

## CHAPTER 1

### NORTH NORFOLK

As Flora drove up the rutted track to the cottage, she thought for a moment that someone had switched on a light upstairs, but it was only the setting sun striking fire from a bedroom window. She parked the svelte Porsche Panamera that had been Michael's wedding present. It was still a new toy and she'd enjoyed the drive from Cambridge. She got out of the car and shivered, pulled her coat around her. The sun had gone down behind the little grove of pines that served as a windbreak. It was the first time she'd been here alone and it occurred to her that another woman might have felt uneasy. The nearest neighbour was a farmer a mile or two away across the fields. But she wasn't the nervous type, and she was looking forward to having time to herself.

She took the cat carrier from the car. Marmaduke, her long-haired mackerel tabby, liked it here and could be trusted not to run away. "Off you go, little tiger," she said, as she let him out. He snuffed the air, and set off with a purposeful air to patrol the garden.

She had to put her shoulder against the front door to open it. The wood must have swelled in the damp. Cold, clammy air came out to meet her. It was early February and they hadn't been here since the previous autumn. She turned on the water and the heating and decided that she'd have a fire that evening. On the morning of their last visit Michael had swept out the hearth and laid a fire ready for the next time they came. That gave her a cosy feeling, as if he were looking after her at a distance.

She unloaded everything that she would need for her stay, including a stack of ready meals. Michael was the domesticated one and that suited her just fine.

When they had first visited the cottage, she'd been surprised that there wasn't a landline, let alone Wi-Fi, but Michael had explained that that was the point, to get away from everything. And now she appreciated the isolation. Mobile coverage was poor too, but never mind. She thought with pleasure of the three weeks stretching ahead of her. She had her lab books to write up, and a new research proposal to plan. She had no commitments until mid-March when she'd be meeting Lyle and his investors in London. She needed to be fully prepared for that meeting, perhaps the most important of her life.

As she arranged the meals for one in the fridge, she took stock. It had been hard work, but it had all paid off. She was where she wanted to be: married to Michael, her career taking off. The breakthrough in cancer research had been exactly what she needed to establish herself. A shadow fell across her thoughts. Suppose someone were to find out that... But no, she wasn't going to go there. She'd always been lucky and her luck wouldn't fail her now. The patent was in the bag and nothing could stop her. She let herself daydream. Large grants, her own lab, a personal chair, fellowship of the Royal Society, maybe even a Nobel Prize. And then there was the money. Yes, it was all possible. She was only thirty-five. All that was ahead of her.

She ought to ring Michael to let him know that she'd arrived. He was in Melbourne on the first leg of a lecture tour of Australia. She looked at her watch – they were twelve hours ahead so that meant six o'clock in the morning. She put her coat back on and went out into the garden, the only place where she'd be able to get a signal.

The temperature had dropped. There would be a frost tonight. The sun had sunk out of sight and a few stars had

appeared in the sky. Far off across the fields a light twinkled from the adjacent farm.

She sent a text to see if Michael was awake yet. Thirty seconds later her phone rang. He *was* awake, suffering from jet lag.

They agreed not to worry about being in touch over the next three weeks. The time difference made things awkward, not to mention the lack of mobile reception, and they were both going to be very busy – Michael moving from city to city and she immersing herself in her work. In any case she wasn't the kind of person to need constant reassurance and neither was he.

As they hung up, and she made her way back into the house, she reflected that theirs wasn't the greatest love story ever told, but she didn't mind that, preferred it really. There was a twenty-year age gap, but that was just fine. What was it they said? Better to be an old man's darling than a young man's fool. Definitely! For one thing he understood that her work came first and he wouldn't be putting pressure on her to have children – he already had a couple of grown-up kids from his first marriage. And there were all sorts of advantages to marrying someone in the same field, especially someone as eminent as Michael. He had already given her more than one leg up in her career. She knew that for his part, he liked playing the mentor and enjoyed showing off his attractive younger wife. It had been almost like an arranged marriage – one that she had arranged herself. She had known what kind of husband she needed and when she'd met Michael she'd known he was it. She smiled to herself. It was a pity that he'd been married to someone else, but really, once she had set her sights on him, he hadn't stood a chance.

She made herself a cup of tea and lit the fire. She spread out her papers on the table in the sitting room. She went into the kitchen and put down food for Marmaduke. She was crouching by the fridge, trying to decide between lasagne and

fish pie for supper, when she heard something outside. What was it? A cat maybe? Or some wild animal? A fox? She stood still and listened. There it was again. Something in distress. And yes, that pathetic mewing: it was definitely a cat, close to the house now, and it was in pain. It wasn't Marmaduke, he'd gone upstairs.

She drew back the bolt and opened the back door.

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Upstairs in the bedroom Marmaduke yawned luxuriously. He was tired now after patrolling the boundaries of his territory. There had been no sign of his enemy, the tom belonging to the farm across the fields. Marmaduke was lord of all he surveyed and his kingdom was full of the rustle of small, furry creatures. He had already found and eaten a mouse and he had topped that up with the food Flora had put down in the kitchen. All was well.

He hesitated between the bed and Flora's open case. He was allowed to sleep on the bed when Michael wasn't there, and he would be turfed out of Flora's case when she saw him, but it was too tempting. He climbed in, turned around a few times, and settled himself down on Flora's brushed cotton pyjamas.

There was a crashing and a bumping downstairs. His head shot up. He waited, listening in the dark. The noise stopped as abruptly as it had started. He heaved a sigh and let his head sink down on his paws. He was drifting off to sleep, when he heard a car driving away. Then there was silence.