

# 1

Ella picked up the mail from the post office box, muttering in annoyance when she saw how battered and torn the largest envelope was. Whoever had sent it should have used more secure packaging.

It was addressed to her husband and Miles really hated anyone to open his mail, even circulars. She'd found that out the hard way early in their marriage when she accidentally opened one of his letters. It had been their first quarrel—but not their last.

As she walked out of the post office, a youth running past bumped into her and knocked the letters flying. Before she could pick them up a policewoman chasing the lad trampled on them. Ella was pleased to see a passer-by trip up the fugitive and end the chase.

The torn envelope had burst open and its contents were jumbled up with the other mail, some pages marked by a dirty footprint. As she sat in the car, smoothing out a crumpled letter, the words on it jumped out at her:

*With regard to finalising the sale of Willowbrook . . .*

She couldn't move for a moment, so shocked was she, then she read the letter carefully, close to tears at what it revealed. Miles was trying to sell the home that had been in her family for centuries, and without telling her! When had he shown these people round? Oh, yes. Two months ago he'd insisted she and Amy spend a weekend at the seaside while he went away on a business trip. It could only have been then.

She'd been touched by his thoughtfulness, only he'd been lying to her, tricking her!

By the time she'd finished reading, blazing anger had taken over from the urge to weep. She'd learned to control her temper years ago, so she breathed deeply and did nothing till she was calm enough to think straight. That took a while.

She and Miles hadn't been getting on for some time, didn't even share a bedroom any more, but she'd hung on to the tatters of their marriage for their daughter Amy's sake—and with a vague hope that things might improve. And he could be charming when he wanted, even now. But Ella had never thought he'd try to cheat her. Had he forged her signature? What did 'finalising the sale' mean? They couldn't do that without her, surely? Willowbrook was hers alone. She'd owned it before they married and made sure it would say hers legally.

At first Miles had pretended to love the country lifestyle, but he'd gradually grown weary of commuting and had suggested she sell the farm and invest the money. She'd refused, of course she had, because the farm wasn't hers to sell. It had been in her family for several generations and she regarded it as a sacred trust. She was merely the person who looked after it in this generation of Turners, as her daughter Amy would in the next.

She shook her head in bafflement. *How could Miles expect to get away with this?* Perhaps he thought she'd change her mind if he presented her with a good enough offer. He was always optimistic about his own powers of persuasion—and about the power of money. It was what made him a good salesman and ideas man—well, ideas that might make money, he wasn't interested in any other sort.

In the end there was only one thing to do. She went to see the lawyer who'd dealt with her family's business until—stupidly, in the first flush of love!—she'd let Miles persuade her to move her affairs into the hands of his London lawyer and leave things to him. At least she'd never signed anything without reading it, even if that had caused more quarrels. She wasn't that stupid. Not quite.

Grimly she started the car and drove to the other end of the village, parking outside the old-fashioned 'rooms' where the Hannows had done business for as many generations as the Turners had farmed at Willowbrook.

Arthur Hannow came out of his office, walking stiffly but still escorting a client to the door with his usual old-fashioned courtesy. Then he turned to her with a beaming smile. 'Ella, my dear girl, how delightful to see you again!'

She tried to smile back, couldn't, and saw his eyes narrow. He might look like everyone's favourite grandfather, but he was as shrewd as they came. She let him usher her into his cosy office overlooking the main street of the village and sighed as she sank down on the worn oxblood leather armchair.

'Something's clearly wrong, Ella. Can I help?'

'I hope so. Will you take me back as a client, me and not my husband?'

'Yes, of course.'

She explained to him what Miles was trying to do and by the time she finished, she was in tears again. She couldn't take the end of her marriage lightly.

Mr Hannow pushed a box of tissues towards her and waited quietly until she'd stopped crying. 'I'll have to ask my nephew to handle this, if it's all right with you, my dear.' He gave her a wry smile. 'I'll be seventy-five next month and it's more than time I retired.'

'I'm sorry you're leaving. You'll be greatly missed. I didn't know you had a nephew working with you.'

'Ian's only been with us for a few months. He's young but he's smart. He's been in London for a few years gaining wider experience. You'll be safe in his hands.'

Ian Hannow joined them, a slimmer, younger version of his uncle, mousy hair already thinning, but with the same gentle smile. 'Young fellow' was a misnomer. He must have

been at least forty, ten years older than her.

‘I’m happy to help you, Mrs Parnell.’

‘It’s Ms Turner from now on. I’m resuming my maiden name.’

‘What exactly do you want to do about this?’

She sighed. ‘For Amy’s sake I’d rather settle everything quietly. Miles is still her father, after all. I just want him to leave Willowbrook and not come back.’

‘Do you hold the property as joint tenants?’

‘No, it’s mine alone. I inherited it from my father before I even met Miles.’

Old Mr Hallow leaned forward. ‘We drew up a list of property and possessions before Ella married and he signed it.’

Ian nodded slowly and thoughtfully. ‘Good. And you never authorised your husband to sell Willowbrook, or gave him the impression you might be interested in considering selling, Ms Turner?’

‘Please call me Ella. And I definitely didn’t authorise Miles to sell the property, though he’s suggested it a few times. It was one of the things we quarrelled about. It might not be a legal trust but it’s a sacred trust, which is why my father left Willowbrook to me, not my mother.’ She frowned and added, ‘Miles put money into the tourist chalets we’ve built at Willowbrook. I can’t pay that back now, obviously, so we’ll have to come to some arrangement about it.’

‘Very well. We can’t keep these papers, of course. You should send them back to your husband, including the torn envelope with the sticker “damaged on receipt”, explaining how they came to be opened.’

‘I’ll send them via his London lawyers.’ And she’d make photocopies of the papers first. But she didn’t say that.

Ian cleared his throat, looking suddenly very wooden-faced. ‘You’re not still—um,

sharing a bed?’

‘No, we’ve haven’t been for a while. Miles comes down every second or third weekend, but he has a service flat in London. He said he was sleeping badly, didn’t want to disturb me. We both knew it was a lie, but there was Amy to think of. Now . . . Well, I’d like to get a divorce as soon as I can.’

‘I see.’

She shrugged. The anger was subsiding, her main emotion sadness that it should come to this—and to her surprise, she felt deeply relieved to be done with the pretence. Miles’s visits over the past few months had been full of arguments and bristling silences. Even four-year-old Amy had noticed that and no longer hurried to meet her father or show him things.

Ella would never forgive Miles for this. Never! He wasn’t just trying to steal the inheritance from her, but from his own daughter. She was quite sure he’d have been getting a huge kickback from any sale of Willowbrook. He’d not have bothered to arrange it otherwise.

The thought of all the lies he’d told recently made her feel physically sick. She’d seen him use his charm on others, hadn’t realised at first that he was using it on her too, that there was nothing behind his endearments.

She looked at her watch. ‘It’s time to pick Amy up from my cousin’s. Is there anything else we need to do now?’

‘We’ll need to have an in-depth discussion about the details of the divorce—and the money your husband invested in Willowbrook. Perhaps you could make an appointment to do that?’

After she’d said goodbye to old Mr Hannow, Ian escorted her to the door in the same way his uncle did. That was comforting. A small continuity in a changing world.

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A couple of weeks later Ella heard a car drive up to the farm and come round towards the rear. Putting down the potato she was peeling, she went to peep out of the window at Amy, who was playing with the dog. When the car came into view, Ella exclaimed, 'Oh, no!' She wasn't ready for this confrontation.

Miles parked and walked towards the back door. He waved to the child, who had turned towards him, a hopeful smile on her face, but he didn't stop to speak. The dog had stiffened into an alert, watchful stance. Porgy had never accepted Miles, nor had her husband liked having a dog around.

It hurt Ella to see Amy's face crumple with disappointment as her father walked briskly past. What would it have cost him to stop and say a few words to his daughter?

He came into the huge kitchen without knocking, smiling as if nothing was wrong. 'Hi.'

She folded her arms and glared at him, waiting.

He cocked one eye at her questioningly. 'Surely we can talk about this in a calm, adult way?'

'I'm past the talking stage. Just take the rest of your things and get out! And don't ever come here again. I want a divorce.'

He studied her and sighed. 'Very well. But we should make this divorce amicable, for Amy's sake, don't you think? How about a coffee? It's a long drive from London.'

'I'd not give you a drink of water if you were dying of thirst.'

'Dear me. How melodramatic!' His smile didn't falter, but his eyes were cold and watchful. 'You always were rash, Ella. Typical redhead. That temper of yours will be your undoing one day.'

'How could you possibly think I'd sell Willowbrook?'

‘I thought when you found out how much they were offering, you’d see reason. We could have made a fortune.’ He looked out of the window towards the six holiday chalets they were building as the first stage of a venture into tourism. ‘I started those chalets to tempt buyers to the farm and they’ve done that. If you read those papers you opened—’

‘I did *not* open them!’

‘However you came by the information, you’ll know what a big fish we had on the hook, Skara Holdings was offering enough to set you and Amy up in comfort for the rest of your lives, even after I’d taken my spotter’s share. Look at that!’ He gestured to the view. ‘A private lake, woods, land zoned for agriculture that can’t be built on. It’s perfect for a major tourist development.’

‘We had trouble getting even limited development permission from the Council.’

‘But those chalets got our foot in the door, planning-wise. That’s how it’s done these days, create a precedent. It wouldn’t be hard to push the Council for more if someone went about it the right way. As it is, you’re going to be left in the mire, Ella, my pet. How are you going to finish the chalets without my money? I’m definitely not paying for something which won’t benefit me.’

She’d been worrying about that. ‘None of your business now. I’ll manage.’

‘You’re being stupid as well as stubborn. What about Amy? She’s only going to get worse. Wouldn’t a disabled child be better facing life with money behind her? She may never be able to work and—’

‘How many times do I have to tell you there’s nothing wrong with Amy’s brain? Her problem is physical and children like her are usually smarter than average, so she’ll be able to do a desk job as well as anyone else, probably better than most. And if by the time she grows up, she’s using a wheelchair to get around—which isn’t always necessary for people with her problem, remember—well, the world is used to people with

disabilities and technology is getting better at helping them all the time.'

She clamped her lips together. It was no use talking to him about their daughter. The minute they'd found out that Amy had spinal muscular atrophy, in her case the milder version known as SMA3, Miles had withdrawn mentally and physically, not only from their daughter but from Ella as well. And yet, the defect only showed up if both parents were carriers, so why he always blamed her for it, she didn't understand.

Actually, she did understand. She'd come to realise that he never admitted being in the wrong, always found someone else to blame. It was part of the way he dealt with every aspect of life.

'The child would get help more easily, if you had money,' he said slowly and with heavy scorn, as if speaking to someone stupid. 'You do realise my medical insurance will no longer cover you from now on?'

'You'll cut Amy off it too? I was hoping . . .' Ella bit back further words, annoyed at having betrayed her feelings.

'Now that *you* have ruined this project, I'm damned if I'm helping you in any way. You've not only turned down a good offer—you always were stupid financially—you've lost me a top job with the same company. It'll be a while before certain people have confidence in me after this fiasco.'

'So why did you waste petrol money coming down here?'

'Haven't you been listening? *We need—to reach an agreement—about the chalets.* You and I, not some damned lawyers. *I* borrowed the money to build them, so I could still close you down and force a sale if I demanded repayment.'

'And if you did that, I'd tell Skara Holdings you were trying to sell my house without my permission, which would further damage your reputation in that wonderful business world you inhabit.'

The look he gave her was briefly vicious but was quickly replaced by a cool expression. 'You won't do that, though. For our dear daughter's sake. Anyway, I'm not going to foreclose. I'll treat it as an investment and let the money you owe me stand for the moment, for Amy's sake—I do care for my child, whatever you believe. But you'll need to buy me out one day—and not in twenty years' time, either. Let's agree that you'll pay me back within five years—with annual interest at current mortgage rates? What could be fairer?' He looked at her questioningly.

'Ten years would be better.'

'I'm not a bloody philanthropist. And what's more, I'm not paying maintenance for Amy as well as losing the chance to use my own money. Is it a deal or not?'

'Probably.' She'd manage somehow, pay Miles back, do whatever it took. She didn't intend to be the Turner who lost Willowbrook, even though she was the first not to farm it. She'd no interest in raising beef cattle and had leased the fields out after her father died, keeping only the land around the lake. Her mother had moved back to Lancashire to be near her elderly parents and was now remarried, to a great guy.

Miles smirked at Ella and she pulled her attention back to the present.

'You'll have to get the chalets up and running without my help.' He reached into his inside pocket. 'I've drawn up an agreement. If you could just sign it and—'

'Send it to my lawyer.'

'I thought we were going to keep this between ourselves. It's all perfectly straightforward, just read it.'

'I'm signing nothing without Ian Hallow's say-so. I trust him; I don't trust you.' She gestured towards the door. 'If that's all, we'll say goodbye. Don't come back here again, Miles. You can make any further arrangements through my lawyer. If you want access to Amy, he'll arrange that too.'

He shoved his hands in his pockets. 'I might have known you'd go back to the Hannows. They're as stick-in-the-mud as you are. Right, then. I'll go up and pack my things, then I'm off.'

He was out of the kitchen and up the stairs before she could stop him.

She followed him up. 'Your clothes are no longer here; they're packed and waiting for you out in the barn.' She hadn't been able to face sharing a wardrobe for one hour longer with his precisely arranged row of designer jeans and trousers, expensive shirts and tops.

'You don't mind if I check that you've got everything?' He moved towards the wardrobe and stared inside, then opened the drawers that had been his one by one. 'You were very thorough, weren't you?'

'It was a labour of love.'

Before he went downstairs he flicked a scornful finger towards her jewellery box. 'You should put that away. It's stupid leaving it in full view. Any burglar would go straight to it. As I said, you have no financial sense.'

She shrugged and followed him downstairs.

He looked at Amy. 'I'm leaving now. Be a good girl.'

But he didn't touch the child or even wait for her answer, simply moved on across the yard to the structure they still called the barn, though it stood empty now, housing only her car and a few old farm tools. She gestured to the pile of rubbish bin bags to one side. 'There you are. Every single thing that belongs to you. I doubt anything's missing, but if it is, tell me and I'll send it on.'

'You realise I'll need to have them all ironed after they've been stuffed into those bags and dumped out here.'

She shrugged. Whether his suits and shirts would need ironing had been the last

thing on her mind. He dressed well, she had to give him that. No woman took more care with her appearance than he did.

For a moment he continued to glare at her, then he picked up a couple of the bags and carried them out to his car.

In the yard, Amy took a few uncertain steps towards him, the rolling gait caused by her weak lower spinal muscles very marked. He didn't even slow down as he walked to and fro, just said, 'I'm busy, Amy.'

Ella put her arm round her daughter. 'Let's go into the house, love. Your father's in a hurry to leave.'

Inside, she went round bolting all the external doors so that he couldn't come back in. She'd have the house locks changed tomorrow. Well, the house locks, anyway. The barn locks were centuries old and would have to stay, but she didn't think he had keys to them. Why would he? After his first tour of the group of outbuildings, he'd hardly ever gone inside again.

'Why is Daddy so angry?'

'Because he's not going to live with us any more.'

Amy frowned. 'Never?'

'Never.'

'Nessa's old daddy went away. It's called a divorce. Are we going to have a divorce?'

So much for breaking the news gently! 'Yes.'

'Nessa's going to have a new daddy soon. Are we going to get a new daddy?'

Ella shuddered at the thought. She was done with men. 'No. There'll just be you and me.' She hugged the child and settled her with a glass of milk and a biscuit, keeping an eye on the barn through the kitchen window, watching Miles load his possessions into his car. When he'd finished he stood for a minute or two, studying the jumble of

outbuildings, turning slowly round in a circle, staring for a few minutes at the picturesque eighteenth century farmhouse then staring at the line of willow trees along one side, where the stream ran into the lake.

Taking out a camera, he snapped a few photos then climbed on a nearby wall and turned his attention to the chalets. The outsides were fully clad in timber now, waiting for the insides to be finished, and the buildings looked pretty, even without being painted.

That raised her suspicions again. She could only suppose he'd not given up hope of making money from Willowbrook. *Well, I'm not going to sell it, whatever you do!* she thought as he put the camera back into his briefcase. *You'll get nothing from knowing this place exists.*

It was a relief when he got into the car and drove away, but sounds carried clearly in the still air and she heard the car stop again on the other side of the house. She ran upstairs and watched him get out of the vehicle near the end of the long dirt drive. Once again he took photos.

Surely he didn't think he could still get his hands on the farm?

She'd see him in hell first.

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After lunch the next day, Ella went up to the bedroom to change out of her old jeans ready for her trip into the village to see Ian Hallow and discuss the divorce plus Miles's suggested financial agreement.

Sitting down at the dressing table she tidied her hair then opened her jewellery box. Tears came into her eyes as she took out three eighteenth-century pieces she knew to be valuable. They were family heirlooms, but she'd have to sell them now to finish fitting out the chalets. Perhaps Ian would be able to advise her on how best to do that.

'Georgina's set' was named after the jewels' original owner. The small gold brooch was in the form of a circle bridged by a bar studded with pearls and it was one of her favourite pieces. She held it up against herself one final time, admiring it in the mirror, then put it resolutely into the padded bag, together with the matching necklace and bracelet.

She couldn't afford to get sentimental. Keeping Willowbrook was more important than keeping the jewels and anyway, there were still one or two other pieces of jewellery left, so she could at least pass on part of the family inheritance to Amy.

Closing the drawers, she locked them carefully, something she didn't usually bother doing, then studied the battered old box, which held her last objects of real value.

Perhaps Miles was right, about this at least, and it wasn't safe to leave the box on her dressing table. She hadn't bothered much about security before, because she was two miles out of the village and could see or hear if anyone drove up the track to the house.

But now . . . She couldn't be too careful of what few treasures she had left.

So she put the box in the safest place she knew. The old house could still keep its secrets, she thought with a smile as she went back downstairs afterwards.

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Ten days later, having sold Georgina's set with Ian Hannow's help, Ella went into the village to look at paint colours for the inside of the first three chalets. She'd thought about it a lot and had decided not to press for maintenance because it might push Miles into demanding his money back. Anyway, Amy was hers, had always been hers and she didn't want Miles to have any reason for interfering in how she brought the child up.

Ian had tried very hard to change her mind about that, but she'd stuck to her guns. She wanted Miles to leave his money invested in Willowbrook.

It's take all the money from the sale of Georgina's jewels to finish the chalets. She'd

got slightly less money than she'd expected, but if she managed it carefully, it would be enough. She was considering giving each chalet a colour theme, so in the end she left the shop with a handful of sample colour cards. She'd get her cousin to come over and help her decide. Rose was the artistic one of the family. They'd grown up together, been inseparable till her cousin went away to art college, were still close friends.

When Ella got back to Willowbrook there was no sign of Porgy and she noticed the broken kitchen window straight away. Instantly on the alert, she told Amy to stay in the car and locked it after she got out.

From the barn came the sound of hysterical barking. Porgy. She ran over there first. As she opened the door, he came out growling and sniffing the ground, but he didn't run round as usual. In fact, he was walking gingerly as if it hurt him to move. When he stopped beside her she saw that he had a cut over one eye. The blood was matted, so it must have happened some time ago.

Picking up a piece of wood for protection, she gestured to Amy to stay where she was and went inside the house, with Porgy limping along behind her. She stood listening carefully but even without the dog she could sense that whoever had broken in had left. She'd always been able to sense whether a building was empty or not, had been surprised as a child to find that others didn't have the same ability.

She went out to fetch her daughter, keeping watch for anyone coming out of the outbuildings, but again, she could sense no human presence, only feel the wind blowing her hair gently across her face and making the flowers bow their heads to her as she passed.

Together she and Amy inspected the house.

The intruder had trashed the sitting room, but hadn't stolen anything that she could see—well, her TV, sound system and computer were elderly, worth nothing. He'd

smashed them, though. Perhaps he'd been disappointed by the lack of valuables.

'Some bad people have been here,' Ella told her daughter by way of explanation.

'Why did they break our things?'

'I don't know. Some people are like that.' She led the way up the stairs, waiting for Amy's slower pace. Porgy didn't even try to come with them, just stood at the bottom, whining in his throat.

'Ooh, mummy! Look at that! The bad people have been in here too.'

Amy's drawers and toy cupboard had been emptied out, but a quick glance showed the toys hadn't been damaged.

Ella gave her a quick cuddle. 'I'm sorry about all this, darling, but I don't think anything's broken. Don't put them away until the police have seen the mess.'

'Can I pick up teddy?'

'Yes.'

Amy picked up the elderly teddy which had once been her mother's and was her favourite toy, cradling it against her. 'It's all right now, Teddy. I've got you safe.'

Ella looked towards the chalets from the bedroom window. Thank goodness the electricians were working there today. The chalets should be untouched, at least. 'Let's look in my bedroom now,' she said, speaking as cheerfully as she could manage.

The burglar had clearly concentrated his upstairs efforts on this room, trashing it thoroughly. It was as if he'd been searching for something. What?

'Don't cry, Mummy. I'll help you to put your things away afterwards.' Amy took hold of her hand.

Ella hadn't realised tears were running down her face until then, tears of relief as well as pain. Thank goodness she'd hidden her jewel box!

'Let's go downstairs and call the police.' She settled Amy and the dog in the kitchen,

then slipped back upstairs to check the hiding place, which her daughter was too young yet to be told about.

Her heart was thudding in her chest as she opened the panel, but the box was safe, its contents untouched. She leaned against the wall for a moment, shuddering in relief, then closed the panel again. The old house had indeed kept its secrets.

Why had the intruder concentrated on her bedroom, though? He couldn't have known about the jewellery, surely? In fact, why had anyone come to Willowbrook at all? Everyone in the neighbourhood knew she wasn't rich. All her spare money had been sunk into the tourist chalets and she couldn't even afford to finish all of them.

But perhaps someone passing by had seen the size of the house and assumed someone rich lived there. Who knew what made people break into others' homes and steal their possessions?

Picking up the phone she called the police, hesitated afterwards, then rang her cousin Rose. 'The farm's been broken into. Can you come round?' Her voice broke on the last word, try as she would to stay calm.

'Of course I can. Poor you. Did they take much?'

'There's not much of value to take, but they certainly made a mess.'

'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

Ella walked slowly down the stairs, as always getting a sense of—something or someone on the half landing. Today, she paused at the turn of the stairs, feeling comforted by that shadowy presence. It might sound foolish and certainly Miles had always laughed at her, saying the family ghosts were figments of her imagination. But she'd seen them since she was a tiny child, too young to know what ghosts were.

Her father had sensed them too. He'd told her the apparitions were real but nothing to be scared of, since they were members of the family who were still keeping an eye on

their old home. Her mother had downplayed this side of life at Willowbrook, saying *she* had never seen anything. But then, Mum was more into practical stuff—and she wasn't a Turner by birth.

Recently Amy had started talking about the lady in the long dress who came to say goodnight to her and sometimes about the man in funny clothes she'd seen on the stairs. Ella had had to try and explain what ghosts were. Not easy with a four-year-old. Since then Amy had taken to calling the main ghost *the Lady*, using a special tone of voice to say the words.

Ella looked round before she moved on down the stairs. The house was shabby, full of awkwardly shaped rooms, but she loved it, most especially this crooked set of stairs with a cupboard on the landing.

Miles had always said it was no wonder the heritage people weren't interested in listing the farm, it was such a shambles. She'd been surprised that they didn't want it, but Miles was right. The place was very run down and was indeed a mish-mash of styles.

At first he'd made a joke of its condition, but even those remarks had been enough to make her keep quiet about the secret places in both the house and outbuildings. Some of them were accidents, nooks and crannies created during the various waves of rebuilding and modernising that had taken place over the centuries. Others had definitely been put there on purpose, perhaps to hide people in the early days, as well as treasured possessions. The rooms and floors were so uneven you'd not notice that walls didn't match exactly unless you were shown or took extremely careful measurements.

To her, Willowbrook was beautiful, a rambling place perfect for raising a family. She'd always intended to have several children, but after producing one child with SMA3, Miles had been adamant about not having any others, even though they could have got tested to make sure it didn't happen again.

A vehicle drew up outside, an old van with a loud exhaust. She didn't have to see it to know who it was and ran out to her cousin. Rose, taller than her by three inches, swept her into a big hug, as if she understood Ella needed the comfort.

'Auntie Rose! Auntie Rose!'

Ella stepped aside to give Amy a turn at being hugged by the woman she called auntie, for lack of any actual aunts or uncles, then the two women went inside, slowing down automatically to keep pace with the slower-moving child.

'Porgy's very quiet today, not like himself at all,' Rose said. 'He didn't come running to meet me.'

'He's been hurt. I think they hit him with something. I'll have to take him to the vet's as soon as I can get away.'

'Once the police arrive, I'll do that for you. But I'll wait with you till then. There you are, you old scamp.' As they entered the kitchen Rose bent to caress the dog, who sighed and leaned against her.

'Thanks. I really need your support after this.' Ella gestured to the mess.

The police arrived half an hour later and soon afterwards Rose left with the dog.

The two officers examined the house carefully, but once it had been established that nothing had been taken, they put it all down to vandalism and asked if she'd upset anyone lately.

'Only my husband,' she said, intending it as a joke. 'We've just split up.'

'Could you give me his name and address, please, Ms Turner?'

'You're not taking that remark seriously? Miles would never—'

'People can do nasty things when marriages end. It won't hurt to check where he was when this happened.'

When they'd gone, she brewed a pot of tea and sat in the kitchen, trying to seem

cheerful for Amy's sake, but jumping at sudden noises, nerves on edge.

It couldn't be Miles. He wouldn't steal Amy's inheritance. He'd trick it out of them but not take it in a way that made him liable for imprisonment if caught. She was sure of that.

The police were probably right and it had been casual vandals looking for something to smash. It was just bad luck that they'd picked on her.

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After she left Willowbrook, Rose drove carefully along the narrow lane, worrying about her cousin, who had been looking strained for a while now, and no wonder. Ella was working inhumanly long hours to get Willowbrook's chalets up and running.

How she could have fallen for that—that *con man*, Rose had never understood. Oh, Miles Parnell was quite good-looking, but he'd never fooled her and he knew it. After he moved in, he'd not encouraged her to visit them at the farm.

She grinned. He'd never known how often she and Ella met in the village or at her house for a quick cup of coffee or just a chat. He hadn't realised how strong the bond was between them. They were more like sisters than cousins.

The van jolted in and out of a particularly bad rut and there was a whimper from the back.

'Soon be there, Porgy!' she called

The vet was new in town, young, giving her the glad eye until he started examining the dog, then becoming serious and forgetting her completely.

'I'd like to X-ray him. I think he's been kicked. He's probably got broken ribs.'

'Will it cost much?' She winced at the amount. 'Is it absolutely necessary to X-ray him? Much as we love the dog, neither my cousin nor I are exactly overflowing with money.'

He pursed his lips. 'Well, I'm pretty certain that's what's wrong. How did it happen?'

She explained about the break-in. 'What's the treatment for broken ribs?'

'Just rest, really, if they're not too badly damaged. He'll heal on his own.' He sighed.

'Look, I'll let you have the X-rays at cost. We really ought to check that there are no chips of bone, or other internal damage.'

'I'll pay for it then and we won't say anything to my cousin unless we have to.' She knew how short of money Ella was now. Paying would max out Rose's credit card and mean holding off buying a new exhaust system for a little longer, but she was getting good at wrapping that special tape round the hole in the tail pipe.

To her relief, Porgy only had a couple of fractures and the cut, which needed four stitches.

She hesitated, then seized the moment and told the new vet about one of her moneymaking ventures, taking him to see the small poster she'd put up, which was now partly obscured by other notices in the waiting room.

He grinned at the little sketches of the dog and cat on the notice. 'Do you get many clients?'

'Some. Enough to help keep the wolf from the door.'

'I must come and look at your paintings one day.'

She looked at his hopeful expression. She didn't want to upset him, but she didn't fancy him in the slightest. 'I'll bring some in to show you next time I'm passing. I do wildlife paintings as well. They're my favourite, really. Thanks.'

She took the dog back to Willowbrook and helped clear up the worst of the damage. She and Ella hugged wordlessly before she left. They didn't see as much of one another as they'd like because they were both working every minute they could manage, but they were always there for one another.

Back at her own cottage Rose worked for a while on her latest commission, a portrait of a fat and wheezy boxer dog, who looked particularly dopey to her in the photos. But you didn't say no to a cash offer. She'd done enough pet paintings to know she needed to make the poor old fellow prettier than he was, because that was how the owner saw him.

She'd tried realism the first time she did one of these paintings and smiled at the memory of the elderly corgi, whose owner had thrown a huff and refused to accept the painting until she'd 'shown the twinkle in Fluffy's eye'. The final result had been more like a cartoon, but it'd earned Rose some much-needed money.

She signed paintings like that *R. Marr*, shortening her surname, keeping her full name, Rose Marwood, for work she was proud of.

What she was really passionate about was painting the smaller wild animals of her native county, Wiltshire. Passionate! It was an obsession. She'd be the first to admit that. She made only the occasional sale from by-products of that, paintings that didn't quite meet her rigorous standards but were good enough to hang on walls. She left them on commission in two or three nearby galleries. She didn't even try to offer her other nature paintings for sale because she was working up a collection which she hoped to see published as an art/nature book. It had been a passion of hers for years and a few months ago had come between her and a guy she'd loved, because she wouldn't move away from Wiltshire and he had to. The thought of him still hurt and she'd not dated since.

Last year she'd spent what was to her a fortune on a special metal security box to keep the finished products in. The need for that was non-negotiable, like Ella's fire extinguishers at Willowbrook, which had cost her cousin a lot of money she could ill afford. Bottom line was: you didn't leave your most precious things vulnerable to fire and theft.

Rose smiled at the box and reached out to pat it. Her friends and regular customers at the pub had teased her about buying it. It had a secure lock and was supposed to be water and everything-proof, even capable of withstanding house fires for a certain length of time. It was almost the right size to hold her paintings and she'd added a wad of bubble plastic round the edges to stop the pieces of card moving around. She just hoped she never needed to put the maker's claims to the test.

Her timer rang and with a sigh she put away her painting equipment and got ready for her work in the pub, where she spent two or three nights a week behind the bar, and did casual waitressing, cleaning, whatever they needed.

That evening they offered her a few extra evenings' work behind the bar, as one of the other staff had had to rush north because of a death in the family. Rose took the work gratefully. Maybe now she'd be able to afford that exhaust system as well as the X-rays.

As for her personal life, she would concentrate on her painting. She was clearly not the sort to get married.

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It took Ella several days to remove all traces of the burglary, and it took several weeks for the insurance company to cough up the money for repairs and replacements of the things that had been smashed. She bought a new computer but waited to get a TV. She was too busy finishing the chalets to miss it and luckily, her daughter could always find something to play with, acting with her toys mainly, using her vivid imagination to dream up stories.

Ella was trying to get the chalets ready for occupation before the summer, sewing curtains, table runners and bedspreads in the evenings, doing the landscaping round each chalet in the daytime.

And since no one except herself knew about the farmhouse's secrets, she wrote a

letter on her new computer to leave at the lawyer's, in case anything happened to her before she told Amy about the hidden places.

She also appointed Rose guardian to Amy, knowing Miles wouldn't want to look after the child. She didn't even inform him about that, but she made sure the lawyer knew that he'd not asked for access, hadn't tried to visit his daughter or even ask about her.

Her lawyer tried several times to persuade her to ask Miles for maintenance but she shook her head stubbornly. He was letting her keep the money he'd invested and that would have to do, whatever Ian said. She didn't want any more hassles, knew Miles would argue over every penny, or maybe call in her debt.

Anyway, she wasn't afraid of hard work. She'd pay him back and keep Willowbrook for Amy—whatever it took.