

Chapter One

‘If you ask me,’ Anthea said, ‘I think it’s a *great* mistake.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I said mildly. ‘They are sisters, after all, and they always used to get on well together.’

‘Years ago. Things are very different now. Rachel’s used to having her own home and doing things her own way. And you remember how she always used to want to run everything.’

This, coming from Anthea who runs most things in Taviscombe, was pretty rich. ‘I’m sure they’ll work it out,’ I said. ‘After all, they both live alone and if Rachel wants to come back here now that Alastair’s dead, it makes a lot of sense.’

‘I can’t think why Phyllis stayed on in that enormous house after her father died, she’d have been much better off in a nice bungalow.’

‘Oh, but it’s been the family home for generations,’ I said. ‘Her grandfather built it before the Great War. It was one of the first new houses to be built in Mere Barton – I remember Mother saying there was quite a bit of excitement about it at the time. I know Phyll couldn’t bear to live anywhere else, and I expect Rachel has many happy memories of it.’

‘Well, it’s still far too big for the two of them,’ Anthea persisted. ‘I thought as much when Dr Gregory was alive and it was just him and Phyllis.’

‘Oh, he’d never have moved,’ I said. ‘He loved the house and being in the village, especially after he retired; he was so much part of the place. I must say, I couldn’t imagine the village without him.’

‘Anyway, why does Rachel want to come back after all those years in Scotland? I’d have thought she’d have made her own life up there.’

‘Inverness was Alastair’s home,’ I said, ‘and when he was offered a practice there, of course he took it, and I’m sure she was quite happy while he was alive, but I don’t think she would have wanted to stay there without him.’

‘But what about the son? Where’s he?’

‘Jamie? Oh, he’s gone off to Africa somewhere – *Médecins Sans Frontières* – something like that. So Rachel’s quite on her own.’

There was a brief silence while Anthea considered

and filed away the information she'd acquired.

'So when's this welcome-home party, then?' she asked.

'Rachel's due here next week, and I expect she'll want time to settle in, but Phyll thought she'd just let us know what she's got planned.'

'Well, I hope it's not on a Wednesday,' Anthea said. 'I'm never free on a Wednesday.'

'I'm sure Phyll will remember that,' I said.

Rachel Craig was an old school friend, part of our special group, whom Rosemary also remembered when I met up with her later on.

'It'll be nice to see her again,' Rosemary said. 'It's ages since she's been back in Taviscombe.'

'Well, it's quite a journey from Inverness, even if you fly. She did come back for her mother's funeral; though, if you remember, she couldn't get away for Dr Gregory's because Alastair was so ill then. Poor Phyll was very upset about that.'

'Oh, Phyll always put her father before anyone else,' Rosemary said. 'Look at the way she gave up a perfectly good job to come back and look after him when her mother died.'

'She never seemed to me to be that keen on a career – not like Rachel.'

'She could have been head of her department if she'd stayed on at that school in Portsmouth.'

‘I suppose so...but she always said she really only liked the teaching – and I can see she’d be a splendid teacher, but she’d be hopeless with a lot of paperwork. Rachel, now, was Alastair’s nurse practitioner and pretty well ran the whole thing. I only hope she finds enough scope in Mere Barton for all her energies!’

‘Well, if Anthea’s right,’ Rosemary said, ‘and she does intend to run the village, she’ll find pretty stiff opposition from Annie.’

Annie Roberts used to be the district nurse, and even though she’s retired she’s still greatly in demand for unofficial consultations. She sees herself (rightly) as the hub of the village, living where she does right in the middle of the main street, next to the village shop. The door of Willow Cottage usually stands open so that Annie can see who’s passing and engage them in conversation. She’s the repository of a great deal of information about what goes on in the village, but she never gossips. ‘Patient confidentiality’, she always says if asked about anything, pressing her lips tightly together to indicate the degree of her integrity. In addition to all that, she runs most of the village activities – she’s in charge of the village hall, president of the Women’s Institute, treasurer of the parochial church council, and it’s Annie who makes the collection for Poppy Day and other flag days for worthy causes. ‘Well, I’ve got the time, you

see', she says, 'now I'm retired', ignoring the fact that a large proportion of the population of Mere Barton are also retired and longing for something to occupy their newly acquired leisure. Though, of course, she is perfectly happy to enrol them as her lieutenants, carrying out her orders, as it were, and, as yet, no one has had the courage to challenge her leadership. Not that she is a formidable figure – barely five foot – she has, however, the immense energy that small people often have, and to see her about the village on some ploy or other is like watching a purposeful darting insect.

I laughed. 'Oh, I think Rachel knows enough not to take on Annie.'

'Or Anthea at Brunswick Lodge?' Rosemary suggested. Brunswick Lodge, a large eighteenth-century house, is the social and cultural centre of Taviscombe and Anthea's own particular fiefdom.

'Don't! That's a terrible thought! But, actually, Rachel is far too tactful to make any sort of overt takeover. If she wanted to, she'd do it so subtly that the person taken over from would actually thank her! Do you remember at school how she always got her own way without seeming to try?'

'Oh well,' Rosemary said, 'it'll be interesting to see what happens.'

Phyll rang about ten days later.

‘She’s dying to see you all,’ she said, ‘so could you come next Tuesday? I thought a lunchtime thing would be best – a lot of people don’t really like driving at night. Twelve for twelve-thirty. Drinks and a few odds and ends to eat, nothing formal. Not a lot of people, mostly neighbours from the village, and you and Rosemary, of course.’

‘That sounds lovely,’ I said. ‘I’ll look forward to it.’

Rosemary and I arranged to go together. ‘If you think it’s going on too long,’ she said, ‘just give me a nod and I’ll say I’ve got to go and collect Alex from school.’

The road to Mere Barton is very narrow with virtually no passing places, and any encounter with a lorry or a tractor means backing a long way with your head uncomfortably screwed back over your shoulder.

‘I must say I’m grateful not to have to drive down this road in the dark,’ I said, ‘and thank goodness for a solid Edwardian house with a proper drive so there’s plenty of space to park!’

Higher Barton, as its name indicates, stands on a slight eminence just outside the village. It is very handsome, its red brick mellowed by time, and with a multiplicity of lovingly crafted architectural adornments which would actually justify that house agents’ favourite phrase ‘many period features’. There

were already several cars there, some of the local residents electing to drive the short distance from the village, and I parked beside the shiny new Range Rover that belonged to Diana Parker. Her husband, Toby, is an MP with a London constituency, but Diana chooses to live down here on the farm that used to be his family home. Not that it's a farm now, just a done-over farmhouse with several fields and stabling where Diana keeps her horses.

'All the usual suspects,' Rosemary murmured as we went into the drawing room.

'I think you know everybody,' Phyll said, leading us forward. 'Rachel, here's Sheila and Rosemary.'

Rachel never really seems to change. Obviously she's grown older as we all have, but her hair is dark and her face unlined – and all, I'm quite sure, without any artificial aids – and she still has the air of relaxed confidence that marked her out even as a schoolgirl.

'How lovely to see you both again.' She came towards us, her hands outstretched and with that particularly sweet smile I remembered so well, and I felt a wave of affection – and I'm sure Rosemary did too – as she embraced us. Rachel always was a special person.

We exchanged a few disjointed remarks and Rachel said, 'We can't chat properly now and there's so much

I want to catch up on. Shall we have lunch at The Buttery, for old times' sake? How about Tuesday?

As schoolgirls the three of us always used to go to The Buttery after games (though it wasn't called The Buttery then – I think it was The Periwinkle) to drink hot chocolate and complain about being forced to participate in athletic activities.

She went away to talk to the little group that were standing beside a table where Phyllis's odds and ends to eat were laid out; though, since she is a splendid cook, they were considerably more than that.

'Come and have some of these gorgeous crostini,' Judith Lamb called out to us. 'I don't know how Phyllis manages to do all these wonderful things. The spread she put on for the village hall Christmas party was fabulous!'

Judith is the widow of an accountant – they both came here from Birmingham when he retired. He died a few years ago and Judith lives in the cottage next to Annie's and is her most enthusiastic helper. She, too, is small and purposeful, but built on fuller lines. She has a round face perched on a round body, and to the fanciful eye resembles an old-fashioned cottage loaf.

'Here,' William Faber proffered a plate, 'do try some of these excellent miniature pizzas – such a good idea!'

William Faber is the rector of All Saints, the handsome village church, and has the care of two other parishes. He likes to be called Father William (though I do find my thoughts fly instantly and inappropriately to Lewis Carroll when I hear him addressed in this way) and has, as they say, spiced up the services (in the face of some opposition – appeals having being made to the bishop) in all three parishes. He can quite frequently be heard giving witty, inspirational talks on the radio in the Thought For The Day slot and is, consequently, very popular in the village.

A group of other people now came into the room: Fred and Ellen Tucker, who have the one remaining farm in the village, Maurice Sanders, who used to be some sort of civil servant but who, with his wife, Margaret, now keeps the village shop, George Prosser, a retired Navy captain, Jim and Mary Fletcher (he had been a bank manager and she was a librarian), Lewis and Naomi Chapman (he still works as an anaesthetist and she is engaged in some sort of medical research) and, finally, ushering them all through the door like an efficient sheepdog, Annie Roberts.

‘We all walked up from the village,’ Annie said, ‘it’s such a lovely day.’

The room, large as it was, suddenly seemed very full of people and I retreated, with my plate of food,

to one of the window seats where I was joined by Lewis Chapman.

‘I’ll wait for the scrum to subside,’ he said, smiling, ‘before I attack the food.’

Lewis is a really nice man, a cheerful soul with a jolly, outgoing disposition, in contrast to his wife’s austere and withdrawn manner. I never feel entirely at ease with Naomi – I always think of that description of Katisha in *The Mikado*, ‘As hard as a bone with a mind of her own’, and there’s something of Katisha’s imperiousness there too. I always feel she’s judging me – and usually finding me wanting.

‘I’m really sorry about poor old Alastair,’ Lewis said. ‘We go back a long way: we did part of our training together at Barts. But it must have been a dreadful time for Rachel – he was ill for so long and he needed a lot of nursing. I must say,’ he continued, looking across the room, ‘she looks pretty good after all she’s had to go through.’

‘Rachel’s always been tough,’ I said, ‘mentally and physically, right from when we were at school together. She always coped, no matter what. That’s why I’m glad she’s back here with Phyll. Poor Phyll – I don’t think she’s really got over her father’s death, even now.’

‘He was a good age.’

'I know, but I suppose we all expect our parents to be immortal.'

'Ah, there you are, Lewis.' Naomi came towards us holding her plate, glass and handbag in the sort of elegant and effortless way that I can never achieve. 'Are you getting some food?'

Lewis got up obediently and went over to the table while Naomi joined me.

'So, Sheila,' she said, 'and what are you writing now?'

'Writing? Oh, nothing special, just a few reviews.'

'Such a pity. I greatly enjoyed your book on Mrs Gaskell.' She gave me what might pass for a smile. 'We shouldn't let our talents rust as we get older.'

'I never seem to have the time,' I said, disconcerted as I frequently am by Naomi's style of conversation, 'what with the house and the animals, and the children.'

'I find that one can usually make the time if it's something one *really* wants to do.' She bit neatly into a vol-au-vent without, I noticed with loathing, scattering shards of puff pastry as other people do.

It was with some relief that I saw Annie Roberts making her way towards us.

'Sheila,' she said, 'just the person I want to see.' My heart sank because I knew immediately that there was something she wanted me to do – and one

never says no to Annie. ‘Just come over and have a word with me and Ellen. It’s about The Book.’

The Book, always referred to in capital letters by those involved with it, was Annie’s latest project. Realising that there’d been a proliferation of village history books – not meagre little brochures, but substantial, glossy publications – with documents going back (if possible) to the Domesday Book, and ancient photographs and reminiscences, Annie decided that Mere Barton should not be left out. Unfortunately, to produce such a volume it’s necessary to have suitable material (especially pictorial records), and the only people able to provide that would be those whose families had lived in the village for generations. Mere Barton was singularly lacking in such people. Of the original inhabitants only Fred and Ellen Tucker, Phyll and Rachel, Toby Parker and Annie herself remained.

Annie detached Ellen from the group she had been happily engaged with.

‘Right, then, I thought you two ought to get together,’ Annie said. ‘Sheila’s our local author so she’s obviously the person to help you, Ellen, and I thought we could all meet sometime next week and get things moving. We’ve got some material – that stuff of Fred’s, for instance, Ellen, and I’ve got all

those photos of my grandfather's. Sheila will be able to tell you what we can use – and I've got a lot of ideas we can all of us follow up. So shall we say next Monday morning – ten o'clock at my cottage?'

Ellen and I looked helplessly at each other and silently nodded our agreement to this arrangement.

'Right,' Annie said, 'I'll see you then. Oh, there's Diana – I'm sure Toby has all sorts of family things that we could use. I'll get her to look them out, and I'll have a word with him when he comes down.'

She dived across the room and Ellen and I looked at each other and smiled.

'Poor Diana,' I said, 'and poor Toby too. Perhaps he'll take refuge in the House where she can't get at him.'

'I'm sorry, Sheila,' Ellen said. 'I'm sure you didn't want to get roped in for this, but I really would be grateful if you could lend a hand. It's not my sort of thing at all and I haven't the faintest idea how to go about it.'

'Well, apart from being resentful at being pushed around by Annie, I'd really quite like to have a look at the material. I love old photos and things like that so it will be a pleasure.' I saw Rosemary making little waving gestures to me across the room. 'Oh, I think Rosemary wants to go, but I'll see you at Annie's on Monday.'

Driving home I told Rosemary about my involvement in *The Book*.

‘It might be interesting,’ I said, ‘if only I didn’t feel so cross at being manipulated by Annie!’

‘Well, you know what she’s like – she’s got the whole village under her thumb; I wish I knew how she manages it! Still, she does get things done, I’ll say that for her.’

I cautiously overtook a tractor with an unsteady load of silage. ‘I wonder what happened to Anthea?’ I said. ‘Do you think she’s ill?’

‘And,’ Rosemary said, ‘did you notice, nobody asked about her? I wonder,’ she continued thoughtfully, ‘if she was actually invited?’