

Chapter 1

He was disappointed to hear that the house wasn't haunted. A ghost might have been one last frail hope of salvaging something from this stupendous disaster. Spectral shenanigans under his own roof had an undeniable cachet and friends who wouldn't come from the city for his sake might be wooed by a whiff of plasma. Without it, Mean Cottage was nothing more than its name suggested.

Rufus drained his glass and stared moodily at his feet, barely listening to some prattle about local legends the old boy beside him at the bar was still jabbering on about. He couldn't remember how much whisky he'd had, but his shoes seemed an awfully long way down, as if his legs had stretched several inches during the night. Perhaps they had. Nothing could make the total and utter cock-up of the last few days any worse: a bit of surprise leg growth was nothing to worry about in comparison. He wondered idly if he was anywhere over six foot now and how this would change his outlook on life. For the better, he hoped. Being five foot eight hadn't done a lot for him in the last thirty-six years. Not that he'd been five foot eight at birth, of course, although his mother would have been glad enough to add that outrageous statistic to her litany of grievances.

A week ago he'd been fine. Abandoned by his wife and without a livelihood, true, but apart from that he'd felt perfectly well and at ease with the world. Just days later here he was in Creech, a place only a ghost would warm to, the not-so-proud owner of a semi-derelict ruin. No-one was going to believe him. After all those plans, everything he'd told people, the pretty pictures he'd flashed about... and now this.

His legs came back sharply into focus and unmistakably at their normal length. It was one disappointment too many. He lumbered off his stool, mumbling about calls of nature and made an erratic exit from the bar, unaware of the grins exchanged between his drinking companions.

Outside The Green Man, sharp country air enveloped him. Rufus stumbled down the three stone steps from the doorway and fell into the road. A savage pain wrenched his left knee. His initial instinct was to howl like a dog, but suppressing this, he speculated momentarily whether his legs, if not longer, were actually now of different lengths. He couldn't think how else he'd ended up down here, but then a lot of other things seemed pretty inexplicable from where he sat. It was beyond belief. What had been a strong and positive decision, to make a new start after the fiasco with Alison, had turned into a nightmare of mammoth proportions. If only he hadn't met up with Charlie before going to the auction. If only he hadn't drunk quite so many toasts to his exciting new future. If only the auction hadn't been conducted in a barn-like hall with dodgy acoustics. If only the alcohol hadn't stripped him of at least two of his senses. Then perhaps he might not have bought the wrong bloody house.

Rufus hauled himself up and began to saunter down the road, trying to look casual, inconspicuous and sober. There was no-one on the street to see him, but he imagined them all inside the white rendered cottages, smugly pointing him out, people unknown to him but well aware that he was the ludicrous outsider who'd been stupid enough to buy that godforsaken place on the outskirts of the village. Old crones shaking their heads and chuckling with delight at the ill-fortune bound to

attend his folly, young girls giggling slyly behind their hands whilst their mothers exchanged knowing glances. Rufus stopped dead, fists clenched in sheer frustration. Why was he so totally incognizant, so unbelievably insensible of what went on around him, whilst the rest of the world clued in effortlessly to the true state of affairs?

Take the dogs coming along the empty street towards him now, for example. There were three of them, one a glossy chestnut brown, two jet black, all running hard and straight at him. What was the obvious, harmless explanation of their behaviour that he was missing? His sudden fear translated their approach into slow motion. Screwing up his eyes into the face of the sun, Rufus watched, mesmerised by the rise and fall of their huge paws on the tarmac, muscular flesh rolling forward along their bodies with each bound.

He roused himself to turn nervously, hoping to see a clear goal in the road behind him - their master jangling a fistful of good strong leads or a roe deer doing a bit of hapless window-shopping in the high street. There was nothing but him in sight.

Rufus felt his thigh muscles trembling and knew the uselessness of flight. Not that he wanted to be chased like a rabbit. He'd been thinking lately about getting a dog, but decided, as the marauding pack came on, jaws wide and slavering in anticipation of a feast, that he might well change his mind if he survived the coming encounter.

His own mouth opened and closed in silent fear. They were six foot from him and he had half-turned away from the onslaught, one arm raised to shield his face, when a piercing whistle split the air like an arrow. Two of the dogs stopped dead, claws clenching into the tarmac. Their heads swung this way and that, searching for the source of the summons and then they were off again, veering

across the road and disappearing from view between the houses.

It was too late to stop the lead dog who had launched itself at Rufus a split second before. Its body lurched sideways in mid-air, instinctively responding to the sound of the whistle, whilst still twisting its muscular neck greedily towards Rufus. He waited for the snap of pain as its jaws closed, but only his sleeve caught in the hound's teeth, pulling him backwards as the dog thudded down to earth. Through the ripping sound of his jacket, another penetrating whistle echoed along the street. The dog barely paused to extract its jaws from the strips of ruined fabric before making off after its fellows down an alley without so much as another glance at Rufus.

Silence returned to the street. Silence except for the blood rushing inside Rufus' head and his heart going like a frenzied drum solo. The thought of all those eyes peering out from behind the curtains prevented him from dashing wildly about cursing and looking for someone to hold responsible. He could hardly go back into the pub in this state as if nothing had happened. He would just have to carry on, pretending to continue his stroll along the road as if this incident was nothing more than a normal daily occurrence. For all he knew, in Creech it was.

He tentatively put one foot in front of the other and was relieved to find his legs still working, at least to the extent of a gentle totter. He'd escaped death on this occasion, and felt absurdly grateful - to what or whom he didn't know - but, as his heart rate slowed and his distance from the scene of the assault increased, he felt it was vaguely humiliating to be the object of such avid attention one minute and then totally rejected at the tug of a more important tie. It was not the first time it had happened to him. He felt himself doomed to a life of fleeting significance.

His rather shaky steps brought him to the end of the main street. Rufus stood for a moment gloomily at the old stone bridge over the busy little River Huele, and took stock of his immediate position - torn jacket, twisted left knee, bruised pride - and the wider picture: his likely bankruptcy and divorce. He looked down at the glinting water, which smiled back up at him eagerly. It's easy for you, he thought. Very pleasant just to skip along over a few smooth stones, babbling banalities. Your course is all marked out for you. Nothing to worry about or battle against.

'What about the chemicals dumped upstream by those bastards at the dye factory?'

Rufus spun round. He hadn't spoken aloud - had he?

An old woman with coarse grey hair in long braids around her head sat astride a bicycle, one foot propping herself upright at the kerb beside him. She deftly finished rolling a reefer and jabbed it firmly behind her ear whilst Rufus struggled to gather his thoughts.

'I was just...'

'Talking to the river. I've given you its answer. Now its your turn.'

'Sorry?'

'The art of conversation. You say something to the river, it replies, you reply to the reply and so on.'

'Except the river can't talk.'

'Who says it can't?'

'Well, I...'

'You?' she interrupted fiercely. 'You' - she looked him up and down, without the least glimmer of approval - 'say the river can't talk? What do you know about it? Did it ever occur to you that perhaps the river *can* talk, but you *can't* hear?'

Before he could think of any possible answer, she