

CHAPTER ONE

Looking for a house

'It's all right, Rick. It's only the post,' she called.

Six or seven thick brown envelopes lay on the doormat. Marilyn picked them up and took them into the kitchen. Rick was sitting at the table. He was finishing his breakfast.

'Is there anything for me?' he asked.

'They're all from estate agents,' she said. 'I hope there's something this time.'

She put three envelopes down in front of Rick, and began to open the others herself. They had been looking for a house for three months. They were tired of the small flat, and they were tired of paying rent every week. They had been saving to buy their own house for nearly two years. They began looking through the letters from estate agents.

Rick looked up. 'Here's one,' he said. 'Listen. Perfect first home. Two bedrooms, large living room, modern kitchen, bathroom, garage, small garden. And it's in Balmoral Avenue, on the new housing estate. \$68,000. What do you think?'

'What number is it?' she asked.

'Er... let me see. Thirty-five. Yes, thirty-five Balmoral Avenue.'

'That's funny,' she said. 'I've just been reading about the same house. Look, here's an advert from Norman and Naylor. I phoned them yesterday.'

'Ah, my advert's from Burchill and Bradley. Yes, it's the same house. Well, that's normal. They've put the house with two estate agents. Which one shall we phone?'

'It doesn't really matter,' said Marilyn. 'Give me the adverts. I'll phone when I get to work.'

'Work ... yes, what time is it?' said Rick.

'Oh, no! It's nearly half past eight. Come on, we should hurry ... if you don't want to be late again.'

Rick and Marilyn hurried out to the car. On the way to work they talked about the house. A lot of their friends lived on the new housing estate, and they'd been looking for a house in Balmoral Avenue, or in one of the roads near it, Sandringham Drive or Osborne Way. Marilyn stopped the car outside Rick's office.

'I'll call the estate agent, and I'll call you later,' she said.

Marilyn worked in an office near Rick's. She usually had the car because there was more parking space at her office, and because she finished work half an hour earlier than Rick.

CHAPTER TWO

Appointment to view

Marilyn hurried into her office, and put the two adverts down on her desk.

She telephoned Burchill and Bradley at five past nine. The phone rang several times, then she heard a voice. 'Hello, this is Burchill and Bradley Estate Agents. This is a recording. I'm sorry, there isn't anyone here at the moment. The office is open from nine thirty until five thirty. If you would like to leave a message, we'll call you back.'

Marilyn put the phone down. She didn't like telephone answering machines. It was easier to call the other estate agent. She looked at the advert again. There it was, Norman and Naylor, 513216. She called the number.

'Good morning. Norman and Naylor. This is Mrs Adams speaking.'

'Oh, good morning,' said Marilyn. 'I've been looking through your adverts. I'm interested in 35 Balmoral Avenue. I wonder if

I could see it?'

'Ah, yes,' said Mrs Adams. That's easy. The owners of 35 Balmoral Avenue are both out at work all day. They've given us a set of keys. I can take you round the house at any time. Today, if you like.'

'Could you show us at lunchtime?' asked Marilyn. 'My husband and I both work too. But we're free from twelve thirty until one forty-five.'

'That's all right. I'll meet you outside the house at ... one o'clock. Will that be all right?'

'That's OK, yes. We'll see you then.'

'Do you know where Balmoral Avenue is?' said Mrs Adams.

'Oh, yes. We've been looking for a house on the High Trees Estate.'

'Right. I'll be outside the house in a blue Ford Mondeo at one o'clock, then.'

'Thank you,' said Marilyn. "We'll be in a white Volkswagen. See you at one.'

Marilyn felt very excited. They had seen a lot of houses in the last few weeks, but she felt really interested in this one. She phoned Rick at work, and told him about the appointment.

They agreed to meet outside Rick's office at twenty to one.

CHAPTER THREE

Their first house

Rick was waiting when Marilyn arrived at the office. He jumped into the car, and they drove to Balmoral Avenue. They parked behind the blue Ford Mondeo. Mrs Adams got out, and came to meet them.

'You know, it's much nicer when the owners aren't at home,' she said. 'You can ask as many questions as you want.'

'Yes,' said Rick, 'and you don't have to agree when they tell you how nice the green and orange paint is.'

Mrs Adams laughed. 'That's true... now let me find the right keys. I've got so many sets of keys in my bag.'

Mrs Adams found the keys, and opened the door. Marilyn and Rick had been looking for a house just like it.

'It was built just over two years ago,' said Mrs Adams, 'and it has everything you'll need ... central heating, a modern kitchen, and it's been decorated very well. The carpets were put in two years ago, and the cooker and fridge are included in the price. The kitchen's beautiful. Come on, I'll show you.'

They went into the kitchen. 'Have you got any children?' said Mrs Adams.

Marilyn and Rick looked at each other. 'No ... not yet,' said Marilyn.

'Well, there's an excellent school just down the road, and you can see the garden from the kitchen window ...'

Everything was easy. That evening Mrs Adams took them to see Mr and Mrs Barclay, the owners of the house. They were very nice people. They were moving to a bigger house. Marilyn and Rick agreed to buy the house. Two months later it was theirs! They moved in during September. They spent a lot of time painting and decorating. The house didn't really need decorating but they enjoyed doing it. They had been living in rented flats for years, and this was their first house. The weekends were wonderful. They painted, cleaned, decorated and worked in the garden. By Christmas the house really seemed like home.

CHAPTER FOUR

A ghost in the house?

The first of the little surprises came early in January. Marilyn and Rick arrived home, as usual, just after six o'clock one Tuesday evening. Rick opened the door, and went into the kitchen to make some tea. Marilyn followed him in.

'Rick,' she said, 'did you pick up the letters in the hall?'

'No,' he said, 'you know I didn't. You were just behind me.'

'Well, that's funny. Look, the post arrived after we'd left for work. It always does at this house. So, usually it's lying on the doormat when we get home. Right?'

'Yes,' said Rick. 'Why?'

'The post isn't on the floor now. It's in a neat pile on the table, next to the telephone.'

Rick followed her into the hall. There were four or five letters in a pile on the hall table.

'Maybe ... maybe the post arrived earlier than usual today. Perhaps it arrived before we left for work. Maybe we picked it

up, put it there, and forgot,' he said.

'No, I'm sure not,' said Marilyn. 'You see, I was waiting for this letter. It's from Wendy. I was thinking about it on the way home.'

The next surprise was two weeks later. They had been out to dinner with friends on Wednesday evening, and they hadn't woken up when the alarm clock rang. Rick woke up at twenty to nine. They both got dressed quickly and left home without breakfast.

They didn't make the bed, and they left their nightclothes on the floor. They were usually very tidy people, but there wasn't enough time. When they got home, Rick went upstairs first.

'Marilyn,' he said, 'come up here.'

Marilyn walked into the bedroom. The bed was made.

Everything looked neat and tidy. She pulled back the bed covers. Rick's pyjamas and her nightdress were folded neatly on the pillows.

'I'm sure we didn't make the bed,' she said.

'Did you come home at lunchtime?' asked Rick.

'No, of course not. I never do. There isn't enough time.'

'Well, you had the car,' he said.

'No, I worked through the lunch hour today. We were busy,' she said. 'Rick, is this a joke? Did you ...?'

'I didn't come home either,' he said.

'Then, we forgot,' said Marilyn. We made the bed and forgot we'd done it. We drank a lot last night. I mean, we forgot those letters a couple of weeks ago.'

There were a few more surprises in the next few weeks. Once they found the letters on the hall table again. Another time the bathroom light was on. Rick was annoyed. He always worried about the electricity bills.

'Did you leave the bathroom light on?' he said angrily.

'No,' said Marilyn. 'Anyway, you were in the bathroom after me this morning. Rick, you're beginning to forget everything.'

Another time they were late for work, and they left their coffee cups on the table. When they got home, the coffee cups had been washed up, and were standing on the table.

Rick laughed. 'Maybe there's a ghost in the house,' he said. 'A very tidy ghost.'

'Don't be silly,' she said, 'it's a new house, not an old castle. There's no ghost.'

Suddenly there was a flash of lightning, and the noise of thunder. It started raining. She looked out of the window.

'Rick,' she said, 'there isn't a ghost, is there?'

They both laughed then.

They didn't laugh at the next surprise. They had been out to dinner, and they got home late. They were both tired. They went into the living room.

'I'll make some tea, Rick,' said Marilyn. "You look in the newspaper and see what's on television.'

She went into the kitchen.

'Marilyn,' called Rick, 'where's the newspaper? I can't find it.'

She came back into the living room. 'It was on the coffee table. I put it there this morning.'

'It isn't here now,' said Rick.

They looked everywhere for the newspaper, but they couldn't find it anywhere.

'I'm tired of this,' said Rick. 'Let's have a drink.'

He went to the cupboard to get the bottle of whisky they had brought back from holiday two years before. They didn't usually drink whisky, and the bottle was nearly full. Rick

opened the cupboard, and there was the newspaper! It was folded neatly, and it was lying next to the bottle.

'Why did you put it in here?' he said.

'I didn't. I was reading it before we left for work, and I put it on the coffee table,' said Marilyn.

'I haven't opened this cupboard for weeks,' said Rick. 'Anyway, neither of us would put the newspaper in here. What's happening?'

Marilyn sat down. 'Rick,' she said, 'you don't think there is a ghost here, do you?'

'What? A tidy ghost? I've never heard of a tidy ghost.'

'Why not?'

Rick sat down too. 'But it's a new house.'

'Maybe someone died here. Maybe one of the Barclays' parents lived with them. Maybe they died here,' said Marilyn.

'Or maybe there were houses here before . . . before the High Trees Estate was built.'

'I don't know,' said Marilyn. 'Maybe we should ask Mr and Mrs Barclay. We've got their new address.'

'We can't,' said Rick, 'it sounds so silly. "Excuse me, Mr

Barclay. Did you leave a ghost here? Did you forget to take it with your furniture?" I can't ask them.'

'Well,' said Marilyn, 'I'm going to the library tomorrow lunchtime. I'm going to discover what was here before this house was built.'

CHAPTER FIVE

A visit to the library

The next day, at twelve thirty, Marilyn hurried to the Sandbourne Central Library. She went over to the man at the desk.

'Excuse me,' she said, 'have you got any books about the history of Sandbourne ... old maps, anything like that?'

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'What do you want to know?'

'Er, I'm interested in the High Trees Estate area. I live there, and I've always been interested in history.'

'Well, come over here, we'll have a look.'

Marilyn followed the man to a shelf of books about the history of the area.

'I'm very interested in old stories ... ghost stories ... things like that,' she said.

'Ghost stories?' he said. 'There won't be many ghost stories about that area. It's all new.'

'Er ... what was there before the housing estate?' asked

Marilyn.

'Well, that's easy. It used to be High Trees Farm. They knocked down the farm five, maybe six years ago.'

'Have you got an old map?' she asked.

'Yes, I'll find it for you,' said the man.

When Rick came out of the office, Marilyn was waiting in the car. She opened the door.

'Rick,' she said, 'I went to the library today.'

'Why?' he said. 'You don't believe there really is a ghost, do you?'

'I found an old map of the area,' she said. 'There used to be a farm. The estate is built on an old farm.'

'So?' said Rick.

'I looked at the map. The farmhouse used to be where Balmoral Avenue is now. It used to be right in the middle of Balmoral Avenue.'

'Yes?'

'Well, our house, number thirty-five, is right in the middle of the Avenue. Perhaps our house is just where the farmhouse used to be. I looked in another book. The farmhouse was built

about two hundred years ago.'

'That doesn't mean there's a ghost! There are thousands of old houses with no ghost stories. Anyway, I don't believe in ghosts. And neither do you.'

'Until today,' said Marilyn. 'Can you explain about the newspaper in the cupboard? The letters? The bed that was made? The clean coffee cups? The light in the bathroom?'

'We've been very busy,' said Rick. 'We've been busy at work, and we've been working hard in our free time on the house. We're forgetting things, that's all.'

'I hope so, Rick,' she said. 'I hope so.'

They arrived home. Marilyn opened the door and turned on the light. There, on the hall table, was a neat pile of letters.

CHAPTER SIX

Murder at the old farm

A week later there was another surprise, and this time they had a row. It was the worst row since they had got married. They got home, as usual, at six o'clock. Rick went into the living room. 'Marilyn,' he said, 'what's this?'

The ashtray, which was usually on the shelf near the radio, was on the coffee table. A cigarette end was in the ashtray.

'Who's been here?' said Rick.

Marilyn picked up the ashtray. 'Look, Rick,' she said, 'you told me that you had stopped smoking. You know that I don't like smoking.'

'It's not mine,' he said. 'I haven't had a cigarette for more than two years. Have you been home today?'

'No, I haven't,' she said. 'But somebody has. I've never smoked. You know that.'

She picked up the cigarette end. There was red lipstick on it. She showed it to Rick.

'A woman's been here,' she said. 'What's happening, Rick? Who is she?'

'A woman ghost that smokes Marlboro cigarettes,' he said.

'It isn't funny, Rick,' she said. She went to the door. 'I'm going out for a walk. Don't come with me. I want to think.'

Marilyn walked along Balmoral Avenue. All the houses were the same. They had all been built two years before. She walked round the corner into Osborne Way. There was one older house at the end of Osborne Way. It had been there before the estate was built. An old man was working in the garden.

'Good evening,' said Marilyn.

'Good evening,' he replied. 'It's a lovely evening, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Er ... have you lived here for a long time?'

'Oh, yes, my dear,' he said. 'I've been living here for thirty years.'

'Do you remember the old farm ... the one that used to be here before the estate was built?'

'High Trees Farm? Of course I do. I used to work there.' The old man walked over to her.

'Who lived there?' said Marilyn.

'Why are you interested in High Trees Farm?' he said. 'You're from one of the new houses, aren't you?'

'Er, yes,' said Marilyn. 'I'm very interested in history ... the history of this area.'

'Well, the farm belonged to old Giles Varley. He lived there by himself - since his wife died, that is. He was a strange man. Nobody liked him very much. I didn't. He used to be a very difficult boss, you see. Everything had to be in the right place. "Don't put that on the shelf!" he used to say to me. "Put it in the cupboard!" And the house . . . I've never seen a place as clean and tidy as that house. His wife had always been a very tidy woman, and he wanted to keep the house the same. Yes, poor old Varley.'

'What happened to him?' said Marilyn.

'Don't you remember?' said the old man. 'It was in all the newspapers six or seven years ago.'

'We didn't live in Sandbourne then,' said Marilyn.

'It was sad,' he said, 'very sad. They never found the murderer, either.'

'The murderer?' said Marilyn.

'That's right. He was murdered in the old farmhouse. A

robber, that's what the police thought. I found the body, you know.'

Marilyn felt suddenly cold. 'I see,' she said. Well, thank you. It's been very interesting.'

'Good night, then,' said the old man. Marilyn turned round and walked home very slowly.

When she got home, Rick was in the garden. They had bought a small tree at the weekend, and Rick was putting it in the front garden. He called to her.

'Marilyn! Come here. Look at this!'

She walked over to him. There was a hole in the ground for the tree. There were a lot of old bricks in the hole.

'So,' he said, 'there was a building here before they built this house. Do you think it was the old farmhouse?'

Marilyn felt cold. 'Rick,' she said, 'come inside. We'll have a cup of tea. I've got something to tell you.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ghost appears

A few days later, both Marilyn and Rick caught flu. They felt terrible all weekend. On Monday neither of them felt well enough to go to work. They telephoned their offices, and decided to spend the day at home. It was a boring day. They both had headaches, and they spent the day in the living room. Rick watched videos, Marilyn read a book from the library, *Ghosts of Sandbourne and East Wessex*. At half past two Marilyn suddenly looked up.

'What's that?' she said.

They heard voices outside the front door. Then they heard the sound of a key in the lock. Rick jumped up. 'What ...?'

They heard footsteps in the hall.

'It's a very nice hall.' It was a man's voice. Rick and Marilyn looked at each other. Then the living room door began to open. Marilyn took Rick's hand. Two men and a woman walked into the room. They stopped in surprise.

'What are you doing here?' said Rick angrily. 'Oh, I'm terribly

sorry,' said one of the men. 'I thought you were out.'

He turned to the man and woman behind him. 'Oh, this is Mr and Mrs Patterson. They're very interested in your house.'

'And who are you?' said Marilyn.

'Oh, I'm sorry. Of couse we haven't met. I'm Michael Webb. From Burchill and Bradley. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs Barclay.'

'I'm not Mrs Barclay!' said Marilyn. The Barclays moved months ago. Last September.'

Rick was laughing. 'Ah! I understand! You're the tidy ghost.'

Mr Webb looked worried. 'The tidy ghost? I don't understand ...'

'Yes, the tidy ghost,' said Rick. He turned to Marilyn. The letters, the nightclothes, the newspaper ...'

Marilyn was laughing too. '... the lipstick on the cigarette, the coffee cups, the bathroom light,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' said Mr Webb, 'I really don't understand.'

'We bought the house from the Barclays. We bought it through Norman and Naylor ... and you're from Burchill and Bradley, the other estate agents!' said Marilyn.

'Oh, I see!' said Mr Webb. The Barclays never told us that the house had been sold. I've been showing the house to people for six months. I am sorry. The Barclays gave us a set of keys, and told us to show people the house when they were at work.'

Marilyn smiled. 'And you've been tidying the house for us, haven't you?' she said.

Mr Webb looked uncomfortable and embarrassed. His face was going redder and redder.

'Er, yes,' he said. 'You see, I usually arrive before the people that want to see the house. So ... I've been coming in and ... er, tidying things.'

'And the cigarette with lipstick?' said Marilyn.

'Yes, I'm sorry about that. I brought a lady to see the house, Mrs Green. She wanted a cigarette while we were talking about the house. I forgot to throw it away. I remembered later in the evening. Didn't you know that it was someone looking at the house?'

'Well, no ... we didn't,' said Marilyn.

'Oh, dear,' said Mr Webb. 'I hope there wasn't any trouble about it.'

'I thought ...' Marilyn looked at Rick. 'I thought my husband

...' Then she felt sorry for Mr Webb, who was very embarrassed. 'I thought my husband had started smoking again,' she said.

Mr Webb remembered that Marilyn had said 'the cigarette with lipstick'. He went redder again.

'I'm very, very sorry,' he said.

Marilyn smiled. She looked at Mr and Mrs Patterson, who were looking embarrassed too.

'It's a pity,' said Mrs Patterson. 'It's a lovely house, and it's a lovely area.'

'Yes, well, it's my fault. I'm sorry I've wasted your time,' said Mr Webb.

'It isn't your fault,' Marilyn said. 'The Barclays didn't tell you they had moved. Look, can I get you all a cup of tea?'

'Yes, please take a seat,' said Rick. 'I know that Mr and Mrs Collins at number twenty-nine are trying to sell their house. It's just the same as this one. Perhaps we're going to be neighbours!'

Mr and Mrs Patterson sat down. Mr Patterson picked up Marilyn's book which was lying on the coffee table.

'Hmm,' he said, 'Ghosts of Sandbourne and East Wessex. I

hope there aren't any ghosts round here.'

'Oh, no,' said Marilyn, 'there aren't any ghosts round here. They're all new houses.'

She went into the kitchen to make the tea. They had had a cup of tea and a sandwich an hour earlier, and she hadn't washed up. There, on the kitchen table was the teapot, and a neat pile of plates and cups. She opened the teapot. It was clean!

'But...' she said. Then she heard a laugh behind her. It was Rick. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'it was me. I came out and washed up half an hour ago. Don't you remember?'