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The Beach Hut



Veronica Henry



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A rare opportunity to purchase a beach hut on the spectacular Everdene Sands, North Devon.

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20'×20', it has four bunks, a small kitchen and spacious living area, veranda with stunning views

Offers invited

Contact the owner, Mrs Jane Milton,
or the estate office



1

THE SHACK

A light breeze ruffled the steel-blue ocean. The sun, growing ever bolder as the season progressed, was determined not to be intimidated by the clouds that had hovered earlier. They had rather reluctantly drifted away an hour ago, threatening to be back as they left, like playground bullies, but in the meantime the beach was bathed in light and warmth. The chill gradually came off the sands. Lundy Island sat squat and determined on the horizon, looking as if it might cast off any moment and float its way across the Atlantic.

Roy Mason emerged from his shed at the head of the beach, hands curled round the second mug of tea of the day. The first had been just before he left his tiny stone cottage high up in one of the winding streets that made up the village of Everdene. If he could have had a pound for every time someone stuck a note through his door asking if he wanted to sell, he would have been able to afford one of the new-build split-level homes that were being built on the top road. The developer's sign proudly boasted that all of phase one had been sold. There might be a housing slump in the rest of the country, but not

here. Not when the air smelled sweeter than any fabric conditioner, the surrounding hills were soft and rolling and studded with the fluffiest white sheep, and the view took your breath away. Roy had never tired of it, in all his years. Not that he'd ever seen much else. His mug, by dint of a large red heart, might proclaim that he loved New York, but he'd never been, and nor did he want to go. His daughter had brought it back when she'd been Christmas shopping. Roy didn't begrudge her the experience, but he didn't want to share it.

He drained the last of the sugary tea, put down the mug and collected up his tools. Proper tools, with wooden handles that had moulded themselves to fit his hands over the years, smooth and solid beneath his fingers, not like the lightweight plastic efforts they sold now that snapped and bent and buckled as soon as you put them to task. It was all about cost-cutting these days. Shaving down the margins. There was no pride.

To Roy's mind, there was no point in doing something unless you gave it your best. He never cut corners. He did things properly, the old-fashioned way. Someone had sent a flyer round once, undercutting his prices, and a few of the owners had been tempted. The lad might have been cut-rate, but he was also cack-handed and ham-fisted. Roy had watched him trying to hang a new door. It was comical. He felt sorry for him, he was only trying to make a living, but he hadn't a bloody clue. In the end, he'd given up, gone off up country, and Roy had picked up with the old customers where he'd left off, no hard feelings, nothing said. He wasn't one to bear a grudge.

He'd been the unofficial caretaker for the beach huts

since they first went up. His father had built them for the estate, and Roy had been his gofer, the fetcher and carrier. Twelve to start with, but they had gone like hot cakes, and gradually the line grew until it had doubled, then tripled, until it reached as far as the line of rocks that created a natural stopping point. And now he was kept on by most of the owners, to do maintenance and repairs, to check for damage and break-ins over the winter.

Some owners were tight and only paid for their hut to be repainted once every three or four years. A false economy. The wind and rain that swept through over the winter, sand-blasting the wooden slats, was unforgiving; the wood needed protection. Some owners kept their huts plain; others saw it as an excuse to express their personality and chose garish colours that somehow worked in the seaside setting, a fairground riot of reds and greens and pinks and oranges. Some of them had their own names: 'Oysters'; 'Atlantic View'; 'Valhalla'. Nothing sparkingly original, but it added to the sense that this was a community, that each hut was a home from home.

Roy loved the lack of logic, the crazy mismatched line that marched down the length of the beach. He knew each one of them, their idiosyncrasies, their histories, who had owned them over the years. Each time one of them was sold, he was unsurprised by the astronomical prices they fetched. It was the same all over the country, if you were to believe the Sunday supplements, and these huts were a cut above the rest, being big enough to sleep in if you didn't mind bunk-beds and a howling wind. They were still pretty basic, but there was electricity and running water, and at night the fronts twinkled with fairy

lights. Despite the lack of luxury, people still flocked to buy them. There was a waiting list in the estate office. All Roy hoped when a hut changed hands was that the new incumbents would treat their hut with respect and obey the unwritten rules of the beach.

He had applied the last lick of paint, oiled the last lock, replaced the last piece of flapping roof felt. The huts were pristine, ready for the season to begin. Soon the beach would be alive with the special sounds of summer. The shouts and squeals of children frolicking in the surf. The thwack of tennis balls against cricket bats. The smell of burning charcoal and roasting meat. The thrum of the coastguard's helicopter as it passed by on its patrol, swooping low over the sands and then shooting up into the sky, off to the next cove.

He spent the morning fixing a new price list to the side of his shed. Roy still worked for the estate as well, maintaining the huts they owned and organising their letting, and renting out windbreaks and deckchairs. At night, he took people out fishing for sea bass. It satisfied the inner Hemingway in them, mostly the men. There was something about fishing that bonded men. Women never took to it in the same way – they were always slightly mystified by the attraction, if they ever ventured out. He could see they were bored. They would much rather buy their bass from the converted ice-cream van that drove along the coast road every evening, selling lobster and crab.

His mobile rang in the pocket of his shorts. Another reason for the popularity of this beach – a good phone signal for all those BlackBerry-toting career people who needed to keep in touch with the office. Roy didn't see

the point. It wasn't a holiday, if your employers could keep tabs on you, or if you could keep tabs on yours. But that seemed to be the way of the world.

It was Jane Milton. Her warm voice danced down the line and his stomach gave a little squeeze of pleasure. He liked Jane. She always paid her bill on time, never expected things to be done yesterday. She spoke to him as an equal, not like some of the buggers.

'Roy. It's Jane. I'm in London with a friend at the moment – how's the weather down there?'

'Set fair for the week, I should say.' He had no idea if it was. The weather here had a mind of its own. But that was what she wanted to hear, so that was what he told her.

'Marvellous. I'll be back down this afternoon. The rabble won't be arriving until the weekend, so I'll get a couple of days' peace and quiet. Many people down yet?'

'Just the regulars.'

He could see a few hardy surfers in the water, which still had an icy chill. It took till September to warm up.

'Good.'

He heard a slight tension in her voice.

'Everything all right?'

She sighed.

'This is going to be the last summer, Roy. I've hung on as long as I can, given the circumstances, but I'm going to have to sell.'

His eyes picked out the Milton hut. A tasteful light blue, with a veranda. He didn't reply for a moment, as was his way. Roy was thoughtful, never felt the need to respond immediately. He liked to take his time. He

remembered her telling him she hadn't got a bean to live on. That she was selling her house. *Downsizing*, she'd called it, but she pronounced the word with as much distaste as if she was saying *dogging*. If she was selling the hut too, then things must be really bad.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' Roy spoke eventually. 'You'll have no shortage of buyers, if that's any consolation. I get people asking me all the time if there's any for sale.'

'Well, I'm not going to sell to any old person. And definitely not that dreadful man who badgers me every summer. He can go to the bottom of the list.'

Roy chuckled. He knew the bloke. The one who phoned him up imperiously asking him to fill the fridge with stuff from Tesco, expected him to pump up his children's inflatable dinghies. He was a caretaker, not a bloody butler. He didn't mind doing that sort of stuff for anyone else, mind. It was just the way the bloke *asked*. Of course he would want the Miltons' hut. He was an Alpha male, he only wanted the best.

'I'll open the hut up for you. Give it an airing.'

'See you later, for a cup of tea.'

Jane was resolutely cheerful. She had only wavered for a moment. He had heard the catch in her voice, the hint of anger at having been left in such a terrible financial mess when her husband had keeled over on the platform at Paddington. The hut had been hers, left to her by her mother. Graham Milton hadn't been able to take *that* with him when he shuffled off this mortal coil.

Roy had been disgusted when Jane told him the details. It was a disgrace, to leave your wife in poverty like that. There had been no pensions, no life insurance, no cash, and a huge mortgage on their Georgian rectory

to pay off and no endowment to cover it. Graham Milton might have been a financial advisor, but he obviously didn't heed his own advice. He probably thought he was being clever, cashing in all their assets, making investments that he thought were going to make him rich quick. Only the gamble had backfired. Instead of coming clean, he had desperately tried to plug the gaps, but got himself deeper and deeper into debt. It was the stress of keeping it all quiet that had killed him, everyone agreed. And poor Jane, totally oblivious until the solicitor and the accountant had broken the news to her, widowed and penniless overnight.

For all Graham Milton's airs and graces – and he'd had a few, not like his wife – he wasn't a gentleman, not in Roy's book.

He hung up. The call had unsettled him. He wasn't usually sentimental, but Jane Milton selling up was like the end of an era. She had the plum hut, the best pitch at the top of the beach, the first one to be built. People would be falling over themselves to buy that one. He could imagine the article in the *Telegraph* already: *on the market for the first time in fifty years . . .*

He remembered clearly the day she'd arrived. She'd been Jane Lowe then, of course. She'd fluttered over the beach in her polka-dot dress, her legs long and bare, her brother and sister scampering behind. He knew as soon as he set eyes on her that a girl like her would never take a boy like him seriously. He'd left school at fourteen, didn't play tennis, his parents didn't even own their own house, let alone have money left over to buy a beach hut.

Roy told himself to not even try. He didn't want to set

himself up for humiliation. She was bound to have a boyfriend already, called Gregory, or Martin, who would turn up in a Triumph Spitfire and cricket flannels to whisk her off for gin and tonics at the golf club. All Roy had was a bike. He could hardly stick her on the crossbar and pedal her down to the local pub.

There had been one summer, the summer they were both seventeen, when they'd started to get quite close. He'd been selling ice creams, and she used to come and talk to him in the kiosk, because he had a wireless. They'd listen to the latest hits, discussing their merits, and sometimes she would dance, and he'd long to have the nerve to dance along with her, but he was far too self-conscious. Not like Jane, who didn't care what anyone thought, swaying and twirling and clicking her fingers. Once, she'd grabbed his hand and tried to make him dance too, and he thought he might die, of a combination of embarrassment and the thrill of her touching him.

'Loosen up, Roy,' she laughed at him. 'Dancing's good for you. It's wonderful!'

Thank God another customer had arrived at that moment, and he tore himself away and busied himself serving a 99, concentrating as the stream of sweet ice cream oozed its way into the cone until he cut it off with a practised flick of the wrist. And then Jane's mother had waved from the hut, indicating lunch was ready, and Jane had skittered off, dancing her way across the sands.

His chance had gone.

And then she'd got that job, disappearing up to the house on the cliff. After that, he'd never really seen her, except for that one night, the night he couldn't really

think about even now without a huge twinge of regret, an overwhelming longing for what might have been, even though it could never have been. Not in a million years. And then she was gone, up to London, until years later she came back as Mrs Milton, by which time it was far, far too late, of course, because by then he was married to Marie.

Roy sighed. Even now, if he narrowed his eyes a little bit, to block out the telephone mast on the hill in the distance, and pretended it was the Beatles on the radio instead of Take That, nothing much had changed. The horizon never altered, the sea was the same, he could still be there . . .

The Lowe children were sick with excitement when their father bought the first hut on Everdene beach. They had been watching them go up for the past six months, whenever their parents brought them to the beach at the weekends or in the holidays. When their father had presented them with a big key, with a brown label attached emblazoned with the number one, they had been puzzled. Then Robert had screamed, 'A hut! He's bought a hut!' and they had raced over the sand to be the first, all arriving at once, crowding round the door.

Inside it was as snug and well equipped as a gypsy caravan. Two sets of bunk beds – Robert and Elsie would have to go toe-to-toe, because there were five of them altogether, with Mum and Dad and Jane having one each. Dear little cupboards and a Calor gas stove. Deck-chairs were neatly stacked in one corner. There was a shelf, with hooks to hang cups, and rails to hang wet towels. A perfect little home from home. They were to

stay there all summer, with their father travelling down at weekends.

It wasn't long before they couldn't remember life without it. The water was their natural habitat. They spent most of the spring, all of the summer and some of the autumn diving in and out of the waves, scrambling over the rocks and bounding over the dunes, armed with fishing nets, buckets, spades, sandwiches. Now they would have somewhere to store all their treasures, somewhere to huddle if it rained, somewhere to dry themselves off and hang their wet towels. And their mother could sit inside all day, doing whatever it was she did – fussing, organising, cooking, writing letters.

Three years on, however, and the eldest Lowe, Jane, was not so enamoured. Where once she would have pounded along the beach, her pale yellow hair streaming behind her, now she was bored absolutely rigid. A summer spent on the beach with her tiresome younger siblings? She might as well be dead. She sat in one of the striped deckchairs, flicking idly through magazines, knowing full well that if she actually got up and joined in she would feel far, far better, but something inside refused to let her and so she remained stationary, day after day, with the stubbornness of an adolescent.

She could still be in London, having fun. Maybe most people had gone home for the summer vac, but not all. It wouldn't be bloody dead, like this place. She thought longingly of the smoky little clubs and cosy pubs where she'd been spending her evenings. Of course, she wasn't supposed to leave the college at night, but she and Sandra had found a way of getting out and getting back in again without being noticed. And it wasn't why her parents

were forking out all that money. They wanted her to come out with tip-top typing and shorthand skills so she could have a career. How very enlightened of them. Jane didn't want a career. She wanted a good time.

Typically, she had spent seven months at Miss Grimshire's before she had discovered the real delights of London nightlife. And the final two months, before she left with her certificate (merit and 140 words per minute, despite burning the candle at both ends), had passed in a flash and suddenly she was back in Everdene, leaving her new self behind, a party-loving creature who wasn't yet fully formed. She wanted bright lights and action and clothes and music and laughter . . .

Finding herself in this total backwater with no hope of any social life whatsoever had plunged her into gloom. Well, there was a social life, but it involved rounders on the beach or burnt sausages – not drinking brandy and ginger in a tiny club with music throbbing through your body.

And so she was sulking. Her mother was not best pleased. Her mother was incensed. She wouldn't stop banging on about her daughter's new-found lassitude. Prue Lowe didn't believe in sulking, or lolling, or dozing, or festering – all the things Jane felt inclined to do. Prue was an up-and-at-it sort of person, a doer, an organiser, and she never knew when to leave well alone.

'You can't just sit in that deckchair moping all holidays,' she chided her eldest daughter. 'Go and get some exercise. Have a walk along the beach.'

Jane just rolled her eyes and went back to her magazine. She'd read it four times already, but the chances of getting anything up to date in the general shop in

Everdene were pretty remote. She was all right if she wanted knitting patterns and foolproof recipes for a sausage plait, but not if she wanted to know what she should be wearing this autumn.

Not that she had any money to buy the clothes she salivated over.

The closest she got to having fun was sitting with Roy Mason in the kiosk where he sold ice cream, listening to the radio. She made him turn it up when one of her favourites came on. She tried to get him to dance, but he jumped away from her as if he'd been branded whenever she touched him. Boys in London didn't jump away from her, far from it. Maybe she just wasn't Roy's type? He seemed very keen on Marie, whose mother ran the café at the end of the promenade. Marie worked in there too, and sometimes she came down to the beach with a bacon sandwich for Roy, and Jane made herself scarce. Two's company, after all.

The third time Marie had found Jane with Roy, she cornered Jane in the post office.

'You keep away from him,' she warned, an accusatory finger pointing in Jane's face.

'Hey,' replied Jane, holding up her hands to indicate her innocence. 'We've only been talking.'

Marie shot her a look of pure venom. Jane kept away from Roy after that, not because she was afraid of Marie, but because she didn't want to cause trouble for Roy. He was nice. He was far too good-looking for Marie, with his dark hair and brown skin and kind eyes. He didn't know he was good-looking. You could tell that by the way he carried himself. Not cocky and arrogant like some of the boys she'd met, who thought they were God's gift when

they weren't, far from it. Maybe the city did that to you, made you more confident than you should be. It had certainly made her more confident.

As the days dragged on, Jane could tell her mother was running out of patience. Prue wasn't tolerant of people who didn't fit into her idea of how things should be. Jane was spoiling her fantasy of a happy seaside family holiday. She clearly expected her daughter to be gung-ho, and take part in the same activities as her younger brother and sister. If Prue had her way Jane would be scrambling over the rocks in her Start-rite sandals, squealing every time she spotted a crab, tucking with gusto into the selection of sandwiches Prue provided for lunch – fish-paste, egg or Marmite.

Jane certainly didn't begrudge her siblings the experience, but it didn't mean she wanted to take part. And it wasn't as if she wanted to sit here, full of torpor, her very being crying out for something, *anything* to happen, though she didn't know quite what. It was the slowest agony, and she wasn't entirely sure of the cure, but she was pretty sure she wasn't going to find it on Everdene beach. She couldn't explain it to her mother, who obviously expected her to stay the same age for ever. Care-free, childlike, innocent.

It was ironic, therefore, that Prue organised the very thing that made sure Jane would never be innocent again.

It was a Thursday morning, and by eleven o'clock the sun was burning bright in the sky. Jane was uncomfortably hot, and was taking refuge in the cool shade of the hut. She was contemplating walking into the village and calling Sandra from the telephone box, to find out if she was

having as dull and miserable a time as she was. Maybe she could ask her to come and stay? They wouldn't be able to get up to much, but at least they could gossip and giggle together. Debate the merits of the boys they had met. She'd ask her mother if she could invite her – Sandra could come down by train, Daddy wouldn't mind motoring over to the station to collect her . . .

'Darling!'

Jane started, her eyes flying open. She'd been on the verge of drifting off. Her mother was standing over her.

'You will not believe what I've arranged!'

She had a smile on her face Jane knew of old. A mixture of self-satisfaction and determination, which meant Prue was pleased with whatever she had done, and whoever she had done it on behalf of had jolly well better be pleased as well. Jane's heart sank. If it was golf lessons, she would absolutely refuse. Her mother had been muttering about organising something for her at the club. Jane thought she would rather die.

'I've got you a job.'

Jane stared at her. This wasn't what she'd expected.

'There was a card pinned up in the post office. *Competent typist wanted.*'

Jane breathed out slowly. It could have been worse. Much, much worse.

Her mother was still looking excited. There must be more. She leaned forward.

'Terence Shaw,' she pronounced.

Jane gazed at her, quite blank.

'Terence Shaw!' repeated her mother. 'The novelist!'

Jane frowned and shook her head.

'I've never heard of him.'

Prue gave a little tut of impatience and Jane felt aggrieved. Her mother was no great intellectual – Jane couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her reading a book – so why the scorn?

'You must have. He's . . . infamous. Sells bucket-loads of books, apparently. Rich as Croesus. Which is why he can afford one of those . . .'

Prue waved her hand vaguely towards the houses further down the beach, on the top of the cliff. There were only half a dozen of them, built in the nineteen thirties, sprawling Art Deco houses with flat roofs and curved fronts, set in their own grounds. They each had a *Great Gatsby* smugness, with their spectacular views and private tennis courts.

'He wants someone to type his latest novel. Six hours a day.' Prue paused dramatically before divulging the next nugget of information. 'Six pounds a week!'

Jane sat up. Now she was definitely interested! Six pounds a week? Her mind raced back to the magazines she'd been perusing – what would she be able to afford if she was earning that kind of money?

'He'd like you to start this afternoon. Two o'clock.' Her mother was ushering her up out of her seat. 'Come on, come on – you need to get yourself tidied up. You can't start a job looking like that, with your hair all over the place.'

'But he hasn't even met me yet,' Jane protested, getting up nevertheless. 'How does he know he wants me?'

'Darling, I told him you'd been trained by Miss Grimshire. And that you'd got a distinction—'

‘Merit. I only got a merit,’ Jane corrected her. Her mother was prone to exaggeration.

Prue flapped away her objection.

‘He’s hardly going to be spoilt for choice for typists down here. He seemed quite happy. In fact, he said as long as you were quiet and kept yourself to yourself . . .’

Jane was already at the sink, washing the dust and sand from her hands and face, doing rapid calculations. By the end of the summer she should have over thirty pounds left to take up to London when she went to look for a job. There certainly wasn’t going to be anything to spend it on down here. Thirty pounds! What heaven, what bliss!

Half an hour later, with her mother’s grudging approval as to her appearance, she walked halfway down the beach, and then took the steep path up through the dunes that led to the back road which served the houses where Mr Shaw lived. The marram grass slapped at her legs as she walked, and the sand insinuated its way into her sandals. She took them off and emptied them out before she walked up the drive. She wondered what he would be like to work for. She imagined a little old man with spectacles and a woolly jumper, a little bit absent-minded, but essentially quite kind. She would have to bring him tea, which he would forget to drink. And eventually she would tidy his office for him, thereby transforming his life, and he would be awfully grateful. Miss Grimshire talked a lot about how to manage your employer. It was best if you went about organising them without them noticing you were doing it. An efficient secretary could

make her own and her boss's life so much easier, if she knew the little tricks.

She had arrived at the front door. There wasn't a bell that she could see, so she rapped her knuckles as hard as she could on the wood. There was no answer, so she tried again.

And again.

Jane reckoned that after three knocks either there was nobody in or the person inside didn't want to answer, and so she turned to go, relieved but at the same time not entirely thrilled at the prospect of going to sit on the beach again for another day. At least a tedious typing job would have given her money—

The door was jerked open.

'What?' came a bark.

Jane turned to see a wild-haired, bare torso-ed man. He was over six foot and as brown as a berry, wearing a pair of baggy khaki shorts, nothing on his feet. He had dark curls that were swept back off his face, and eyes that looked as if they had been burnt into his face with a branding iron – dark, deep-set.

He didn't look pleased to see her. She felt tempted just to run and avoid any sort of confrontation, but he could probably catch up with her in two strides.

'Hello,' said Jane brightly. 'I'm Jane Lowe.'

He looked at her with annoyance.

'Who?'

'Your typist?' She corrected herself. 'The typist.' She wasn't his typist, exclusively. 'My mother spoke to you.'

'Oh yes.' He still looked annoyed, but he stood to one side to let her in.

'Were you not expecting me?'

He gave a small sigh of annoyance and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

‘I suppose so.’

Jane felt as if she was a huge inconvenience, like someone who had come to read the meter. She followed him into the house, through a cool dark hallway and into the living room.

She had seen the house so often from the outside. They walked past it whenever they went to the best rock pools at the far end of the beach – it loomed rather menacingly over the sands, the signs at the bottom of the garden warning ‘Private Property – Keep Out’ in red letters. It was strange, now being inside. The living room was vast, the floor made from polished wood, and the entire wall overlooking the sea was made of windows. She was used to seeing the sea from the hut, of course, but from here the view seemed even more spectacular, winking and glittering for miles.

‘Whatever you do, please don’t say what a wonderful view,’ he warned her. ‘It’s been said once or twice before.’

‘I wasn’t going to,’ she retorted. ‘I see it every day. I’m sick of the sight of it, if you must know.’

He looked at her, and she thought she detected the hint of a smile on his rather cruel lips.

There was a large desk in front of the windows, smothered in paper and books. And empty mugs and glasses, as well as a bottle of brandy. An ashtray overflowed with cigarettes, some half-smoked, perched on an open dictionary. Jane itched to whisk the mess away and make everything tidy, but somehow she didn’t think Mr Shaw would take to interference kindly, just yet. Miss Grimshire had explained that it often took time to lick an

employer into shape. She suspected Mr Shaw would take longer than most.

‘I was going to wait till I went back to London to have it typed up,’ Mr Shaw was explaining, ‘but my editor wants the manuscript sooner than I thought. Are you fast?’

Jane nodded.

‘And accurate?’

Again, she nodded.

‘Good.’ He scooped up a bundle of papers. ‘Follow me.’

She followed him obediently out of the room, disappointed that she wouldn’t be working in there. Instead, he led her up the staircase and down a corridor into what had been a bedroom but was now a study. Apart from one small window that looked over the front of the house, the walls were lined with more books than Jane had ever seen outside a library. There was a small table with a typewriter and a stack of fresh paper.

‘I’ve put you here because I can’t stand any noise. Keep the door shut. If you want a drink or something to eat, just help yourself from the kitchen, but don’t bother me.’

He dropped the papers on the desk and gave her a nod.

‘Ten till four, I told your mother. I can’t have anyone in the house for longer than that. The important thing is not to interrupt me. On pain of death.’

He looked at her, his eyes boring into her. She managed a smile.

‘Of course not.’

He gave a curt nod and left the room.

Jane raised her eyebrows. He certainly wasn't what she had expected. Much, much younger than the crusty old Mr Shaw she had imagined, probably in his mid-thirties, she thought. And incredibly rude. In fact, she suspected he might have been a tiny bit drunk – she thought she had caught the smell of brandy as he left. Well, she would certainly do her best to keep out of his way. She didn't need to be spoken to like that by anyone.

She sat down tentatively at her new desk. It wobbled slightly. She looked at the pages of manuscript he had given her. Black slanted writing swirled over the paper in an indecipherable tangle, interspersed with angry crossings-out and arrows and asterisks.

Halesowen, she read, was the sort of town that made you want to slit your wrists. Unless you had the misfortune to be born there, in which case you didn't know any better. But if by some cruel twist of fate you ended up there, having enjoyed the pleasure of some other part of our sceptre'd isle, eventually you would start to look longingly at the blue road map on the inside of your arm, wondering just how much it was going to hurt.

On a stifling summer's evening, Anita Palmer was asking herself just that.

Jane made a face. Where on earth was Halesowen, she wondered? And was that where he was from? He had a slight accent, a twang she couldn't place, but then Jane wasn't strong on accents – most of the people she came into contact with spoke just as she did, unless they were staff.

She shrugged, and put a piece of paper into the typewriter, turned it until it was exactly so, then carefully began to type.