

Chapter 2

2010

At half-past-two Martin opened his front door to a gentle little rap, and received another small surprise, for which he, again, immediately mentally berated himself. A short lady, not fat exactly but pleasantly plump, in her late fifties he imagined, stood on his doorstep in the thin March sunshine. A blue Peugeot, one of those little ones and presumably hers, was parked across the lane. She had a friendly open face that was still pretty in defiance of her obvious age, had short, tightly curled greying hair, and was black. She was smartly dressed in a maroon jacket over a red subtly floral-patterned dress; obviously a lady who took pains with her appearance and one with a good dress sense. Martin felt immediately, self-consciously, scruffy. His surprise was momentary, and he quickly recovered and smiled at her.

‘Oh, hello. Mr Spencer? I’m Mrs Richards. I’ve come about the house.’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Martin. ‘It’s the house next door. Just a sec and I’ll get the key.’

Martin opened the door – it led straight into the living room – walked in and waited for her to follow. She entered and cast a look around the room. Her reaction was quite different from Tracey’s. Her eyes lit up and she beamed a wide, appreciative smile.

‘This is beautiful! The agent told me you did it up yourself?’

‘Yes, ‘fraid so. It’s what I used to do for a living.’

Mrs Richards walked around, clearly impressed, lightly touching surfaces here and there as if a connoisseur, and taking it all in.

Martin showed her through into the small kitchen with its cornflower blue units and gingham curtains, trying not to remember

how filthy it had been when Tracey (he couldn't bring himself to remember her by her diminutive now) had left. He hoped this lady wouldn't see through his recent frantic, bad-tempered attempts to refresh it. He wished now that he'd put some cut flowers in a vase. But again she was generous with her compliments. 'Lovely and fresh,' she declared, as if judging an interior decoration competition.

Then he led the way up the narrow winding stairs ('I love these!' she enthused, like a little girl) to the bedroom with its pale apricot walls. They stood side by side under the low ceiling, a third of it sloping up around the tiny dormer window. Martin tried to will her not to look at the bed with its uncovered mattress; again self-conscious. Surely she couldn't tell that, underneath, it was less than pristine? But her eyes were travelling around the room, her open mouth still fixed in a smile of admiration, alighting on the little window. 'That is so sweet!' she exclaimed.

'Thank you,' said Martin, illogically, as if he were responsible for fitting its original two hundred years earlier, before masochistically bringing her attention back to the naked bed. 'I don't provide bed covers because I suppose you'd rather have your own.' 'Yes, of course,' she reassured, as if stating the blindingly obvious.

They looked at the bathroom, Martin still worrying (but again it received the seal of approval, so he needn't have), and then went back downstairs and out into the garden. Glancing at her furtively, he thought he detected a first faint shadow of disappointment. Her smile was still in place, but this time no spontaneous compliment came. The garden certainly didn't look wonderful. Clumps of daffodil leaves were erupting here and there but there was no colour yet and the lawn, although it had re-greened over the winter, still had bald brown patches. And he wished there were more of it. He felt a ridiculous need to apologise.

'I'm sorry the garden's not up to much. I'm afraid the last tenant . . .'

‘No, that’s alright . . .’ Her voice trailed off too, as if she were anxious not to spoil things and show disappointment but couldn’t help doing so anyway.

‘Hopefully we’ll have a nice wet spring and the lawn will recover. I could get some seed . . .’ Martin was acutely conscious of the bare patches. Inwardly he cursed the previous year’s hot summer and the memory of Tracey.

‘No,’ she repeated, ‘don’t worry, I could do that.’ She paused. ‘I can’t understand people not caring about gardens’ she added, as if kindly absolving him of blame.

They stood a little awkwardly looking at the tiny garden, which terminated so embarrassingly soon at the end fence just twenty feet away.

This is silly, thought Martin. I really want this nice woman to take the place but I’m not sure that she wants it. She doesn’t seem all that keen on the garden. It’s a bit like all those dates I used to go on, when after the first evening I felt the onus on me to suggest a second one. I’d struggle to come out with the proposal, trying to appear nonchalant but afraid of rejection. No, don’t be absurd. It’s nothing like that. This is just a potential tenant, for goodness sake. But old habits, old insecurities, die hard.

He took the proverbial bull by the horns.

‘Well, what do you think? About the house I mean? I know the garden’s not up to much . . .’ He trailed off again, pathetically, repeating himself.

She turned to face him, apparently waking from a reverie, her face brightening.

‘Yes, I love it. I’d like to take it.’

Martin felt like a little boy pleasing his mum. ‘Right! Good! Shall we go in and talk about it? Would you like a cup of tea?’

They walked back through the house, Martin forgetting to lock up, and in through his own front door. Bessie, always the typical overfriendly spaniel, made her usual beeline for this exciting visitor, tail wagging wildly and leaping up. He pulled her down, trying to be stern, afraid of her spoiling the lady's nice clothes. 'Bessie down! DOWN! As usual, she took no notice and immediately reared again. Martin wished for the thousandth time that he'd been firmer about training her when she was a pup. But then she'd been such a cute, lovable little mite (most of the time, anyway) that he'd found it hard to be stern. But Mrs Richards didn't seem to mind too much – at least she wasn't absolutely horrified. She took Bessie's mottled white front legs and firmly pushed them from her.

'Yes, you're a lovely girl, but down!' she ordered with calm authority. To Martin's great surprise, the springer complied.

'Sorry about the dog; I'm afraid she doesn't do calm very well. Tea or coffee?' he asked to cover his embarrassment.

With the order for tea, milk, no sugar established, Martin went through to his kitchen, filled the kettle and set it to boil. He took down two of his best mugs (he didn't possess any porcelain cups and saucers) and arranged rich tea cream biscuits on a plate, wishing he had other varieties too so that he could offer a choice. Waiting for the water to boil, he wandered back into the living room carrying the plate of biscuits. Mrs Richards was sitting on the long sofa, one arm draped across Bessie who lay beside her, head in her lap as if she'd known her all her life.

She looked up and smiled as he reappeared.

'Is it alright for her to be up here?'

'Yes, fine, as long as you're sure you don't mind. That's what the cover's for. When she's wet she goes on her own bed though.' Martin indicated what appeared to be a pile of seat cushions, covered with a paw motif-patterned blanket, near the woodstove.

'I love dogs,' said Mrs Richards. 'I've not been able to have one in recent years though, what with being at work all day. Perhaps now I'm retired I could again.'

Ah, right, thought Martin. A retiree. So she's possibly at least sixty. But she certainly doesn't look it. But that was the thing with slightly overweight people; they were often less wrinkly. It was deceptive, and in a way a compensation for what some might call the ravages of time. Not that appearance mattered anyway. Besides, there was a certain dignity in the creases and furrows of experience, he'd always thought. He was pulled out of his idle musings – he'd missed the last couple of sentences his guest had spoken – by the click of the kettle going off, and returned to mash the tea (if dunking tea bags could be described as 'mashing'). Back in the living room, he ensconced himself on the other, smaller sofa. His new tenant-to-be was casting admiring glances around the room again.

'You've done this one beautifully too,' she remarked in her friendly yet slightly reserved way.

'Thank you,' he replied, 'I do my best.' This was all very well, soaking up all this admiration, he thought, but we ought to be talking about the tenancy. He allowed a pause for the change of subject.

'So when would you like to start?'

She finished nibbling her biscuit. He offered the plate again. This time she declined, with a polite stop-signal of raised pale palm, 'No thank you; really shouldn't. Fat enough!'

Martin wanted to say 'No you're not,' but caught himself in time.

'I shall have to give four week's notice to my present landlord in Shrewsbury, so I can come after then. Will that be alright?'

'Yes, that's fine,' said Martin. 'Obviously you'll have to sort out the details with the estate agent.'

She seemed to visibly relax into the sofa, a tension loosening, as if somehow there had been some doubt that merely saying she'd like to have the tenancy was sufficient in itself to secure it.

'Wonderful! I can't get out of Shrewsbury fast enough, I can tell you. It's a nice enough town, but I like the country much better. I'm a peace-and-quiet girl at heart. It would be like . . .'

The sentence ran out of steam, evaporated to silence. Her eyes shifted focus. She seemed to be seeing something far away, perhaps remembering something painful. But then she composed herself and with a couple of rapid blinks of her brown-black eyes, brightened again.

They chatted about generalities, and it was all very pleasant, until she finally said, 'Well, I've taken up too much of your time.' She lifted Bessie's head from her lap and rose. 'Thank you for the tea. It's a lovely cottage. I can't wait to come. Shall I let you know exactly when it'll be?'

'Yes, good idea.' Martin searched around for a pen and a scrap of paper and wrote down his phone number. She walked towards the door, and paused, holding out her hand for a formal shake.

'Thank you very much Mr Spencer.'

'No, please,' said Martin, 'call me Martin.'

'Right – Martin – and I'm Lily.'

'Is that as in Lillian or as in the flower?'

'Sorry? Oh, I see what you mean. As in the flower of course! One L at the end. My dad used to call me his little flower. Some people call me Lil. I answer to anything.'

Martin opened the door. She gifted him another wide, generous-lipped, toothy grin and walked over to her car. He waited at his door until she'd driven away, with a final wave, back to Shrewsbury.

Martin spent the next four weeks in a state of mild, not unpleasant anticipation. He wasn't quite sure why, but there was even a slight frisson of excitement. Mrs Richards – Lily – seemed a much better bet than Tracey. After all, she was a mature lady and had doubtless learned life's lessons about civilised behaviour, of considerateness and respect for others and their property. He couldn't somehow see her throwing late night raves (was that what they called them?) And she was just a little, intriguingly, exotic. No; why should he think that? It was a bit patronising. She was more than likely a second-generation ethnic minority person (what a clumsy politically-correct phrase that was) and as English as he. Her background must be interesting though.

He wondered what the other villagers would make of the situation though. It was commonplace to see black people in Birmingham, Asians in Leicester and the north and every race and nationality on earth was represented in the melting pot of London, but a different-looking face in a tiny village in shire-county England? What would old Mrs Williams, or the Burtons, make of her? But in this day and age, did old age or village clannishness necessarily equal die-hard conservatism or, worse, prejudice? Surely it didn't still happen. He'd really never understood bigotry anyway. It just seemed totally stupid and *unfair*. He supposed it was his upbringing and early adulthood. He'd been brought up as a practicing Christian (as opposed to a nominal, official one as most people were if asked). In his boyhood village in Lincolnshire, Sundays had meant best clothes, baggy short trousers exposing his skinny little legs, and being packed off to Sunday school, later followed by graduation to Evensong at St Peter's Church with his mum, a devout lady who could keep general morality separate from personal; weeping for starving children in Africa and ready with her coins on the collection plate on the one hand but very uncertain about mixed marriage if it affected her own family (well, what about the children?) on the other. Was that simply ancient folk-

chauvinism: visceral fear of The Other, a barricade against the threatening tribe on the other side of the hill?

Later still, the heady liberal environment of Art College in the sixties had reinforced his attitudes. He'd become implacably, passionately opposed to Apartheid in South Africa and couldn't for the life of him understand why some of those of a conservative bent were so relaxed about it. After the idealistic bubble of college, inspired by the protest music of Dylan and Baez and the impenetrable poetry of Cohen, back out in the real world, he'd encountered real, blatant, shocking bigotry. He remembered once having a violent argument with a colleague in the drawing office. The man had made hateful, cruel comments about immigrants and it had made Martin really see red. The argument had degenerated into an undignified full-scale shouting match and others had practically had to drag them apart. After that he'd tried to curb his rage. When others told unpleasant racist jokes, usually involving violence, he walked away and quietly seethed in private. When otherwise decent, kind people casually called blacks or Asians wogs or Pakki's (even when they might have been Indian) as a matter of course, he closed his ears. In retrospect, it probably set him up for what would come later. There was a distinct feeling of *dèjà vu* about his having met Lily Richards.

But leaving the race issue out of it, his second try at landlordship would surely turn out all right.

Although he'd heard officially from the agent that the new tenancy would be starting imminently, Lily telephoned three weeks later to say that she'd be moving in on the following Saturday. He'd been going over number three (the other cottage) again, anxious to make it as spick and span as possible, trying again to remove the last vestiges of staining from the cooker now that he knew a trustworthy tenant was coming, cleaning the widows for the second time in three weeks (something quite unheard of with his own place, number four)

and, the day before her arrival, vacuuming, floor washing and dusting again too. Lily had said that she hoped it wouldn't be a problem for him, but she'd prefer to bring her own furniture. Neither of them had thought to bring up the subject when she'd visited: she'd been so taken with the cottage that she'd forgotten and it simply hadn't occurred to Martin that she might have her own.

So he'd had a slight problem. He could have sold the furniture he'd so recently bought (although it was less than pristine now), but it was just possible that this second tenancy wouldn't work out either and he didn't want to let it go. Walter Burton had solved the difficulty for him. Their detached cottage was bigger than he and Gladys really needed now that their children had grown up and left and, appreciating Martin's problem, had offered one of their spare bedrooms as storage space. Walter was probably only too glad to help if it meant, as Martin had assured him, that this time it was a middle-aged, very respectable lady who'd be very unlikely to be a nuisance. So Martin and Walter had humped the contents, a complete job-lot including furniture, pictures, ornaments, rugs, cutlery, you name it, up into the Burton's back bedroom and packed it in. Things like the vacuum cleaner and small kitchen appliances he left out, in case Lily preferred any of them to hers. Then he awaited her arrival.

At midday the following Saturday a long wheelbase, hired Ford Transit pulled into the lane, preceded by Lily's little Peugeot. Alerted by Bessie's barking, Martin went out to investigate. Lily, dressed less formally now in seersucker shirt and jeans, a blue bandana tied over her hair, got out, followed by a thirty-something young woman. A man of similar age climbed from the driver's seat of the van. They too were black. Immediately, Martin noticed, a curtain twitched and stilled in the Burton's across the road. He smiled to himself. Human nature never changes, he thought.

‘Morning!’ Lily beamed at him as he closed his front door on a still barking Bessie. Her companions lined up behind her, surveying him. The younger woman had the same ready smile, but the man looked a little sullen.

‘Got here then,’ Lily chirruped, unnecessarily. I’ve brought my helpers with me. She swept her arm to include them. ‘This is my daughter Vera and my son Robbie.’ Completing the introductory protocol, she looked at them, waved her arm in Martin’s direction and added, ‘this is Martin.’

He smiled at them. They were a good looking pair, certainly taking after their mum.

‘Hello, pleased to meet you.’

‘Hi,’ said Vera, still smiling.

‘Hi,’ mumbled Robbie, eye contact only momentary as his eyes slid away.

‘Can I offer you a cup of coffee or something?’ Martin asked.

Lily and Vera exchanged glances in mute consultation, but Robbie promptly said – a little rudely, Martin thought – ‘no, it’s alright, I want to get the stuff in.’ Not ‘we ought to’ but ‘I want to.’ He clearly considered himself, as the male, to be in charge. And with that he pointedly, the subject closed, opened the van’s rear doors. The women looked at each other again with resigned, we’ve-been-here-before-so-many-times expressions on their faces, and joined him. Martin was a little discomforted.

‘Right; I’ll leave you to it then. Give me a shout if you need any help,’ he said, and went back inside.

Sometime later an embarrassed and not a little harassed Lily rapped on his door.

‘Sorry to bother you Martin, but we’re having trouble getting the wardrobe upstairs.’

He joined them next door. The wardrobe in question was a nice old polished wood one with moulding around its top. Robbie’s face was

like thunder. Martin could see that they'd been trying to force the base up the narrow twisting stairwell when it just wouldn't go. Paint had been scraped from the door, leaving a jagged groove, and transferred to the wardrobe. He considered the problem. He could see what it was; if there had been a square right-angled turn at the foot of the stairs it could have been passed through the doorway easily before being rotated to go up the stairs. But the stairs began to wind steeply as soon as you got through the door, making a turning manoeuvre limited and difficult. There was only one thing – two, possibly – to try as far as he could see. 'It might be easier with the door off, and I might have to take the wardrobe apart too; I'll fetch a screwdriver,' he told them.

But removing the ancient door was easier said than done. It had probably never been off in its lifetime and the grooves in the screws of its hinges had largely disappeared beneath many layers of paint. They stubbornly refused to turn. Martin swore under his breath. Old doors could be absolute buggers to get off sometimes, and this wasn't the time to be struggling. As the others continued to carry in more goods and chattels he set to to clear the grooves and then resorted to brute force. Several hefty whacks with a hammer to the screwdriver set in each groove broke the thick film of paint around the screws, and with much red-faced gritting of teeth and straining they eventually, reluctantly turned and the door could be lifted off. But, infuriatingly, the wardrobe still wouldn't go up.

There was nothing for it but to instigate plan B as well. Fortunately the overhanging frieze at the top of the wardrobe was simply screwed on from above and was easy enough to detach. They tried again. It was still a very tight squeeze, but with Martin pulling from above and an angry Robbie pushing from below they finally got it up and around the turn. Then they took up the bed. Martin was relieved to see that it was the traditional type: old, with nice carved head and

foot boards into which a spring base locked. It broke down into manageable bits (he had had nightmares that she might be bringing a large chunky divan, the sort with storage in its base). And it was only a three-foot-wide one. It wasn't difficult to carry the components up and the mattress, being bendy, went up quite easily too. Anticipating staircase-negotiating problems, Martin had bought cheap flat-pack bedroom furniture. He hadn't really anticipated that someone might want to bring in their own, more difficult-to-shift goods. That was the only trouble with old, tiny cottages; they sometimes made life difficult.

Now everything was safely installed upstairs, but more damage had been inflicted on the doorframe and the wall. Lily was aghast and apologetic. 'I'm so sorry about this. I'm wrecking your house.'

Martin was magnanimous. This wasn't couldn't-care-less negligence, bringing to mind someone he could mention. 'That's all right,' he reassured her, like the boffins in the TV *Bionic Man* from many years ago, 'we can rebuild it.'

'Oh well, she joked feebly, 'now the stuff's up we'll never get it down again. I'll just have to stay here for the rest of my life!'

With all the stuff now in, Martin admired her taste. There wasn't a great deal of it, but he could see why she liked old houses. There weren't many actual antiques, apart from a rather nice buttoned, spoon-back Victorian nursing chair and a nice Arts and Crafts inspired bureau, but her modest collection was mostly old, sometimes a little battered and some of it, he suspected, treasured heirlooms.

Martin tried again to be hospitable. The removals crew looked sweaty and exhausted and ready to drop. 'Would you like a drink now?' he offered.

Again though the surly Robbie declined. 'No, you're all right; I've got to get the van back.' Lily, clearly embarrassed, tried to remonstrate. 'Oh, come on love; you've got time . . .'

'No!' he interrupted her, exasperated, 'I'm seeing Max later. Gotta go!'

He headed for the door then turned, sounding a little contrite. 'Right, see you then,' he muttered to the women. But he ignored Martin completely.

Back at home, with Lily and Vera slumped gratefully on the sofa and the not-to-be-denied Bessie between them, Martin fussed around making tea and bringing out the food he'd got in the other day, just in case (he hadn't wanted to be caught with just a packet of biscuits to offer again). They fell on his sausage rolls, quiche, scones and fruit cake hungrily. Lily was still embarrassed, and apologetic.

'I'm so sorry about Robbie. New girlfriend. You know how it is . . .'

She grasped for an excuse for his boorish behaviour. 'He would rather have been with her today really.'

'No Mum!' Vera cut in. 'He was behaving like a stupid selfish little pig. You shouldn't stand for it.'

Martin smiled to himself at the 'little.' This feisty lady was presumably the older Big Sister, eternally regarding Robbie as Little Brother notwithstanding that he was a grown man. But perhaps she had a point. Lily seemed to be rather under his thumb. Now she looked discomfited; less the cheery confident person she'd seemed at their first meeting. An awkward silence fell. Martin broke it by changing the subject.

'Don't worry about the door and wall. I've got some paint left so I can easily patch them up. I shouldn't have such a pokey stairwell!'

Lily looked relieved. 'Thanks Martin; you're very kind.'

The conversation drifted onto other, pleasanter topics. Lily had been living in a small rented house in Shrewsbury. She didn't say for how long. Vera lived and worked in Wolverhampton; she was a police officer. That, thought Martin, explained her strong personality.

Little was said about Robbie – he'd probably caused enough embarrassment for one day.

They finished eating and Lily reluctantly rose. 'Well this is no good. I could sit here with you and Bessie all day, but there's a house next door to sort out.'

'Do you need any help?' Martin offered, 'putting your bed together or anything?'

'No, really; we're very capable, thanks all the same. We're not your typical useless women!' Vera chimed in, all calm authority and dependability. Yes, thought Martin, I can see that. They left. Vera offered her hand. 'It's been very nice meeting you. I'll see you again I expect.' Martin shook her hand, a little surprised at the firmness of her grip.

'Yes,' he said, 'I hope so.'

They left him and, slightly at a loose end, he decided to treat Bessie an extra-long walkies. At six-thirty, standing in his garden looking at the first emerging daffodil blooms, he heard her car drive away, taking Vera back to Wolverhampton, presumably. Two hours later it returned. His new tenant was in residence.

Well, what a nice family, he thought.

Apart from Robbie, anyway.

