

## *Chapter One*

‘Why don’t you bring a friend with you to the wedding, Mum? Then you won’t have to sit alone.’ Avoiding her mother’s eyes, Rachel twisted and turned in front of the mirror, holding her hair up and checking her profile.

‘I don’t need to bring a friend to my own daughter’s wedding, surely?’ Molly picked up a tissue that had fallen to the ground, suddenly feeling apprehensive. What did Rachel want to change now? You’d have thought they were organizing the premiere of a Hollywood blockbuster movie, not a wedding.

‘We-ell, Dad’s a bit worried that with him and Tasha sitting together, and Brian sitting with Geneva, you’ll be on your own at the family table.’

Craig worried about her? No way. The last time he’d worried about her was when he’d asked for a divorce two years ago and been desperate to take as much money he could out of the marriage with him. And the house. He’d badly wanted to stay in the family home, but she’d dug her heels in there.

When Rachel said nothing, Molly added, ‘Anyway, I won’t be on my own. My son and daughter will be on the top table with me.’

‘Yes, but . . .’

Here it comes, thought Molly, more bad news. It felt as if she’d been standing alone against the rest of the family ever since Craig left. She braced herself, determined not to weep or make a scene. She’d done that all too often over the first few bewildering months of sorting out a new life for herself.

‘Well, Mum, Tasha thinks she and Dad should sit on either side of us, and Jamie’s parents don’t mind.’

‘Tasha isn’t the mother of the bride. I am.’

‘I know, and no one can take that away from you, but you see, it’s her money that’s paying for such a swish venue. Dad’s not been exactly flush since you took the family home and he had to buy the flat.’

Thank goodness she’d come to her senses before it was too late, Molly thought. And thank goodness her friends had found her a good lawyer. ‘It was *my* family home, actually, which *I* inherited. Why should he take it from me?’

‘You have to keep harping on that, don’t you? It was Daddy’s home as well for ten years, and he misses it terribly. He looks so sad when he talks about it.’

Molly breathed in deeply. She’d promised herself not to do anything to spoil Rachel’s special day, because bad feelings about important occasions could linger for years, but it was hard sometimes to bite her tongue. ‘I thought we were having traditional seating.’

Rachel shrugged. ‘It’s a bit old-fashioned to stick to a formula. And does it matter that much where you sit, as long as you’re on the top table.’

‘It matters to me. Very much.’ Molly looked at her daughter, but Rachel had brushed her hair over her eyes and was pretending to try out a new style. When the fiddling with the hairbrush went on for longer than it needed to, Molly realized the seating change was a done deal. If she made a big fuss, she’d be the one in the wrong, as far as her daughter was concerned.

She moved to stand by the window, colours blurring as she blinked her eyes and looked out at the garden. She suddenly remembered her own wedding day and had to stuff her hand into her mouth not to sob. So much hope, so much joy.

She had to start fighting back more skilfully. They were steamrolling her. Only . . . was it worth creating a fuss about this? It was Rachel’s wedding, after all, not hers. The trouble was, these days she couldn’t be bothered to fight back most of the time. It was all just – too much. Her friend Di said she was depressed. Well, she had reason to be.

A bright yellow delivery van turned in to the drive and pulled up at the house. A minute later

stet the doorbell rang, then Brian yelled up the stairs, ‘It’s a parcel for you, Rach, from that shoe place.’

Rachel squeaked and dived out of the bedroom.

Molly wiped her eyes hastily, but couldn’t wipe away the sick feeling. Thanks to her husband’s rich and extremely slim second wife, she now felt totally excluded from her only daughter’s wedding – and she was dreading the event.

She went to her own bedroom and opened the wardrobe door to stare at the blue dress and jacket she’d bought. ‘Perfect for the mother of the bride,’ the sales assistant had assured her.

‘It’s a pretty shade of blue,’ Rachel had said. ‘One of your favourite colours.’

But her daughter hadn’t seen it on, and the dress didn’t look half as flattering once Molly got it home. Dresses never did. She wasn’t good at choosing clothes. And anyway, she’d put on two kilos since then, what with all the hassles, all of it round her waist. She’d let herself go since the divorce and she wasn’t naturally slim.

No. 2 wife was not only slender but ferociously elegant, never seemed to have a hair out of place, and was the perfect partner for an ambitious man who’d climbed almost to the top of the executive ladder and was still going.

There was a joyous squeal from the hall. When Rachel squealed like that she wanted an audience, and if she didn’t get one here, she’d go round to her father’s, where Tasha would take an intense and clever interest in anything to do with clothes.

In the hall, Molly found her daughter balancing on shoes with impossibly high heels, moving to and fro, beaming at her reflection in the full-length mirror. ‘They look beautiful, darling,’ Molly lied. In reality, she thought heels that high not only looked ridiculous but were dangerous to walk in. But what was one minor lie in the confusion her life was in now?

Rachel wobbled across to the dining room to find the swatch of ivory satin and hold it against the shoes. ‘Oh, yes. The dyers got the shade exactly right.’

‘They certainly did.’

Beaming, Rachel walked up and down the hall again. ‘I’d better practise.’

‘I’ll go and start tea. Chicken breasts with salad all right? I’ve found a new low-fat sauce recipe.’ She turned towards the kitchen.

‘Oh. I’m not going to be here for tea, Mum. Didn’t Brian tell you? We’re both going over to Dad’s tonight.’

‘But we agreed we’d have a family night tonight! I bought some champagne and ...’ Molly had been looking forward to an evening with just her two children, something which wouldn’t be likely after the wedding. She’d wanted them to reminisce about old times and get closer again, as they used to be. She’d hunted out some old photo albums for them to go through, something Rachel usually loved doing.

Of course, Brian would still be living at home after the wedding, but apart from piling his dirty clothes in the laundry and regularly eating the last of the bread, he wasn’t around very often, especially since he’d started dating his stepmother’s daughter, Geneva.

Molly turned away, hearing her daughter go in the other direction. Once this wedding was over, she’d have to find something more interesting to do with her life, something for her. What did they call it? Moving on.

But what could she do? She’d never had a career, just a series of jobs when they were first married and short of money, then years of being the perfect hostess for Craig. She was a good cook, at least; prided herself on that. She looked down at herself and grimaced. Too good a cook, maybe.

Only she wasn’t professionally trained, and anyway, the joy of cooking was giving pleasure to others . . . and soon she wouldn’t have any close family to cook for. She felt as if the world had tossed her on the scrap heap.

On the afternoon of the wedding set Molly dressed carefully, sucking in her stomach and tugging the dress down over it. When she let her breath out, she moaned aloud because the dress was stretched too tightly. She should have tried it on a couple of days ago, while there was still time to buy another. But there was nothing she could do about that now. She slipped the jacket on and it looked marginally better – but it'd look frumpy and wrong against Tasha's outfit, she knew.

When she put the hat on, she realized she'd made an even bigger mistake. The hat was huge, fussy and more suited to an English lady in Edwardian times than a modern woman. It was pretty in itself, but it did nothing for her. She tried it several different ways, but couldn't get it to flatter her. Should she leave it at home? No, her hair had been messed up by it now. She wished she had nice bouncy hair, instead of straight fine hair with built-in flop.

Last week set Rachel had decided she would be getting ready at her father's house, so that Tasha could help her with her make-up. It seemed you had to be specially made-up for weddings these days, though with a complexion as good as her daughter's, Molly wondered why she needed so much make-up.

Molly and her son were going to the church in a taxi. She tried not to mind too much about being left out of the preparations, and tried not to mind having a taxi instead of a limo, like the rest of the family. But she did mind. She should have ordered a limo for herself and Brian, only she had to be careful about money nowadays.

*Oh, stop it!* she told herself crossly. *Stop moaning. You've done nothing but moan for days, Molly Peel. Just get the wedding over, then get a life.*

'Right,' she told her reflection and squared her shoulders. 'I will.'

Brian yelled along the corridor. 'Geneva just rang. She wants me to ride to the wedding with her in the limo. Do you mind, Mum? After all, the taxi is booked. You'll just have to sit in it like a queen and be swooshed away to the church.'

He didn't wait for an answer – he never did these days – but rushed out of the house.

Molly looked away from the mirror and picked up the tiny bag that matched her outfit. Rachel had begged her not to take her roomy shoulder bag today and had helped her choose this silly thing.

Standing by the front door, she waited for the taxi. It was late. Five times she glanced at her watch, which equated to four minutes.

Ten minutes passed. She was getting seriously worried now.

Just as she was about to ring the taxi firm, a vehicle with a sign on top turned into the drive. With a sigh of relief, she locked the house door and got into the back seat.

'Meesis Taylor? St Jude church?' the driver asked in strongly accented English.

'Yes. Can you hurry, please? I don't want to be late.'

He set off as if he was fleeing from justice, screeching round corners and exceeding the speed limit whenever he could. But inevitably the traffic got heavier as they reached the town centre. People were starting to go home from work. Five o'clock was a stupid time to hold a wedding.

As the minutes ticked relentlessly past, Molly kept glancing at her watch.

It happened so quickly, she didn't even see the other car approaching, but she felt the impact as it slammed into the side of her taxi. In spite of the seat belt, she bumped her head hard against the side of the car, and she really did see stars for a moment or two.

The taxi driver began to swear and tried to get out to check the damage, but his door wouldn't open.

A crowd gathered and someone yelled that they'd called the police.

With the aid of a passer-by, Molly managed to unfasten her seat belt and get her door open. As she climbed out, she had to clutch the stranger because she felt dizzy, couldn't seem to focus properly.

The driver of the other car was holding a handkerchief to his bleeding forehead. The taxi

driver was yelling at him in a language Molly didn't recognize and gesticulating wildly.

As the argument continued, all she could think of was her daughter waiting at the church. She suddenly lost patience and yelled, 'Never mind that, I have to get to a wedding!'

They both turned towards her looking surprised.

'My daughter's getting married in five minutes time. *Five minutes!* I'm going to be late.'

Just then a police car drew up and two officers got out.

Molly went across to the female officer. 'I'm the passenger and—'

'We need to speak to the driver first.'

'I'm going to be late for my only daughter's wedding.'

That got the woman officer's attention. 'Tough luck. Hey, John, can we take down this lady's details first and let her go? Her daughter's getting married today. What time at?'

Molly glanced at her watch and sobbed. 'In three minutes' time.'

'You'll never make it.'

They took her name and address, while the driver summoned another taxi by radio, but more precious minutes were ticking past. The new taxi wove in and out of traffic jams and Molly tried in vain to ring her husband, then her son, to let them know what had happened. But of course their mobiles were switched off. She could only hope they'd delay the wedding till she arrived.

She crept into the back of the church in time to hear the words, 'I now pronounce you man and wife.'

She could only stand at the rear, tears streaming down her cheeks and watch as her daughter and son-in-law went off to sign the register.

Craig turned round, saw her and slipped out of the pew. 'Where the hell have you been? Brian said you were ready ages ago.'

'The taxi was involved in an accident.'

‘Only you could manage to miss your daughter’s wedding. Rachel was extremely upset.’

‘We were in an *accident*, and no, I’m not badly injured, thank you for asking, just a few bruises.’

‘It certainly didn’t affect your mouth.’

‘You could have waited for me.’

‘We did. We waited ten minutes. Rachel was nearly in hysterics. In the end, it was either cancel the wedding ceremony or get on with it. There are other weddings planned for today, you know. Those people waiting outside aren’t *our* guests. Anyway, never mind that. You’d better move to the front, so that Rachel can see you’re here.’

He grasped her arm and tugged her forward. ‘And straighten your hat. The brim’s bent. You look a mess. As usual.’

She jerked away from his hand. ‘I told you not to touch me – ever again.’

‘Don’t be such a bloody drama queen.’

Head held high, she walked to the front of the church and slid into the second pew next to her son.

Brian scowled at her. ‘What the hell happened to you? Rachel’s really upset.’

Molly was too busy fighting back sobs to answer him.

When the newly-weds came out of the door at the side of the church and began to walk down the aisle, they stopped for a moment next to her.

‘I will never, ever forgive you for this!’ Rachel hissed, not letting her smile slip. Then she moved on without allowing her mother to explain.

At the reception, pride alone kept a smile on Molly’s face. Well, she hoped it was a smile. She explained several times about the taxi accident, and only a cousin of her ex showed any real sympathy.



‘Why didn’t they take you with them in the limo?’ Sally asked, then gave her a quick hug. ‘Stupid question. Because Madam didn’t want you.’ She cast a sour look at Tasha, who was queening it as if she was the mother of the bride.

Molly didn’t trust her voice and could only hug Sally back.

‘Craig always was a selfish bastard, even when we were children. I think you’re well rid of him, actually. Not a man to grow old with, my dear cousin. Oh look, we have to sit down now. Look, if you get fed up of talking to *them*, come and chat to me once the meal’s over. Pete’s working off shore, so I’m here on my own.’

That kindness nearly destroyed Molly’s self-control, and it took her a minute of deep breathing before she could carry on round the room to the top table, where she’d been ousted from her rightful place by Tasha. She hesitated for a moment or two, feeling slightly nauseous and seriously considering going home. When she found her place, not the place the mother of the bride should be in, she shot a reproachful glance at Rachel, but her daughter gave a slight shrug and turned away.

There were all sorts of stray relatives scattered around the room to remember for ever if she fell apart at the wedding, so Molly kept it together. Just.

After an hour of sitting in stiff silence at the end of the table, ignored by her son who was in the next seat and had eyes only for Geneva, she excused herself and went to the restroom. Her head was thumping and she felt dreadful. If she’d had her proper handbag she’d have had aspirins, but she only had this ridiculous little blue thing, which barely fitted tissues, money, her house key and a comb.

She stayed in the cubicle for ten minutes, feeling sick and dizzy. But she couldn’t stay there for ever so stood up. Just as she was about to open the door, two women came in.

‘Did you see the mother of the bride roll in late?’ one asked. ‘She looked as if she’d been drinking to me.’

‘Tasha told me Craig’s ex was putting on weight. The woman must be at least a size sixteen. Talk about porky.’

As they tittered, Molly let her hand fall from the latch and stood absolutely motionless.

‘No wonder he left her. The wonder is a man like him stayed with her for so long.’

‘He’s still good looking, isn’t he, though he must be going on for fifty . . . ?’

They left and Molly crept out of the cubicle, staring at herself in the mirror. Her face was chalk white, not rosy as usual. She felt so unsteady she had to lean against the wall after she’d washed her hands. As she opened the outer door, the room spun round her and if Sally hadn’t come in and caught her, she’d have fallen.

‘Are you all right, Molly love? I was worried about you. You’ve been gone quarter of an hour and you looked so pale.’

‘I do feel . . . a bit dizzy.’

‘Look at me.’ Sally, who was a nurse, stared into her eyes. ‘You might have concussion. Ouch, look at this bruise. Good thing it was hidden under your hair for the photos. You must have hit your head in the accident.’

‘I suppose. Can’t remember.’

‘I think I’d better take you to hospital.’

‘No.’ Molly clung to Sally’s arm. ‘Just call me a taxi. I’ll go home and lie down, take it easy.’ She wasn’t wanted here, anyway.

‘You shouldn’t be on your own. I’ll come with you.’

‘No. I’ll be all right, I promise you.’

‘Are you sure? Is there someone else you can call? You really shouldn’t be alone tonight.’

‘Oh, yes. I’ve got plenty of friends.’

‘I’d stay with you, but it’s a five-hour drive back to our part of Yorkshire. I’d not have come here at all today, but Mum made such a fuss about the family showing up to support Craig. Ha!

As if *he* needs our support. Look, I'll see you into a taxi, then go and tell your family what's happened.'

'No. Don't say anything. I don't want ... to spoil things for Rachel.'

'But what will she think if you're not there for the speeches?'

'The worst. She always does lately.'

Sally gave her a sudden hug. 'She'll grow up now she's married.'

Molly shook her head, wincing as it thumped with pain. The headache was getting worse by the minute and everything seemed a bit blurry. Suddenly she couldn't move, and everything went into slow motion as she started falling. She could do nothing about it but close her eyes and let the blackness swallow her up.

She woke in a strange bed and in spite of the curtains drawn around it, the light hurt her eyes so much she shut them again.

'What's your name?' someone asked.

She didn't want to speak but they asked her again, so she said, 'Molly.'

'Surname?'

'Taylor – no, Peel.'

'Aren't you sure?'

'Divorced. Keep forgetting.'

'What date is it today?'

'Look at the newspaper. I can never remember.' She opened her eyes again, squinting in the harsh flow of light, and found a young nurse staring at her anxiously. 'Where am I?'

'In hospital. You were brought in last night with concussion.'

Molly stared at her in shock. '*Last night?*'

'Yes. Just look at me, please. Oh good, you're focusing properly now.'

She realized she was wearing a short hospital gown, the sort that fastened down the back and made you feel horribly vulnerable. ‘My glasses.’

‘They’re here.’ The nurse opened the drawer next to the bed and passed her her spectacles.

With a sigh of relief, Molly put them on and the world became clearer. ‘I want to go home.’

‘You can’t leave till the doctor’s checked you out. Is there someone who can fetch you and keep an eye on you for the rest of the day? A woman called Sally brought you in, but she said she didn’t live near here. She promised to tell your son and your ex, but I’m afraid no one’s phoned.’

As that information sank in, tears welled in Molly’s eyes. They couldn’t even be bothered to look after her, could they, her precious children? Well, Rachel had some excuse. She and Jamie would be away on their honeymoon now, but what about Brian? And Craig. Her ex could have called one of her friends. He could at least have done that.

But he hadn’t.

She’d never have gone away and left one of her family alone in hospital, without even a change of clothes to go home in. Well, she wasn’t going to beg for their help now. She sat up and pushed the covers back. ‘I need to use the bathroom.’

‘Perhaps a bed pan until—?’

With only curtains round the bed and other people nearby to hear her. ‘No way!’

‘OK. Let me help you. You’re in the end bed, so it’s quite close.’

‘Why am I in a public ward? I have private medical insurance.’

‘You didn’t have anything on you to show that.’

She remembered the stupid little handbag. She’d throw it away as soon as she got home. ‘Just ... stand outside the bathroom and let me see how I manage.’

‘Well, OK. You’re not sounding slurred.’

Molly closed the bathroom door, used the facilities, then stared at herself in the mirror, trying

to smooth her hair a bit. Bruised forehead, huge bruise on her arm, but her head felt clear. Very clear. Clearer than it had been for over a year.

She opened the door, holding the open-backed hospital gown together with one hand. 'I feel fine now, better by the minute, so I'm getting dressed and going home.'

'The doctor hasn't discharged you yet.'

Nearby someone moaned and asked for a bedpan.

Molly shuddered. 'If the doctor doesn't come quickly, I'm discharging myself.'

By the time she was dressed, they'd found a junior doctor, who looked dead on his feet. He shone a light in her eyes, watched her walk up and down the room and signed the release papers.

Her clothes were wrinkled and she looked a mess. She threw the hat in a rubbish bin near the hospital entrance. Then she called a taxi from the free phone near the entrance. At least she had some money in her handbag to pay for it.

When she got home, she saw that Brian's car was missing. That was unusual. Tasha didn't encourage him to stay overnight with Geneva.

The empty house seemed to echo around her, every sound she made magnified, in her head at least. She made a piece of toast, but couldn't force more than a few bites down. Shoving the plate aside, she went up to Brian's room. It was a mess, as usual, but she wasn't going to clear it up this time.

If Rachel had still been at home, she would have refused to clear up after her any longer, too. Jamie was welcome to the perpetual mess.

She rang Brian's mobile, but got no answer. Where was he?

'What's the point?' she asked the empty house. 'Why did I have children at all? Rachel believes the worst and won't listen to me, and Brian doesn't give a stuff about me, except when he needs an unpaid servant.'

Anger welled up so strongly she had to do something, anything rather than sit around talking

to herself and waiting for her son to return. Why should she wait for him anyway? He'd not waited for her, or come to visit her in hospital.

Suddenly she knew exactly what she was going to do.

In Wiltshire stet Euan Santiago picked up the phone because his secretary hadn't arrived yet.

'Yes? Ah, Becky. How are things in the IT world?'

'Your new website's finished. It's ready to go live as soon as you've checked it all out.'

'Great. I'll get on to that straight away. The sooner it's out there, the better. I've got a few sales brewing by word of mouth, but I want to start selling in earnest now that we've got six finished houses ready to show people. I'll get back to you by noon at the latest, then, if there are no glitches, you can put the site up on line.'

As he put the phone down, there was the sound of an outer door opening. He strode out into the reception area, having trouble keeping his voice calm. 'You're late again, Penny.'

She looked at him resentfully. 'The traffic was bad.'

'That's what you always say.'

'Well, Swindon's famous for it.'

'Then set off earlier or come here by another route.' He bit back more sharp words. After years of Miss Buttermere being in charge of his office, and having a larger staff at his disposal, he was finding it hard to put up with such inefficient help. But he'd set himself this business challenge and he was going to make it work, whatever it took. Unfortunately, Avril Buttermere couldn't be coaxed out of retirement at any price and he didn't want to be without a secretary, even an inefficient one, not at this crucial time.

Avril still lived nearby and always waved cheerfully if he passed her in the car. When they met in the village, she stopped to chat, sounding to be involved in a dozen community activities already. Lucky them to have her help! She was the most capable organizer he'd ever met.

‘I’ll be checking out the new website this morning,’ he told Penny. ‘Cancel my first appointment and fit it in another time. I don’t want interrupting unless it’s important.’

He got the new website up on the screen. It looked very attractive. ‘Marlbury Golf Club and Leisure Village,’ it announced at the top in gold lettering on a teal blue background. Below that, it showed the architect’s concept sketch for the whole development, with the golf course in the background.

The golf course had been there for years, of course, but the leisure village was his own idea. He’d bought the golf course and adjoining land, and set out to make his long-time dream come true without impinging on his other business interests. That had left him a little tight for money, but he was determined to cope. He didn’t want any backers who might interfere with his plans. Fortunately, he’d leased the hotel and golf course to someone else, so that left him free to do what he wanted with the development.

This time he wasn’t building cramped little flats someone else had commissioned and trying to cram too many into the space, or office buildings that looked like a stack of crates. He was attempting to create a community, somewhere people would enjoy living – somewhere *he* would enjoy living.

He’d spotted a niche market – he was pretty certain about that – and was offering people second homes, suitable for expats or people who wanted to spend part of their time in England. Lodges was the official term for these wooden houses, but he always thought of them as homes. He was going to move here himself shortly and just keep a small flat in London.

His present house was far too big for one person. Once he’d got over his wife’s death, as much as you ever did when you’d loved someone, he’d bought a new house, thinking – hoping even! – that he might end up marrying again one day. Karen would have wanted that. Now that his sons had completely left home, he didn’t like living alone

He’d spent several months in one relationship, but it hadn’t lasted, not because of quarrels or

infidelity, but simply because he didn't want any more children and it turned out she was aching for a child. He wished her well, but the thought of raising more young children didn't appeal to him at all.

Euan didn't see much of his sons at the moment. Jason was working in Newcastle upon Tyne and Grant had set off to see the world as soon as he'd obtained his degree. Jason had done the same thing, and you couldn't help worrying about their safety while they were overseas. But you couldn't hold them back.

Forcing himself to concentrate, Euan clicked on every link he could find on the new website, moving from the artist's concept sketches of the finished development, to computer images of larger detached dwellings, to a photograph of the first group of six finished lodges, painted in a dark blue-grey with white window frames and doors.

The house plans came up clearly, but he didn't linger on them because he knew them by heart. He wasn't an architect, but the houses were basically his design and he'd put a lot of thought into them. The architect who'd checked them out for him had congratulated him on their workability.

Two hours later he smiled at the screen. Perfect. Not a single link that didn't work. Becky was a talented woman, young as she was. She'd worked hard on this, knowing it would be a feather in her cap and could bring other major business her way. He had her on retainer for regular tech support and maintenance, which would give her a steady part-time wage.

When he went out into the reception area, he found it unoccupied. Frowning, he went to the corner and saw Penny standing further down the corridor next to the automatic food dispenser, which sold rubbish snacks for people staying at the hotel. He made a mental note to do something about that tendency of hers to wander off, but couldn't just sack her without a better excuse.

She was making eyes at one of the waiters, her whole face animated as it never was in the



office. He frowned. She was in a steady relationship, talked a lot about her partner, so shouldn't be flirting like that. Not in his book, anyway.

Euan didn't draw attention to himself, but watched for a few moments then went back inside the office, keeping an eye on the time.

Ten minutes later she came back just as he was answering a call at her desk. He looked at his watch and finished the call, then stared at her until she wriggled uncomfortably.

He'd hired Penny because she had all the necessary qualifications on paper and seemed enthusiastic, but it was clear now that she was a better actress than secretary. He needed to find someone else – and quickly.

He rang Becky and congratulated her on the website. 'Every link that I could find works. We can go live now.'

'Do you have sales staff ready to go.'

'I'll handle that myself for the moment. Thank you, Becky. You did a great job. Send me your bill, then we'll go on to the monthly maintenance budget we discussed. And if you want to use me as a reference, don't hesitate.'

She couldn't hold back a few squeaks of joy and he smiled. He loved the enthusiasm of young people setting out to make a life.

Putting the phone down, he wondered what to do next. He fiddled with some papers. He really ought to get into these accounts. But he couldn't settle, which wasn't like him.

Since there was half an hour before his next appointment, he went out to stroll round the leisure village – well, what would be the village one day. The roads for the first stage were there, and the lamp posts, plus a great deal of cleared land where grass and wild plants were already growing back. He'd miss the wild flowers once the development was finished; hoped he could keep some growing in the nature patches; hoped the people who bought his houses would like that and not want billiard green lawns everywhere.

Wooden-framed houses went up quickly once you started building, but the group of six looked lonely at the moment. It was all happening so much more slowly than he'd expected. Maybe he should hire more admin staff. No, he'd set himself to managing this project himself, so that he didn't lose touch with the grass roots.

If he did it right, this project would come in at a good profit – as well as giving him a sense of pride in his creation, which the more lucrative office blocks never could.

On the way back to the admin suite, he stopped to watch two men playing the sixth hole, his hands twitching to pick up a golf club. He could play better than they were doing standing on his head. And he *would* once he'd got the village on its feet. He sometimes managed nine holes, but couldn't remember the last time he'd had a whole afternoon free to play for pleasure.

The office closed around him like a stifling blanket. He gave a wry smile. He infinitely preferred being outdoors. Was he stupid to take this on single-handed? No.

He'd been growing stale, had needed to move on, make changes.