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The Hidden Cottage

Written by Erica James

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The Hidden Cottage

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Chapter One

'Expect the unexpected' was Owen Fletcher's new personal mantra.

And the unexpected was exactly what he got when he turned off the main road and dropped his speed to enter the village of Little Pelham and saw a floral sofa hurtling by at considerable speed.

Now that's something you don't see every day, he thought with an amused smile.

With two lads riding the sofa down the narrow street and a motley gang of children chasing after it, their happy laughter and boisterous cries of encouragement rang out in the peaceful still of the afternoon.

Keeping his distance, Owen carefully followed behind. Passing the stone-built cottages, their tiny front gardens vibrant with spring flowers, he recalled a time when he had used this very street to ride his bike at breakneck speed. He had to admit, though, sofa racing was a lot more inspired, much more of an extreme sport.

Ahead of him the sofa and children had come to an abrupt stop near the water trough, where the slope levelled and the village green with its semi-circle of thatched cottages began. Seeing that the sofa had tipped over – its wheels had dug into the grass, and its two riders had tumbled out to great cheers – he pulled alongside and with the top back on his car, he leant over. 'Everything OK?' he asked. 'Anyone hurt?'

Judging from the laughter, he was fairly sure no one was injured, but there was no harm in checking. Without answering his question, two boys came over; they looked to be about eleven years old. The smaller of the pair said, 'Cool car.'

With a roll of his eyes, the other boy said, 'Of course it's cool; it's a Jaguar E-Type.'

‘You’re very knowledgeable for one so young,’ Owen said with a smile.

‘My dad’s into classic cars,’ the boy replied with a shrug of his shoulders, casting what appeared to be an expert eye over the Henley green bodywork of Owen’s pride and joy. ‘He takes me to the car shows.’

‘Well, I’ve got to say your turbo-charged sofa is pretty cool,’ Owen said with a laugh. ‘I wouldn’t mind a go on it myself.’

‘You can, if you help push it back up the hill.’

Owen laughed again. ‘Another time, boys. You take care now.’

He drove slowly on, passing the Fox and Goose on his left; it bore all the hallmarks of having been thoroughly updated to suit the needs of a discerning gastro-pub clientele. He doubted there would be a dartboard inside any more. Nor a bunch of old boys playing dominoes in a quiet dusty corner. In the late-afternoon sunshine, the pub’s pale walls, built of local Northamptonshire limestone and partially covered with wisteria, were mellow with age and added to the quintessential English village vibe. Stretching the full width of the building was a raised decking area with tables and chairs and umbrellas. A number of tables were occupied; Owen noticed a few curious glances being cast in his direction. The likelihood of anyone recognizing him was zero.

Next to the pub was a general store; it wasn’t dissimilar from the shop he remembered from his childhood. On the pavement, a man was tying a sign to a telegraph pole. On closer inspection Owen saw that it was a poster advertising Little Pelham’s forthcoming May fete.

His speed still low, he drove on. To his left was Cloverdale Lane, where he had once lived. He’d been nine years old when his father had been taken on as a farm labourer at Cloverdale Farm. He could remember so clearly the day they had moved into the terraced cottage. The sun had been shining, just like today, and the next-door neighbour had called round with a fruitcake she had baked. ‘Welcome to the village,’ she had said. ‘Anything you need, just knock on my door.’ A jolly elderly woman who lived alone with her two cats, she had been quickly labelled as an interfering busy-body by Owen’s father, the sort of woman he didn’t want nosing around in his business. And with good reason: Ronald Fletcher got up to plenty of stuff he didn’t want people

to know about. Despite his father's predictable disapproval, Mum had been the happiest Owen had seen her. 'Everything's going to be all right here,' she had said when she had kissed him goodnight that first evening. 'From now on, things are going to be different.'

But things hadn't been different. Within the year his father's vicious temper had once again got the better of him. Just as it always did.

Owen made no effort to turn left for Cloverdale Lane, not even for old times' sake, but kept to the main street through the village, towards the church on his right with its squat Norman tower, where he had once been allowed to have a go at ringing the bells.

Running adjacent to the churchyard was a footpath and on this side of it was the vicarage where, for a short time, before his father put a stop to it, Owen's mother had worked as a cleaner for the vicar and his family. The house had backed on to gently sloping green fields with woodland beyond. He wondered if it still did. Perhaps now a development of houses had been built on the land. It was then that Owen spotted something that was definitely different – the sign on the gatepost no longer said The Vicarage.

He stopped the car and blatantly stared at the handsome five-bay-fronted Georgian house with its elegant sash windows and front door painted dark blue and the sign that read: Medlar House. What was that all about? Another example of the Church of England hitting hard times and selling off more of the family silver? Very possibly.

Idly wondering where the present incumbent of St George's lived, Owen pressed on, and the nearer he got to his destination the more his excitement and anticipation grew exponentially.

Expect the unexpected.

Some would say that his expectations for coming here were too high, that the reality couldn't ever live up to the dream. But it was a risk he was prepared to take. After all, what was life without taking a risk, or more importantly, chasing a dream?

Ever since the day, thirty-four years ago, when he was ten years old and had left Little Pelham he had dreamt of returning. It had not been a case of casual or wistful daydreaming, but an actual and very persistent dream. And it was always the same. It was

a hot summer's day and, alone and lost, he would be drawn in to the cool and leafy shade of a dense copse of trees. Wandering amongst the trees, he would find a path that led to a house. But the only way to reach the house was to cross a small lake in a wooden dinghy. Untying the rope that was looped around the stump of a dead birch tree on the bank, he would row across the lake, somehow not destroying the perfect reflection of the house in the glassy-smooth water. The front door would always be open and music – faint and beguiling – would reach out to him, inviting him in like a beckoning finger. Exploring the house, searching for the source of the music, he would discover that behind every door was a room with yet another door that led to yet another room and another door, and he would be endlessly surprised and fascinated.

Always when he woke from the dream, he felt a sense of pleasurable contentment. And a pull, as if a tiny thread was attached to him and was being tweaked.

The house he dreamt of so regularly was not entirely the product of his imagination; it was based on something very real right here in Little Pelham. It was where he was going now.

To The Hidden Cottage.

Chapter Two

The woman turned around from the mirror. 'What do you think? And be honest.'

Mia picked up a medium-sized brimmed hat that was softened with a pretty layer of gauze and trimmed with a silk bow. 'I still think this one suited you best,' she said with well-practised diplomacy.

Wrinkling her nose, the woman scrunched up her face, giving herself the unfortunate appearance of a bulldog. 'But it's so boring,' she said. 'Every other woman will be wearing a hat like that at my son's wedding. Whereas this little beauty will make me stand out from the crowd.' Sighing like a love-sick teenager, she patted the red and black miniature top hat that was perched at a jaunty angle on her head. 'Yes,' she said decisively, 'this is the one I want.'

Mia knew when she was beaten and with a smile firmly in place and agreeing that the woman would indeed stand out from the crowd at her son's wedding, she thought of her own son, Jensen. It was his thirtieth birthday today and they were having a family get-together.

It was a while since she'd managed to get everyone in the same place and she was looking forward to seeing Jensen and Eliza and Daisy. She was also looking forward to meeting the girlfriend Jensen was bringing with him. A girlfriend they knew nothing about, as Jeff had been only too quick to point out when Jensen had phoned last week to ask if he could bring Tattie.

'Tattie,' Jeff had said in response to Mia relaying the news, 'what sort of name is that? What is she, some kind of potato?'

'It's short for Tatiana,' Mia had replied. 'I think it's nice.'

'More like short for something very affected.'

Her husband had no time for affectation or anything of an ostentatious nature. Nor did he believe in 'pussy-footing about',

as he called Mia's reluctance to speak her mind. He wouldn't have held back with this woman; he would have come right out with the truth and informed her that she was choosing the wrong hat. Moreover, he probably would have said that a dustbin lid would flatter her more. 'The trouble with you, Mia,' he regularly said, 'is that you're much too middle-class and polite for your own good.'

An hour later Mia had shut up shop and was letting herself in at the back door of Medlar House: her commute took all of forty seconds.

Four years ago when Daisy, the youngest of their children, had left for university Mia had had the idea of converting the unused barn to the side of the house into a light and airy space from which she could run her own business. Jeff had been sceptical. 'You really think the demand is out there?' he'd asked. Mia knew, from listening to friends bemoaning the difficulty of tracking down the perfect hat to complete an outfit for a special occasion and how wasteful it was to buy something that would only be worn once or twice, that the demand was most definitely there. She was proved right. From day one, after Jensen had helped her to create a website to promote the business, Mia's Hats was a success. Women came from miles around to her showroom in the village of Little Pelham, where, in a relaxed and welcoming environment, she gave them the opportunity to try on as many hats and fascinators as it took to find what they were looking for. With changing rooms on offer, she encouraged her customers to bring their outfits with them so that nothing was left to chance. She had recently extended the service and started selling handbags and costume jewellery as well.

She opened the fridge and focused on dinner that evening, not that it was going to tax her too much. At Jensen's request she was making his favourite meal – corned beef hash followed by apple crumble. It was hardly the last word in haute cuisine, but when she'd asked him what he wanted for his birthday dinner, he'd said, 'The usual, of course, Mum.' It was what he always wanted her to make; it had been his meal of choice as a young child.

There had been many times in his life when Jensen had been averse to choice and to change, to the extent of making him seem

awkward and obstructive. As his mother, Mia knew all too well his faults and failings, but she also knew that at heart he was fiercely loyal to those he cared about. He might have an odd way of showing it, but that was just his way.

As she peeled the potatoes, Mia thought of this day thirty years ago when she had given birth to Jensen. She had been nineteen years old, alone and terrified. Well, not entirely alone – the delivery room in the hospital had been buzzing with activity: there had been the midwife, a doctor and two junior doctors, one of whom had been Chinese. Even now she could remember that the doctor had been wearing absurdly large-framed spectacles and a blue and yellow bow-tie. He'd been the epitome of a pompous ass as he'd questioned the junior doctors on the procedures currently being performed on Mia. The midwife had rudely shoved him out of the way just as Jensen had made his appearance into the world. When she had been allowed to, Mia had hugged her newborn son close and tearfully promised him the world. A tall order given that she had no husband, few friends and no support from her parents.

But look at me now, she thought wryly as she put the saucepan of potatoes on the hotplate of the Aga. A husband, three grown-up children, a successful business and a beautiful home that when she was nineteen she could never have dreamt of living in.

They had moved into Medlar House ten years ago; the previous owners having bought it from the Church of England and renamed it. With Jeff's new job basing him in Milton Keynes, the picturesque village of Little Pelham on the Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire border had been the perfect location for the family. It had a good school close by for Daisy – Eliza was then away at boarding school and Jensen was at university – and offered the family a chance to put down some roots in an idyllic country setting. They had moved house three times in the preceding decade, each time because Jeff had tired of his current job and had traded up to something bigger and more challenging, and more financially rewarding. The ten years they'd been at Medlar House was the longest Mia had lived anywhere.

But last year Jeff had sprung another move on her and announced that he'd been offered the job of divisional managing director of a large Swiss engineering company and that his office would be in Brussels.

'A job offer like that doesn't materialize overnight,' she'd said with a sinking heart. 'How long has this been going on for?' She'd sounded like a wife asking how long her husband had been seeing another woman.

'For the last four weeks,' he'd answered.

'Hmm … and you didn't think to tell me when the proposal first came up?'

He'd had the grace to look guiltily shamefaced. 'I was waiting until the final details had been thrashed out. You know how these things can drag on; I didn't want to worry you unnecessarily.'

'Have you accepted the job?' she'd asked.

Silly question. Of course he had. 'I'm fifty-five, Mia,' he'd said. 'This could be my last big hurrah. And wait till I tell you about the financial package. We'll be set for the rest of our lives.'

'I thought we already were.'

'Don't be like that. I'm doing this for *us*. So that we won't have to worry about the future.'

More concerned about the present, about losing the life she had created for herself within the village, she had said, 'I'm sorry, Jeff, but I can't do it. I want to stay here. What would I do in Brussels?'

'You could do what you do here. Or better still, take it easy and have some fun. Just think; we could bob over to Paris for dinner whenever we liked. We could go to Antwerp, Amsterdam, Bruges. You've always wanted to go there, haven't you?'

'What about the children?'

'Oh, Mia, they have their own lives now. Which means we can have *our* lives back. We can start to enjoy ourselves.'

As much as he tried to sell the idea to her, Mia wouldn't budge. It was one of the few times in their marriage that she said no to Jeff. In the end he reluctantly accepted her decision but still went ahead and took the job, saying that since the flight was such a short one it would be a manageable Monday to Friday commute and he would divide his time between Brussels and Little Pelham quite easily. He found himself a furnished one-bedroom apartment in the centre of Brussels, just off Avenue Louise and a short walk from his office. Mia stayed there a couple of times with him when he moved in, but she hadn't returned.

She would never openly admit this, least of all to Jeff, but she liked the new routine they had settled into. She enjoyed having

some time to herself. She particularly enjoyed the peace and sense of calm being alone gave her.

She glanced at her watch. Under normal circumstances she would take with a pinch of salt Jeff's promise that he would catch an earlier flight home to be here for Jensen's birthday. However, in this instance he was picking Daisy up in Luton where she now lived, and if there was one thing he would never do, it was go back on his word to Daisy.