



# They'll never find you now

by DOREEN DUGDALE



**H**idden behind the thick hedge, Sweeney studied the cottage and the old woman pottering in its garden.

The dilapidated cottage seemed to be fighting a losing battle with the encroaching vegetation. Small wonder if the bent old woman who was snipping at flowers and shrubs was the only gardener.

Sweeney had come across the place only by accident, having taken a wrong turning and landed himself in a maze of winding and ever-narrowing lanes. When the stolen mini had suddenly acquired a puncture he had pushed it off the road into a thicket, taken his suitcase and, cursing his bad luck, gone forward on foot.

The lane had been knobbly as a knuckleduster under his thin city shoes, and he had seen no habitation of any kind until he had come upon the cottage.

The old woman hobbled back indoors with her basket of cuttings, and the only remaining sign of life was a large black cat sunning itself on the doorstep.

Sweeney shuffled his aching feet and weighed the pros and cons. All

his instincts told him the woman lived alone—he could scent loneliness and defencelessness as quickly as he could smell a peeled orange—and he had to hide somewhere for a while.

Cautiously Sweeney followed the hedge round to the back. There was another neglected strip of garden with a nanny goat tethered to a post and a few hens scratching about in a wire run. Self-sufficient this old girl—and Sweeney reckoned she needed to be, living as she did in such isolation. He made up his mind; the cottage might be a bit short on the mod cons but it offered safety.

His double-cross would have been discovered by now and the gang would be searching for him. They would never find him here, that was certain. He would wait long enough for them to think he had slipped through the net and got out of the country, then he would make his way down to the coast where the fisherman who had ferried Vickie across the channel was waiting to make a second trip with him.

Sweeney sweated a little as he thought of Vickie—blonde, beautiful, and waiting for him to join her with the proceeds of the robbery. Not just

his share but the whole of the cash. She was worth the risk he had taken but he valued his neck too much to spoil everything for want of a bit of patience now.

He picked up his case and went round to the front again. The cat, seeing him come up the path, stretched itself lazily and slipped ahead of him into the cottage.

Sweeney stood in the doorway, his big frame blocking out the light, and stared assessingly around. The room was cluttered but comparatively clean and had a pleasant, garden-like perfume from bunches of mint, thyme, and other herbs which hung drying from the mantelshelf.

The old woman had frozen into an animal stillness, her hands motionless amongst the blossoms spread on the table. She was even older than he had thought, just skin and bones. Only her bright, monkey-brown eyes showed any vitality.

'Good afternoon,' Sweeney said, playing it cool. 'May I use your phone?'

'There is no phone here.' The voice was a rusty croak.

'Well, maybe your husband or son could give me a hand to get the car back on the road?'

She shook her head. 'There is nobody but me here.'

Sweeney reached behind him and closed the cottage door.

The woman's hand fluttered to her throat. 'What do you want?'



'Just board and lodging for a while.' Sweeney nodded towards an ancient sofa. 'That will do if you haven't got a spare bed.'

The old eyes studied Sweeney's face, registering its brutality and bleak coldness of his prominent, heavy-lidded eyes.

'Nobody would want to stay here ... unless they were trying to hide.'

'That's about it, Grandma.' He was moving about the room, opening drawers and cupboards. They contained nothing but an eccentric old country woman's collection of junk. There was nothing to make him doubt that she lived alone.

'Are the police looking for you?'

Sweeney grinned. 'Yeah, them too—but it's more my friends I'm concerned about at the moment. If they get their hands on me after what I've done ...' His grin vanished and he gripped the old woman's shoulder, making her wince. 'Do you have any visitors here? The truth now—or I'll make you regret it.'

# Blackie

She surprised him with a cackle of laughter. 'Visitors? Who'd want to visit me? There is not a soul within miles.'

'That's what I thought. How come you live here all on your own like this?'

'I was born here.' All at once she seemed to accept Sweeney's presence as inevitable. 'There were other cottages scattered around here then. But times change. There is only me left now. Me and Blackie.'

The cat, which had been sitting quietly at her feet, looked up and acknowledged its name with a soft mew.

Sweeney sat down in one of the two fireside chairs, the suitcase full of money placed carefully within reach.

Just so that the old girl should know the score right from the start he took his revolver out of his pocket and examined it nonchalantly. Fear flickered in the woman's eyes and Sweeney put the gun away again, casually, as if it had been a cigarette lighter.

'I want food and a place to sleep. You won't come to any harm so long as you do as you are told—but don't cross me, see?'

She nodded and returned to her sorting of flowers and leaves. Her gnarled hands were trembling but she obviously wasn't the hysterical type. That suited Sweeney. He didn't want to have to knock her about—she was too frail to stand up to it and he couldn't afford to have that complication along with everything else.

Time, Sweeney decided a couple of hours later, was going to be his biggest problem here. It was going to drag so much it would drive him up the wall with boredom. The old woman didn't even have a radio let alone television.

Sweeney pushed his plate away and sat picking his teeth disconsolately. His meal had been surprisingly good—an omelette made with eggs fresh from the hens and fragrant with herbs, accompanied by homemade bread and cheese. He had realised that his unwilling hostess must be some sort of back-to-nature crank—but he didn't mind going back to nature if it resulted in food that tasted like that.

But how was he going to kill time? He saw himself cooped up in the cottage, perhaps for weeks, with not even a drink to relieve the monotony—and suddenly the hideout didn't seem such a good idea after all.

He went out to the little scullery where the old woman, who had said she would have her own meal later, tended a pot bubbling on the stove.

It was a mystery to Sweeney how she could cook so well on anything so ancient. Flames leaped and spluttered from its rusty iron top, filling the place with a scarlet glow.

'Hell!' Sweeney's voice was truculent. 'I don't suppose you have even got a drink in this God-forsaken hole!'

The old woman looked at him in silence for a moment, then shuffled across to open a cupboard door.

Sweeney, glimpsing bottles of homemade wines, pushed her aside and began rummaging. Beetroot, dandelion, elderberry and, more to his fancy, a bottle labelled 'sloe gin'.

'Get me a glass,' Sweeney ordered, and took the bottle back with him to the big fireside chair.

'That's strong stuff, Grandma!' Sweeney nodded his approval. The gin was as smooth as silk but with a kick like dynamite.

For the first time since his arrival the old woman smiled.

'In the old days,' she boasted, 'people used to come from miles around for my sloe gin—and other things I used to make for them.'

'I can believe it.' Sweeney refilled his glass. Once again he found himself thinking how monkey-like the old woman's eye were—bright, and with a kind of sly mischievousness lurking in their brown depths.

He could have snapped her in two with his bare hands, he told himself, but it was always as well to be cautious. He placed his gun to hand on the table.

'Drunk or sober, I can put a bullet in you,' he said. 'So don't get any ideas.'

'An old woman like me?' She looked at him for a moment, then went out to the scullery again.

Sweeney smiled and refilled his glass. The cottage was quite cosy at night with the firelight flickering on the copper kettle and brass fire irons.

'I've done all right for myself,' Sweeney said, addressing the cat curled up in the chair opposite.

'What's that you are cooking, Ma?' Sweeney could see the old woman bent over the pot oblivious to the steam wreathing about her face.

'Oh, just a pinch of this and a scrap of that.' The rusty old voice seemed to come from far away.

'Smells good,' Sweeney said and he was amused to hear himself having trouble pronouncing his words. His glass was empty so he filled it again and drank in silence for a while. He had begun to feel quite lethargic although drink didn't usually affect him that way.

He watched the cat uncurl itself

and arch its back in a long, luxurious stretch. It began purring and, with its emerald eyes fixed on Sweeney, it clawed at the chair cushion, moving its paws one after the other in a soft, padding, feline, kind of dance.

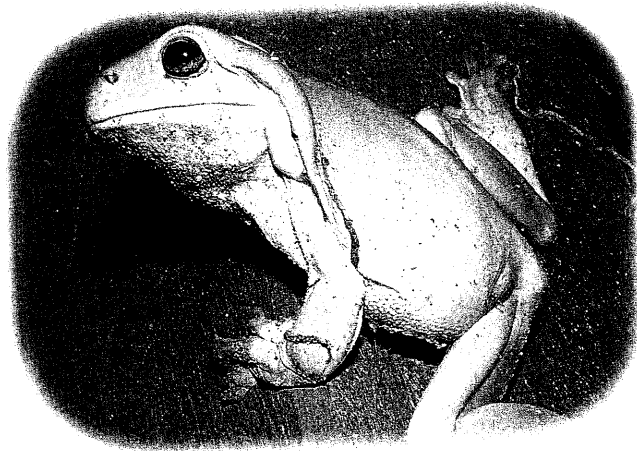
Sweeney shook his head, trying to clear it. The old woman was singing in the scullery, her voice cracked and shrill.

'Shut up,' Sweeney said. But the old woman took no notice, just went on stirring the pot and chanting—it wasn't really singing—and despite his bemused senses Sweeney was chillingly aware that he didn't like the words.

The cat's purring grew louder, a rumbling accompaniment of its mistress's chant.

Sweeney tried to rise from his chair but found that he couldn't. He felt so ... peculiar. A kind of strange disturbance was taking place within him—a kaleidoscopic rearrangement of molecule and cell.

The old woman came in from the scullery, the cat stopped its purring, and together they looked at the small green frog with the protuberant eyes so like Sweeney's that squatted now in Sweeney's chair.



'Come along, little 'un,' the old woman said. She carried the frog to the front door and placed it on the step. It stayed still, its bulging eyes gazing mournfully upwards, until she put her foot under its rear and flipped it onto the path—then it went hopping off into the undergrowth.

'That's it, my dear, off you go,' said the old woman. 'And if it's any consolation—they'll never find you now.'



## ➔ Responding to the story

- 1 *They'll never find you now.* Explain why the title is suitable for the story.
- 2 How had Sweeney arrived at the old woman's house?
- 3 Why was it important for Sweeney to know that the old woman lived alone and without a phone or relatives?
- 4 'His double-cross would have been discovered by now ...' Why was Sweeney hiding from the gang?
- 5 '... he took his revolver out of his pocket and examined it nonchalantly.' Why did Sweeney do this?
- 6 What effect did the old woman's drink have on Sweeney?
- 7 What comments would you make about the character of Sweeney?
- 8 How is the suspense built up in the story?
- 9 '... she put her foot under its rear and flipped it onto the path.' Do you think the old woman's treatment of Sweeney was justified? Why or why not?
- 10 Why is *They'll never find you now* a fantasy story?

# Creating an interesting character

As the suspense in the story builds up, we are given clues that suggest the old woman is a witch. Complete the profile below by using information from the story that shows the old woman could be a witch.

The old woman—the witch	
Her cooking:	
Her physical appearance:	
Her singing:	
Her cat, Blackie:	
Her laugh:	
Her magical powers:	
Her cottage:	

