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ReviewsRevues

THE HIDDEN LEGACY

G.J. Minett studied at Cambridge and then spent many years as a teacher of foreign languages. He studied for an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Chichester, and won the 2010 Chapter One Prize for unpublished novels with the opening chapter of *The Hidden Legacy*.

THE HIDDEN LEGACY

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twenty7

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For Elaine

PROLOGUE

November 1966: John Michael

It's a quarter to nine when he reaches the school gates. *Ten minutes*, he thinks, *ten minutes*.

He'd have been here earlier, but he had to wait until his dad was safely out of the way. The last thing he needed was awkward questions. *What's with the duffel bag, son? What's wrong with your satchel? What have you got in there anyway?* So he'd waited, kicking his heels in the hallway, counting off the seconds until at long last his dad oh so slowly closed the bonnet of the Austin A40, climbed in and drove off. As soon as he'd watched him turn the corner at the end of the road, he slammed the front door and ran the mile and a half to school, barely pausing for breath – not easy with a heavy bag strapped across your shoulders. He'd lost his footing several times, skidding on the icy pavement.

He takes several deep breaths. His shirt is clammy against his back and the chill of the air is starting to bite through his clothing now that he's no longer on the move. But at least he's here.

It's fourteen minutes to nine. He has nine minutes.

At five-to precisely, Miss Cattermole will emerge from the staff room and stride confidently out to the centre of the playground. She'll ring the bell seven times with extravagant sweeps

of her right arm. Always seven times. Always her right arm. The left dangles limply at her side. Permanently useless. Some say it was a war injury, but he doesn't believe it. People just love to make up stories ... and what would someone like Miss Cattermole have been doing in the war anyway? One thing's for certain, she'll never say what really caused it. Waves away questions with the words '*gross impertinence*'. Favourite phrase of hers. Everything's '*gross impertinence*'. He knows what it means – it means don't ask.

When she rings the bell, everyone will appear from nowhere, as if by magic. They'll gather like ants around a jam jar. In the summer you have to drag them out of their hidey-holes, but when it's this cold they come pouring out, can't get inside quickly enough. The fourth and fifth years will emerge from the walled area by the boiler room. It's their territory because they're the oldest. He hasn't been at secondary school for long, but he knows this much. If you've got any sense, you keep away from there.

The third years will be sheltering in the bike sheds, making the most of their last chance until break for a quick smoke. As for the first and second years, they'll be dotted around what's left of the playground, huddled into groups to protect themselves against whatever the weather and the older pupils might decide to throw at them. They'll be first in the line which will form at the main entrance, waiting for Mr Copeland to unbolt the doors from the inside – first, that is, until the older pupils push their way in ahead of them.

Once Miss Cattermole has rung the bell, it will be too late.

He looks again at his Timex wristwatch. *Ticka ticka Timex*. He has eight minutes.

The playground is a mass of bodies. Seems like everyone's taller than he is. This isn't going to be easy. It's one thing to stand at the gate and spot her as she arrives. Now that he's late, how's he supposed to find her in this forest of arms and legs? He hurries from group to group, trying not to draw attention to himself.

Just another first year going about his business.

Insignificant.

He heads for the bike sheds, then stops. The duffel bag is cutting into his shoulders and he needs to slide it off his back, just for a few seconds. He catches it by the straps and lets it dangle from his wrist, moving stiff neck muscles from side to side. As the bag swings backwards and forwards, he can hear the liquid sloshing around inside the container. He finds the sound reassuring. Then he hears a laugh that works on his senses like a road drill.

Carol Bingham is not the sort of girl his mother would have wanted him to bring home. *Never in a month of Sundays!* She's been in trouble more than once for wearing a miniskirt and make-up to school. She's very common, swears a lot. Calls him 'half inch' and wags her little finger at him. That's very unkind. Her laugh's easy to pick out . . . and once he's tracked down Carol, finding Julie is easy. She never seems to stray more than a few feet from Carol's side. Unfortunately.

Until yesterday he thought Julie was the nicest girl he'd ever met. Now he knows better. Maybe she's nice when Carol's not there. Maybe she changes because she's embarrassed in front of an audience. But that's no excuse. And nor is being pretty. *Good manners cost nothing.*

Carol's already spotted him and she's making sure everyone within range knows about yesterday. And the others are

all laughing now. Taking their cue from Carol, they're wiggling their little fingers and chanting 'half inch' in high, squeaky voices, clouds of warm breath clinging to them like speech bubbles in a cartoon. He ignores them and stands in front of Julie. *Sticks and stones*. He knows what he has to do.

Things could still change, even now. Julie could turn to Carol and tell her to grow up. She could be nice to him if she wanted. It's her choice. But he suspects deep down that she doesn't have it in her. And sure enough, she rounds on him before he can even get a word in: *Jesus, don't you ever learn?* Tells him to *piss off*. She's picked up that sort of language from Carol, of course. Then, in case she's not made herself clear, she turns her back on him with a toss of her hair and returns to the conversation he's interrupted.

So, he thinks to himself, *that's that, then*.

He rests the duffel bag on the floor, takes off his gloves and loosens the toggle. Julie may have finished with him, but Carol clearly hasn't. She wants to know what he's got in there. Flowers? Chocolates? *Look, Julie – Romeo's brought you a present, ha, ha!* He doesn't answer. He manoeuvres the container out of the bag. It's a tight fit and keeps catching on the strings, just as it did going in. Everyone's intrigued now, pressing forward for a closer look. He finally yanks it free and rests it on the ground. Unscrews the cap of the can he took from his father's garage. Takes the can in both hands, straightens up and swings it in Julie's direction, sending its contents flying out in an arc, backlit by the sun, colours sparkling. The can is heavy and the momentum nearly drags it out of his hands.

Carol and Julie leap back with a squeal. Carol swears – of course, she would do. The two girls hunch their shoulders and

glance at each other as if they can't quite believe what's happened. Then they start shrieking. Their clothes. Their hair. And the smell – it's disgusting.

All around him there's silence, followed by nervous giggles as the hangers-on wonder what will happen next. This should be good. Carol is not someone you mess with. She's got a seventeen-year-old boyfriend with a Vespa. No way will she let him get away with this – she'll kill him. So everyone's watching the two girls to see what their next move will be ... which is why he has time to take the matches from his pocket, light one and throw it into the pool of liquid gathering at their feet. It's over before anyone realises what's happening. And that brings them to life alright, scattering in all directions.

He throws down the box containing the rest of the matches, turns on his heels and walks through the playground, heading for the school gates. Walks, not runs. Walks away, as if nothing at all has happened. He's calm, in control. 'Unflustered' is the word they'll use at the trial. It's what everyone will remember.

No one moves to stop him. He walks on, hears nothing. He's vaguely aware of Miss Cattermole barrelling out of the school building, heading for the two girls, one arm flapping uselessly like a wounded penguin. But that's all.

Which is odd, really. Should have heard something, they will tell him. You could hear the screams in Rennison Park, several streets away.

PART ONE

THE LETTER

February 2008: Ellen

The letter was there on the mat when Ellen came downstairs. She missed it at first among the daily quota of junk mail and local advertising, which she swept up along with the rain-damaged *Independent* – *mental note: serious word with the paper girl* – and whisked away into the kitchen. It was the light blue envelope that caught her attention; the letters AWL shaped into an elaborate logo in the top left-hand corner. On the reverse side she found the words *Aitcheson, Wilmot and Lowe, Solicitors* printed in full, immediately above an address in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

Her immediate response was one of surprise. She wasn't unaccustomed to letters from solicitors – she received more than her fair share, sent on behalf of disappointed holidaymakers, holding her personally responsible for everything from faulty bathroom fittings to the lousy weather. These were always sent to work though, never to her home address. She fanned her face with the envelope, debating whether to open it straightaway. She even got as far as picking up a knife and inserting the tip of the blade into the flap before thinking better of it. She placed it carefully next to her plate on the table. She'd have more time over breakfast. There were more pressing things to see to first.

Early mornings were frantic – invariably. No matter how hard she tried to impose a semblance of order on the chaos, the odds were always stacked against her somehow and today was no different. First Harry, who had to be prised out of bed with a chisel on the best of mornings, decided he was too sick for school. For two or three minutes Ellen probed and he parried, an impasse which was resolved only when he realised that missing school would also rule out Under-9s football practice. Suddenly it was Lazarus all over again.

As for Megan, she was giving full rein to every pout in her extensive repertoire because Ellen was refusing to take Harry and her to the cinema on Friday night, having already invited Kate to dinner. She'd offered to take them both some other time but, for reasons destined to remain beyond her comprehension, this wasn't good enough. Megan came downstairs minus her school sweatshirt, which she was unhappy about wearing because it was too small, *made her look stupid*. Ellen instinctively interpreted this as a euphemism for *overweight* and found herself pressing emotional alarm bells better left untouched for some time yet. *She's only ten, for God's sake! If she says stupid, she means stupid*. She persuaded Megan to wear it for the rest of the week, promising to take her into town and buy a new one at the weekend. The victory felt Pyrrhic at best – she suspected the sweatshirt would be taken off and stuffed into Megan's bag the moment she drove off.

Then, to set the seal on a stressful start to the morning, Harry was unable to find his lunch box. She wasted valuable time searching for it before he remembered leaving it in the back of Shannon's car. Trying not to roll her eyes, Ellen grabbed his sandwiches, banana and carton of apple juice and thrust them

into a large freezer bag, saying nothing but knotting it with a vehemence that spoke volumes. *What's the matter with Jack? How long does it take to check they've left nothing behind? Who's the adult here? And what sort of a name is Shannon anyway? What is she – a cheerleader, for God's sake?*

Although they were running late by the time everyone was seated at the table, Ellen vowed not to let it spoil her breakfast. *It's only ten minutes*, she told herself. She'd make it up somehow. She poured muesli into her bowl and reached for the pile of letters, weeding out the junk mail first, which she always binned unopened. Then came the various advertising leaflets and special-offer coupons for things she would never buy, plus the free local paper, which she never bothered to read and which, unlike the *Independent*, was bone dry. Of course.

The credit-card statement and the car insurance renewal form were placed in the centre of the table – she would have to deal with them tonight. The letter from AWL she saved until last.

'Mrs Ellen Harrison', it said in the small window, with not a trace of irony. The last time she'd changed her name, she'd continued to receive letters addressed to Miss Ellen Sutherland for what seemed like an eternity. Presumably she could expect more of the same now in reverse. It occurred to her that she was guilty yet again of thinking about her divorce less in terms of its emotional impact than the logistical and administrative inconvenience it would entail. Kate would be merciless if she knew. *What are you like, girl? Do you ever listen to yourself?* She'd once referred to Ellen as an emotional vacuum, pausing perhaps a fraction of a second too long before smiling to suggest that she wasn't being serious. From time to time Ellen found herself wondering about that pause.

Picking up the sharp knife once more, she sliced the envelope open and teased out the crisp blue notepaper. Unfolding the single sheet, she read it. Then, with a frown, she read it again, more carefully this time.

February 5th, 2008

Re: The Last Will and Testament of Eudora Jane Nash

Dear Mrs Harrison,

I should be grateful if you would telephone me as a matter of some urgency in respect of the above. When calling, please ask to speak with me in person. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Derek Wilmot

Senior Executive Partner

None the wiser, she looked again at the envelope, then threw it into the middle of the table with a sigh. Nonsense, of course. No question. Who on earth was Eudora Nash? She'd never heard of her. It wasn't exactly a name you'd forget in a hurry. As for Cheltenham, she'd never been there in her life, as far as she was aware; she'd have difficulty locating it on a map. Whatever was going on here, it was nothing to do with her. Someone had obviously been careless, picking out the wrong Ellen Harrison, and now her time was being wasted. She hated sloppiness.

Slipping the notepaper back into the envelope, she promised herself she'd ring from work and sort it out the first chance she had.

COTSWOLD DAILY GAZETTE

APRIL 12TH 1967

JUDGE REVEALS IDENTITY OF BOY X

In a surprise development on the opening day of the trial of 'the playground killer', hitherto known as Boy X, it was announced that the injunction ensuring his anonymity was to be lifted. The judge, Mr Justice Lawson, said in his opening remarks that he had taken this unusual step under advisement and that the decision met with the approval of both the prosecution and defence legal teams.

Naming 12-year-old John Michael Adams of Churchdown, Gloucestershire, the judge explained that lifting the injunction was the only sensible course of action under the circumstances. The boy's identity has been common knowledge for some

time, both in the local area and further afield, and any suggestion that his anonymity might be protected would be little more than hypocrisy. He took the opportunity to condemn what he described as 'the maverick and highly irresponsible behaviour of individuals representing news agencies and media organisations, from whom higher standards of professional integrity might reasonably be expected.'

Mr Justice Lawson also made clear his expectations of anyone attending the trial. He said that it was his duty 'to uphold the process of law and order and to ensure that the proceedings are carried out with the appropriate degree of decorum' and that

any unwarranted outbursts would result in the immediate ejection of those responsible.

It is now almost five months since John Michael Adams is alleged to have walked into the playground of Fairfield Secondary Modern School and poured petrol over two 14-year-old schoolgirls before setting them alight. Julie Kasprowicz died in hospital from her injuries. Carol Bingham suffered serious burns to her face and shoulders and, after several operations, is expected to bear the physical and emo-

tional scars for life. The accused watched impassively throughout the 45-minute hearing. Sitting on a raised chair in full view of the court, including members of the families of both victims, he spoke only once, confirming his identity in a quiet voice. Accompanied by a social worker, he smiled from time to time at his father, who sat almost within touching distance. His mother, as has already been widely circulated, committed suicide in July 1964.

The trial continues...

February 2008: Ellen

'I'm afraid Mr Wilmot will be in conference all morning. Might I take a message?'

Ellen turned away from her first-floor window, leaving the boys on security to deal with the delivery lorry which had just turned in through the gates. She reached for her coffee and dunked one of her Rich Tea biscuits, watching with satisfaction as the dark stain seeped slowly upwards.

'I don't think so. I'm actually ringing at Mr Wilmot's request. I have a letter here asking me to get in touch as a matter of some urgency. His words, not mine.'

'I see. Might I have your name, please?'

'Ellen Sutherland ... although he'll know me by the name of Harrison.'

'Mrs Harrison – of course. I'll see if I can connect you. Might I ask you to hold for just a few moments?'

Click. Cue muzak.

You might, thought Ellen, then instantly reproached herself for being so pedantic. The girl was only doing her job. When it came to her own staff, she'd take artificial and mannered over rude and aggressive any day of the week.

She eased the soggy half of the biscuit into her mouth, then settled back in her chair and listened to what she tentatively identified as Vivaldi. She remembered, when she was first pregnant with Megan, she'd vowed to find some way into what she saw as the arcane world of music, poetry and art appreciation. She'd even gone as far as sending for a copy of the prospectus from the local college in the hope that there might be a course that would fit the bill. *Bluff your way through the Classics. Culture for the terminally clueless.* Something of that order. But, as with so many other projects aimed at self-improvement, she'd never found the time or the impetus required to move things forward. Then, of course, once the children were born, the idea of evening classes became a non-starter.

She'd pushed the children into learning an instrument at an early age, as if determined to compensate through them. She'd bought a recorder for Megan who, for a while at least, had shown enough interest and aptitude to encourage Ellen to consider possible next steps. Flute? Clarinet? Where might she go for private tuition? She could see now how misguided she was in making her enthusiasm for the project so obvious. Megan was never slow to recognise a button she could press and her interest soon evaporated altogether, much to Ellen's frustration. As for the guitar that Harry had pestered her to buy, she'd caught him last week standing on it to reach one of the shelves in his bedroom. That was more use than it had been put to in the preceding twelve months. It seemed the harder she tried...

'Mrs Harrison? Good of you to ring so promptly. I'm Derek Wilmot.'

Miraculously available after all.

‘Not at all,’ said Ellen, trying to swallow the rest of the biscuit and free up her mouth. ‘I’m intrigued – it’s not every day I’m mentioned in a will.’

‘Quite.’

‘Especially the will of someone I’ve never even heard of, let alone met.’

‘Indeed.’

Ellen paused to allow this to sink in. ‘You’re not surprised that I don’t know this ... Eudora Nash?’

Wilmot sneezed, and excused himself. ‘I am sure there are many questions you’ll want to ask, Mrs Harrison, but first things first. If you’ll bear with me just for a few moments, there are one or two formalities to be observed. I need to be certain that I am indeed speaking to the correct person. Your full name is Ellen Catherine Harrison?’

‘It was.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I’m divorced. As of last month.’ It occurred to her then, for the first time, that it was actually one month to the day.

‘I see.’

‘I’m now Ellen Catherine Sutherland again.’

There was a pause, during which she could hear him rum-maging through the sheets in front of him. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, Mrs Harrison,’ he said at length, his tone flat, dispassionate. ‘Although I feel bound to point out that, in respect of the matter in hand, this changes nothing. Our immediate concern here is one of identity rather than nomenclature.’

Ellen tried to conjure up a mental picture to go with the voice, came up with cobwebs. Cobwebs and clouds of dust. A Dickensian lawyer, black coat, thinning silver hair, mutton chop

whiskers, stooped over his work, trembling quill hovering over the virgin page, desk heaving with piles of dusty ledgers. Not exactly of this world. She tried not to be too offended by his casual dismissal of her personal circumstances.

‘Can you confirm your date of birth?’

‘September the twenty-second, nineteen seventy-four.’

‘Place of birth?’

‘Chichester. West Sussex.’

‘Indeed.’ Another shuffle of papers. She could sense him ticking boxes.

‘And your current employment?’

‘Excuse me for asking,’ said Ellen, ‘but is all of this strictly necessary?’

‘If you’ll just bear with me –’

Ellen took a deep breath and wondered whether or not to pursue the point. She looked at the photos of Sam Balfour which took up most of the wall facing her – one large portrait plus a number of shots of him shaking hands with a variety of celebrities and local politicians – and tried to imagine how he would have dealt with the Derek Wilmots of this world. She suspected he would have given him very short shrift. Empire building didn’t allow for social niceties.

‘I’m manager of Langmere Grove Holiday Park near Ryhill in West Sussex,’ she said.

‘And your mother’s name?’

Ellen nudged at the coaster on the desk in front of her until it was equidistant from each of the edges forming the corner.

‘Barbara Ann Sutherland.’

‘And her maiden name?’

‘That *is* her maiden name.’

'I see.' Slight clearing of the throat.

'And her date of birth?'

'First of February, nineteen thirty-seven.'

Ellen waited. Taking a tissue from the box on her desk, she dabbed at a few drops of coffee which had spilled over the rim of the cup.

'And ... ah ... your father?'

She screwed the tissue into a ball and dropped it into the bin next to her.

'On my birth certificate it says "Father unknown".' She did her best to keep the irritation out of her voice.

'Indeed,' said Wilmot. If he had picked up on anything defensive or sensitive in her tone, there was nothing in his voice to suggest it. During the ensuing pause, she took a sip of coffee and began dunking the other biscuit, which broke off before she could lift it clear of the cup.

'Well, that would appear to be satisfactory for the time being. I think we can say with some confidence that you are the ... Ellen Catherine Harrison my client had in mind. You will of course need to bring with you documentary evidence as corroboration when you pop in to see us. Your passport maybe ...'

'Excuse me?'

'... driving licence, something of that sort.'

'Mr Wilmot,' said Ellen, taking a spoon and scooping the remains of the biscuit onto the saucer, 'you *do* know I live in West Sussex?'

'Of course.'

'In which case, you must be aware that "popping in to see you", as you put it, would entail something in the region of a six-hour round trip.'

'I appreciate that, Mrs Harrison...'

'Ms Sutherland.'

'Indeed. Nevertheless you'll understand that in matters such as these, there are protocols which have to be observed, forms to complete, etc.' Oh so patient. Not quite patronising, but near enough to irritate her intensely. 'If today is out of the question, perhaps we could try for tomorrow morning. What would be a good time for you?'

'Apparently I'm not making myself clear,' said Ellen, pressing her ballpoint pen against the desk and clicking it open and shut, open and shut. 'I have a job. Two children. I'm a single parent. I can't simply drop everything and drive all the way to Cheltenham just like that.'

'I understand the difficulties, Mrs Harrison,' said Wilmot, with the weary indifference of someone who does nothing of the sort. 'I assume however that you will want this whole business to be tied up as quickly as possible.'

'What business? You haven't even told me what it's all about. I don't mean to sound mercenary, Mr Wilmot, but if I've come into money somehow, how much is it? For all I know, arranging for someone to look after the children and then travelling all that distance might leave me worse off than when I started. You take my point.'

Wilmot gave what might have passed for a dry chuckle. 'I think we can safely say you will not regard it as a waste of your time,' he said. 'Perhaps if I tell you that my client has bequeathed to you full title and deeds of a property called Primrose Cottage...?'

Ellen pulled the phone away from her ear and stared blankly at it for a second.

'Excuse me?'

‘It’s in Oakham ... a rather picturesque little Cotswold village. I don’t suppose you know it, by any chance?’

‘Did you say ... a cottage?’ Ellen gave up any attempt to keep the note of incredulity out of her voice.

‘Indeed – although the word “cottage” may give quite the wrong impression as to its size. It’s actually more spacious than it looks from the outside – early nineteenth century, old Cotswold stone, three bedrooms, small front garden, larger one to the rear. Also outright ownership of a field which borders the property. I gather the owner before my client was a keen rider and used to keep his horse there although, of course, you might have your own plans for it.’

A sharp squall buffeted the window, picking up a cluster of raindrops in the air and flinging them against the glass. From the comfort of her office, Ellen watched two cleaners struggling to push a trolley from one building to another. A member of the grounds maintenance crew backed an open-top buggy across the courtyard to get it under cover. The driver of a delivery van, parked outside the unloading bay at the rear of the on-site supermarket, tried hard to avoid looking ridiculous as he chased after a handful of papers, which skipped out of range every time he tried to plant his foot on them. A day like any other.

‘Mrs Harrison?’

‘Yes ... I’m still here. I’m just ... You’re sure about this?’

‘Absolutely. My client was a very particular lady, meticulous in her preparation. She went to a great deal of trouble to find you. I can assure you, there is no mistake.’

‘But I don’t even know who she is. I’ve never heard of her,’ said Ellen, ticking off the objections as they occurred to her. ‘This can’t be right, surely. It’ll be contested – I mean, the family aren’t

going to just sit back and let some total stranger come wandering in and take over their home, are they?’

‘There is no family...’

‘What ... no one?’

‘Well, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is no one in a position to make a realistic claim. My client, you understand, was an elderly lady. She was ninety-one when she died. She outlived her husband by more than thirty years. There are no children. There *was* a younger sister, Miss Emily Nash, but she died a few years ago.’ More shuffling of papers. ‘In June 2001, to be precise.’

‘What about her husband’s family?’

‘My understanding is that relations between my client and her husband’s family were no more than civil even while he was alive. Since his death, there has been no contact to speak of. Of course, one can never be sure about these things – such matters do have the unfortunate tendency to draw out the most unlikely claimants. However the will is quite straightforward. Apart from a few personal items, the property goes to you and the money is equally divided between three children’s charities. There are no grounds to encourage anyone to contest it and, should they do so, they will most certainly fail.’

There was something very reassuring about his confidence. A thought occurred to Ellen.

‘The funeral – when is it?’

‘Ah yes –’

‘Maybe there’ll be someone there who can shed some light on this, someone she confided in. I ought to be there.’

He cleared his throat. ‘The funeral was yesterday.’

‘Yesterday? But ... when did she die?’

‘Monday of last week.’

‘Monday? But that’s over a week ago.’ For some reason she couldn’t quite define, Ellen felt culpable in her failure to be there, as if she had let the old lady down somehow.

‘My client was most insistent that you should not be notified of her death until after the service.’

‘Really? But why?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Wilmot. ‘There were several things my client chose not to share with me. She may, of course, have been less reticent about talking to some of her friends in the village, which is one of the reasons why I thought you might be anxious to visit the property as soon as possible.’

In other words, why don’t you just do as I suggested and get yourself over here! Ellen thought this over for a moment.

‘So how long will it be before the cottage is legally mine? You mentioned papers I need to sign.’

‘Just a few formalities. Everything that does not require your direct participation has already been taken care of. If you were to come here as early as tomorrow morning, the property would be yours by the weekend. If you wish, I could also give the keys to one of my associates and arrange for him to drive you over there so that you might view the property for yourself.’

Ellen was working through the possibilities in her mind. Jack didn’t work Wednesday evenings. If he could have the children, she’d be able to make a really early start. Leave at seven, be there by nine thirty. Three hours or so to sort out the formalities and visit the cottage, then back by mid-to-late afternoon to pick up the children. Colin could take care of things at work – no problem there. He was desperate for any opportunity to show

Sam and everybody else for that matter that he could do her job standing on his head. It would all hinge on Jack.

‘This village,’ she said. ‘Oakley?’

‘Oakham.’

‘How far is it from Cheltenham?’

‘Half an hour or so, I would say.’

‘And is there anything in the will to say whether or not I’m allowed to sell the property?’

‘No,’ said Wilmot, a note of disapproval creeping into his voice. ‘No, there is no stipulation to that effect. My client did express hopes that you might be so enamoured of the cottage that you would want to keep it. Once the property is legally yours however, you are not bound by any such considerations. You will be free to do with it as your conscience dictates.’

‘And property in a Cotswold village...?’

Wilmot paused for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. ‘You appear to be groping your way towards a particular question, Mrs Harrison. Perhaps I might save us both some time by saying that I can tell you with some degree of certainty how much the property is worth.’ If there was any ambiguity in his tone before, there was none now. Ellen reached across the desk for her notepad and waited.

‘My client arranged for valuations with three separate agencies in the months leading up to her death. They varied by fifty thousand pounds, but the lowest estimate was for seven hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds.’

Ellen slowly lowered the receiver to her shoulder. Clicking the biro again, she flipped open the pad and wrote a seven, followed by another, then a five, a comma and three zeros. She looked at it for a moment, then wrote a dash, followed by an eight, a two,

a five, a comma and three more zeros. She placed a pound sign at the front, a large, exaggerated symbol which dwarfed the numbers. Finally she drew a box around it all and underlined the figures three times. It did nothing to make any of it seem more real.

‘Mrs Harrison?’

She took up the receiver once more.

‘I’ll be there tomorrow at nine thirty.’