

Chandlers Green

Ruth Hamilton

Chapter 1

The house was white and square, three windows across the top, two at the bottom, a large black door in the centre. Its roof was of grey-purple slate and the whole façade was covered in Virginia creeper, so pretty in the autumn, its leaves russet-coloured as they crisped their way towards the year's end.

'It's lovely.' Leena Martindale stepped back to take in the whole view, her heels suspended over the edge of a narrow pavement. 'Eeh, I never thought we'd be living in a place like this, Alf. It's like a dream come true, isn't it? Tell me I'll not wake up in a minute, love. Tell me it's real.' She would surely come to her full senses any second now, would be back in Emblem Street, mills to the left, mills to the right, chimneys belching into the sky for hours each day.

'It's real, Leena. God knows we worked long and hard enough for it. We're as good as any of them round here now, love - even yon pot-bellied bugger up at the grange. Wait till he realizes it's us, eh? That'll take the skin off his rice pudding.' Alf managed, just, not to rub his hands together in glee. He had trounced Chandler for the second time and the feeling was more than good - it was glorious. There would be no beating the first occasion, of course, because that had been a show-stopper . . . No, no, he must not laugh out loud.

Leena walked forward and opened the gate. Unused to movement, the black-painted wood creaked, while its hinges screamed for oil as they dropped flakes of rust onto the weed-covered path. 'It's not been shifted in a while, this gate,' she commented as she led her husband towards their new home. She pointed to a gap in the fence. 'I reckon folk have been coming and going through that hole. Eeh, the whole place looks sad. But I don't care what state it's in, Alf. We're here. We're up on the moors and no bugger can say different.' Here, she could get better; here, her lungs would heal, would learn their full capacity all over again, no smoke, no fumes, no specks of scarlet contained within a white handkerchief.

They had bought the house unseen, had negotiated through agents and solicitors, had mentioned to no-one that they would be moving out of Bolton and up the moorlands to a village so select that it was beyond the reach of most ordinary folk. Aye, well, there'd be a few eyes wiped when the removal van arrived, because Alf and Leena Martindale were not doctors or lawyers, were not any kind of gentry, landed or otherwise; they had made their fortune through collecting rubbish thrown out by rich and poor alike. Alf, the rag-and-bone man, and Leena, the ex-char, had reached for the stars.

Proud of what they had achieved, they were nervous nevertheless, because the move felt like the biggest stride since the Eighth Army had hopped across from North Africa . . . Time froze for several seconds as the pair hovered on the brink of this new horizon, this fresh and much-needed new start.

'They won't like us,' said Leena as Alf broke the moment by turning the key in its aged lock. 'We'll be like sore thumbs.'

Alf laughed. 'He won't like it and that's for certain sure. But he can bloody whistle, because we've bought outright, our money's as good as anybody's and, on top of all that, I can't wait to see his face when he finds out.'

This was Richard Chandler's patch. He acted as lord of the manor, carried on as if he owned everything and everybody for miles around, but he seemed to have forgotten this one empty house at the edge of his principality, the property of an eccentric and housebound spinster who had faded away just weeks earlier. Alf had kept his ear to the ground for ages, had jumped in as soon as the house had become available. And now, here they were, bold as brass and ready to knock the place into shape. 'Hang on,' he said.

Leena giggled like a newly-wed when he lifted her up and carried her over the threshold. After over twenty-five years of marriage, she was not the slender maiden who had stood at the altar of Sts Peter and Paul, was no longer the shy, awkward girl from the bottom of Deane Road. As for Alf, who was nearing fifty, three decades of heavy lifting had taken its toll, so he was glad when Leena was safely deposited in the hall. 'It smells funny,' she remarked.

'Aye, that's what the surveyor said.' Alf regained his breath after a few seconds. 'Give yourself no more second helpings of black pudding in future, lass - I've lifted four-poster bedsteads lighter than you.' He inhaled. 'Dry rot,' was the pronouncement. 'Don't worry, it's all in hand.' This place would be like a little palace once the rough edges had been knocked off. Alf would make it shine, he would, bugger the cost.

At each side of the hall, a door led to twin rooms, both square, both with nice old fireplaces that screamed for a good scrubbing. Behind the room on the left there was another square area, probably the dining room, and on the opposite side a large kitchen led to a back garden of mammoth proportions. 'The jungle was thrown in with the price,' said Alf. 'It'll take an army to shift that lot. Poor old girl depended on her neighbours towards the end, and they couldn't look after her and the garden too. We'll need farm machinery to get through the weeds - we could well find half a dozen bloody lions living out there.'

But Leena was already designing her kitchen, was planning on moving the sink, arranging cupboards and shelves, was wondering whether to have a table and chairs near the window.