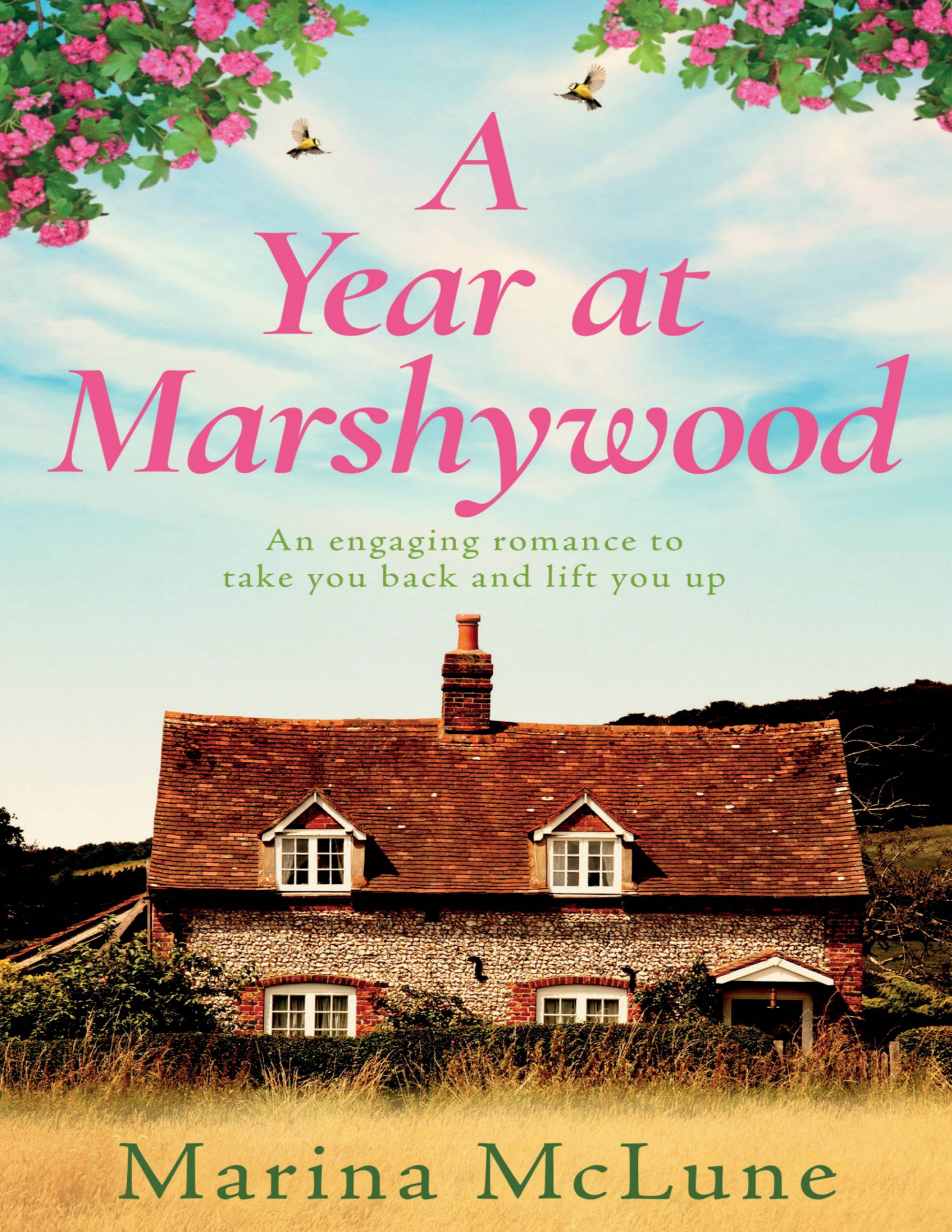


The top of the cover features pink flowering branches in the corners and two small birds flying in a blue sky with light clouds.

A Year at Marshywood

An engaging romance to
take you back and lift you up



Marina McLune

**A Year at
Marshywood**

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Chapter 1

Drapers Lane looked different today. Amanda had walked down this street countless times but now all was set to change. Could this be the reason she felt she was looking at it with fresh eyes, noticing things she had never seen before? That alleyway, for instance. She ambled past and stopped to take a look, wondering where it led. On either side were tall grey stone walls, softened on the right by the green leaves of a laurel hedge peering over a wooden fence. Beyond, she could see the roofs and upper windows of terraced houses. The passage veered towards the left, leaving only a solid block of wooden fencing visible in the distance.

Suddenly, soft cumulus clouds separated in the sky, allowing the spring sun to light up the paving stones. She watched for a moment, now even more tempted to venture in and explore, but she didn't have the time, not today. She felt a tightening in her stomach, knowing this could be her last chance to find out where it would lead.

This unexpected pathway to an unknown destination perfectly summed up Amanda's life right now. She knew the chances of finding hidden and mysterious places in East London were small, but there was always something new, if you were prepared to look. Yet Amanda didn't have to do anything to experience novelty and change. Her life was going to get very interesting, whether she liked it or not. Nothing would ever be the same again, which both frightened and excited her. Very soon she would break the news, making it official. What would the reaction be?

In front of her stood a small silver birch, and she looked up to see several goldfinches, sporting flashes of red and yellow, chirping energetically. This greatly helped settle her nerves. She loved this tree, and it always held her interest, whatever time of year she passed by. It was now April, and she stopped to look at the long male catkins, hanging down like lambs' tails, in close proximity to the smaller pale-green female ones, standing upright beside the leaves. Catkins were a beautiful sign that spring was here, as was the frenetic activity of goldfinches preparing their nests. Males, females and nest-building – even the natural world echoed her desire.

* * *

Sam had just finished talking about a new guy at work when Amanda finally broke the news.

'You're definitely leaving London and moving to a village?' Sam held back an uneasy laugh. 'Can't you just stay here and leave them to it?' Amanda shook her head. 'Okay, I get it. Your dad's taking early retirement, but has he thought for a second about you? You'll miss all your friends, and you'll be bored stiff.' Amanda wasn't so sure a few work colleagues and former classmates qualified as friends. Samantha – Sam for short – was the only person she could always rely on.

'And what about Mark?' Sam added with a knowing smile.

She certainly knew how to get Amanda's attention. As well as being Sam's cousin, Mark just happened to be Amanda's dream date. He lived south of the river in East Dulwich, and after not being in touch for several years, Sam had been meeting up with him since his father had contacted hers to break the news of his terminal illness. It was at the funeral that Amanda met Mark for the first time. Sam had invited her, explaining that Ghanaian funerals were big social occasions. 'Sometimes hundreds come along. In fact, the more people the better.' Amanda had felt reassured,

hoping the experience would leave her feeling positive, despite it being an unhappy event.

She thought back to that day. It started with the girls making their way by train, to allow for a quick stop-over at Petticoat Lane market, while Sam's parents were coming later in the car. The aim was for Amanda to pick up a pair of shiny red Sandy-in-*Grease* shoes, but after she eventually tracked them down, she changed her mind.

'Standing in these all day at Woolies would do me in – not that they'd let me wear them,' she said, her shoulders dropping.

'Yes, they're definitely more suitable for clubbing,' Sam agreed. 'But if you're planning a night out on the town, you'll just have to go without me. You know what my mum thinks about those "dens of iniquity."'" She gave Amanda a snarky smile.

'I'd trip over and do myself a serious injury, so it's just as well,' Amanda said, reluctantly placing them back on the market stall table.

'Yeh, there's a good reason they're called killer heels. Let's go shall we?' Sam gestured for her friend to get a move on.

Amanda had enjoyed *Grease*, but unlike most people she wouldn't describe it as a feel-good movie. When it came out the previous year the queue had snaked around the street and extended for almost as far as the eye could see. Many girls fancied themselves as Sandy, but not Amanda. She didn't want to light up a cigarette or don sexy gear in order to get her man. Surely any guy worth his salt wouldn't be impressed by that. She hoped that Mark was a man able to look beyond the superficial.

Within minutes of arriving at the church hall, she had noticed Mark's heart-warming smile. He was tall, dark and handsome. Like his cousin Sam he had a Ghanaian father, but whereas Sam's father had married a lively Nigerian lady, Mark's mother was an Irish lass from Dublin, and his toffee-coloured skin tone reflected this mix. The moment she introduced them, Sam saw her best friend's eyes light up and she immediately set about trying to matchmake. Perhaps the distraction of an understanding girlfriend would help Mark cope with his grief.

'Amanda, this is Mark, my cousin. Mark, this is Amanda, a friend of mine I've known since school – I'm not sure if your mum mentioned she was coming.'

'Yes,' Mark replied, smiling warmly and turning towards her, 'she did say you were bringing a friend. Hi, Amanda.'

'Hello Mark, I'm really sorry about your loss.' Amanda felt her words were feeble and pressed her lips tightly before returning his smile. Couldn't she think of something slightly more original to say?

'Thank you,' he said, sounding relaxed and with a momentary distant look in his eyes. 'We were so grateful that Dad's last days were free from suffering, and Guy's hospital was amazing.'

A long pause followed, and Sam felt obliged to step in. 'Mark, your mum looks really ... how can I put it ... calm and peaceful today. When Mum and Dad went to see her a few weeks ago, they said things were very difficult for her during your dad's last days.'

'That's right, they were,' Mark said. 'Reconnecting with you all, after all these years, has been a great support for Mum. My sister worries that she hasn't been able to look after her in the way she would have liked, since becoming a mum herself, so we can't thank your parents enough, especially Aunt Precious for ringing Mum almost every day.'

That's so typical of Sam's mum, Amanda thought. She knew from personal experience how caring she could be. Mark was soon distracted by a relative, and they wouldn't get the chance to talk again for a good few hours.

* * *

'I told you there'd be vol-au-vents,' Sam said, swallowing a mouthful of pastry and prawns. But Amanda was only picking at her food. Sam saw that her friend kept glancing towards the other side

of the room. 'I'll have to get you two talking again, won't I, Mand? Let's go over to him.' She tugged at Amanda's sleeve and soon Amanda and Mark were face to face once more, but before they could strike up another conversation, Mark's mother interrupted them.

'Mark, a friend of mine wants to ask you a quick question about a boundary issue with her neighbour,' she uttered in her soft Irish accent.

Mark looked uncomfortable. 'I'll try my best, but I've only just started working for Cartwright Berrington, and they don't teach you everything in the Law Society exams.'

It was getting late and everything was drawing to a close. Before walking away to respond to this request, Mark said goodbye. He extended his hand to Amanda, and she took it, thinking it would be a brief handshake, but instead he didn't let go. Starting to become too aware of herself, she felt her breathing quicken and hoped it wasn't obvious. Was he just seeking consolation, or was it something more? All she knew was, she never wanted to let go.

In reality, the physical contact was brief, but it seemed like an age. Amanda suddenly noticed that several pairs of eyes were watching them – Sam's, of course, Mark's mother, even his sister, who was trying to soothe her crying baby. Amanda's face glowed from the heat of embarrassment, but she also felt flushed for another reason. After holding his hand, she knew she wanted to see him again and hoped he felt the same way.

The journey home began with Sam's little brother carefully positioning himself on her lap, while she sat next to the eldest one on the back seat of the family's Austin Allegro. Now they'd have no problem having four people in the back.

'Get in, Mand!' Sam said, giving the seat a whack.

There was just enough room for Amanda to squeeze onto the seat. They set off across London, leaving East Dulwich and crossing over the Thames towards Leytonstone. The two friends, although keen to chat about the day's events, had little opportunity to talk, since gospel music was ringing out through the newly installed cassette player, to which Sam's mother Precious sang along heartily, encouraging the young people in the back to join in.

Amanda sat in silence watching the sights of London whizz by to Precious' musical backdrop, and in her heart of hearts she knew saying goodbye to all of this was not going to be easy.

* * *

Reality was slowly sinking in and Amanda's excitement began to grow. She adored the countryside, and the coast too. Even so, it was disconcerting to be moving to a totally new area where there was no one she or her parents knew – apart from her father's brother and his wife.

Uncle Charles and Aunt Pauline had settled in Pevensey Bay on the East Sussex coast, following a life of jet-setting. After living the dream in Toulouse for five years, they had decided there was no place like home, and somewhere on the south coast, the warmest part of the UK, seemed a natural choice. '1066 country is the home of the most famous battle ever,' Charles would crow at his jaded brother and sister-in-law. Although they struggled to understand his morbid fascination with war, Amanda's parents, Joan and Robert, made an effort to tolerate his interest in all things heroic and bloody.

Little surprise then that Charles would enjoy recounting memories of his time as a young man in the navy during the second world war. Robert, on the other hand, chose never to speak about his service. Although Amanda had tried to get him to open up and would occasionally broach the subject, in recent years she had all but given up, accepting that her father would never talk openly about his experiences to her or anyone else, perhaps not even to Joan. All he was prepared to say was that war was a very ugly thing, he was too young to handle it, and that he had lost friends. Amanda wondered if needing time to recover was a reason he remained single until he finally met Joan at the age of 33.

Trips down to Sussex to find the perfect new home, exciting as they were, came at a price – the obligatory visit to Charles and Pauline’s house.

‘So Rob, have you decided where around Hailsham you’re going to settle?’ Charles asked, frowning. ‘It’s very inland, and I thought Joan suffered terribly from hay fever. Wouldn’t the coast be a better bet?’

Robert sat in his brother’s lounge and found himself silently agreeing with him. The coast might well be a better choice, but there was only one problem: his wife found Charles even more intolerable than he did. Because they were the only close family members left, and could be a means of support one day, she had conceded that it would be good to live within striking distance of them, but she didn’t want them too close. Since they lived by the sea, she wanted something different. Of course there were other areas of coastline nearby – further along westwards towards Seaford, for example – but Joan liked the idea of having country lanes, farmland and fields on her doorstep.

Robert, momentarily distracted by visions of Joan sneezing uncontrollably, was brought back to the presence of his hosts when Pauline gently prodded him with a plate.

‘Here Rob, have a slice. Where near Hailsham exactly?’ she asked.

‘Magham Down village,’ he said, picking up some Swiss roll, ‘we were thinking, looks like a nice area, close enough to town but also far enough to enjoy the best views and scenic walks. It’s been on the radar for us ever since I saw it featured in a book on Sussex walks.’

‘Magham Down?’ Charles guffawed. ‘Sounds awfully provincial to me. Have you checked there’s anyone living there who’s actually left the village?’ Robert clenched his jaw. ‘Not wishing to pour cold water over your plans,’ Charles continued, tipping a teaspoon of sugar into his cup and stirring, ‘but you know me, I couldn’t cope without the sea and the sailing club, especially since selling our yacht. Are you, Joan and Amanda sure you can handle living next door to a bunch of backward country bumpkins?’

Robert just wasn’t in the mood for his brother’s clumsy attempts at humour. He knew his exaggerated words were a veiled attempt to irritate him, so now was probably a good time to make his excuses and leave. He had also discovered a long time ago that getting annoyed was fruitless. His mind travelled back to when he was nine and Charles was eleven, recalling a rare occasion when he decided to fight back. It was 1928, and Charles had accused Robert of stealing a marble which had gone missing. Robert’s dismay at being unjustly blamed turned into fury when Charles started teasing him after their mother confiscated Robert’s halfpenny-an-ounce bag of aniseed balls and gobstoppers as a punishment. That was the last straw. Robert lashed out at Charles in a tearful fit of anger. As a result he was swiftly punished with the strap from his father, and even when Charles’ marble was found under the Welsh dresser several weeks later, Robert received no apologies from either his mother or his father, and certainly not from Charles.

‘Thanks for the tea and cake,’ Robert said, rising to his feet. ‘We’ll keep you posted, and as I said before, I’m sorry Joan couldn’t make it.’

Charles saw Pauline’s fixed smile, and he knew precisely what she was thinking: that Joan usually developed a migraine or something similar just before visiting them.

‘And just one other thing,’ Robert continued, ‘we’re staying at a guest house for a couple of nights, and we’re only here until Sunday morning, so I don’t suppose we’ll see you again before going back to London, but if house hunting goes well this weekend, we’ll let you know. No need to come to the door, I’ll let myself out.’

Robert left Charles and Pauline’s large beachfront house and shut the door behind him. Now at last they were alone, free to talk about what they really thought of Robert and Joan and their ridiculous decision to leave London to pursue the country dream.

‘This place has seen better days.’ Amanda looked around as Robert quietly muttered to himself. ‘Definitely seen better days,’ he repeated uneasily, looking up at the exposed dark-wood beams covered in layers of cobwebs.

‘I know,’ Amanda said, trying her best to sound encouraging, ‘but Mum’s been in the garden for ages and she’s fallen in love with those views. You know she’s always dreamed of somewhere like this, and she may even be right – a good clean, some fresh paint and thick carpets, and we’ll be well on our way to a cosy home again.’

Robert nodded but then looked pained. ‘Yes, she insists on carpeting throughout, only she seems to forget her asthma improves whenever we stay in that cottage in Wales with the flagstone floors. She claims it’s the Welsh air.’ Amanda smiled and nodded while her father vented his frustrations. ‘Ever since I read that report about dust mites, she’s been battling her desire for shagpile against her need to breathe easily, and as you know, the shagpile’s won. Only here will be even worse than back home, since this house, being so old, is also damp. Carpets plus damp will be lethal for Mum’s asthma, but what can I say?’

‘I know, Dad, I know.’ Amanda nodded.

At that moment, Joan dashed into the house, puffing and out of breath with excitement. ‘Oh my goodness, it’s absolutely breathtaking out there. And look!’ she said, rushing to a window. ‘From here you can see those fields and sheep. We have to buy it, Rob,’ she urged, turning around swiftly. ‘I know it’s the place for us, I can just feel it.’

Robert knew his reservations wouldn’t stop her. ‘Where’s Mr Brookes?’ he asked.

‘I think he’s speaking to what will be our new neighbours. He’ll be in soon.’

Right at that moment, in through the back door walked their estate agent, a tall well-dressed man in his early fifties. ‘Did someone mention my name? Just talking to the nearby farmer, Cecil Appleby.’

Joan hurried upstairs again, this time taking Amanda with her, leaving Robert with Mr Brookes.

‘Your wife is very taken with this cottage, Mr Fernsby,’ Mr Brookes said, peering at him over his half moon glasses.

‘I know,’ Robert replied, his shoulders sagging, ‘so there’s not much point saying we need to sleep on it. Not when Joan’s mind is firmly made up.’

‘Excellent,’ the agent said, grasping his clipboard. ‘Old Miss Baldwin would have been delighted you’re going to buy it. You seem such a lovely family. Being a probate sale, there’s no onward chain, and since you already have a buyer for your London house, I’m sure we can get you in before the summer.’ Looking uncomfortable, Robert offered up a reserved smile. ‘Life here is slow and steady,’ Mr Brookes continued, ‘and folk look out for one another. But take it from me ...’ He stopped short and looked him squarely in the eye. ‘The people here will treat you very well, provided, of course, you do your bit.’

‘I really hope we can,’ Robert said, as he and Mr Brookes shook hands on the deal.