now!' The two men climbed back into the boat and smiled at the photographers. Then Simon stood up in the boat with Christine and held up a long white sheet. On the sheet was written:

GREEN

WORLD

This pipe kills seals!

At that moment two things happened. A man ran out of the factory, shouting angrily. And the wind suddenly became stronger. It caught the sail and sent it quickly from one side of the boat to the other. The back of the sail hit Christine hard on the back of the head. She fell into the water, like a bag of potatoes. Then the wind caught the sail again and threw it back across the boat. This time the boat fell over on its side and lay with its sail under the water.

Simon was under the sail. The sail and the sheet were all around him, and for several seconds he could see nothing. Then he came up, into the air. He saw a foot kicking hard in the water beside him. Someone was moving under the sail. Quickly, he went down under the

water again, and tried to help Peter. But Peter caught hold of Simon and pulled him under water too. There was a quick, frightening fight, and then Simon managed to pull them both up, into the air again. They held onto the side of the boat together, breathing deeply.

Simon saw Susan holding onto the back of the boat. Then he heard someone shouting. He looked behind him and saw the man from the factory. He was shouting and pointing downstream. But Simon had water in his ears, and at first, he couldn't hear the words very well. Then he understood.

'Look!' the man said. 'The girl! She's drowning!'

Simon looked downstream, where the man was pointing. He saw something white, floating, far away. It was not doing anything, just floating round and round, like a bag of old clothes on the water. Christine! The river was taking her quickly downstream, towards the sea.

Hurriedly, Simon began to swim after her. He was a good swimmer, but the white clothes slowed him down. He swam as fast as he could, but he seemed to go slowly, so slowly. The water seemed heavy and held him back. For the rest of his life he would dream about that long, slow swim, towards a white body that floated quickly away in front of him.

At last he reached Christine. She was floating with her face down, unconscious. He tried to turn her over, but it was so difficult. She was heavy, and her arms fell back in the water when he dropped them. He got her face out of the water, but her head fell backwards, lifeless, and she was not breathing. He caught hold of her face then, put his mouth over hers, and blew into it. He rested, and then blew into her mouth again, and again. Nothing happened.

He looked around him. They were in the middle of the river, moving quickly downstream. Here, it was about twenty-five meters to the bank, but about two hundred meters downstream a second river came in from the left. The bank was further away there, and the water moved faster. Simon was tired, and afraid. It had rained last night, and there was a lot of water moving downstream to the sea. The strong wind blew little waves into his face.

He began to swim on his back, pulling Christine towards the trees on the bank. He swam for half a minute, then stopped, and blew four times into her mouth. Once, he thought he saw her breathe, but he couldn't be sure. Her face was very white, and he had no idea if her heart was beating. The river was taking them quickly to the sea.

He swam harder, kicking strongly with his legs. Nearer - only five meters to go now. But the bank was moving past very quickly. There was a tree near the bank. Its branches were low over the water. Simon kicked hard, caught the branch, and held onto it. The water tried to pull him away. He took a deep breath and blew strongly into Christine's mouth again. And this time, he was sure, she took a breath by herself, afterwards.

It took him nearly five minutes to pull her on to the bank. When they got there, he put her on the ground, breathed into her mouth again, and then felt for her heart.

At first, he couldn't find it - his hands were too cold. Then - yes! - it was beating.

For another five minutes he helped her breathe, until he was sure she could do it by herself. Then he began to shiver. The wind made his wet clothes cold on his body. He wondered what to do. Then he looked down and saw that Christine's eyes were open.

'Chris,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

She said something, but very quietly and he could not hear it. He lay down, and put his arms around her, to keep her warm. He could feel her heart beating, and her body breathing under him. Simon began to cry.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### **The Public Enquiry**

Two days later, the Enquiry began. Scientists came from London to ask questions about the disease that was killing the seals. Before he had gone to Scotland, John had been to see David Wilson about the Enquiry. David Wilson had asked John to speak for the company.

'You're our chief biologist, John,' he said. 'You're an important man. They'll believe you.'

John said nothing. He didn't want to speak at the Enquiry, but he knew he had to. David Wilson smiled. Or at least, his mouth smiled. But his eyes watched John carefully, all the time, like the cold eyes of a fish.

'Think carefully about what you say, John. If you say the wrong thing next week, hundreds of people will lose their jobs. And the first person to lose his job will be you, John. I promise you that.'

The Enquiry room was crowded. There were a lot of journalists and photographers there, and a lot of people from the town and the factory too. John's train was late, and he caught a taxi from the station. When he came into the room, he saw Simon, sitting with the journalists. Christine was near him, with Andrew and some young people from Greenworld. John smiled at her, but she didn't smile back. She looks very white and ill, he thought. It's probably the baby. He remembered how ill his wife Rachel had been in the mornings, before Christine was born, and he smiled sadly to himself.

'Mr John Duncan, please!'

He walked to the front of the room. As he sat down, he saw David Wilson's cold, grey eyes watching him from the other side of the room. That man should be up here instead, he thought. He should tell his own lies.

A lawyer began to ask him questions. At first it was easy. John explained how long he had worked for the company, and how much paint the factory produced. Then the lawyer asked about the waste products.

'These are very dangerous chemicals, aren't they?' the lawyer said.

'Well yes, of course,' John answered. 'Most chemicals are dangerous if people aren't careful with them. But we're very careful with them in our factory. Everyone wears special clothing. We haven't had a single serious accident in three years.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' said the lawyer. 'But what happens outside the factory? Do you really put these very dangerous chemicals into the river?'

'Yes, we do,' said John. There was a noise in the room. Someone near Christine shouted something angrily, and a policewoman told him to be quiet. John went on. 'Of course, we put these chemicals in the river, but we don't put a lot in. Only two or three hundred liters every day. That's not much. And we check the river all the time - three times every day. There are

usually only two parts per million, or less, in the water near the factory, and there is much less downstream. That's not dangerous.'

'Not dangerous, Mr. Duncan?' said the lawyer slowly. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I am,' John said. He looked up, at the hundreds of eyes watching him. David Wilson's eyes, Christine's eyes, Simon's.

'I understand', the lawyer said slowly, 'that there has been an experiment with some rats. Some mother rats were given these chemicals in their drinking water, and some of their babies were born without legs. Is that right, Mr. Duncan?'

John looked at the lawyer for the first time. He was a small, uninteresting-looking man in grey clothes, with grey hair and a thin face. He looks like a rat himself, John thought. The man's eyes were small and bright, and for some strange reason he had a newspaper in his hand. John began to feel afraid of him.

'Yes,' he said. 'That's right. But rats are much smaller than people, and they were given nearly five parts per million in their drinking water for ten days. That's very different. No one drinks the river water. It goes straight out to sea.'

He looked at the lawyer and waited for the question about the seals. But it didn't come. Instead, the lawyer said: 'So you won't be worried, Mr. Duncan, if someone falls into the river by accident, and drinks a lot of river water. Your own daughter, for example. There's no danger in an accident like that - is that right?'

John looked at Christine across the room. How big her eyes look in that white face, he thought. It must be because of the baby.

'No,' he said. 'There's no danger at all.'

There was the sound of voices in the room. The lawyer smiled a small, rat-like smile. He held his newspaper out towards John.

'You've been away in Scotland, Mr Duncan,' he said. 'Have you seen this?'

As John read the newspaper, his hands began to shake, and he had to hold the side of the table. There was a picture of Christine, standing up in a boat near the factory, and another picture of her lying in an ambulance, with Simon beside her. The headline said:

BIOLOGIST'S DAUGHTER NEARLY  
DROWNS IN RIVER

There was a long silence. He tried to read the newspaper carefully, but there was something wrong with his eyes. And his head was full of pictures of

Christine in the river, drowning. And his wife, Rachel, drowning in the storm, long ago. He shook his head quickly from side to side, then took his glasses off and cleaned them.

'No,' he said in a quiet voice. 'I haven't read this before.'

'It's all right, Mr. Duncan,' said the lawyer softly. 'Your daughter is safe. Her husband saved her, and she hasn't lost her baby. But she did drink a lot of river water. It was near the factory, too. You're not worried about that, are you?'

The lawyer's bright eyes were staring at him, like a rat that has just seen its food. Behind him, David Wilson suddenly stood up.

'That is a terrible question!' he shouted into the silence. 'You can't ask a man questions like that! Of course, he's worried about his daughter! You must stop this Enquiry at once!'

'Just a minute, Mr. Wilson,' said the lawyer. 'Mr. Duncan can go in a minute. He just has to answer one question. Are you worried, because your daughter has drunk so much river water, Mr. Duncan? Are you worried about her baby?'

John Duncan stared at the lawyer with fear in his eyes. Suddenly he hated him. He picked up the newspaper and threw it into the little man's rat-like face. 'Yes!' he shouted wildly. 'Yes! Yes! Yes! Of course, I'm worried about the baby! Of course, it's dangerous! Now let me go!'

He ran down the room, out of the door, into the street. A hundred staring eyes watched him go.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **The future**

Six months later, John Duncan was living in a small flat near the sea. He had lost his job and had had to sell his expensive house. He couldn't afford the payments on it.

From a window in his flat, he could look at the sea. He sat and looked at the cold, grey sea for hours, every day.

Christine would have her baby soon. He had bought lots of baby clothes to give her. His bedroom was full of baby clothes - little pink coats and trousers for a girl, blue ones for a boy. There were little soft toys too - teddy bears and small animals with blue, empty eyes.

But he hadn't given any of these things to her, because she wouldn't talk to him. When he went to see her, she closed the door in his face; when he rang, she put the phone down; when he wrote, she sent the letters back unopened.

There were a lot of books and magazines in his bedroom, too. But he kept them under his bed. He read them sometimes at night, but he didn't like to see them during the day. They were about babies, and the diseases that babies could get, before they were born. There were some terrible things in the books, terrible pictures. He didn't like to think about them, but he couldn't stop. He thought about them all day, all the time.

Today, as he sat staring out of the window at the sea, he could not stop his hands shaking. Every morning he rang the hospital, to ask if his daughter Christine

MacDonald was there. He had rung this morning, and a nurse had said yes, Christine was there, and the baby was coming. That had been four hours ago. For two hours John had sat by the telephone, afraid to ring the hospital again. Three times he had picked it up, and three times he had put it down again.

He picked it up again and rang the number. Seven... five... eight... three... it was no good. He put the phone down again. He could not hear the news from the cold voice of a nurse over the telephone. He had to see the baby for himself.

He got up, put on his coat, and went downstairs. There was a cold wind outside, blowing from the sea. The sea and the sky were grey and miserable. He went into a shop and bought some flowers. He chose them carefully - bright red and yellow colors - and the shopkeeper put paper around them to keep them safe. John took them and walked quickly, nervously, along the windy road by the sea, towards the hospital.

It was raining out at sea. Already the rain was falling on the sandbanks where the seals used to live. Soon it would be falling on the town. John Duncan shivered and turned his coat collar up. Then, with his bright flowers in his hand, he walked on, into the winter wind.