

The Partridge and the Pelican

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Chapter 1

In the summer of 1983, Olivia Conafray and her friend Eve found a baby in a telephone box beside a country road in Suffolk.

It was the last week of August, an empty afternoon. The clouds had finally retreated after a week of storms and the countryside lay quiet and listless under the tepid sunshine. Olivia and Eve had been driving around for hours in the tangle of roads between the sea and the A12, among villages with angular, unpromising names: Theberton, Knodishall, Friston. It went against the grain to admit that they were lost, but when Olivia spotted the phone box, like a red flag against the bare fields, she swerved over onto the verge.

“I’m going to phone James,” she said. She glanced across at Eve, but Eve didn’t respond.

Olivia could taste the sharpness of salt in the air as soon as she opened the car door. The wet grass brushed her ankles, but her eyes lifted above the spirit-level horizon to the pale grey light that hung over the sea. A couple more days, she thought. A couple more days and the holiday would be over: they’d be away from this strange, flat place and away from each other. Six weeks together was quite long enough. She crossed the verge to the phone box feeling light-hearted, almost light-headed.

As she pulled open the door she saw the receiver hanging loose, then the bundle on the floor below, wrapped in an old blue shawl. At first she thought it was a doll, perhaps left behind by a child who’d wandered off while her mother was talking on the phone, but she knelt down to look at it all the same. The way it was swaddled drew her curiosity: a tight, close binding like a shroud. Not the way you’d wrap a doll. She reached a finger to the tiny face, barely visible between the layers of wool, and the eyelids flickered open for a second. There was a glimpse of slate-grey iris and whites the colour of marble; the slightest hint of life.

Olivia felt a shriek rising inside her, but already she was thinking of the baby, of protecting it from noise and alarm.

“Quick, quick!” Her voice came out somewhere between a whisper and a cry. She twisted round: Eve was still hunched in the car, her blonde hair a blur against the windscreen. “Come quick, there’s a baby in the phone box!”

It could only have taken a few seconds for Eve to join her, but it felt to Olivia as though time had stalled, trapping her in suspense while she waited, waited for help to arrive. The long summer behind and the broad horizon ahead slipped out of view as the world shrank to that single moment, the bundle of blue wool the same colour as the washed-out sky and the dizzy flood of anticipation and disbelief. And then the moment passed, the world moved again, and Eve was coming towards her. Eve tall and familiar, wearing the flowered skirt

Olivia knew so well, her face still showing traces of the rage that had driven them out of Shearwater House earlier in the day. Eve squatted down beside her in the narrow doorway and Olivia swallowed, steadying her voice.

“Is it all right?” she asked.

Every detail felt acutely vivid now, as though impressing itself on her memory: the floor of the phone box littered with cigarette butts and sweet wrappers; the smell of urine mixed with something dry and metallic. Her own worn-out jeans and tennis shoes, the same ones she’d worn all summer.

Eve didn’t touch the little parcel on the floor. She shook her head, a quick flutter of denial. “I don’t know anything about babies.”

Olivia shifted slightly to give Eve a better view. The door of the phone box rested against her back, the metal ridges pressing through her T-shirt.

“But you’re a medical student. You must be able to tell if it’s okay.”

Eve’s eyes settled on the baby for a moment, then she rocked back on her heels, pushed herself to her feet again.

“We haven’t done paediatrics yet,” she said.

She was already cultivating a clinical detachment, Olivia thought: the first hint of a professional persona, but not of the reassuring kind. Panic swelled inside her, and before she could think better of it (*don’t move the patient*, they’d been taught in First Aid) she leaned forward and scooped up the baby. It felt warm and soft and very light; an armful of wool.

“It’s definitely alive. I’ve seen it move.” Olivia pulled the edge of the shawl down to look at the baby’s face. Its skin was pale and slightly waxy, the lips bluish. “It must be brand new. I’ve never seen a baby this small before. Should we ring for an ambulance?”

Without speaking, Eve stepped past her. She grabbed the receiver, still hanging loose on its cord, and clicked the button on the cradle.

But the phone was dead.

Later, Olivia could hardly bear to think about the baby’s mother, but at that moment, staring at Eve as she held the receiver at arm’s length like a question mark, she sensed that other young woman’s despair when she found the phone out of order. Had she hoped to leave her child with help on the way?

Eve pushed past her again, back out onto the grass verge.

“Bloody hell,” she said. “What now?”

Olivia could feel the baby’s chest rising and falling, the minute movement of air that kept it alive. She remembered holding a doll when she was little, feeling the same pricking of maternal gratification. She got carefully to her feet, settling the baby in the crook of her arm, cradled close against her own slight frame.

“We can’t leave it here,” she said. “We’ll have to find help.”

Eve didn’t reply. She stood on the verge, staring down the road into the empty distance. Silence surrounded them; nothing moved in their field of view. Olivia stood irresolute for a moment, but the weight of the baby in her arms spurred her on.

“We’d better take it to a hospital,” she said.

“A hospital where, exactly?” Eve demanded.

Part of Olivia, a small, shameful part, was relieved that they couldn’t summon an ambulance. She wanted to go on holding the baby, making plans for it. But Eve’s mood

worried her – her irritation with the broken phone and the way the baby had complicated things. Irritation with herself too, no doubt, for arguing with James.

“Where’s the nearest big town?” she asked, keeping her voice light, matter-of-fact, as though they were simply planning the next stage of their route.

Eve shrugged. “Ipswich, I guess.”

“How far’s Ipswich?”

“Maybe an hour, if we knew the way.”

An hour seemed a long time to Olivia. A long time for the baby.

“Surely the signposts mention Ipswich,” she said.

“Which bloody signposts?”

“There must be signposts, Eve. We’ve passed some, I’m sure.”

Olivia had taken the map out of the car at lunchtime, back at the house. They’d been planning an outing, but when Eve lost her temper they’d left without James or the map, just driven off without a plan. They probably weren’t far from Aldeburgh, but the country lanes crossed back and forth over each other like a spider’s web, and in this landscape each direction looked the same.

“We can’t leave it here,” she said again.

“I’m not suggesting we leave it.” Eve sighed. “For God’s sake let’s get back in the car. Let’s just get in the car and drive.”

The baby lay in Olivia’s lap, its face quiescent, eyes shut. Olivia had unwrapped the layers of wool far enough to find dried blood caked on the inside, then covered the child up again. She had no idea how much blood was normal, and only the haziest understanding of umbilical cords; she didn’t dare investigate further. She gazed down at the baby as if constant vigilance might keep it safe, her voice low as she negotiated with Eve.

“We could stop and ask if there’s a hospital any closer than Ipswich.”

“If we stop at every house we’ll never get anywhere.”

“All we need is one person to lend us a phone,” Olivia reasoned. “We might even find a doctor or a midwife, someone who could help.”

Eve looked pale, her eyes set hard. She was tired, Olivia knew that; she hadn’t been well. Olivia took a deep breath, casting her mind back over the summer. She ought to know what to do, how to manage the situation, but Eve was always so sure she was right. Had she been complicit in that, admiring Eve’s confidence?

“We don’t know which way to go, Eve,” she said. “We don’t know whether we’re going the right way.”

“For God’s sake, Olivia: we haven’t passed a single damn house anyway. There’s the sun ahead of us, so we must be going west. The A12 is west, right? We didn’t cross it earlier, so it must be in this direction.”

Basing their hopes on the position of the sun made the whole thing seem like a game, some kind of orienteering challenge. But the arguing was worse; Olivia couldn’t think straight while she and Eve were arguing.

When they’d arrived in Aldeburgh the week before, Olivia had felt a sense of pleasure, almost of triumph. They’d spent July and August, their first university vacation, driving

around the coast of Great Britain, and this was the last leg of the tour, this week in Suffolk in a borrowed house on the sea front.

“We’ve made it,” she’d said, that first night at Shearwater House, and Eve had smiled. “All this way, just the two of us.”

A mistake; she saw that now. They hadn’t reached the end of the journey at all.

When they hit the A12 and the sign for Ipswich, Eve was triumphant.

“Nineteen miles,” she said. “Closer than I thought.”

Olivia was silent. The baby was very still: too still, perhaps. She had no idea.

“When I was little,” she said eventually, staring out at the flat sweep of the land, “we had a cat who brought half-dead creatures into the house at night. Baby birds and mice; once a little rabbit.”

The words sounded childish and unnatural, but she had the feeling that her voice was comforting to the baby, that she ought to talk to it.

“I’d find him crouched in the middle of the landing, yowling at them. I used to rescue them. I’d carry them off to my room and make a bed in a shoe box, feed them milk from a dropper.”

Her voice trailed away. It wasn’t a suitable story for a baby, after all, and Eve showed no sign of listening.

By the morning the cat’s victims were always dead: she remembered the fragile corpses, curled in postures of defeat. Even when she’d known that’s what would happen, she couldn’t stop herself trying.

Eve made a noise that might have been a grudging laugh. “This isn’t a chewed-up baby rabbit.”

“You think it’ll be all right, then?”

Eve didn’t answer. The baby hadn’t whimpered, nothing about it had changed, but as they drove southwards and the sun sank slowly over the brown fields, Olivia thought of the little bodies of dormice and starlings and her hold on the bundle of wool stiffened.

Eve glanced at her. “Babies are tougher than you think,” she said.

Her voice sounded tough too, but Olivia tried to feel encouraged by the words. She stroked the baby’s cheek, watching the occasional, almost imperceptible flicker of the waxen eyelids. She was afraid all the noise had frightened it, the anxious rattle of the Fiat as it struggled to keep up a steady sixty-five. She watched the lorries hurling their way along the dual carriageway, the families glued behind car windows, and she thought of primitive birthing rites: even in the most precarious societies the newborn and its mother were assured seclusion and peace, fed on milk and honey for a month. The heft and shift of modern life felt all wrong. She and Eve driving a baby they knew nothing about across a strange county at dusk felt like the worst kind of foolishness.

She shut her eyes and imagined the hospital, the mirage of lights and glass somewhere in the distance. Her hand rested on the baby’s chest, feeling for the thready heartbeat that was just discernible through thick layers of swaddling.