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Village Deception

Written by Rebecca Shaw

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A Village Deception

REBECCA SHAW



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Chapter 1

By nine o'clock, Zack Hooper, well pleased with his attempts at getting the Church of St Thomas à Becket thoroughly organised for the wedding later that morning, decided to have a brew up in his new shed in the churchyard. It had a window along one side so he had a good view of the flowerbeds he'd planted and the ancient trees. Halfway through his mug of tea he became aware of a man studying the inscriptions on the gravestones. Not someone he knew, though. He must have come early for the wedding, he thought. His tea finished, he tossed the tea leaves out on the grass with a practised aim and suddenly the man was beside him.

'Morning, sir, here for the wedding?'

'Er, yes. Yes, I am. Yes, got here a mite early. Is it all right if I walk around for a bit?'

'Of course, the main door's open when you're ready to go in.'

'Lovely morning for a wedding, if it's ever a good morning for one.'

'Ah! Well, the two of them have found love for the first time very late in life, as you will know, so it's a very happy occasion.'

'Of course. Yes, you're right.' The man nodded his head in agreement.

'Relatives of yours, are they?'

'Distant. Come for my mother's sake, really, she can't manage to get here herself. She's confined to a wheelchair, you see.'

Zack's eyes followed the man as he wandered about.

Good-looking chap. Well dressed too, though the suit might just have seen better days. Tall, held himself well, might be an army man, fifties? No, perhaps late forties. Nice thought that, coming for his mother's sake. Showed respect, like.

There were only six guests at the service, not including the man who'd spoken to him, who sat at the back, kind of half there and half not.

Zack tidied up after the service, checked the flowers had plenty of water, turned out the lights, and decided he'd done for the day. But the tall chap was still around.

'Anywhere I could get lunch later on?'

'The Royal Oak has a dining room. Very nice food.'

'Do they have bedrooms?'

Zack shook his head. 'No. Are you wanting somewhere for tonight?'

'Well, yes, I could be.'

'The only place in this village is my wife's B&B. Down Shepherd's Hill, go left at the shop. Or else it means going into Culworth, there're hotels there.'

'I like the idea of staying in this village. Has she a room for tonight?'

'By chance, yes, she has.'

'I'd like to take it. My name's Harry Dickinson.' He held out his hand and Zack found it a no-nonsense handshake, strong, firm and reassuring.

'I'm Zack Hooper. My wife's Marie Hooper, and the house is on the left-hand side going down the hill, Shepherd's Hill that is, and it's called Laburnum Cottage. It's bigger than it looks.'

'Thanks, I'll go down there shortly. I'll have a look round the village first though.'

'Tell her Zack recommended you.'

'I will. Certainly. Thanks.'

'I'm off into Culworth now. Perhaps I'll see you later.'

'Indeed.'

Zack gave Marie a brief blast on his mobile to warn her the chap might be coming, then went into Culworth for lunch and a pint at the Cricketers Inn and a visit to the betting shop. He missed his weekly racing tip from Barclay Ford, such a pity he'd had to do a moonlight flit. Altogether, he'd made about £500 from his tips and his luck hadn't really been in since.

While Zack was lunching in Culworth, the man from the wedding, having bought some chocolate in the village shop, had a coffee in the bar of the Royal Oak, then sat on the seat on the green and watched the geese, was now walking down Shepherd's Hill.

Harry Dickinson liked the look of Laburnum Cottage. A house rather than a cottage, and very smart in a country way. The front had no garden, nor pavement to separate it from the road, and its age showed in the old sash windows and the slightly bulging walls, which were painted yellow as befitted a cottage with the name of laburnum. The door was a gleaming, spotless black with an unusual knocker in the shape of a tree, polished to within an inch of its life. Looking at the upstairs windows he noted the immaculate lace curtains neatly draped and the flowers, real or fake, in each window. Yes, Harry thought, just the place for me.

He gave three loud, positive bangs with the brass knocker and waited. He must be living in country time because there was a long delay before the door was opened. When it did, he was confronted by a small, round woman looking remarkably like a rosy red apple just plucked from the tree; not a blemish on it and ripe and ready for eating.

'Good afternoon. My name's Harry Dickinson. You must be the verger's wife? He said you might have a room available?'

Marie saw a tall, well-dressed man with a charming smile and something about him made her heart skip a beat. 'That's right.

I'm Marie. I do have a room with a lovely view of the garden and Sykes Wood at the back. Would you like to see it?'

Harry nodded. 'Yes, please. It's just for a couple of nights.' He followed her into the house, remembering to wipe his feet on the doormat to make a good impression. The stairs led straight up from the tiny hall and he followed her up the shallow stairs, liking the pictures which scaled the wall as they went upwards. Not a speck of dust was lurking anywhere and the upstairs showed great promise.

She turned to the first door on the left and opened it, inviting him to go in ahead of her. The bedroom glowed with light, the duvet cover and the curtains matched, the carpet was rose coloured, and there was another door which Harry hoped would be an en suite, for he hated sharing bathrooms with strangers. He'd had enough of that.

Harry asked, 'En suite, is it?' Pointing to the door.

'Oh! Yes, my rooms are all en suite. Everyone expects it now, don't they? Gone are the days of nipping down the landing in your shimmy.' She grinned at him and her rosy cheeks became more rounded. He liked her very much indeed.

'I might stay a week, would you have room?'

'At the moment, yes I have. If it's a week, then it's seven nights for the price of six.'

'Which is?'

'Twenty-five pounds a night with full English, access to your room twenty-four-seven and use of the sitting room.'

'I wouldn't want to be in your way.'

'You wouldn't be. Zack and I have ample space in the attic rooms, so you have the guest area to yourself.'

'I see.'

Caution, born of experience, prompted Marie to say, 'Your luggage?'

'In my car. I parked in the village. If I may, I'll go and get it now.'

Marie beamed at him. She pointed to the hospitality tray. 'I keep it well stocked.'

'Thank you, I can see I shall want for nothing. We'll shake hands on the deal.'

And they did and somehow he held her hand a little longer than he should have done, but she didn't mind, he had such a lovely smile.

'You can park round the back. It's better than in the road, sometimes they come charging down the hill as if they were in a Grand Prix race.'

'And parking too. Wonderful. Won't be long.'

Marie then remembered that she'd omitted to take his credit card number as a surety. Well, she'd ask him when he came back.

Harry Dickinson kept himself to himself at first, he had a key so he came and went at will. Once Zack met him in the bar and they had a drink and walked home together but really that was all. He always ate a hearty breakfast, having something of everything and a pile of toast, but then he had paid for it so that didn't matter.

He said he was thinking about staying on and, naturally, Marie agreed because he was no trouble at all. In fact, they'd settled down to a very comfortable going on. She'd already invited him to have Sunday lunch with the two of them and they'd had a nice chat about politics and present-day country life and how it had changed, then he'd gone out for the rest of the day so that was that. He used his car a great deal for going here and there, he'd bought a map from Jimbo's store, and popped into the Royal Oak. One day, when Zack couldn't get the mower to work, Harry had gone to the church and given him a hand and solved the problem almost immediately, so that night he and Marie had gone to the bar and bought him a couple of whiskies as a gesture of thanks. He was so appreciative it was

almost embarrassing. 'I don't drink very much, you see. I like to be on the abstemious side, it's all too easy to slip into being dependent on it and that's not my style.'

'Nor mine,' said Zack, 'too many lives ruined by drinking too much.'

'Exactly,' said Harry, staring into his whisky glass. He looked up as though he was about to add some intimate revelation, but closed his mouth and looked bleakly out of the window.

Marie touched his hand gently. 'You look sad.'

He gave her an apologetic half smile and said, 'You don't want to hear my troubles.'

'A trouble shared is a trouble halved.'

But he refused to reply and somehow the pleasure went out of the evening and, before long, Harry asked to be excused and disappeared out of the door with only the briefest of thank yous.

'The poor chap, he's very upset.'

Zack looked at Marie, wondering what was going through her mind, but before he could ask, Paddy Cleary came across.

'Evening, Zack. Marie, how're things? That one of your B&B guests?'

'Yes he is, actually. He's booked to stay a week but he's fancying staying a fortnight.'

'He's a nice chap,' said Paddy.

'Sit down, Paddy, we're about to have another drink. You've met him then?'

'Yes. He came up to the big house thinking it was open for viewing like a stately home is, and I met him in the garden. He gave me a hand loading some new paving stones on to my truck. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Insisted, he did.'

Marie smiled. 'That's typical of him, he gave Zack a hand getting the church mower going when he couldn't fathom what was wrong with it. Such a nice man, so well mannered and no trouble at all. I wish all our guests were as good as him. Two new ones came yesterday and they are a pest.'

'Picky, are they?'

Marie nodded her head emphatically. 'You can say that again. They turn their noses up at my cooked breakfast and want yoghurt and fresh fruit and brown toast and something funny called organic or something or other, can't even pronounce it, which I haven't got. If they think they'll get money knocked off for not having cooked, they've got another think coming.'

'Well, if that's the agreed price they can't ask for a discount, can they?'

'Can't they? We'll wait and see.' Marie studied Paddy's face and decided to take the plunge. 'You know, Paddy, I've been thinking, why is it a charming chap like you, in a good, steady job and with this new horticultural qualification Mr Fitch has paid for you to get, why aren't you married?'

Paddy took a long drink of his home-brew before he answered. Those Irish blue eyes of his with their dark lashes twinkled as he said, 'To be honest, Marie, if you were free, I'd …'

Zack laughed like a drain. 'Too late, Paddy. I found her first, and it's staying that way.'

'You're greedy, Zack, keeping her all to yourself.'

Marie blushed. 'I'm too old for you anyway.'

'I like older women, they know how to look after a chap.' Paddy raised his eyebrows at her and then winked.

'Well, really! You've all the blarney of the Irish and then some, Paddy Cleary.'

Tamsin Goodenough came by, glass in hand. Glad of something to divert Paddy's attention from her, Marie said, 'Oh! There's Tamsin. Come and join us, Tamsin, it's been ages since we saw you. What have you been getting up to lately?'

Tamsin wandered over, Martini and lemonade in hand. 'Hi, Marie. Good evening, Zack.' She nodded to Paddy, who moved his chair a little to make room for her. 'Busy, busy as usual, you know how it is.'

Marie was eager to know, for she was envious of Tamsin's musical success. 'Well, tell us then.'

'Gave an organ recital in the abbey last week, and I've another one in London on Friday evening. Keeps me going.'

Zack, who knew Tamsin well due to her being St Thomas's organist, said, 'We're proud of you, you know. People might not say much, but they are. You're always such a joy to listen to. Have you heard her play, Paddy?'

'No, never. I don't go to church.'

'You can always go to a recital, even if you aren't a church-goer. I'm not, but I go to her recitals when I can.' Marie smiled at Tamsin, thinking as she did so that maybe a bit of matchmaking with these two might be a good idea. Paddy, being lightly built, appeared smaller than he actually was when he stood up, and Tamsin, well, she was just the right size for a woman; not too big and not too small. 'The rector is one of your biggest fans, isn't he, Tamsin?'

'He is, but he plays the organ well too, you know, with no training whatsoever. You've heard him, haven't you, Zack?'

'I have, it can be tear-jerking when he plays sometimes. On the other hand, it can be very jolly. Yes, jolly, that's right and it can lift your spirits. You'll have to go to one of Tamsin's recitals, Paddy, see what you think. Her playing isn't all solemn, it can be funny too and make you laugh.'

'Another drink, anyone?' Paddy wasn't going to let himself get involved with anything at all to do with the church. The further he stayed away from it, the better, in his opinion.

Things got quite lively later on. Dicky Tutt came out from behind the bar to give one of his comic performances, complete with new jokes, and Vince Jones was turned out by Georgie Tutt for becoming truculent, having drunk too much as he celebrated a win on the lottery. Someone also brought in a dog that threatened to clamp its jaws round Paddy's ankle when he trod

on its tail as he passed it on his way to the bar again. Altogether, Marie wished Harry had stayed and witnessed a typical night in the Royal Oak saloon bar.

They'd decided to walk to the pub as the evening was fair but, when it came time to go home, Marie wished they'd brought the car. It seemed a long way home, even though it was downhill all the way. Then, as luck would have it, Harry came past in his car and stopped to give them a lift.

'You should have stayed, Harry. We had a right laugh after you'd gone.'

'Had other things to do.'

'Oh! Right.'

When they got back to Laburnum Cottage, Marie suggested Harry might like a hot drink with them before he went to bed. 'I'll gladly make you one. I can offer you tea, coffee, Ovaltine or Horlicks. I think we've got some …'

'That would be lovely. Add it to my bill, I insist.'

'Oh for goodness sake! One cup of whatever isn't going to break the bank.'

'Please, I insist.'

'Very well then. What shall it be?'

'I fancy a Horlicks. Please.'

'Come in the kitchen then, while I make it. Zack, what about you?'

'No, thanks. I'm off to bed. Goodnight, Harry.'

While Marie was making Harry's Horlicks, they heard the couple in the front bedroom come in. Marie listened for them going up the stairs and she was glad they did so without calling in the kitchen like they normally did with some complaint about the weather or some outlandish request for their breakfast that she wouldn't be able to cater for.

'Here we are. Horlicks, as requested.'

She sat down with her cup of tea and dared to ask him, 'You

seemed sad in the pub. I hope it wasn't anything me or Zack said.'

Harry's dark-brown eyes focused on her. 'This Horlicks tastes just like my granny used to make.'

'She was a good granny then?'

Harry nodded. 'Drink ruined our family, you see. That's why I'm careful in the pub.'

'Ah! Right. Alcohol has a lot to answer for.'

'Exactly. Both my mum and my dad drank to excess and it made for a rotten childhood.'

Marie felt so sorry for him. She'd had a brilliant childhood, loved and cared for, even though there wasn't that much money about when she was growing up. 'That's hard.'

Harry nodded again. 'They used all the money for drink and then had nothing left to provide food for us all. It was hard.'

'It certainly is.'

'I guess, from the kind of person you are, your childhood was as every child has a right to?'

'Well, we hadn't much money, but we were loved and cared for.'

'That makes such a difference. It spoils your life otherwise, the whole of your life. I joined the army to get away from it all. It's so lovely here, being looked after by you.'

'Pleasure. I suppose at least you got fed well.'

'Yes, but the Falklands and then every unmentionable place you could think of after that, didn't exactly help.'

'You're a Falklands veteran?' Marie reached across and patted Harry's hand. 'Then you're a hero in my eyes. And Zack's.'

He gave her half a smile, then a shadow crossed his face and the sadness was back. 'I was just eighteen. I think I'll drink the rest of this in bed. Do you mind?'

'Of course not, Harry. Feel free. Goodnight.'

As Marie listened to him climbing the stairs, all her mothering instincts sprang to the fore. The poor, dear chap. The

Falklands at eighteen! Just eighteen. Far, far too young for such an experience, and such a sensitive man would find it very hard. If he was eighteen in 1982, what did that make him now? Forty … Forty-seven, if her maths was right. He hadn't mentioned a wife, though. Come to think of it, he hadn't really mentioned anything at all in detail. Perhaps that was part of being a soldier, you learned to shut out the things that you hated. Poor Harry. When he paid her tomorrow she'd find out if he wanted to stay a while longer, except not much longer, because she was already fully booked for some weeks in the summer. Anyway, his money was as good as the next one's, so perhaps she could squeeze him in somehow.

But the day for Harry to pay his bill arrived and he made no offer to pay at breakfast. She'd mention it when she met up with him during the day, Marie decided. Perhaps he was planning to go to the bank today anyway, or pay by credit card. That would be the easiest for her, by credit card.

When she casually reminded him that same evening, on his return at about eight o'clock, he was genuinely sorry. 'My God! What am I thinking about? I've so enjoyed myself here I didn't realise I'd been here a whole week. Tomorrow, first thing, I shall go straight to the bank. I shall draw it out as the clock strikes nine-thirty. In fact, I could go now, couldn't I, and get it from the cash machine instead? I will. I'll go right now. Right away. Please, Marie, please forgive me. It's so careless of me and I wouldn't want to cause offence, not for anything. I'll be back in about an hour.'

He struggled to put his jacket on, but one sleeve somehow managed to be inside out and his hand caught in it and …

'Look, Harry, please don't rush out now. It'll do in the morning. Honestly.'

He stopped struggling with his jacket and looked Marie full in the face. Honesty was in every millimetre of his smile as he

said, 'Are you sure, because …' and continued the battle with his jacket sleeve.

'Just do as I say, pay me in the morning.'

'Well, I have had a busy day …'

'There you are then. Tomorrow will do. I get the days mixed up sometimes too, it's easy done when you're busy.'

Harry left the moment he finished his breakfast without even cleaning his teeth, which she knew he always did before he went anywhere at all, and was back with the cash by ten-thirty. He insisted on paying her for seven nights seeing as he was paying late. She didn't want him to, but he persuaded her to accept it in the end so his conscience would be clear.

Chapter 2

Despite the downturn in the economy, Jimbo's Turnham Malpas village store was thriving. He'd carefully taken on board a few basic lines that customers could buy more cheaply and yet feel they were buying good food and getting real value for money. Also, and he never let on to Harriet, nor anyone else for that matter, sometimes when his customer was elderly, he added up wrongly on purpose and very few people noticed he was quietly cutting their costs.

The day after Marie had been paid for his week's stay, Harry walked into the store and Jimbo met him for the first time.

'Good morning!'

Jimbo looked up to see who was speaking. 'Good morning. You must be new round here?'

'Well, I'm staying at Laburnum Cottage with Marie and Zack—'

'I've heard about you. Falklands War veteran?'

Harry nodded. 'Name's Harry Dickinson.'

'Yes, that's right. I'm Jimbo, the owner of this establishment.'

'Ah! Right. Nice to meet you. I have been in before, but not when you've been around.' Harry reached out to shake hands.

Like Zack, Jimbo found Harry's handshake very agreeable. 'What can I do for you this bright morning?'

'Because Marie has been so welcoming to me, I'd like to make a meal for them this evening. Just a gesture, you know … of gratitude.'

'They are very genuine people and I'm sure they'll appreciate that.'

'I wondered if you knew something that they would enjoy? I assume they shop here?'

'They do indeed. Something easy?'

'Well, yes. I'm not really very accustomed to cooking. I'd rather pay someone else to do it.' He grinned at Jimbo, who had to grin back. He was that sort of man was this Harry. Very relaxed and friendly, a really nice man.

'They both like fish and, this week, I have a new line in salmon. It comes already cooked, in herbs and wine, so it's just a question of tipping it out onto the plates. I'd also suggest a very nice French mayonnaise to go with it and a pack of new potatoes, scraped and cleaned, all ready for the pan. And perhaps some fresh artichokes? No, maybe not, artichokes could cause you problems if you're not good at cooking. How about frozen broccoli? The cooking instructions are on the packet.'

'Sounds just what the doctor ordered, I'll take your advice.'

In less time than it takes to tell, Jimbo had all the items in one of his smart carrier bags and registered on the cash till but, just before he touched the button for the total, he paused. 'How about wine? Thought about that?'

'Ah! Right! Yes. Wine.'

From the fleeting look of hesitation on his face, Jimbo did wonder if he'd embarrassed the chap moneywise by suggesting wine. 'You don't have to …'

'Yes, of course. Why not?'

A choice was made after an informative discussion about wine.

'You take credit cards?'

'Wouldn't still be in business if I didn't.'

'How right you are. They are so useful, aren't they?' Harry did the chip and pin and then made to leave, but not before another customer spoke to him.

'Couldn't let you go without saying, "Hello". I'm Venetia

Mayer from the big house. I'm in charge of leisure activities for Mr Fitch's staff. You must be the new man staying with Marie Hooper? Nice to meet you. Your reputation goes before you.'

Harry looked at the vivid creature holding out her hand to him. She was dressed, from head to toe, in a pink sports outfit, including trainers, and a mass of sizzlingly curly black hair fluffed out around her face. She was giving out all kinds of messages. Not village material at all, Harry thought. 'How do you do? I'm not sure I like the idea of my reputation going before me!' he laughed and shook her hand.

'Don't worry, it's only good things about what a nice man you are. You should be flattered, they don't take to strangers quickly round here!' Venetia laughed, showing her startlingly white, perfect teeth which Harry guessed had had hours of work devoted to them by some dentist specialising in cosmetic work.

'That's all right then. I wouldn't want the story of my misspent youth to be broadcast all round here!' He flirted with her with his eyes, just enough to excite her. After all, you had to spread a little sunshine on your way through life.

She confidentially tapped his forearm saying, 'What nonsense! I'm quite sure you had an unblemished youth!'

'Well, we won't enquire too closely into that.' He grinned at her and made to leave, but she stopped him by softly suggesting, 'If you have time to spare, you could come during the day and swim in the pool at Turnham House. You could have it to yourself, the students attend lectures most of the day.'

'I might just do that.'

'Are you here for the summer?'

So she was fishing for more information about him, was she? Well, he'd keep her guessing. 'Haven't made up my mind yet, though I must say I'm very comfortable at Laburnum Cottage.'

'Well, any time during the day in the week, except lunchtime. Any time weekends, too, the students have all left then, you see. Ask for me when you come. OK?' She twinkled her

fingers at him and he noted the long, well-shaped nails with their matching pink lacquer. She took good care of her body too, he guessed. 'Bye, be seeing you.'

'Thanks. Good morning, Jimbo. I'll let you know how my cooking goes!'

Venetia watched him leave. Jimbo had noted her reaction to Harry and smiled to himself. Well, he thought. She *has* behaved herself for years, ever since her husband Jeremy had his heart attack. Maybe she thinks it's time to go off the rails a little.

'What a nice man. So pleasant.'

'Yes, he is. What can I get you, Venetia?'

'A bottle of vodka please. Craddock is on an economy drive and our free drinks have been banned. He can be so domineering, can Craddock. I like powerful men but … Now, take you for instance, Jimbo. You have authority, without being a pig. How do you do it?'

'Just my charm. Always got charm, I have. I find it works. Vodka then.'

He slid back the heavy glass door that fronted the drinks shelves and took out a bottle of vodka. 'Anything else?'

'No thanks.' She handed over her credit card.

'I notice *I* don't get an invite to swim in your pool.'

Venetia looked very seriously at him before she replied, 'I … Well … You're a happily married man, and very moral to boot. I'd be wasting my time with you. In any case, I don't want your Harriet after my blood, she's a very formidable woman.' She grinned very sweetly at him and Jimbo was forced to acknowledge the truth in what she said. She did the chip and pin and then left. Jimbo watched the swing of her hips as she went out of the door and sensed trouble in the air.

As he stood staring into space, thinking about the trouble Venetia Mayer had caused in the past, Harriet appeared. 'Got nothing to do? Come and give me a hand up at the Old Barn for an hour.'

'Can't, it's Tom's day off.'

'Oh! Of course. What's troubling you?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all.'

'Do I smell Venetia's perfume?'

'Yes.'

'She been flirting again?'

'Not with me.'

'Who then?'

'Harry Dickinson, the man staying at Marie Hooper's.'

'I haven't met him yet. Is he worth her flirting with him?'

'Very well could be. Time on his hands and I suspect there's more to Mr Dickinson than meets the eye.'

'Such as?'

'On the surface he's a very pleasant man; friendly, well spoken and good-looking but … I don't know, there's a kind of depth to him …'

'If he's ex-army, perhaps there is. You know, terrible things he doesn't want to remember.'

Jimbo shrugged. 'You're probably right. Will this formidable woman give her old man a kiss before she goes?' He pursed his lips, ready.

'Me? Formidable? Was that Venetia saying that?'

Jimbo nodded, lips still pursed.

So she kissed him. 'Less of the old man! If you're old, then so am I, and I'm not. Bye bye!'

'Bye!' Jimbo thought he was right about Harry. He probably wasn't hiding *unpleasant* thoughts, it was more likely that he was simply a very private person. That could very well be it. A very private person.

All morning, business had been slow and then suddenly, the doorbell, the love of his heart, didn't stop ringing and he was too busy on the till to be thinking about Harry and about him going to be ensnared by Venetia, if he let her.

At Laburnum Cottage, Harry was carefully explaining to

Marie that he was cooking supper that night. 'I don't wish to cause offence, but I thought I should like to do it. So, please, do you mind?' He smiled the gentle smile of a very genuine man, and Marie was won over.

'Of course I don't expect it of my guests but, yes, that's fine. Zack and I will be delighted to have supper with you. The kitchen is yours.'

Harry hoisted the carrier bag onto the hall table. 'To be frank, Jimbo has recommended some very simple things for me to prepare. A couple of things will need to go in the fridge until tonight. Is there room?'

'Of course there is.'

'It's just occurred to me, I've completely forgotten about a dessert! I'll go back and …'

'You'll do no such thing. I've a box of Cadbury's roulade in the freezer, that can be our contribution.'

Harry thanked her profusely. 'I didn't intend …'

'Think no more about it. Give me what needs to go in the fridge and I'll put it away. Right?' Marie's lovely country face was lit with a beaming smile and Harry couldn't stop himself from responding to it. He quickly kissed each of her rosy cheeks saying, 'You're too kind.'

Marie blushed bright red.

'Sorry, shouldn't have done that, but you are so very kind to me.'

He handed her the carrier bag and when she noticed there was a bottle of wine in there she said, 'You naughty boy, wine too! Zack will be set up.'

'Jimbo advised me which one to buy. I'm not very well informed about wine, you see.'

'I'm certain it will be lovely then, he's very knowledgeable.'

Harry stood watching her as she disappeared into the kitchen, thinking how lucky he was to have found such a nice place to stay. He almost wished he could stay for ever, but staying in one

place for a long time wasn't his scene. He preferred to move on, it was much easier that way. He wandered into the sitting room and sat down to read Zack's morning paper.

He heard Zack shouting to Marie that he was going to do the mowing at the church and that he'd be a couple of hours. Harry, already bored with the day, jumped to his feet. 'Zack! Zack! I'm at a loose end this morning, the friend I was going to meet can't make it. Could I come and give you a hand?'

Glad of the company, to say nothing of the help, Zack welcomed his offer. 'You can use the small cutter and do the awkward bits, if you like. But those shoes of yours will get spoiled.'

'I've got some old trainers.'

Zack nodded his approval and within minutes they were striding up Shepherd's Hill together like old friends.

It took a while for Zack to get the big mower out of the shed and set it up, then he got the small, old-fashioned mower out for Harry to use. 'You don't need me to tell you which bits this little one is for. At one time old Willie Biggs used this for everywhere, but a kind benefactor bought me this big one and it's made all the difference.'

'Not much technical expertise needed with this little one then, just elbow grease!'

'Exactly. When you're fed up, just stop and I'll finish it off.'

'Absolutely not, it will do me good to get my teeth into something and see it through to the end.' Harry switched on the old mower and set off between the graves. Zack studied his purposefulness and thought he really was a grand chap. Such determination and such vigour. He could do with him every week right through the summer.

The two of them worked for the next hour and a half without exchanging a word until Zack felt in need of his morning tea. He switched off the big mower and shouted, 'Just going to put the kettle on.'

Harry acknowledged what he said, then went to the end of the narrow path he was mowing and switched off.

Zack had quite a comfortable set-up in the shed. There was an old kitchen cupboard that provided him with a workspace for his kettle, bottle of milk, mugs and spoons and a trio of old kitchen canisters held the coffee, tea bags and sugar. There was an electric socket just above the worktop. 'Sit yourself down. It won't take long with this kettle, it used to be Marie's but when she decided to do B&B, she bought a new one and I got this.'

'You're lucky with Marie, she's a lovely lady.'

'You're right there. I'm the luckiest man alive, and there's not many that can say that after thirty years of marriage.'

'Thirty years, that's a long time.' Harry sat ruminating on this matter while they waited for the kettle to boil. 'My parents weren't even married. It might have been better if they had been, they might have felt more commitment, you know.'

'There's lots nowadays aren't married, isn't there? They seem happy enough, but it's not quite the same, I always think.'

'Children?'

'One daughter in America, and she's the spitting image of Marie. Always wished we had more but it didn't happen. You got brothers or sisters?'

'Two brothers and we fought like hell. Dad encouraged us.' Harry sighed. 'He favoured first one, then another. He put us at each other's throats, to make men of us, he said. The idiot. He drank himself to death, literally. I don't remember him ever being in work.'

Zack detected a slight tremor in Harry's voice and wished he'd never brought the subject up. Poor Harry, what a life. It took a lot of character to overcome a childhood like that and become such a decent man. 'Here's your tea. I never thought to ask, is tea OK or would you prefer coffee? Is that enough milk?'

'Tea's fine.' They sat, drinking in silence, until Harry

eventually said, 'That's why I joined the army. To get out of the way, have a roof over my head and some half-decent food.'

'First time I saw you, I thought you might be army. It was the way you walked; upright, shoulders back. You always look as if you're going somewhere too, not just idling about.'

The light flooding in from the wide open doors of the shed was unexpectedly blocked by a tall figure. 'Good morning, Zack.'

Zack leaped to his feet. 'Good morning, sir. Another beautiful day. What can I do for you?'

Harry got a nod from the intruder and Zack introduced him, 'This is Harry Dickinson. He's staying with us for a while and he's been helping with the mowing. Harry, this is our rector, Peter Harris.'

Harry stood up and shook the hand he'd been offered. 'Good morning, Rector. A lovely day.' Harry found himself looking up into a pair of startlingly blue eyes that seemed to bore into his very soul. It took some strength not to feel intimidated by him. This man had the kind of aura that Harry found disturbing, so he sat down again, eager to avoid his thoughtful eyes.

'Just a message, Zack. I had a phone call this morning from the undertaker in Culworth to say that the last of the Gotobed sisters has died in the nursing home. Not unexpected, I must say. I saw her a week ago and her Gotobed sparkle had seriously diminished. We've arranged the funeral for next Monday at two o'clock, refreshments afterwards in the church hall. The last of a long line of Gotobeds, I'm afraid. None of the three girls, nor their brother, ever married, you see. A hundred and one she is … Was. I'll put the details in the book for you. Right? You know which grave, don't you? The Gotobed one under the apple tree, not the one out by the yew tree.'

Zack nodded. 'Right you are, sir.'

'Nice to have met you, Harry. See you again sometime.'

'I'm sure you will.'

'Kind of you to help Zack with the mowing.'

'A pleasure … Sir.'

Harry didn't speak for a while after Peter had left then, having finished his tea right to the bottom of the mug, he said, 'Nice man?'

'The day he leaves here, and please God it won't be for years yet, will be a bad day for this village. He's seen us through a lot these last years. He's always there if you need support and whatever you tell him, it's absolutely confidential. He never breathes a word, even though some of the busybodies round here try to get him to say what he knows. A wonderful rector, couldn't be bettered.'

'Good-looking man. Is he married?'

'He is. Married to a doctor. She's a lovely lady who sees the best in everyone and brings out the best in everyone, believe me. You seem very interested.'

'The clergy interest me in general. I just can't understand why they do it. A fine, upstanding chap like him. He's obviously intelligent and has a lot going for him, and he becomes a rector. I mean, you know. Clerical collar, and all that. It's a funny occupation for a real man.'

'Well, he's a real man and he's good at his job.'

'Didn't say he wasn't.'

'And, what's more, he means every word he says. He prays for half an hour every morning in church from six thirty to seven, then he does a three-mile run, home for his breakfast and then on with his work.'

'He has a pretty penetrating stare.'

Zack grinned. 'You've noticed. Nobody can hide things from him. He knows you inside out, so you'd better watch out!' Zack nudged Harry and laughed out loud, 'Come on then, let's get cracking.'

'Let's go to the pub after and you can introduce me to some of the others. Right?'

'Great.' Zack glanced at his watch. 'Half an hour should see us finished. Come on then.'

Harry went back to finish his mowing and started raking up the grass, thinking hard. The less he saw of that rector, the better it would be for him. He hated it when he met people who wanted to find out too much about him. He liked to keep his life private, after all, his life was his life and no one else's, and that's how it should be. He'd never been close to anyone in his life. In fact …

'I'm done, are you? I'll rake this bit here up for you and that'll be it, won't it?'

'OK, Zack. Thanks.'

They each had a ploughmans. The cheese was wonderful, the salad fresh and the pickle homemade. A glass of Dicky's home-brew topped it all off wonderfully well. Harry enjoyed meeting Dicky properly. He was a 'hail fellow well met' kind of person, there didn't seem to be any unknown depths to him, nor his wife Georgie, who was bright, blonde and jolly. Just the kind of wife he would …

'Hi there!' It was Jimbo from the store, delivering a side of cooked ham for the dining room. 'Mind if I join you? I just fancy a glass of ale. I'll see Georgie first.'

Jimbo exchanged the side of ham for a fistful of notes from the till and ordered his ale. 'On the house, Jimbo, you dear boy. We've run out of ham and I never thought you'd deliver today. You're special, you are.'

Jimbo came across to sit with Zack and Harry and a general conversation ensued, in which they told Harry all about the advantages of living in Turnham Malpas. Some things they thought were good, Harry knew for sure he wouldn't like, but others he could see the advantage of, and wondered why he'd never chosen to live in a village before.

Jimbo downed the last of his ale and, after wiping his

moustache in case of froth lingering on it, said, 'I don't suppose you're a bell-ringer, are you?'

'A bell-ringer?' Harry almost choked on the last of his pickle. '*Me,* a bell-ringer?'

'I only meant it if you intend staying in the village. Do you?'

'Well, not really. I'm just here for a week or so to get my bearings and such, but no intention of staying for a lifetime. No, no. I'm terribly sorry.'

'Have you any experience in that field?'

Harry laughed. 'Absolutely none, sorry. I can't help you with that.'

'Ah! We're desperately short of volunteers, you see. I saw you helping Zack and thought that perhaps you were thinking of staying.'

'No, I'm not. I was just at a bit of a loose end this morning, so I thought I'd give him a hand, that's all. Thanks for thinking I might be a suitable candidate, though.'

'What is your forte?'

'Accounts, mainly.'

Jimbo came alive. 'Accounts! I could give you two weeks' work, immediately. My accounts person is just out of hospital after an operation, and I'd be grateful for you to take over the basic running of the accounts for me. He'll be back at work two weeks from now, he says, though I doubt it.'

'I haven't any references with me.'

'Not to worry, you won't be handling money. I always do that side. It's entering the data that's the bit that bores me and takes up too much of my time. Overheads, wages, writing cheques for me to sign to pay my suppliers etc. Would you? You could start tomorrow. I'd be ever so grateful. You'd be working up in the office at the Old Barn. Lovely working conditions.'

'Well, I am computer literate. But … You're taking a risk … No, maybe I'd better not.' Harry shook his head, a grave expression on his face.

'Really? My daughter Fran helps out sometimes with the data-entering, but she's busy at school at the moment. GCSEs and all that. Come on, how about it? I pay good workers, good money. I'm not a penny pincher, honest.'

Harry hesitated. He could do with the money … He'd get a reference out of it too, he supposed. 'Shall I? OK then, I will. As long as I'm not outstaying my welcome at Marie's.'

Zack emphatically declared he would not be, privately thinking of the £150 a week Harry would pay for the privilege.

'Tomorrow morning. Eight-thirty start, four-thirty finish. I'll be up there and I'll explain everything. I'll be so glad to have someone reliable.'

'You don't know if I'm reliable. Not yet, anyway.'

'If you're not, then I shall give you the elbow. I'm not in the business of paying people to play when I'm paying them to work. I'm a tough but fair employer.'

'I like the sound of that.You're up front and that pleases me. I like to know where I stand. I like that kind of honesty. Right, you're on. Eight-thirty tomorrow morning, for two weeks.'

Harry watched Jimbo leaving, lost in thought. Suddenly he said, 'That all right with Marie, Zack? I don't want to upset her plans in any way.'

'There're two guests coming this Friday for the weekend, that's all at the moment. Things don't hot up until the summer, you see. June, July, August time. We'll both be glad of your company until then.'

Harry left the Royal Oak delighted by the prospect of working for Jimbo. He'd been at a loss for things to do these last few days, there was a limit to the sightseeing one could do without travelling miles, and petrol wasn't cheap. Two weeks' work. First thing tomorrow, he'd ask what the pay was.

That same afternoon he walked up to Turnham House for a swim.