

Chapter One

Sunday, 16th September

Pools of rain trickled down the limestone wall, licking its way over lichen and mosses, filling up crevices before spilling onto the mud, liquefying it further. It treated the usual and the unusual alike, rivulets coursing towards the barns, the cowshed, the door of the farmhouse, which stood ajar. Everything was damp and dripping, covered by a moving sheet of water which almost drowned an ant scurrying frantically to find its lost tribe. A slow worm slept in almost the one warm, dry place, between two stones, protected from the elements by an overhang; the Scarlet Pimpernel had closed her petals and the lichens and mosses flourished. Finally the ant was reunited with the rest of its kind and they marched in grim and narrow formation across the drab colours: the pale grey of the limestone, the sopping green of the moss. The only hint of colour was in the splashes of another, brighter hue, which had once been scarlet but

was now changed to blurred and watery flecks of rust-red. Specks of it spattered the wall, a larger patch on the ground mixing with the mud and something else that had once been human tissue. Brain tissue: thinking, loving, hating, knowing – finally fearing – brain tissue. A person’s personality, character and memories, now carelessly spilt over the ancient stones. It could think no more. As the batter of rain continued, the pattern changed, too, becoming less defined while the wall stood motionless and imperfect. For like a damaged row of teeth, something was missing, spoiling the line. The copestone was still near, lying at the foot of the wall, almost touching the still shape on the floor as the rain continued its rinsing of the scene.

About nine hundred miles away Joanna Piercy was lying on a striped velour beach towel that had been carefully laid over a wooden slatted sunlounger to keep the gravelly sand from sticking to her body. She was reading – or trying to read – a paperback while Matthew chattered and attempted to distract her. Finally, in desperation, he grabbed the book and held it aloft, like a trophy.

‘Matthew.’ Joanna made a vain attempt to snatch the book back. She was laughing. ‘This is so unfair.’ She put her hand out again to attempt recovery but Matthew was tall; his arms were long and he wasn’t going to give it back. He held it away from her, his face both merry and challenging.

‘Come on, Jo,’ he said, bending over her now,

grinning. ‘How can you possibly lie there reading when the sea is so inviting?’

She glanced over his shoulder at the sparkling water. He spoke the truth. The sea did look beautiful. Cool and clean and bright. She made another swipe at his hand – and missed again. ‘The book’s exciting,’ she protested. ‘The heroine has just been shot and I can’t bear—’

He stood up before her, tall, tanned and slim, hands on his hips, black swimming trunks, honey blond hair, bright green eyes and that wonderful eager, inviting expression. It was too much. She abandoned the idea of reading – for the next hour at least. Matthew was right. It was time to frolic.

She sat up, fastened the halter-neck strap of her bikini around her neck, peeled off her sunglasses and jumped to her feet. ‘I’ll race you,’ she said and before he had a chance to respond ran helter skelter down the beach, Matthew in hot pursuit.

They had finally given in to the terrible English ‘summer’ weather and escaped to Spain – Mojacar, in Almeria, the south east corner where both the Moorish influence and the sun were at their strongest.

Joanna felt happy. Ecstatically happy. She had felt like this from the moment she had stepped off the plane. After days and days of heavy skies and thunderous rain at home the Spanish sunshine had dazzled, the colours seeming almost too bright for her eyes. On that first afternoon she had squinted up at the bluest of skies, the whitest of walls, the

brilliant reds of the geraniums in their terracotta pots decorating the balconies, and felt as though a giant weight had rolled off her chest. All towns in England can seem dreary at times under leaden skies but the incessant rain in the Staffordshire town of Leek, the malicious floods that had drowned parts of the country and the persistently cold temperatures had seemed to leak her happiness away, making her disgruntled and irritable. Something her colleagues – particularly Korpanski – had both noticed and commented on. She'd felt a certain dissatisfaction with her life, feeling she was simply treading water as the years slipped by without really going anywhere. So when Matthew had suggested they take a break she had gladly agreed. They'd spent a fruitful hour on the Internet, hiring a small apartment near the town of Mojacar and a jeep for the duration. They had spent their days sunbathing, swimming in the sea and reading paperbacks and the evenings strolling hand in hand through shops and restaurants.

Like her, Matthew was in buoyant mood.

The sand here was coarse and gravelly and hot underfoot; the beach shelving steeply making the rollers high and powerful, their breaking over the beach providing the perfect background music. They ran straight into the waves, hardly pausing as the surf hit their knees then their chests. They were both good swimmers and enjoyed the challenge of a fearsome current. Matthew bent his head towards her, eyeing her with lascivious amusement. 'I hope you didn't pay

more than fifty pence for that scrap of a thing you're wearing.'

'Why?'

'Because there isn't more than four square inches of material in it.'

'It's the latest thing,' she said unperturbed, 'and I'm not even telling you how much per square inch I paid, Matthew Levin. It's none of your business. I shall get a lovely tan and be the envy of everyone back at the station.'

'I sincerely hope not,' he said. 'If you start flashing your white bits I would fear for your morals.'

In the flippant holiday mood she was in she was tempted to stick her tongue out at him. Instead she dived underneath the waves, tasting the salt water against her lips.

At that very moment, Detective Sergeant Mike Korpanski was queuing up to go on Oblivion at Alton Towers. And as he watched a car of previous passengers scream, white-faced, and disappear into the black hole, he wasn't absolutely sure that this was where he wanted to be. But Ricky was tugging at his arm, coaxing him and pleading, without realising that his father, for all his toughness, was not relishing testing his response to G-forces.

The trip to Alton Towers was an annual treat that he and Fran promised their children. Normally they enjoyed it. But this summer, queuing in the cold and rain, it didn't seem much like a treat to him. For two

pins he would have vanished into one of the restaurants and left Ricky and Joss to their own devices. But he was a father and so he grinned at the pair of them and was about to be hurled into Oblivion.

Less than ten miles away in the town of Leek, Queen of the Moorlands, the rain had stopped, luring Hilary Barnes out of her house on the Prospect Farm Estate with a basketful of washing, looking up at the sky, willing it to hold off raining just long enough for the sheets to dry. As she pegged the laundry to the line she sniffed the air cautiously. *That smell.*

She used the rotary line, holding the plastic pegs in her mouth and pinning the clothes neatly in rows, socks paired together, a line of knickers, a couple of shirts, all the time eyeing the overcast sky with a malevolent challenge.

You dare rain – again. She felt like shaking her fist at it – or taking a deep breath and puffing the clouds out of the way like the portrayal of the North Wind in a child’s picture book. But it was no use. The sky remained obstinately heavy and grey, threatening to soak yet another line of washing, without even a glimpse of blue. Not even enough to make the fabled sailor’s trousers.

She sniffed again, screwing up her face. It is sometimes hard to know whether our memory stores smells, retrieving them at inopportune times. Was it there, in the air, or simply remembered, a chemical flashback? Hilary paused, hardly daring to breathe.

Should she get the drains checked again? Was it worse? She breathed in tentatively and believed it was. This was not her imagination but an invasive, pervasive stink, which was fouling the air all around. She put an experimental hand over her nose and mouth and gave a sharp sniff. At the same time her eyes drifted towards the bottom of the garden. The boundary of her house and all the houses on this side of the Prospect Farm Estate was a dry stone wall, beyond which was probably the most decrepit farm in the whole of Staffordshire. Her lips tightened. Ignoring the fact that the farm had been in existence more than two hundred years before the estate – or development – as the brochure had called it – she could not understand why the council could seem to do nothing about Prospect Farm itself. The animals looked skinny and emaciated, covered in sores; the yard was nothing but a quagmire – particularly after all this rain. The entire place was a breeding ground for flies and rats. She'd seen a large, brown rodent scuttle from her wheelie bin only last week. Sometimes she fancied the filthy spillage actually seeped beneath the stone wall to pollute her own garden. There were certainly brown patches on the lawn nearest the wall. The barns were dangerous, about to collapse, with gaping holes in the roof. The house was – her eyes narrowed in disapproval – a disgrace. Broken windows, doors falling off their hinges, peeling paint. It was a tribute to nothing but neglect. It was hard to imagine that it could ever have been anyone's pride and joy. Certainly not now. She pursed her lips.

And as for Grimshaw. She practically shuddered as she pictured the farmer, bent with arthritis, in navy dungarees, hardly acknowledging her greetings. The question was – what was to be done? Her eyes slid over her garden fence towards her next door neighbour's house.

Ten years ago Jakob Grimshaw had started selling off small pockets of land around his farm. A portion of field here to a local farmer, a larger sliver there to a couple who had a daughter and a pony but nowhere to keep it. As he had sold the land a local property developer named Gabriel Frankwell had watched and plotted for his own share. He stepped in at exactly the right moment, bid for and bought a parcel of land, obtained planning permission for nine houses with suspicious speed and employed architects to maximise his profit. Finally he had built the Prospect Farm Estate: nine luxury houses, all five-bedroomed, three-bathroomed, double-garaged and individually designed. It was common knowledge that Frankwell had banked on procuring the farm itself and finishing the job before retiring to Rio de Janeiro, where he had a twenty five year-old mistress named Lucia, but old Grimshaw had proved stubborn – quite a thorn in his flesh – and the deal that would have secured Frankwell his final million had proved tantalisingly out of his reach. He, as sharp a wide-boy as existed, had been thwarted by someone he considered a simple Staffordshire farmer. Frankwell was humiliated and furious but he too was stubborn, persistent and sometimes, when the stakes were high,

he could also be patient. It had been these qualities that had lifted him out of his native Liverpool estate to the position of one of the wealthiest men in Leek. While waiting for the farmer to cave in he had sold seven of the houses, given one to his ex-wife, Charlotte, as part of their divorce settlement and lived in the ninth while it was on the market.

Next door to Hilary Barnes, Frankwell was nibbling his lip. It was sheer bad luck that the housing market had crashed at the very moment that he *needed* to sell the final property quickly. Frankwell was a man who did not like to be thwarted and he imagined the farmer laughing behind his back, which added to his fury. His patience was wearing thin now – partly because he needed to be with Lucia and partly because he was uncomfortable with the proximity of the neighbours, who never missed an opportunity to voice their disappointment with their purchases. Almost every time he put his nose outside the door one of them would complain. It was wearing him down, depressing him. Then there was his ex-wife, who could be vindictive and unpredictable at times. One never quite knew with her. One day she could be saccharin-sweet, the next spiteful and sour enough to turn the milk, as his daughter had wittily said. In fact the first reason was the most pressing; Charlotte and he had usually managed to see eye to eye. They were both practical realists. But he did not exercise the same control over the other reason for wanting to move. Lucia was due to give birth in five weeks' time.

Nothing would stop this and he had decided early on that he wanted to be present at the birth, which had surprised even him. He certainly hadn't wanted to be at Phoebe's birth; neither would Charlotte have wanted him there. But the relationship with Lucia was different in every single detail from his relationship with his first wife. He loved Lucia with a sentimental, maudlin absorption that made him putty in her hands. He had a feeling this child would be a son and that his future life with sweetheart and son would achieve perfection, the zenith of his entire existence. For the first time in his tricky life he would live in financial security and tranquillity. He simply needed a bit more money. Frankwell ground his teeth. It all depended on two things: selling this final property and acquiring the last three fields that belonged to Grimshaw's farm, the farm building itself and selling it all on with planning permission, which he had already secured by way of a little palm-greasing. Friends in the council offices were to be nurtured. Frankwell peered through his patio doors, scowling at the decrepit barn. That eyesore, he thought angrily, was why none of the viewers had translated their obvious admiration of the house into a firm offer. With the property market being so much tighter now, people wanted perfection. Odd how he'd bought the land (cheaply) and built the houses without realising just what a problem it was. But it had hit him right in the solar plexus the second he actually lived in one of his own properties. He had quickly realised that, while the farm and its traditions

initially appeared pretty, almost like a Victorian pastoral painting, the reality was something else: cow byres bred flies, animals left excreta, everything either smelt or made a noise. Instead of revelling in the rural idyll – as he had promised his buyers when they needed subtle persuasion – the inhabitants of the estate resented the farm and blamed him for its problems. Worse, Grimshaw had turned stubborn. The last time he'd spoken to him the farmer had grimaced with his toothy grin. 'If I sell that to you, *Mister Frankwell*, I'll have no farm left. It'll be the end.' There had been a note of mockery in his tone. Malice sparkling out of the pale eyes.

Frankwell ran his fingers through his hair. He couldn't afford for this final part to go wrong. He didn't want to fall at the last jump. He didn't take failure well. To cheer himself up he conjured up the vision of Lucia to comfort him. But he could only seem to see her standing, hands on hips, thick black hair a storm cloud around her face, mocking him. She was not comforting him but taunting him instead.

He opened his eyes, glared at the crumbling wall and the wrecked farmhouse beyond. *That* had been the biggest mistake of all. *It* was responsible. *He* was responsible.

Hilary had finished pegging her washing out and mercifully the weather had remained dry. She turned away from the wall to return to her house. But after two steps she frowned. Something was not right. It

wasn't *just* the smell. It was quiet – too quiet. There was none of the usual farmyard activity. She could not hear any of the normal everyday sounds – the dog, Ratchet, barking or growling. There was no rattle of the chain he pulled after him.

It was not natural. Why was he so quiet?

She listened, her face tensed, her head on one side, the pupils of her eyes small and sharp. She was an intuitive and inquisitive woman. The cockerel was quiet too. And the sheep and the cows. Even the pigs. She peered across towards the farmhouse, frowning.

Were they all sleeping? The farmer too?

She knew then that it was all too still. And overlying the abnormal torpor there was that unpleasant, rotting smell. Already she had a sense of foreboding. It was not right. Nothing was right.

She went inside, closing the door behind her.

But even though she closed every single window in every room of the house she could still smell it permeating her luxury home. The scent of rotting meat.

She knew exactly what it was.

Korpanski gripped the restraint that fitted tightly over his chest. Would Ricky despise him if he squeezed his eyes shut? He tried to laugh it off. 'What a laugh, hey?'

Ricky looked at him curiously and slipped his hands in his. 'Aren't you just a *bit* frightened, Dad?'

This is the dilemma of a father. To be honest and confess he was, sharing this with his son and making him feel normal for experiencing fear? Or bluff it out,

deny any cowardice, bolster up the male ego and shrug it off. Which one?

Korpanski had no more time to make a decision. He saw Fran and Jocelyn way down below them. Managed a weak wave. And then...

He thought his heart would stop. He could not breathe. The air rushed passed him. Beside him his son shrieked in terror as they dropped. Vertically. He felt sick. And then they were in the black hole, braced against the final jolt which came out of the unknown. And out again in the fresh, cool air.

And then it was all over. Korpanski sucked in a deeply relieved breath. He heard the click as the restraints were released. He lifted it up, grinned shakily at his son. 'Great,' he said. 'That was absolutely *fantastic*.'

His wife and daughter were waving, Jocelyn dancing towards them. Fran met his eyes and gave a small, cynical, sideways, lop-sided smile. He might have fooled Ricky, she was saying, but he hadn't fooled her, not for a second.

'Careful,' Matthew said, gripping her arm. 'There's a big wave coming.' He dived underneath it as she stood her ground, feeling the surf crash against her body. She felt dwarfed by the power of nature. Breathless, exhilarated, gasping for air, Matthew surfaced, clenching his right hand into a fist. 'Look what I found,' he panted triumphantly, 'on the sea bed.' His hair was sticking to his head, seawater streaming down

his face. He held his hand towards her then curled the fingers back, one by one, until Joanna could see what he held. 'Oh, Matthew,' she breathed. 'Matthew.'

It was a ring, a single black pearl, set in a hoop of silver studded with diamonds. She stared at it speechlessly before looking up at him and reading the mix of amusement and anxiety in his face while the waves continued crashing around them. But she was oblivious to all but the man standing in front of her and the object in his hand. He was smiling that ever-hopeful smile.

'I hope you don't expect me to go down on one knee,' he said. 'I might just drown.' He paused, his gaze focused on her. 'I think you know what I'm saying, Jo.'

'No. You don't need to go down on one knee,' she said, standing against him, brushing his lips with her own. 'I understand.'

He moved even closer and took her left hand. 'I take it that's a yes, then?'

For answer she slipped the ring onto her finger, put her arms around his neck and stood, looking up at him, oblivious to the surf smashing around her legs.

We can all ignore the surf breaking around us but it is still there. Energetic and furious, it can still bruise us.

Together they walked out of the sea. Matthew took hold of her hand and gazed down at the ring. 'It's a Tahitan pearl,' he said eagerly, as they walked up the

beach. 'I wanted something unusual – different.'

'It is that,' she agreed.

'It's set in white gold. The pearl,' he continued, 'is between nine and ten millimetres and...' he was grinning with more confidence now, 'is AAA quality. That,' he carried on speaking quickly, continuing the teaching session as they walked over the coarse dark sand, 'means that it has been graded for lustre, surface quality, cleanliness and something called nacre, which is the amount of pearl which covers the piece of grit, the initial flaw which gave rise to such beauty.' He cradled her left hand in his then lifted it to his lips.

'I have to give you this, Matthew Levin,' she said. 'You certainly do your homework.' It was typical of him that he would think, research and then buy. All before asking her. 'It's lovely,' she continued. 'And so unusual.'

It was so him.

Matthew nodded. 'I thought a black pearl was somehow right for a detective inspector.' His grin was wide and warm. 'Sinister, beautiful, mysterious.' His light grin robbed the words of any cliché. 'Unpredictable, Jo, just like you, with a bit of grit at your centre.'

'Should I be insulted?'

He shook his head.

'Oh Matthew,' she said, pulling his face down to hers. 'I do love you.'

'I know,' he said comfortably, tucking her arm inside his.

She touched the pearl. ‘And after all that studying,’ she mocked, ‘if I’d said no?’

He was silent and instinctively she knew the answer.

It would have been the end. He would not have asked again but had risked all on that one throw.

She would not ask that question again. Ever.

The ring felt strange on her finger but it was a perfect fit. ‘How did you know my size?’

‘And you’re supposed to be the detective?’ he mocked.

She looked at him even more carefully, studied the tousled hair the colour of damp sand, which he wore a little shorter these days, a little tidier; the bright green eyes that could hold such warmth but more often than not held a very straight, uncompromising message. Matthew could be a very stubborn man, which was easy to read in his face – from the firm set of his mouth to the square angle of his jaw. Many times she had watched the full, generous lips tighten. She reached out and touched the smooth cheek, remembering. Their love had stood many tests; one a wife, two a daughter, and three her career, which was always a threat side by side with Eloise. Yet in a way it had been these tests that had constructed their love.

Stone by stone.

She twisted the ring around on her finger, the band feeling strange in her hand. All beauty comes at a price. An oyster spoilt by a piece of grit, a relationship so easily spoilt in the same way. And yet from that irritation was formed a stone of such depth and beauty.

This ring and its significance might mean many things to Matthew but it could ultimately cost her a sacrifice. She was well aware that they had a lot to talk about before they tied the knot – and not just the trifling details of a wedding.

‘We should celebrate tonight,’ she said. ‘We have a lot to talk about.’

Always sensitive, Matthew’s face changed to become suddenly strained. He pressed his index finger against her lips. ‘One step at a time, Joanna,’ he said quietly. ‘Let’s not spend the evening talking about how high some of the fences are that we need to jump.’ He frowned. ‘Let’s just enjoy the moment as a romantic interlude.’

‘Enjoy the moment,’ she echoed, ignoring Eloise, the house, her career, his yearning for a son. As they reached their sunloungers Joanna was aware of the fact that they were a different couple from the one that had left them.

This had changed everything.

The Korpanski family were on their way home, relaxing in a pub in Ipstones, a small village between Alton and Leek. Korpanski was downing a pint of Rudyard Ruby, a beer brewed locally in Cheddleton. Fran had offered to drive for the rest of the day as a reward for his bravery earlier on. He only wished he could eradicate the amused look in her eyes every time she met his eyes. *Why do wives read their husbands so completely when every man wants to be a hero.*

Ricky was telling his wide-eyed sister how terrifying it had been – the climb that seemed to go on for ever, the fall into the unknown, the jolting, the screaming, the terror, the speed. He pulled his face out of shape with his fingers inserted into the corners of his mouth to illustrate the effect of the G force. Satisfyingly, his sister’s mouth was wide open with admiration.

8 p.m. Mojacar

Something must have appeared different about them that night because the man with a guitar serenaded them, the gypsy in a flamenco dress gave them a rose without asking for any Euros and the waiter who had served them each night since their arrival offered to take a picture of them together. And so they froze onto the screen of Matthew’s digital camera, a newly engaged couple, heads close, smiling into the lens.

Riding on the back of that was the next hurdle, something she had pushed to the back of her mind. Matthew wanted another child while she didn’t want any of her own. But Matthew’s daughter, Eloise, was almost grown up and he felt he’d missed out on years of her childhood because his marriage had broken up. Eloise Levin was currently doing her A levels and had been having long discussions with her father about medicine as a career. Something even worse had been whispered: Eloise was talking about applying to Staffordshire University. It was a well thought of, new medical school, with a growing reputation. Its buildings

were, according to Matthew, first class, its facilities equally so. He should know. He taught Pathology there. Joanna had overheard the telephone conversations with his daughter without voicing her own, private objections.

That would mean that Eloise would be living very close to them at best. At worst...

Joanna stared into the corner of the restaurant, watching a skinny black cat scavenging beneath a table. She couldn't bear to face it. Surely, *surely* Eloise wasn't thinking of living with *them*? But a quick glance at Matthew's face seemed to tell her different. There was an unnerving set to his jaw. Perhaps he thought that if he and Joanna were engaged or married she would be less likely to object to Eloise's presence. Joanna's eyes lingered on Matthew's face and she remembered something else.

In the last few months he had started to find their cottage too small. He wanted to move into the town, preferably into one of the large Victorian houses that lined the Buxton road. But she loved Waterfall Cottage. She loved living in the quiet moorlands village where they had finally moved more than a year after Matthew had left Jane, his first wife, Eloise's mother. Waterfall Cottage had been their first home together. A romantic love nest. She didn't want to move. She almost sighed and handed Matthew the black pearl back. But something stopped her.

It was all or nothing now. And she couldn't bear the thought of nothing. It was later, much later, as she was

getting ready for bed, pulling the ring off her finger, that Joanna started to count the complications. There would have to be a wedding. Where? What sort?

In number 3, Prospect Farm Estate, Charlotte Frankwell was sitting in shell pink satin lingerie, painting her nails. She had allowed them to grow long and had filed them straight across into sharp, deadly weapons. Now she was applying white French nail varnish to the tips and admiring the effect, splaying her fingers wide in front of her. When the scent of something unpleasant wafted through the open window she stood up angrily and slammed it shut, careful not to damage her nail varnish, and turned back scowling. An expression that would have made her ex-husband disappear quickly.

When she had accepted number 3, Prospect Farm Estate as part of her divorce settlement, she had not expected a *real farm*, with real *smelly* animals in her back yard. She wouldn't have minded little moos and baahs but the smells could be simply atrocious. And that scruffy, rude man in his disgusting clothes. Did he ever wash? Charlotte doubted it. Whenever she saw Farmer Grimshaw tending to his animals in the farmyard that backed right on to her garden, she studiously ignored him. Her mouth tightened. Added to that, Gabriel was *practically* her next-door neighbour; there was only creepy old Mostyn in his shiny black suit between them when she'd hoped he'd be far away in Rio by now with his pregnant little gold-digger juvenile delinquent,

leaving her free to pursue other goals. This was not ideal.

Her eyes narrowed and her orange-painted mouth curved. Friends said Charlotte Frankwell had about the most unpleasant smile in the human race. It held malice and spite, cruelty and vindictiveness, and no mirth at all.

Next door, in number 5, Peter Mostyn was sitting at his computer, attempting to make sense of the accounts in front of him. Once he had paid the mortgage and standing orders he had little enough left. Then Carol got her claws into his last pennies. That solicitor she'd hired to handle the divorce was a bloodsucker. A criminal. Mostyn clenched his jaw. Did he want him to starve? Didn't he realise that Carol and her paramour had *plenty* to live on? They didn't need his money. His anger bubbled up. How was it that a wife could abandon her husband for another, richer man, rob him of his children and still bleed him dry? There was no justice in this immoral world. He flexed his fingers and wished they were fastened around the bastard's scrawny little neck. He leant forward to peer again at the screen. He was in trouble. He simply wasn't managing his finances. He'd have to put the house on the market and buy somewhere cheaper. He heaved a great long sigh. He loved this place. It was so good for when the children came over for the holidays. It felt old-fashioned, traditional and peaceful. He too caught the waft of something unpleasant in the air but,

unlike Hilary Barnes, it meant nothing to him. The physical smell merely mingled, unrecognised, with his bitterness and anger and lay there, rancid and oily, at the bottom of his heart. How much would the place fetch? £400,000? £425,000? With a bit of luck. It had not been a good investment in spite of the assurances Frankwell had given him. The property market had been anything but healthy lately and Leek wasn't exactly Mayfair with its still exploding house prices.

He wandered into the kitchen to flick the kettle on, his eyes scanning the room with some appreciation. All done to the highest specifications. He'd give Frankwell that. Handmade units, granite surfaces, built-in appliances, bathrooms aplenty, separate bedrooms for all three offspring. Once he had taken up residence he had never wanted to move again. But now, with his financial situation so dire, his pleasure in the place was turning as sour as his life. The more he liked it the worse it would be to move. 'Bloody Carol', he muttered, filling his mug with boiling water and spooning in powdered milk and coffee. And all for the man Carol had left him for, the one he called 'that Simmonds chap', who was fifty if he was a day, hugely overweight. *And* made of money. So why did she want all of his? Spite. It had to be. It was a travesty of justice. That was what it was. Mostyn sipped his coffee, his eyes peering over the rim suspiciously. Carol and Simmonds were clever. They lived together but were wisely avoiding tying the knot. He could appeal but that would be more expense. Every time he rang the solicitor he seemed to see the

man's finger hovering over the time clock, totting up the pounds. The last bill had been over a thousand pounds. Just for a few letters.

Carrying the mug of coffee he returned to the study and peered again into the computer screen. Solicitor's bill. He hadn't put that on the accounts. So that was why he was overdrawn – again – at the bank. It was no use asking for another extension to his overdraft facility. He wouldn't be able to pay it back unless...

Mostyn's face narrowed to grow sly and cunning, his eyes dark and unfathomable.

He had a secret.

When he had bought number 5 he had brokered a very smart deal. He had bought the field on the far side of the farm from old Grimshaw for a snip of a price. It was a good-sized field – an acre and a half – and to further the masquerade that it still belonged to Grimshaw he'd allowed the farmer to continue grazing his cattle on it. He would bet on it that no one knew it no longer belonged to the farm. He had to hold back the smirk when Frankwell boasted about expanding the estate, swallowing up the farm, building a further fifty houses on the fields where sheep and cows now grazed. In Mostyn's mind's he imagined the small, select development expanding to a larger estate, which would turn his field into a building plot and raise the price accordingly. All it had needed was planning permission, which Carol, with her customary lack of confidence in his financial acumen, had grumpily assured him would never be granted. 'It's Green Belt,' she'd said when he'd

confided in her. 'It's yet another pig in the poke from Mostyn Estates and Co. You're wasting your money, Richard.'

He'd encouraged her to believe this was so right through the divorce settlement but actually, through a business acquaintance in the Planning Department of the local council, he knew different. Leek was short of houses. Overspill from the Potteries had soaked up every available dwelling and people liked the quaint town with its picturesque streets and mock Victorian buildings. Prices had continued to creep up even over the last year, when the rest of the property market had stagnated. And with the flood plains being no good for building on, mutterings were being made about the need to build on Green Belt. After all – Prospect Farm Estate itself had been built on Green Belt. Why shouldn't it expand? And without the farm itself, the estate would rise in value.

Unconsciously, Mostyn rubbed his palms together. If he could only manage his finances until the children had finished school he would be all right. His father was elderly, his mother dead. Being an only child he would inherit all. So the dismal figures on the screen were simply a symptom of a *temporary* cash flow problem. And then he had his piece of land. There was only one thing that stood in the way of an excellent profit there. The farm. When he had bought the field he had realised that if the estate were to be expanded the farm would stand in the way. The only access to his field was through the farmyard, which was why

he had been able to buy it so cheaply. Even he, with his optimism, knew that no planning permission could be granted unless the farm was also sold as building land. The far side of the field was bordered by a brook. If only Grimshaw could be persuaded to sell up the road could curve around, finally ending in his field. They could even keep the duck pond as a feature. But the last time he had talked to the farmer Grimshaw had looked bemused. ‘Sell my inheritance? No way, sir. That farm is all I have left of my family tree. My old bones belong here. No doubt Judy’ll sell up after I’m dead. I can’t do much about that. She despises farming. She’s no interest in the land and all it can yield. Oh yes. She’ll sell up for sure after I’m dead, squander it all on high living, a smart car and some foreign holidays, I’ll be sure.’ His face had grown even meaner. ‘She only wants money, that girl. Greedy, she is. Money’s all she’s ever been interested in – even as a little girl. Always wanting more of everything: food, toys, presents, a bigger horse, a smarter bedroom.’ The old farmer looked weary. ‘I couldn’t keep up with her demands. Not on a farmer’s salary. It weren’t possible.’

Mostyn had shrunk away from the defeat in the old man’s voice. The pale eyes had fixed on his face with a sneer. ‘This farm’ll be gone afore too long, dunna you worry. Your investment will make good.’ He’d stomped back into the cowshed leaving Mostyn to wonder. *When* would his investment make good? The farmer might live for years. Sometimes he wondered

whether Grimshaw had made a monkey out of him, that his stupidity and simplicity were a front and really he was laughing at him. At all the inhabitants of the Prospect Farm Estate and their mean little tricks: leaving gates open, chucking weedkiller over his fields, leaving plastic bags to blow over the wall knowing that they were potentially lethal to his animals, fishing line strung across the gateways when no one from Prospect Farm fished, as far as he knew. But none of their tricks irritated Grimshaw as much as his farm annoyed them. So he had the last laugh.

Mostyn had turned around and returned to his house, reflecting. The old farmer spoke the truth. He would never leave. He might be getting on a bit – well into his seventies – but these moorlands folk were tough. He might last for years. On the other hand... As for the daughter, again Grimshaw spoke the truth. He couldn't imagine Judy the witch going in for farming. Whenever she visited her dad it invariably led to a blazing row. She'd ask for money. Scream, more like, and Grimshaw would dig his heels in. Mostyn could remember plenty of incidences of raised voices, shouting, fury followed by the little red car skidding back down the farm track, anger spilling out of it.

Judy wouldn't want to do anything with the land except sell it. She'd want to take the money and run. Mostyn put his fingers over his mouth and chewed his nails as he stared into the computer screen, willing the figures to dance across the columns and produce something a little more healthy. He typed out a

few figures – an optimistic top price for the field – and watched all the DR in the bank statement turn magically to CR. Credit. If Grimshaw was out of the way he could realise his investment quickly and bingo. Mostyn snapped his fingers cheerily. Problem solved. He smiled, saved his workings out and switched the computer off.

The wall was in darkness. Clouds drifted shadows across the stones, a field mouse scuttled along its foot, a bat flew towards it, suddenly rising in the sky to clear the top, a hedgehog foraged around its base. From far above a barn owl scanned the stones for its evening meal and spied the field mouse. It swooped. The spattered stains were almost invisible. Inky black against grey.

Leaning against the wall is something strange and foreign. Farmers do not, as a rule, lie motionless, in their own yards, for hours, days at a time, right through the night.

Steven Weston was standing at the window, frowning at the scene. He didn't like being made a fool of. You'd think with his training to present things well he would have realised. But he'd rather liked the outlook onto the farmyard, been seduced by Frankwell's oily blurb. He dropped the muslin curtain with a curse. *He* who *wrote* the bloody stuff for a living, had been taken in by someone else's spiel. Which made him hate Gabriel Frankwell even more. Kathleen had mocked him as

they'd viewed it. 'Didn't you realise,' she'd said in that condescending tone she habitually used when addressing him (only him, he'd noticed; she kept that special tone specifically for him), 'farmyards are smelly places; they breed flies and animals are noisy. We could have bought no end of places for the price we paid for this. I told you you were being a fool.'

Along with Frankwell his wife was good at making him feel a fool. Which was why he'd taken up with Faria. She made him feel something else. Something quite different. Subconsciously he straightened his shoulders, puffed out his chest, flexed his muscles and drew in a long, deep breath. He morphed into someone powerful, sexy, interesting. Fascinating. He fished his mobile phone out of his pocket. As he'd thought, the little envelope icon was flashing a message at him. '*He's out 2night!!?*'

He tapped one back. '*What time?*'

She must have been keeping an eye out for his response because her reply was almost instant.

'8'

He tapped back a quick, '*C u then.*'

Before deleting all messages.

Then he smiled. She was hot stuff.