

CLIVE WEST

*“Every crime
has its victim”*

**THE
ROAD**

The text 'THE ROAD' is rendered in large, bold, red, sans-serif capital letters. The letters are filled with a collage of images, including close-ups of banknotes (likely British pounds) and a woman's face. The background is a dark red, torn-paper-like shape that frames the text.

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Prologue

Snuffing out a human life isn't easy, particularly when it's your own. The spirit is designed to survive. It will deceive itself when all else fails; kid itself that life is worthwhile, that things will get better. But she had come to the end of the road. And the end of the lane that led on from the end of the road. She had tried everything, and everything had failed her.

She liked to think of herself as logical and methodical; the sort of person who considers all possibilities, weighs up all the pros and cons and then makes an informed decision.

Initially, there had been so many possibilities to choose from. There was the razor-sharp set of Sabatier knives that were conveniently set in their wooden holder; there were the morphine tablets she had saved when her husband hurt his back and recovered more quickly than expected; there was the car and a garden hose in the garage, the tow rope in the car boot, the sleeping pills her doctor had given her, and their lovely deep Jacuzzi. There had been so many choices and it had been completely up to her which one she picked. Her final decision rested on two important aspects: it should not be a messy affair as that might traumatise anyone finding her, and the possibility of failing must not exist.

The worst thing of all was not the waste of her life – that no longer mattered – but the sheer frustration and ultimate disgrace she had felt when she finally realised she could not even protect her own family. It was not an easy fact to accept but it was there, the inescapable truth, that there was nothing she could do to restore the life they had once known and enjoyed.

She knew it would be unforgivably bad manners not to leave a note, some clue as to the rationale behind her decision. Succumbing to her sense of responsibility and guilt, she penned the words:

'There is nothing left for me to do. I have no choice'

before carefully placing the note on the kitchen table near a pre-made meal she was defrosting for her family's dinner. No point in expressing her anger and sense of injustice – all that was behind her. She just couldn't think of anything else to say. If she once started, she wouldn't know where to stop.

She put on her favourite CD of Secret Garden playing 'Once In A Red Moon', poured out a very large tumbler of brandy, then sat back in one of the two slightly battered but, nevertheless, extremely comfortable leather armchairs. She took a long draught of brandy, choking a little as it burnt her throat. When the fire had eased off she popped the morphine tablets into her mouth and swallowed, washing them down with further gulps of brandy.

A few seconds later she started taking the sleeping tablets, two at a time, until the packet was empty. After each pair of tablets, she sipped more brandy. The glass was nearly drained now.

She waited a few minutes, enjoying the music. It was a long time since she'd been able to sit back and actually relax. It was pure luxury. After a couple of tracks had played through, she realised she was beginning to feel drowsy. She instinctively knew that now was the time to act, and reached down to pick up one of the polythene carrier bags from the shopping trip she had made the previous evening.

Please reuse me', it said on one side. Well, she was only following instructions, trying to please as always. She grinned to herself, stifling a boozy giggle for fear of waking up her family.

The polythene bag sat loosely on her shoulders. The music now seemed a bit muffled – was that the effect of the bag or was it the tablets beginning to work? There was no time to waste. She felt around for the roll of brown adhesive tape they had

used to mask off surfaces when they were decorating, knocking her glass over as she fumbled blindly. She tore off a strip of tape, and with a dexterity achieved by years of tying children's shoelaces, sealed the open end of the bag where it passed around her neck.

Part 1 - There Is A Green Field

Chapter 1

Eight years earlier

A spark of blue caught Sandra's eye as she swivelled on her chair to ease her aching shoulders. It came from the windowsill, or more precisely, the carcass of a blue-bottle lying in a heap of dust among other insects that had head-butted their way into oblivion. A shaft of early spring sunshine had penetrated the smeary pane and turned this most repulsive of objects, for a brief moment, into a jewel. Just as well. She had nearly forgotten to clean this particular surface and for some reason it had been the thing which offended Henry's eye most of all.

She swept the fly and the other debris deftly into a waste paper bin and took advantage of the moment, while she waited for the office to be invaded, to stretch her back and peer out the window. If only there were something to look at! The view hardly changed either with the seasons or with the weather, consisting as it did of a car park and the almost windowless rear walls of three four-square buildings. There were a few token trees in the car park but these were surrounded by kerbs as if to further emphasise the captive nature of their residents.

The windowsill was still too dirty for her to risk resting her arm on it, particularly as she was wearing, for the very first time, a pale blue angora pullover knitted by her own hands from a pattern she had found in a magazine. She sat down again and reflected on the monotony of her employment.

Henry Blaynes, the Planning Officer whom she served as full-time assistant, scarcely ever seemed to even register her presence and never commented on what she wore. Why would he? All the same a little bit of human interaction would not have gone amiss. Even when her favourite pendant (a carved mother-of-pearl medallion) swung forward and brushed the piece of paper she was presenting to him, he didn't react.

Once, she had painted her nails in the office during her lunch-break, and Henry had mocked her by pretending to chew gum and file his own nails like some bored telephonist. This told her plainly that he saw her efforts to groom herself as common, which she found rather hurtful. It would have been nice to have had him admire her now and again, but, she always reminded herself, she wasn't trying to make herself attractive to him. God forbid. She had a proper relationship and definite prospects with Angelo, a junior officer in the Treasury Department, whose only fault was extreme caution, bless him.

If Henry never seemed to see her she, on the other hand, observed him constantly and made assessments about his mood and family life from the ties he chose to wear and the crumpled or not-so crumpled condition of his shirt and jacket. He was frequently untidy and badly turned-out but at least he was never actually dirty, which was more than could be said for the office in which they worked. She only hoped she had managed to make enough of a difference this morning. She had been told they were expecting visitors today and would she please 'tidy up a bit' which in practice meant doing some long-overdue cleaning with a duster, some polish and the little vacuum cleaner she had brought from home. Obviously she could have refused but she was damn certain that Henry would say it came under the heading of 'any other duties as instructed by your superior' that was in her job description. To his credit, Henry had wandered around a bit with a bin in his hand but he was so hopeless that in the end she took it upon herself to straighten out the office and it was in doing this that she had somehow managed to pull a muscle in her shoulder.

It was all Henry's fault that their office was so dirty. It began with the windows. Fred, the window cleaner, was an agile man in brown overalls who spread-eagled himself across the light - Sandra half-expected him to have suckers on his fingers like a gecko - and made noises. He surely need not have made quite so many squeaking, slopping and slapping noises, and then to cap it all he sang ditties -

usually from Gilbert and Sullivan - in a falsetto voice:

"I'm called little buttercup, poor little buttercup ..."

... whistling where he had forgotten the words.

Sandra, being a pragmatic person, knew she would get no work done during his monthly visits so she went to the vending machines for a cup of tea, a biscuit and a quick chat with any friendly face doing likewise. Henry however made no such concessions and in fact always seemed to be in the middle of something which required extra concentration. He would get angrier and angrier, the back of his neck turning a fiery crimson, until on one occasion he thundered:

"For God's sake let it be! I'd rather have dirty windows than listen to your infernal racket!"

Fred had taken the hint. After one final insolent 'wheek' of his rag across the window, his rickety gondola departed never to return. Henceforth, he cleaned the windows of everyone else's offices but not theirs. Henry was not one to eat humble pie and Sandra knew better than to upset either party by interfering.