ON THE BACKS OF OTHERS

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For Susan, Alex, Amy, Livs, Jess, John,
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CHAPTER ONE

'I assume this charming message is meant for me.' Mrs Woodcock waved the creased cardboard she had ripped from the greenhouse door under Benson's dripping nose. Rotter opened one resentful eye, but didn't lift his head from the patch of warm sunlight he had found on the cracked cement.

Benson did not look up from his tomato plants, or signify that he had heard her. The sign had been up for so long he had stopped noticing it.

'He says you need to come,' she said, spinning the card onto the floor. The words 'BUGGER OFF', scrawled in marker pen, stared up at her from the chaos of broken pots and cobwebs. 'The man I told you about. The one who phoned. He's here now. He says it concerns both of us.'

Benson gave a rasping cough as he straightened up, expelling a large slug of phlegm into the pile of potting compost under the bench.

'Take your boots off before you come inside,' she added, as she walked out without looking back. 'And that disgusting dog stays outside.'

Rotter closed his eye and sank back into the peace and quiet of his dreams.

Benson took his time following Mrs Woodcock back to the house and made a pantomime of pulling off his boots at the door. He never wanted her to get the idea she could order him about, although she undoubtedly did, and by the time he joined them in the library the elderly visitor was showing signs of impatience that even a lifetime of studied politeness could not completely suppress. Seeing the state of the old gardener's socks as he shuffled across her polished floor for the first time in many years, beneath the towering glass-fronted mahogany bookcases, Mrs Woodcock decided it would have been wiser to have allowed him to keep his boots on. His dishevelled appearance was a stark contrast to the sharp creases of their visitor's pin-striped suit, the glowing whiteness of his collar and cuffs and the shiny gold of the cufflinks.

For a second, she was distracted by a movement at the window, but when she went over to check, there was no one there, just ragged trails of wisteria shifting in the breeze. By the time she turned back, Benson had made a show of making himself comfortable in the other wing-back leather chair and she only just managed to stop herself from scolding him for showing such disrespect in the circumstances. Even seeing him in this room fanned the coals of painful childhood jealousy, still smouldering somewhere deep inside her. She told herself that he had as much right to sit there as anyone else, but in her heart she didn't believe it.

The visitor gave Benson a curt nod of acknowledgement, to which Benson did not bother to respond. 'This concerns both of you equally,' he said, as what sounded like a small

dog started yapping frantically from somewhere outside the house. 'It is rather a delicate matter.'

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When the dapper old man had appeared in the village the previous evening, the bar at the Crown Inn already contained the usual cheerful herd of local drinkers, all of whom fell silent and turned their heads as one as the creaking front door heralded the arrival of the second stranger of the evening. The smells of cooking mingled with those of centuries of spilled beer, overlaid with notes from the ash that had lain in the unlit fireplace all summer. There were faded hunting prints on the walls, but the lighting was too low to make out any of the bucolic details. Several of the light fittings lacked working bulbs and their shades had been knocked to precarious angles by the passing shoulders of drinkers. Everyone in the village liked it that way.

The first stranger, who had walked through the same door a few hours earlier, was already halfway through her light supper, sitting alone at a table in one of the darkest corners of the bar. For a second it seemed to the more hawk-eyed of the drinkers that the two of them exchanged glances of recognition. But if they did, the moment passed in the wink of an eye. The French woman, who had given her name to the landlady as Daisy de Courcy, returned to spearing her salad, which was constructed entirely from produce grown around the village. The sweetness of the tomatoes, on the brink of becoming overripe, compensated pleasantly for the bitterness of the sharply ridged peel on the cucumber.

A few late-summer petals from the pub garden had been scattered over the top. The old man made his way slowly to the bar, careful not to trip on the uneven stone floor, placing his cases down with fussy precision.

'Good evening,' he said to Joan, who was watching his approach from behind the bar. Her smile was the professional welcome of a landlady, her eyes suggesting a curiosity at finding two of her usually vacant bedrooms filled simultaneously. 'My name is Gerald Remers, I booked a room.'

'I know,' Joan said, as the rest of the room stayed silent and pretended not to be listening. The name had rung a dim and distant bell in her memory at the time the reservation was made, but she still couldn't think why that would be. Nothing about his appearance seemed familiar.

'I'm sorry to arrive so late. Is there any chance of getting something to eat?'

'We can probably rustle up something. What do you fancy?'

Having ordered a bowl of soup and a glass of wine, Gerald shuffled to a table at the opposite end of the room from the French woman and pointedly studied some papers from his time-worn briefcase, making it clear he did not wish to be engaged in conversation by anyone else in the room. Heads turned back towards Daisy, who was equally engrossed in reading something on an iPad, the landlady's dog curled contentedly beside her. Since nothing else of interest appeared to be imminent, the drinkers returned to the normal evening exchanges of village news, and views, peppered with the banter of people who had known one

another a long time, as if the two strangers had now rendered themselves invisible.

An hour later, both visitors had actually disappeared, up to their bedrooms. As she sat at the dressing table, carefully removing her make-up, Daisy could hear the voices rising clearly through the dark, time-polished floorboards from the bar below.

'Did you see her handbag?' a younger voice asked Joan.

'I saw she had one …' Joan sounded like she was shrugging.

'Hermès,' the girl informed her.

'Which means?'

'Thousands and thousands of pounds.'

'Should be able to pay her bill then.'

'That coat was Chanel,' another female voice joined in.

'All a bit fancy for us, then.'

Daisy pictured Joan giving the bar a cursory wipe with the cloth she seemed to wear as a permanent accessory over her shoulder.

'Trotsky gave her the seal of approval,' Joan said, and Daisy assumed she meant the dog.

'Probably liked the way she smelled,' someone suggested.

'That was Chanel too.'

'It looked to me like they knew each other,' someone else ventured, and Daisy paused to listen more carefully, her fingertips lifting the skin on her cheeks, removing several more years from her reflection.

'You think they're having an illicit affair?'

'At his age?'

'Here?'

'What's wrong with here?' Joan asked, with an edge of genuine indignation in her voice.

'Well, it's not exactly the Ritz, is it?'

'They'll be waking up to some of the best views in England, I'll have you know. It was good enough for Victoria and Albert.'

'Still got the same plumbing as well.'

There was laughter and what sounded like a slap from Joan's wet tea-towel. Daisy returned to her nightly skincare routine as the conversation continued below her feet.

'Give us another round, Joanie.'

'The old boy looked like he was dressed more for a funeral than an affair.'

'You got a funeral on tomorrow, Vicar?'

'Nothing booked in. Maybe one of the other villages.'

'Didn't you ask either of them why they were here, Joanie?'

'None of my business,' Joan sniffed.

'How old do you reckon she is?'

'I know how old she is.' It was Joan's voice again. 'She showed me her passport when she arrived. She's in her seventies.'

'Seventies?' a chorus of shocked voices exclaimed, and Daisy smiled into the mirror as she applied a liberal quantity of La Mer to compensate her complexion for the rigors of the day's travels.

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The misty valley view she awoke to the next morning was just as beautiful and expansive as Joan had predicted. The only sound to be heard was horses' hooves on the high street

tarmac as the first ponies of the day were taken out for gentle exercise from the neighbouring livery yard. By the time Daisy got downstairs, Gerald was already halfway through his cooked breakfast. They nodded an acknowledgement of one another's existence as fellow travellers, giving no clue as to whether the drinkers' suspicions were well founded or not, and Daisy passed him on her way to the far end of the room. Watching from the kitchen, Joan paid closer attention to her guest's clothes, being more interested than she had wanted anyone to know the previous evening. Even with simple black trousers, black polo neck, and boots designed to look like they might have been inspired by something to do with riding, she could see that everything Daisy was wearing was expensive and carefully put together. She glanced down at her own comfortable, well-worn jeans and sweatshirt, and sighed.

'Where is Trotsky this morning?' Daisy asked.

'He's having a lie-in,' Joan said, as she poured her guest a cup of coffee. 'He's not as young as he was.'

'May I take him for a walk later?'

'Of course, he would love that. You need to keep him on a lead though, or you'll lose him down a rabbit hole. If he picks up a scent, he forgets he isn't a puppy anymore.'

'Okay.' Daisy laughed and held up her iPad to show a map of the village. 'Can you show me the best route? If this is the pub here, what's that building?'

'Oh, that's the big house,' Joan said, squinting at the map, 'it's all private round there. They don't like anyone walking through their land. There have been a few nasty incidents

between ramblers and the gamekeeper over the years. You need to keep to the footpath round the side, outside the walls, that red dotted line. There are some lovely views over the valley.'

'The gamekeeper?' Daisy kept her voice casual. 'They have shooting there?'

'Not formal shoots. Not anymore. But you hear shooting now and then. Hunting rabbits, maybe, or keeping the foxes away from the chickens. They used to raise a lot of pheasants but I think the foxes wiped them out. They used to have peacocks too, but the foxes got them as well. As kids we used to follow them around the grounds for hours, just waiting for them to open their tails. Mind you, they made a god-awful racket, screeching at one another from the rooftops.'

Once Joan had disappeared into the kitchen with her breakfast order, Daisy went back to studying the map, switching to street view so she could track along the wall that surrounded the estate, looking for any openings that might allow her to slip through without triggering cameras. Judging by the density of the undergrowth inside the wall, she doubted that there were any or, if there were, that they would be working, but it never hurt to be careful. Where she came from, surveillance cameras were as standard as alarms and high gates for every large house, and most of the smaller ones.

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An hour and a half later, Gerald was setting off from the pub, slowly and cautiously, avoiding the potholes as he

headed towards the weed-covered gates of the big house in preparation for the long walk up the drive to the front door, while Daisy strolled as discreetly as she could manage, with Trotsky whirling around her ankles in tight circles of excitement, along the road at the back, following the outer wall of the estate. Most of the ancient stones were swamped in a thick mat of dark-green ivy; home, no doubt, to untold thousands of small creatures. The tangled, spiky tentacles of the brambles sprouted from stems as thick as the branches of small trees. The verge was so overgrown, Daisy almost missed the hole in the wall that she had spotted on Google. Clambering over the fallen stones, dislodged by a carelessly driven car sometime in the past, she gave up trying to avoid scuffing her boots, as the thick undergrowth forced her to stumble on virtually every step. Struggling to stay upright, she noticed a smear of blood on her palm, but the mission was too important for her to fret about such small stuff. Trotsky pulled hard on the lead, sensing the possibility of escape and independent adventure, giving Daisy no time to avoid the bramble tendrils that scraped her face and grabbed at her clothing as she forced her way forward.

Eventually regaining her equilibrium, she reined the dog in with some ferocity, rebalancing the power structure between them. Trotsky accepted her authority cheerfully, but immediately went back to pulling in the direction of interesting trails, ignoring the restrictions of the collar, which had tightened around his throat, making him cough and wheeze constantly as he wriggled enthusiastically onwards.

There was a rustle in the brambles, and a flash of red fur, as a fox made a dash for safety.

After what seemed like an age, the walls of the house loomed up through the undergrowth, just a few feet away, and she hauled Trotsky in. He looked up at her as if sensing something interesting was about to happen and awaiting an order. Peering through the branches, she could see that this had once been the back elevation of the house, no doubt looking out over sweeping lawns, which had since reverted to the jungle she had just battled through. The tall, elegant windows were barely visible amidst the bundles of wisteria hanging off rusty fixings, which bound their gnarled, twisting stems to the brickwork. Only one downstairs window was not barred from prying eyes by wooden shutters. Daisy crouched low, lifting a wriggling Trotsky under her arm, and crept closer. Raising her head slowly over the froth of wisteria leaves, she peered in.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, she could make out the back of a wing-back leather chair, with Gerald's pin-striped sleeve and white cuff resting on the arm. Two other people were in the room, who she guessed were the ones she was looking for. As Mrs Woodcock seemed for a split second to glance in her direction, Daisy ducked down and ran in a crouch round the corner of the house, where the windows were less grand and less firmly shuttered. One casement stood slightly open. Daisy tied Trotsky to a sturdy buddleia, which had rooted itself firmly into a crack in the courtyard's brick floor, and pulled the window fully open. With an agility honed by many a Pilates class, she pulled

herself up onto the sill and dropped down into a room that smelled of a mixture of cleaning products and damp washing. There was a single bed, neatly made up, in the corner of the room. Pausing for a second to check that she could not hear any movements or voices on the other side of the door, Daisy let herself into the deserted kitchen and set off on her search for a staircase to the bedrooms. She could hear Gerald's fragile voice through a closed door, explaining the situation. Trotsky was yapping impatiently for her to return and release him. The tempting scent of the nearby foxes was almost more than he could bear.