

Chapter Two

‘Where does this one go, miss?’

The fair young mover’s assistant hoisted an upholstered chair as easily as if it were a child’s toy, and paused in the hallway for directions.

I was busy rummaging in one of the tidily packed boxes, trying to locate my faithful old teapot before the kettle I’d put on the kitchen cooker came to a boil. I glanced over my shoulder, distracted.

‘In my bedroom,’ I told him. ‘First room on your right at the top of the stairs. Aha!’

My hand closed over the familiar contour of the teapot’s handle at the same instant that the kettle burst into full boil with a piercing whistle. Switching off the gas ring, I spooned some loose tea into the pot, filled it with water, and set it on the back of the cooker to brew.

‘Miss Beckett?’ That was Mr Owen, the head mover, with another assistant in tow at the back door. His cheerful round face was pink with exertion. ‘We’ve got your kitchen table here. Thought it might be best to bring it through the back – I’d hate to make a mark on that panelling in the front entry.’

I moved obligingly out of their way, pulling a box or two along with me.

‘I’ve just put some tea on,’ I said, ‘if you and your men would like a cup. Oh.’ I looked around, suddenly remembering. ‘I haven’t got any cups unpacked yet.’

‘Never you mind, miss.’ Mr Owen winked good-naturedly. ‘I’ve got a box of disposable ones in the truck. Always come prepared, I do.’

The fair-haired young assistant was back again, looking perplexed. ‘Are you sure you mean the *first* door on the right, miss? It doesn’t look like a bedroom to me – it’s awfully small and has an easel or something in it.’

I clapped a hand to my forehead and smiled in apology.

‘Sorry, I meant the *third* door on the right. The big bedroom on the north side of the house.’

‘Right, miss.’ His face cleared, and he was off again.

‘Always a bit of a panic, isn’t it?’ Mr Owen slid my table into position against the pantry wall. ‘You’ll get it sorted out soon enough. Right, I think that’s all the furniture. Just the boxes left. I’ll nip out and get those cups for our tea, then, shall I?’

He was a bit of a marvel, certainly the most organised man I’d ever met, and well worth the extra money I was paying for his services. When I’d bought the house three weeks ago, I hadn’t given much thought to the matter of moving my belongings from London to Exbury. But when I returned to my flat in Bloomsbury and started packing up, I soon realised that professional assistance was called for. Apart from my prized Victorian bedroom suite – another inheritance from Aunt Helen – there was my lounge and kitchen furniture, all my studio supplies, my drawing board, and the few hundred books I’d

picked up at sales and secondhand shops during my years in London. On the recommendation of a close friend, I had called Mr Owen, and he had come charging like a modern knight to my rescue.

In my flat, the neatly taped and labelled packing boxes had looked huge and overpowering. Here in the house they were barely noticeable, dwarfed by the sheer proportion of the architecture and the spacious, sunlit rooms. I had been pleased to find the interior of the old house every bit as appealing as the exterior, and well suited to my traditional tastes.

One entered through the front door into a large entry hall, panelled in richly burnished oak. ‘Seventeenth century,’ Mr Owen had pronounced at a glance, ‘and very good quality.’ Directly ahead, a heavy oak staircase set in the centre of the hall ascended several steps, paused for breath at a square landing, then executed a sharp ninety-degree turn to the left and continued its climb to the first floor. Doors to the sitting room and the study opened off the hall to the left and right, respectively, while to the right of the staircase a narrow passage led through to the kitchen. Dining room, kitchen, and old-fashioned pantry occupied the back half of the ground floor, their large, bright windows looking out over the rolling green plain with its fresh sprinkling of early spring wildflowers.

There were four bedrooms upstairs. The large one, running the full length of the north side of the house above study and pantry, had been the obvious choice for my own use. It even had its own working fireplace, along with a sizeable cupboard nestled in the space under the attic stairs. I had selected the small back bedroom for my studio, and was content to leave the two front rooms unfurnished for the time being, to serve as

storage areas until I was completely settled. Between my studio and my bedroom, opening onto the wide landing, was a full bath – quite a luxury to find in an older home.

There were a few cracks and creaks, naturally, some protestations from the pipes, and dampness had crumbled the plaster round the upstairs windows, but there was nothing that couldn't be put right, in time.

'It's a lovely old house you've got here,' Mr Owen said, affirming my own thoughts as he took a seat on the packing crates beside me and passed me a polystyrene cup. 'Built in the 1580s, you said?'

'That's what the house agent told me.' I nodded. I poured out strong tea for the mover and his two perspiring helpers, then settled back on my makeshift seat to enjoy my own steaming cupful. 'I don't know much about its history, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, the village folk will fill you in there, I've no doubt,' said Mr Owen sagely. 'Old houses like this always have a past. Interesting, most of 'em. You'll learn more over a pint in the local than you will out of any history book.'

'I'll remember that.'

The two younger men drank their tea in respectful silence, waiting patiently for Mr Owen to finish chatting and give them the signal to return to work. Eventually, after his second cup of tea, he rose to his feet. At precisely the same moment, a terrific bang echoed in the front hall, and I jumped in my seat.

'Just the front door, miss,' one of the younger movers explained. 'The hinges swing inward, see, and the latch is none too sturdy. Strong gust of wind'll blow it open.'

Mr Owen promptly examined the door, fitted the inside handle with a protective cover to avoid further damage to the

panelled wall behind, and suggested I buy a new lock as soon as possible. 'Can't be too careful,' was his fatherly advice.

It took the three men less than an hour to unload and distribute the remainder of my belongings, and at half-past two I found myself standing in the front doorway, giving a final wave to the retreating van and feeling, for the first time, very unsure of myself. And very much alone.

The enormousness of what I'd just done suddenly struck me, with a force that neither my brother's outright skepticism nor my parents' gentler lectures on the telephone had been able to achieve.

I could do my work just as well from Exbury as I could in London, I'd told everybody. In fact, I would probably be more productive in Exbury, away from the distractions of the city. And property was, after all, a sound investment. The fact that I was exchanging a familiar environment and an established circle of friends for a community of strangers had never seemed to me to be very important. Until now. I felt a tiny pang of longing for my third-floor flat, and for my neighbour Angie, down the hall, who could always be counted on for a cup of coffee and gossip in the midafternoon.

The longing vanished in an instant, though, as I turned from the hall into the study. It was a lovely, peaceful room, with dark panelled walls, rows of empty bookshelves smelling faintly of lemon oil, and a cosy-looking fireplace that corresponded to the one in my bedroom upstairs. Earlier that morning, sunlight had come spilling in through the curtainless window, falling in wide, slanting squares across the brown leather upholstery of my old sofa. Now the light was indirect, and dimly restful. Apart from the sofa, the only other pieces of furniture I'd added

to this room were a matching armchair in front of the fireplace, and a simple walnut writing desk and chair. At the moment, they were buried beneath the boxes of books and papers I'd brought with me.

It was tempting to begin my unpacking in here, but I knew from experience how little it took to distract me. A favourite old book, joyfully discovered in the middle of a box, would mean my spending the rest of the afternoon in blissful, unproductive oblivion. Better to leave the study for last, I reasoned, and begin in the most logical and practical place – the kitchen.

I shut the study door reluctantly and retreated to the back of the house, where for the next few hours I attacked the packing boxes with a fervour that would have made my mother proud. The hard work left me, in the end, covered with dust, and longing – like the mole in my favourite children's story – for a breath of the fresh spring air.

With Mole's impulsiveness, I swung the back door wide and wandered outside, welcoming the gentle breeze that played upon my skin and lifted the curls from my damp forehead. I rubbed my palms on the legs of my jeans to get the worst of the dirt off, and stood for a moment with my hands on my hips, enjoying the feeling of well-earned freedom.

My gaze fell upon the tumbled pile of stones where Iain Sumner had been standing on the day I'd bought the house, and I altered my course towards it, interested.

It was some thirty yards or more distant from the house, well outside my own property line, and while it was therefore unlikely to have been part of a fence, it was far too symmetrical to be a natural feature. As I drew closer, I saw that the stones were arranged in an L shape, the longer side of the L running

parallel to the back wall of my house. In places, the wall was not much shorter than my own height of five foot three, and in the shelter of the L someone had carefully broken and cultivated the earth to make a garden.

The dark soil was neatly furrowed and newly fertilised, ready for planting.

‘So you’ve bought it.’

For the second time I jumped, and turned, at the sound of Iain Sumner’s voice. He was not a small man, and it was a mystery to me how he could have crossed the yard without my hearing him. Recovering quickly, I was able to greet him with my most brilliant smile. He was wearing a rough brown sweater over heavy work trousers, and a brown cap with a stained brim. He pushed the cap back on his head, and his grey eyes smiled back at me.

‘You’ve bought the house,’ he repeated. It was a statement, not a question, but I answered it anyway.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, you’ve been all the talk of the village these past few weeks, I’d best warn you. Mr Ridley let out that you were an artist, and from London, so everyone’s fair curious. If you don’t have a few disreputable, bohemian friends to invite down for weekends, you’d best get some, else the whole village will be disappointed.’

I laughed. ‘I’m afraid they’ll find me very boring. And I don’t have any bohemian friends.’

‘Not even a disreputable relative?’

‘They all moved to New Zealand. My parents are out there now, actually, on holiday, so the only person likely to visit me in the near future is my brother,’ I confided. ‘And he’s a vicar.’

‘Ah. Well.’ He accepted the information graciously, tilting his head to one side. ‘What do you think of my garden?’

‘Very nice,’ I said honestly. ‘This is your land, then?’

‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘It belongs to a friend of mine. I just do this as a favour to him. There’s only room for a few flowers, nothing much.’

‘And brambles,’ I added, remembering his hands.

‘Aye.’ He grinned ruefully. ‘And brambles. Goes along with the gardening, that does.’

I reached out a hand to touch the stone wall, liking the feel of the sun-warmed roughness beneath my fingers.

‘What was this place?’ I asked him.

‘Used to be a dovecote, they tell me, for keeping pigeons. Not much left of it, now.’

‘Is it very old?’

‘As old as the house, I believe. Maybe older.’

‘The people who lived here were farmers, then, originally?’

‘Tenant farmers, maybe.’ He shrugged. ‘The land you’re standing on is manor land, and always has been to my knowledge.’

‘I’ve an interest in old houses,’ I confessed, still caressing the weathered stone with an absent hand, ‘especially this one. I’d love to learn more about its history.’

‘Ah,’ he said, smiling, ‘you’re talking to the wrong person, then. I’ve not been here more than five years, myself. Vivien’s the one you should ask.’

‘Vivien?’

‘Aye.’ His eyes softened. ‘Vivien Wells, at the Red Lion. A regular walking encyclopedia, she is. If she doesn’t know it, it’s not worth knowing.’

I wasn't really listening, because as I'd raised my head my attention had been captured by a solitary horse and rider who had appeared just over Iain Sumner's shoulder, in the distance. They were standing in the shadow of an oak, watching us. The horse was a large, powerful grey, and the rider was a man, dressed in dark clothes, but they were too far away for me to see them clearly.

Iain Sumner narrowed his eyes. 'Is something wrong?'

'What?' I brought my gaze back to him guiltily. 'Sorry. No, I was just looking at that man.'

'What man?'

'That man on the horse, behind you,' I said, pointing.

He turned to look, but the shadow under the oak was empty.

I shook my head. 'He's gone now. A big man, on a grey horse.'

'Might have been Geoff,' Iain said slowly. 'That's manor land. Though I don't know that he has any greys in his stable.'

'It's not important,' I told him.

'Perhaps not.' He smiled. 'Well, I'd best leave you in peace. I just came back to get my spade.'

He retrieved the forgotten tool from its resting place in the corner of the wall and, wishing me a good evening, pulled his cap down over his eyes and strode off towards the road, whistling.

After a final look round, I went back into the house where, unable to recapture my previous energy, I ignored my earlier resolution and settled myself in the study. After unpacking nearly two boxes of books, I came across a dog-eared copy of

Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, and it was well past midnight when I finally dragged myself upstairs, bathed, and fell asleep exhausted, with the shadow of the poplar tree lying like a guardian across my bed.