

## ONE

As it turned out, the house was lovely. No, Kate thought, more than lovely: it was spectacularly, breathtakingly perfect. She hadn't expected that, to be honest. The agent's particulars – such a quaint word for what was, these days, little more than a two-page printout and a listing on Rightmove – had been almost impossible to make sense of, even with the help of the floor plan. Rooms appeared to open into other rooms almost at random; there were two staircases; the kitchen windows looked out into the sitting room; upright oak beams were stranded in the middle of floors, like the ghosts of long-removed walls. But when they got there and actually saw it, it all made sense. Trade Cottage, it turned out, had originally been not one house but three, a small terrace of knapped flint built as accommodation for the retainers of a nearby estate. The estate had long since shrunk to the other side of the woods that bordered Trade Cottage's garden, though its traces still lay all around: the farm next to the house was very much a working one, its fields dotted with sheep and dung, but the rusted iron fences and guards around the trees hinted at a past grandeur as parkland. Even as they made their way up the

dilapidated drive, Kate had been imagining the Mitford sisters hunting their ponies across it.

The agent, Damon, had got there before them, his spotless blue Tesla parked a discreet distance from the house so as not to detract from the wow factor of its façade – the big bay window at one end, the ancient oak porch at the other; the former topped by a wisteria, pendulous with blossom, the latter by the carved crest of the estate and a delicate climbing rose. As Matt parked their Kia alongside the Tesla, Tilly said wonderingly from the back seat, ‘Is this really it?’, and even Will looked up from the game he was playing on Matt’s phone and muttered, ‘Cool.’

They got out and walked slowly towards the front door. The outbuildings, about which the particulars had been a bit vague – possibly exhausted by the effort of breathlessly describing the house’s interior: *As you ascend the second staircase towards the sumptuous main bedroom, dazzling views past wildflower-strewn woods await . . .* – looked to be substantial structures in their own right. Kate glimpsed a small barn, stables, and an open-fronted thatched shed containing a sit-down mower and a battered old Land Rover. That was good; converting one or two outbuildings into Airbnbs was the only way they could possibly make this work, even with the bonanza from Matt’s earn-out and the sale of their house in Dulwich.

Damon must have seen them arrive – the door opened a moment before they could knock. ‘Come in, come in,’ he said, stepping back and beaming with almost proprietorial pride as they took in the utterly beautiful entrance hall – not large, but lined with manorial oak panelling. Kate tried to guess its age, but couldn’t.

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‘The story is, a sea captain related to the Pelham family retired here in the 1840s – he was the one who had it converted into a single dwelling,’ Damon was explaining. ‘So some parts are late Georgian, some Victorian – although there’s a bit in the middle that may be the remnants of an older building still. Tudor, quite possibly. The seller can tell you more – she’s done loads of research on the place. Anyway, it’s hardly a cottage, I know, but I guess when your frame of reference is Pelham House . . .’

‘And the name?’ Matt asked. ‘Where did that come from?’

‘Ah, yes – Trade Cottage, on Smugglers Lane,’ Damon said with relish. ‘Short for “Free Trade Cottage” originally, I understand. In the eighteenth century, the government slapped tariffs on imports of brandy and rum to pay for the Napoleonic Wars. Apparently, this was one of the main smuggling routes up from the coast, and the sea captain wasn’t above taking a few barrels off his old naval contacts and selling them on. There’s even a secret cellar under the dining room.’

‘Hear that, Will? A secret cellar,’ Kate said encouragingly, hoping their son wasn’t being put off by all this talk of Tudors and Georgians. But when she turned to look, she saw he was hanging on Damon’s every word.

‘Come on through.’ Damon opened another door – also oak, and also impossible to date; the latch, she saw, had been hand-hammered in a forge. ‘It’s a bit of a warren, but that’s part of its charm. We’ll say hello to the vendors, then I’m generally just letting people wander.’

So there had been other viewings already, Kate noted. It had only come on the market that week – they’d got an alert from

the selling platform. Well, the interest wasn't surprising, given how unique it was. But no actual offers yet, or Damon would have told them.

A small passage – oddly misshapen, as if tunnelled round obstacles – led into a lovely light-filled sitting room. This was the room that had perplexing windows opening into it, but, she now saw, that was because it was actually an oak-framed structure that had been added to the rear of the house at a later date. The spaces between the beams were mostly glass; the view was of the large, pretty garden, but also beyond that, to rolling fields of grazing sheep. She was trying not to fall in love with the place – she'd had her hopes dashed so many times when they were looking in Dulwich, four years ago – but, at the thought of having her first coffee of the day in this room, overlooking that valley, her heart melted.

'Hello! Welcome!' a voice boomed. A tall, white-haired man was coming round a sofa towards them. He was using canes to support himself – even so, Kate noticed, both knees were buckling slightly – but was clearly determined to greet them properly. He had to fiddle with the sticks to get a hand free. When Kate took it, he clasped his other hand firmly over hers as well – as much for support, she thought, as out of hospitality: she could feel a slight tremor in his fingers. He had clearly once been handsome, possibly dazzlingly so; even now, a lock of white hair flopped fetchingly over one of his blue eyes as he pumped her hand vigorously.

'Oh, Paul, there's no need . . .' A slight woman jumped up from an armchair – that was the thing Kate noticed straight away, how she almost sprang from the chair, the agile movement of someone

far younger than her neatly coiffed grey hair suggested her to be. 'Hello.'

'Nonsense! Guests!' the man – Paul, presumably – said cheerfully. He turned back to Kate. 'Normally I'd have a glass of champagne in your hand as soon as you walked through that door, but I suppose it's a bit early for that.'

Kate wondered if he meant a bit early in the day or a bit early in the process. Probably the latter, she decided. She knew some sellers liked to stick around for viewings, to answer questions or simply to keep an eye on things, but she'd never been called a guest before.

'Rosemary,' the woman said, indicating herself. 'And Paul. Please, make yourselves at home. Would you like a scone while you look round? I baked them this morning.' She turned to the agent. 'Damon?'

'I don't mind if I do,' Damon said happily. 'Particularly if there's some of that raspberry jam . . . ?'

'Masses!' Rosemary smiled at Kate. 'Do you make jam? I'm afraid you'd have to, living here. The fruit cage is far too large – we built it forty years ago, when we were younger and more sprightly – and we always get a glut.'

'Well,' Kate said apologetically, 'we live in London at the moment, so . . .'

'Oh, of course.' Rosemary turned to Will and Tilly. 'And what are *your* names? Any takers for a scone and raspberry jam while you go and choose your bedrooms?'

'It might be a bit soon for—' Kate interjected, but the children were already telling Rosemary their names, and she was pointing them in the direction of 'the back staircase, the one that leads all

the way up to the attic, and then why don't you see if you can find the room with a pony in it.'

Kate watched them beetling off, already appearing somehow energised by the house, or perhaps the country air, or perhaps just Paul and Rosemary's effervescent welcome. As for choosing bedrooms – she worried about getting their hopes up, of course she did. They'd debated whether to even bring the children on a whole day of traipsing round viewings, but there was the problem of what to do with them if they didn't – and, besides, she wanted them to want this move too. Leaving London would be a wrench for Tilly and Will, despite the fact they were both, in their different ways, struggling where they were. It would be better if they were committed to it, even if it did take a while to find the right property.

Although, she thought dizzily, perhaps they already had.

As promised, Damon let them wander, while Paul and Rosemary stayed downstairs in the sitting room – Paul levering himself back into a chair with some difficulty, Kate noticed. She was surprised they were so relaxed about letting people just roam around their house. When she and Matt put Liphook Crescent on the market, the estate agent had been under strict instructions not to let viewers out of his sight. But Paul and Rosemary, it seemed, were more trusting.

The listing had called it 'a family home of character and charm', and for once that had been no exaggeration. From the children's heights proudly recorded in black felt-tip on a wall – each one signed and dated, all the way back to the 1980s; from the look of it, 'Jamie' was older than 'Tessa' by about eighteen months, the

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same age gap as there was between Will and Tilly – to the framed hand-drawn map of the house and garden in the loo, the sense of a childhood lived here to the full was palpable. The map's features were labelled in neat, childish handwriting: *Paul's Pool*, *Christmas-Tree Thicket*, *Jamie's Citadel*, *The Silver Brook*. It was signed *Tessa 1986*. The same feel was there in the enormous boot room – bigger even than the dining room – crammed with the detritus of a dozen outdoor pastimes: fishing rods, croquet mallets held together with electrical tape, ancient tennis racquets, shooting sticks, a plastic ball-thrower with a chewed tennis ball jammed into it, all stuffed into two huge old chimney pots, along with half a dozen walking sticks and a shepherd's crook. The tennis ball, she guessed, was for the grey-snouted black Lab which thumped its thick tail lethargically at her from its bed by the back door.

The kitchen, by way of contrast, was almost comically ugly: small and functional, with two fluorescent strip lights overhead, the countertops made of pale Formica. The only redeeming feature was the cream-coloured Aga, and even that had Dalmatian-like patches where the enamel had flaked off and revealed the black iron beneath. It was oil-powered, the listing had said – surely, therefore, the least climate-friendly cooking device on the planet, but one she instinctively yearned to keep. Could Agas be re-enamelled? Or, indeed, converted to electric? She made a mental note to google it on the way home. And, of course, it wouldn't stay here, in this room; it was the dining room that cried out to be made into a spacious kitchen-diner, while this poky little space would become a utility room . . . She was good at this, she knew, reconfiguring every place they'd ever lived in, from their first flat in grotty Camberwell

to the four-bed semi they were selling now. And it was great that Trade Cottage hadn't been touched in decades. Matt, ever practical, might have objected if there'd been some expensive designer kitchen she wanted to rip out, but, as it was, she'd have free rein, their stretched finances permitting.

'Mummy! Mummy, we're going outside.' That was Tilly, still fizzing with excitement, dashing in and immediately out again. Behind her Kate glimpsed Will, also heading for the back door. It was great to see them so upbeat – Will, in particular, was capable of announcing he was bored and slouching back to the car after a few surly glances, but there was absolutely no sign of that here.

'Take Daddy,' she called after them, unsure what dangers might lurk in the garden – one of the photographs had shown a pond, complete with a small island for ducks and a rowing boat for getting to it – but Matt was ahead of her.

'Let's go right to the end and see what's in the field,' she heard him say as he followed them out, and she could tell from his voice that he, too, was excited.

She continued her tour alone. Upstairs, it was very much a house of two halves, with no interconnecting door or passageway between the children's bedrooms, up one staircase, and the main bedroom, up another. Checking out the latter, she couldn't help noticing that one of the nightstands was strewn with pill bottles. Paul's, presumably.

She went to the window to look at the view, which turned out to be even lovelier up here than it was from downstairs. At the end of the garden, beyond a belt of woods, farmland stretched for mile after mile. Off to her right, admittedly, was a huge green

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cliff of *leylandii*, but that was OK: it was far enough away not to overshadow the house, and, in any case, it gave them privacy from the property next door. On the other side, to her left, the woods had a faint shimmer of blue in them. *Wildflower-strewn*, indeed.

It was musty in the bedroom, and she longed to throw the window open, to lean out and gulp down that clean country air. But that would have felt discourteous to Paul and Rosemary, whose private space this was. When we own it, we can sleep with the windows open, she thought, and was surprised to note that it already felt like a foregone conclusion.

The bathrooms were as ancient as the kitchen – avocado-green baths that doubled as showers; vinyl shower curtains; sinks with spluttering taps that sported drooping moustaches of discoloration and limescale. It was as if the whole house had been stopped in time, a slumbering giant. But, again, that was all to the good: they could live with it perfectly happily while they renovated.

She realised she hadn't yet found the room with the big bay window she'd seen as they approached. Going back downstairs, she followed her sense of direction down a passage, the floor tiled in a black-and-white geometric pattern, the walls hung with painted oars. One, she saw, commemorated a victory for *Brasenose College 1st Torpid 1961*, whatever that was; among the crew's names was *No. 3 Paul Finch*. On the opposite wall, a similar oar recorded that, in 1994, Jamie Finch had rowed stroke for Balliol.

She walked into a room that turned out not to be the one she was looking for, but a second, smaller sitting room. There was a television, a comfortable mishmash of chairs around a small marble fireplace. And a huge, dappled rocking horse, with scarlet

nostrils and real leather tack. Its sides were worn where little feet had kicked it into a gallop.

Going back into the corridor, she got her bearings again and went on. What had looked at first glance like an alcove, a counterpart to one opposite containing a floor-standing oriental vase, was, she now saw, a door, and the room she was looking for lay beyond it. She stepped inside.

The particulars – and the more she explored Trade Cottage’s quirky, sprawling interior, the more appropriate that word seemed – had called this ‘the study’. She’d scoffed inwardly at that – estate agents’ ‘studies’, she’d generally found, were box rooms at best, cramped work-from-home cubbyholes at worst. But this was neither. Even ‘study’ undersold what was almost a small library, the walls on two sides lined with oak shelves filled with books. In the middle of the room sat a big pedestal desk, with a wheeled leather chair facing the window. ‘Captain’s chairs’, they were called, she vaguely remembered. So perhaps this was where the sea captain himself had sat in his retirement, and the desk was where he’d spread his maps.

She realised that the bay window, too, had a nautical feel – it jutted out at each side, like the windows that projected over a man-of-war’s stern. Yes, this had definitely been his favourite room, she decided, looking around, just as it would be hers. In such a room, with its view over the quiet front garden and drive, she might even be able to carve out a few hours a day to realise her long-held dream of writing something, once the children were settled. *I for this, and this for me* – she’d forgotten where she’d read those words, but it was exactly what she felt now: as if Trade Cottage was somehow choosing her, just as much as she was choosing it.

As she went to the window, she couldn't help glancing down at the sheets of writing paper neatly laid out on the desk. They were thank-you letters, she saw, written with a fountain pen, the signature a shaky but regal R. She bent closer to see who or what was being thanked, then jumped back as the door opened and Rosemary herself came in, holding a plate of scones.

'I see you've found Captain Pelham's cabin,' she said, with a smile. 'I always think it's the nicest room in the house.' She gestured at a small portrait Kate hadn't noticed before, hanging beside the door. It showed a short, thickset man in naval uniform. 'I like to imagine that his spirit still watches over the place, though Paul thinks that's sentimental nonsense.'

'The whole house is lovely,' Kate said truthfully. 'But, yes – there's something about this room, in particular.' She hesitated. 'It must be so hard to leave. Where are you going, if you don't mind my asking?'

Rosemary waved the question away. 'It's a wrench, of course it is, but it's time to move on. This house should have children running round it.' She nodded outside, to where Will had discovered a rope hanging from the elm tree that bordered the pond. 'Yours seem to have taken quite a shine to it already.'

'Do you have grandchildren?' It wasn't as intrusive a question as it might have been; all around them were framed photographs, including several of a tall, bearded man – Jamie, presumably – with a blonde woman and two dark-haired children.

Rosemary picked up the nearest one, her eyes softening as she looked at it. 'Yes. Hamish and Flora. But Jamie's something big at the IMF, so he's based in Washington. They come over every year,

and of course we Zoom, but . . .’ Her voice trailed off. ‘The children have American accents now, which feels strange. And Tess never wanted children. She lives in Wales, on a sort of commune.’

There were many more pictures of Jamie and his family, Kate noticed, than of Tessa. And a whole shelf of him as a young man – Jamie in cricket whites, Jamie with a surfboard, Jamie brandishing a football trophy – flanking a single picture of Tessa in her matriculation garb.

‘Jamie’s a bit cross we’re selling, actually,’ Rosemary went on. ‘But it’s him who keeps telling us we have to have a wet room. And Paul will need a wheelchair soon. His Dalek wheels, he calls them – he’s already been measured up. Really, a wheelchair in this house would be impossible.’

Kate nodded sympathetically. Trade Cottage was a house of many levels, with a step up or down into almost every room, and both staircases were narrow and steep.

‘And the fact is, I’m not getting any younger.’ Rosemary sighed. ‘I think I’m doing pretty well for eighty-three –’ Here Kate nodded again; Rosemary had so much energy, Kate had assumed she was early seventies at most – ‘But my bones are creaky now and I’m getting forgetful. So we’re downsizing, to a lovely little bungalow.’ She looked around wistfully. ‘But I have been excessively fond of my cottage.’

‘“There is always so much elegance, so much comfort about them”,’ Kate agreed.

Rosemary shot her a glance, clearly pleased Kate had picked up the reference. ‘Oh, are you a Janeite, too? She’s my guilty pleasure.’

I take to my bed and reread *Sense and Sensibility* whenever I feel under the weather.'

'I'm like that with *Love in a Cold Climate*,' Kate confessed. 'And some of Dodie Smith. But I like Austen, too.'

Outside, Will was swinging on the rope, out over the duck pond and back in a wide looping spiral, lifting his knees high to avoid getting his feet wet. A part of Kate wanted to run out and stop him – the rope, if it had been there since Jamie and Tessa's day, must be forty years old at least, and the sludge-brown water was presumably full of duck poo – but something held her back. Rosemary was watching Will with an indulgent smile on her face, and the moment felt, somehow, like a kind of test.

When she didn't move, Rosemary's eyes came back to scrutinise her face, a strangely searching look.

'I do hope you buy it,' she said quietly. 'I mean, I'm sure you're looking at lots of other nice places too, but perhaps . . . Damon says, for the money we're asking, most people want something grander. We had someone yesterday who said the first thing he'd do is rename it Monkwood Manor. Can you imagine? Just throw away two hundred years of history, to make himself look posh. Like those awful people who buy themselves a title, or rename pubs so they sound like wine bars. But Damon thinks the right person might walk through the door and fall in love with it, just like we did, forty-odd years ago.'

You were meant to play it cool, Kate knew. Matt always said it was a bad negotiating tactic to appear too keen at a viewing. But something about Rosemary – the fact Kate genuinely liked her, for one thing – made her say, 'Well, I *do* love it. And I can tell that the

children adore it. I'll have to talk to Matt, of course, and we'll need to do our sums. But I can see us being very happy here.'

Rosemary beamed, and was about to say something else when a noise in the corridor signalled the approach of the others – Tilly and Will bursting in first, followed after an interval by Matt and Paul. Matt was loitering discreetly by Paul's side, Kate saw, ready to catch him if his canes slipped. The children wanted to tell her excitedly about the lambs they'd seen in the field, and Paul and Matt were discussing irises – 'They're called Purple Knights,' Paul was saying, 'and they like a bit of grit every autumn –' and Matt was making a point of getting out his phone and noting that down, and she could tell from his body language that he liked Paul, and liked Trade Cottage, too.

'Well, darling,' Rosemary remarked, 'I don't know about you, but I'm very much hoping the house has found its rightful heirs.'

She was smiling, but was that the glint of a tear in her eye? It was hard to be sure, and, of course, older eyes like hers were more prone to watering.

'Not heirs, darling. We're not dead yet!' Paul said cheerfully. 'A new chapter, that's all.' He put his arms round her, but with the sticks in his hands he was clumsy; one swung round and hit her lightly on the back. 'How exciting!'

'Yes, of course,' Rosemary said, and Kate saw her discreetly blink the tear away. 'How very, very exciting.'