

Chapter One

In the lanes that cradled the Cotswold hills, the air was so thick with thistle blossom that it looked as though it was snowing in midsummer. The thick lion's manes of blonde grasses along the verges barely stirred in the still heat haze, and the drooping, jewelled wildflowers weaving necklaces amongst them had no scent powerful enough to battle with the reek of melting tarmac.

In a record-breaking summer, this was the hottest day to date – a squinting, sunburnt August day, one week before the Bank Holiday. The ridge around the Lodes valley was a sun-starched pelmet, its tree-line stiff, dusty net curtains compared to the usual furled, pompomed drapes. The checked fields on its flanks made up a true summer patchwork – some yellow and polka-dotted with huge black plastic bales, or green embroidered with white sheep; some were striped with copper corn furrows, others the faded lovage velvet of set-aside and yet more the verdigris shot silk of well-munched pasture. Several combine harvesters were out – great mechanical locusts sending up clouds of dust as they worked through the hottest hours on a shift that would take them through the balm of evening and into the black cool of night.

For once, it was too hot for all but the most foolhardy of tourists to pedal or yomp or caravan between the little clustered villages that drew thousands to admire them year after year. Village stores had sold out of ice-creams, and their chilled drink fridges were almost empty. The minor injury unit in Market Addington cottage hospital was doing a roaring trade in burns and heat stroke. Idcote-over-Foxrush garden centre had finally managed to shift the last of the bulk order of bad-taste flowery sun-hats ordered seven years ago. It was that hot.

In one parish in the Lodes valley, three houses awaited new occupants, empty spectators to summer pastimes. Beside the lush emerald pile of Oddlode village green – saved from drought-ridden dust by its shading chestnut trees – a group of young children was playing cricket, overseen by one of the small, honey-coloured cottages whose deep-set peephole windows had kept a knowing eye on many generations. A mile away, alongside the hot solder of the railway line, another honey-stone house blinked its freshly cleaned upper windows out on to the Oddlode amenity ground, where local handyman Reg Wyck was mowing the parched grass and swearing at a pair of teenagers from the nearby estate who were sunbathing their soft, reddened bodies on the football pitch penalty spot.

High on the ridge above Oddlode, the third empty house watched through cataracts of thick dust as a group of horses from one of the many local yards hacked by, their riders carefully keeping to the dappled shade of the bridleway that led into the Gunning woods. One brushed a shoulder against the rampant buddleia overhanging the track from the cottage's garden and sent out a cloud of red admiral butterflies, spooking the horses into snorting dances. The butterflies soared over the wild, untamed garden and settled on the sills of the cottage's blind, smeary eyes – unexpected mascara anointing an elderly gaze as it waited for a new guardian angel.

It wasn't a day to move house. It wasn't a day to move far from a deckchair.

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At Number Four Horseshoe Cottages in Oddlode, Gladys Gates had been at work since dawn. She had already Cif-ed every surface and wrapped every one of her dear friend Rose's three hundred and twenty-eight ornaments in anticipation of its new tenants, the 'Unmarried Irish Couple' as she thought of them. The fact that the couple were not Irish and were, in fact, moving from East Anglia was immaterial to her.

Number Four, like the other three Horseshoe Cottages beside the village green in Oddlode, belonged to an era when few adults grew beyond five feet five. Its ceilings were absurdly low, weighed down by vast beams dripping with horse brasses that had crowned many an unsuspecting guest – supposing the squat doorways hadn't already called seconds out upon them. So-named because the first cottage in the terraced row was attached to the old forge, each Horseshoe Cottage boasted its own iron crescent over the door. Number Four's horseshoe was the rustiest and, according to local legend, had belonged to one of the best hunters in the county – a celebrated Gunning horse called Flint. After a particularly good day's sport, the shoe had been given to Simmons, the Wolds Hunt terrier man, who had lived in the cottage in the days when the hunt kennels were based at Oddlode Manor. Gladys remembered

Simmons well, particularly his passion for pickling – himself as well as his vegetables, which had been amongst the first raised in the Oddlode allotments. Some of the cupboards in the cottage still smelled of vinegar and home-made wine. Rumour had it that Simmons hadn't needed embalming.

His niece, old Rose Simmons, had until recently lived in Number Four on her own. Taken into residential care after a particularly nasty bout of shingles earlier that summer, she looked increasingly unlikely to return home. Her family had consequently decided to rent out the cottage to stop it mouldering, although Gladys suspected that the reason they were only doing so on a three-month 'cash' let was in case the old dear snuffed it and they could make merry with the investment. It was a nice little nest egg. The cottage had once belonged to the Manor, but ownership had transferred to the Simmons family at around the same time as Rose had left service at Foxrush Hall to move in with her uncle. This had always struck Gladys as strange – the Constantine family, who had always owned the Manor, were a notoriously mean lot. Gladys could smell a scandal but had never been able to get to the bottom of it. Even today's thorough tidy-up heralded no clues.

She collected the framed photographs from above the gas mantel, admiring one of the young Rose looking like Rita Hayworth.

She had once been a very beautiful woman. Gladys had somewhat idolised her as a girl and thought it a great shame she'd never married and had children of her own. Gladys had known Rose Simmons all her life and, being kind-hearted, she was happy to keep an eye on things in Rose's absence. She'd followed the fate of Number Four with interest, reporting to Rose as prospective tenants arrived to get the guided tour.

Miss Stillitoe had come alone, parking a very tatty little car beside the village green while Gladys was standing outside the nearby post office stores. Gladys, whose network of spies was notorious in the village, quickly ascertained that she was the new teacher appointed to take over from recently-retired Miss Frappington at Oddlode primary school. Young, petite and somewhat scruffy, Mo Stillitoe (Gladys assumed the 'Mo' was short for Maureen) was moving to the Cotswolds from Newmarket. She was thought to be a Cambridge graduate (an old campus parking permit still lived on her car windscreen), a vegetarian (seen buying salad sandwich from shop), a cat lover (cat hairs spotted on skirt) and something of a dancer (the way she moved gave it away). There wasn't much that got past the Manor's housekeeper. Gladys was not known locally as Glad Tidings for her cheery hellos alone; gossip was her life.

She later learned from Netta, the school secretary, that Miss Stillitoe was one of these modern girls who referred to her boyfriend as a partner, only naming him during her job interview as 'Pod'.

'Pod and Mo,' Gladys muttered under her breath as she adjusted the lovely print of working shire-horses that lived above the fireplace. They sounded like cartoon characters.

Finding out about Pod had not been easy, and Gladys was only part of the way through enquiries. His real name – which Gladys couldn't pronounce – had appeared in the rental agreement that Rose had shown her, along with his occupation.

It was when Gladys had discovered Padhraig Shannon to be a jockey that she'd made the mistaken Irish connection – with a name like that, it seemed a safe bet that Pod was a racing import from the Emerald Isle. Her boss, Sir St John Belling, was luckily a man of the turf, but was unfortunately also a man of few words. All week Gladys had been conducting frustrating investigations into Mr Shannon whilst serving meals at the Manor. She'd thus far only gleaned a few fascinating morsels – young Pod was, it seemed, a 'bad lot' who had brought the sport of kings into disrepute. He was no longer racing for a living. Gladys was agog.

Gladys – whose own cottage almost backed on to the Horseshoe Cottages gardens – had promised Rose that she would keep a close eye on the new tenants at Number Four. She had already placed a set of binoculars by her box room window and made sure the cherry tree was cut back enough to afford a good view. She was looking forward to the entertainment.

At Wyck Farm on the Lower Oddford road, agent Lloyd Fenniweather was playing with the two sets of keys that he had been handed by the developer, idly spinning them around his fingers like a gunslinger. As he awaited his buyers, he admired the fifth reincarnation of the old house that he'd seen in as many years. It had certainly taken some selling – and a lot of tarring up – but the farm had made him a very healthy commission. Thank goodness the Brakespears were in so much of a hurry when they bought it. They seemed a pleasant family, although he doubted they would stay long. Nobody did. They were moving from the luxury

of a modern Essex gin palace. Wyck Farm was a much darker spirit, its cold comforts barely disguised by the glow of new chrome fittings, slate worktops and beech floors.

He gave the Brakespears a year at most. He would keep the house details on file just in case. No family, apart from its original owners, had lasted at Wyck Farm for more than four seasons. It seemed cursed to destroy marriages, and Lloyd already harboured doubts about Anke and Graham Brakespear. Estate agents soon learned to read the signs – they sold enough properties for divorcing couples. The Brakespears never touched one another, and rarely stood close enough together to be able to. They talked to and through their children more than to one another. The Danish mother had been the driving force and decision-maker behind the move, the others all dragging their feet. The husband – a self-made northerner – seemed as much a child to her as the teenagers and the young son. Lloyd, who had a penchant for blondes, rather fancied Anke Brakespear, who had a Bo Derek older woman appeal, with that amazing bone structure and supercool elegance. She was far too tall to be a practical option, but he'd nevertheless allowed himself a few passing fantasies about showing her around the property very, very thoroughly – particularly the master bedroom suite and its vast whirlpool bath.

He smiled to himself now, realising that Anke's whistle-stop viewing was the very reason that he had finally shifted Wyck Farm off his books. The bath – like most other things in the house – was likely to explode the moment it was switched on. He'd had a very nasty moment with the electric gates only that morning.

Letting the sun lick a few more highlights into his treacle toffee hair and dust a few more freckles on to his bronzed cheeks as he gazed up at the gables, Lloyd pondered the old place's transformation from tatty, rundown farmhouse owned by the legendary Wyck family to desirable (or almost) country residence. It was only a shame, he reflected as yet another Intercity blasted past on one side while a loud game of football started up on another, that its location wasn't better.

At Overlodes Riding School – known to many as 'Legoverlodes' – Justine Jones was waiting forlornly in the car park, clutching her velvet riding hat. It seemed Rory Midwinter had yet again forgotten her lunch-time riding lesson. The lorry was missing from its parking space and the yard was deserted.

When *The Archers* came to a finish, Justine decided that it was time to give up. But, just as she was about to start the engine, she heard a rumble of tyres on gravel and leapt out of her car, heart hammering as it always did when she prepared to see Rory. Alas, the shiny metallic livery and blacked-out windows that emerged over the spruce hedges told her that this wasn't Rory's clapped out old Bedford cattle wagon. Justine watched in amazement as two vast, flashy horseboxes rolled into the drive. Each lorry had *Home Counties Horse Transport* emblazoned on its side.

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Faith Brakespear was sulking furiously because she hadn't been allowed to travel from Essex with her beloved pony, Bert. She slouched angrily in the bucket seat of her brother Magnus's sports car, watching the convoy ahead of her through narrowed eyes. At its helm was her stepfather, driving his pride and joy, the Lexus. Following was her mother, Anke, sharing the Mercedes off-roader with Faith's half-brother Chad, two dogs, two cats and a host of small, furry animals in perforated cardboard boxes. Magnus and Faith brought up the rear, although there had until recently been another member of the cavalcade behind them. Faith cast fretful looks over her shoulder. They had lost the horsebox at traffic lights somewhere between Oxford and Witney. She was certain that there had been two *Home Counties Horse Transport* lorries following them until then. Not for the first time, she cursed her stepfather for selling the family's own horsebox when her mother retired from competition.

Faith was sweltering, her sweaty back and the clammy upholstered seat creating a hot doughy sandwich that had turned her T-shirt into a sodden filling. Magnus's 1980s Porsche was the only Brakespear car without air conditioning, but she had been loath to travel with her stepfather in the leathery cool of the Lexus and her mother was being especially protective of Chad today. This struck Faith as deeply unfair. After initial doubts, both the boys were now eager to move to the new farmhouse, whereas Faith had been in a decline for weeks at the prospect. She might be almost twice Chad's age, but that didn't put her beyond the need to share a car with her mother on such a momentous day and perhaps allow herself a small cry. She couldn't cry in front of Magnus. He was hopeless. For almost two hours, he had alternately chatted into the Bluetooth headphone of his Nokia, selected teeth-grittingly alternative tracks on the CD stacker, or cursed other drivers.

'Stupid bitch!' he spat as a woman in an Audi estate pulled out in front of him, butting into the Brakespear convoy. He leaned on the horn and two fingers appeared out of the sun-roof in front of him. 'Did you see that?!" He flashed his lights.

Through the Audi's tinted rear-view window, two cherubic little faces poked their tongues out at the Porsche, making Faith smile for the first time that day. The smile turned into a laugh as a huge silver dog thrust its head out of a side window to stare at them, tongue lolling and ears flapping inside out. It was a Weimaraner – the rare and beautiful German gundog. It had been on the wish list that Faith had made when desperate for a puppy, but Graham, her stepfather, had insisted that, as the only child with a pony, she couldn't have her own dog, too. That honour had fallen to the spoiled Chad, now the proud owner of Bomber, the flatulent bull terrier. Faith secretly adored Bomber – certainly more than their other dog, Evig, the Japanese Akita bought for her mother as a fifth anniversary present from Graham. Weighing in at nine stone with eyes like a camp commandant, Evig – which meant forever in Danish – was cold-hearted, volatile and slavishly loyal to Faith's stepfather.

She glared irritably at the Lexus several cars ahead of them. Graham liked to flash his money around, but only very selectively, and Faith was convinced he singled her out for especially tight-fisted treatment. Not only was she not allowed a dog of her own, neither was she permitted a new horse unless she agreed to part with Bert, whom she had grown far too

tall and heavy to ride. It had become a stand-off that had thus far lasted eighteen months. Apart from best friend Carly, who was now going to be over a hundred miles away, Bert was Faith's closest ally. Selling him would be like selling her soul.

She took out her mobile phone to text best friend Carly, only getting as far as '*Having a crap*' before Magnus tried a lunatic overtaking move on the Audi so that she accidentally pressed Send before she could add '*journey*'.

Diana Lampeter was running late, and she loathed running late. She also loathed emotional scenes. Her well-planned schedule was already falling to pieces.

Mim wouldn't stop crying after a tearful farewell with her father Tim (who would, after all, be seeing the children next weekend, and was being a complete heel already – insisting that he be at the London house throughout the removal process). Just as Tim had finally calmed Mim down enough to buckle her in the car and plug the portable DVD into the cigarette lighter, the removal men had dropped a Welsh dresser on their own feet. Faced with the prospect of Mim staging another tantrum, Diana had been forced to go ahead

and leave Tim awaiting a replacement driver for the van. He was bound to have poked through the last of her boxes and discovered his favourite Henry Alken oil and the George III silver teapot that his grandmother had given them as a wedding present, neither of which he'd agreed to let her take.

A flat tyre on the A40 had delayed her so much that both her removal lorry and her horse transporter had sailed past as she sweated with the jack and wheel nuts in the sweltering heat while, in the back of the car, Digby stayed glued to the DVD player, Mim sobbed her heart out and Hally barked constantly. Not one kind Samaritan had stopped to help. Diana could hardly blame them.

Her passengers were enough to put anybody off.

Then Digby went missing at Oxford services, having insisted on going to the loo unaccompanied, setting off a panic-stricken search. She was certain both the horse transporter and the *Kensington Quality Removals* van would have arrived by now, and bloody Rory wasn't answering the phone. To cap it all, some idiot in a Porsche had just almost driven her off the road.

'Not much further,' she promised the children through gritted teeth, glancing in the rear-view mirror. 'Digby, *stop* feeding chewing gum to Hally.' On the back seat beside her children, the big grey dog was struggling to unglue her jaws, saliva pouring from her chomping jowls on to Mim's fat little legs.

She could see the Porsche behind them, weaving in and out of an overtaking position despite the never-ending oncoming tourist traffic. Idiot. Good-looking idiot, mind you, she realised, as she took in the flop of blonde hair and the breadth of shoulders.

They slowed to a crawl as they came to a roundabout backed up with traffic.

‘Someone else is on the move today.’ With false jollity Diana pointed out the Pickfords vans ahead of her. Digby didn’t look up from cramming chewing gum into the rear ashtray. Mim snivelled some more and said she needed the toilet.

‘Lavatory,’ Diana snapped. ‘And you’ll have to wait.’

Porsche Boy had an incredibly plain girlfriend, she noticed as he forced his way into the outside lane and alongside her, intent on

overtaking on the roundabout. Compared to his symmetrical perfection, his companion had a long, thin face like a camel, round shoulders and hair the colour and texture of a dirty sisal carpet.

Diana briefly admired her own reflection in the mirror – golden skin, black hair curling around huge espresso-dark eyes set in a heart-shaped face. It had served her well, although too much crying and comfort eating towards the end of her marriage had given her bags and a double chin she was determined to shift. Tim had been particularly cruel about the weight she’d put on, calling her a fat slob and a disgrace in those tortuous final weeks. He’d told her she should get out and exercise; she’d just longed for him to be sent away on exercise to let her binge-eat in peace. But ceremonial duties had kept him in London all summer, picking over the corpse of their love with unexpected glee.

An angry beep behind her snapped her back into the here and now as she realised that the traffic had moved on, Porsche Boy longsince departed in a plume of fumes.

‘Okay, okay.’ She waved a hand at the impatient driver behind her. ‘What *is* it with people today? Bloody white van man.’

White Van Man remained glued to her exhaust pipe all the way through Idcote-over-Foxrush and out on to the ridgeway above the Lodes valley, intimidating her with his radiator grille and his black scowl. It was only when he peeled away on to the Oddlode road and she stayed on the ridge heading for the Springlode turning that Diana realised her children had fallen unusually quiet. She glanced behind her and saw that they were both asleep at last, Hally stretched out over them both, her slobbery face pressed to Digby’s chin.

Diana pulled into a lay-by, keeping the engine running and savouring the moment. Her beautiful, dark-eyed, honey-skinned children who had both inherited a streak of her South American heritage along with the Constantine freckles and curls, and their father’s highcheeked haughtiness. That he had accused her of being a bad mother had been Tim’s dirtiest trick. She loved her children with a passion beyond rationality. Yes, she was impatient, probably far too liberal and shamefully fond of them when they were asleep as opposed to awake, but they were her life and the centre of her world.

Diana kissed her fingers and touched the tip of Mim’s perfect, plump toe poking from her flowery flip-flops. Then she turned to look out across the valley, so coppery from drought that the black woods spreading their fingers across it looked like stripes on a tiger’s back. Putting the car into gear, she set off again, driving into its jaws.