

Chapter One

“Dad, are we nearly there yet?” The enquiry was delivered with a plea.

“Hmm, well we’re a bit closer than we were ten minutes ago when you last asked, Zack.”

“But, I’m hungry.” He wasn’t letting go.

Jo Drake looked across at her husband. “I think we should take a break, Liam. We’ve been on the road nearly four hours.”

The family Volvo was comfortable with the air-conditioning control set at ‘full’. Saturday at the end of July and, despite the early start from their London home, the traffic was busy, the motorway, stop/start in places.

“Yes, ok, keep an eye out for a service station or something.”

“How many miles is it, do you think?”

“To the cottage? According to the Sat Nav, about another hundred or so. It depends on the roads; there’re no motorways in Cornwall. Should be a couple of hours if we don’t keep stopping.”

About ten minutes later, Jo spotted a sign. “Oh, look, there, services, half a mile.”

Moments later, Liam Drake was guiding the Volvo into the large car park. It was busy, with most spaces taken.

“That family seem to be leaving, I’ll ask them,” said Jo and lowered the window.

“Excuse me, are you leaving?” she called.

The driver indicated with a thumbs up and Liam waited while the man’s over-weight partner climbed into the passenger seat; she seemed stressed. Three raucous children made themselves comfortable in the back.

With the manoeuvre completed, Liam gave a polite wave to the driver and drove into the vacant parking spot.

“Did you see that woman’s face? Obviously wasn’t enjoying her holiday.”

“Yes, but with three teenagers, I think I’d be pretty stressed too,” said Liam.

“That’s true. Come on Zack, Far, make sure you put your games away. You don’t want to get them pinched.”

Ten-year-old Zack and his eight-year-old sibling, Farrah, had been playing computer games since they had left home.

The family exited the car. Liam, early forties – young for a top barrister, was dressed comfortably for the drive in jeans, short-sleeved shirt, trainers. Nearly six-foot, with well-groomed fair hair, he walked alongside his wife, Jo, a physiotherapist, while the two children skipped towards the entrance.

A coach party was just leaving, creating a bottleneck which took a few moments to clear. It was a typical trunk road service station with an array of shops close to the entrance and a filling station with petrol at exorbitant prices.

“Right, first stop, toilet. Do you want to go, Zack?” said Liam.

“Yeah,” said the lad and followed his dad to the gents, while Jo escorted Farrah to the ladies.

Having completed the toilet, the family reconvened and made their way to the cafeteria.

“Find a seat; I’ll get the drinks,” said Liam.

“Can I have a chocolate brownie?” asked Zack.

Liam looked at Jo who frowned, then nodded. “Go on, why not? I’ll have one too; we’re on holiday.”

The family eventually settled on a four-seater table to enjoy their refreshments.

“Hey, these are really scrummy... Good choice, Zack,” said Jo and turned to her son. “You’ve got chocolate all ’round your mouth; you’ll get it everywhere. Wait, let me get a tissue.”

She rummaged through her rucksack and handed Zack a Wet-Wipe.

“Have you got the folder with you?” asked Liam.

Jo was back in the rucksack and handed him a foolscap plastic folder containing various documents.

Liam started to look through.

“Just want to check when we can collect the keys.”

“From two o’clock, I think it said,” advised Jo.

Liam checked his watch. “Well it’s two now. It’ll be nearer four when we get there, I reckon.”

He looked at the photo of the cottage. “I hope it lives up to the billing in the brochure. It said a new let.”

“You can always sue them under the Trades Description Act,” said Jo.

“Ha, I’ve got enough cases on the go without taking on any more. Which reminds me.”

Liam took out his mobile phone and checked his messages.

“I thought we were going to dispense with phones for three weeks.”

“Sorry, force of habit,” replied Liam, but continued scrolling through his emails anyway.

“You said Sunita was handling your cases?” said Jo.

“Yes, she is, but I did say to contact me if she had any problems.”

“Oh, great! So you’ll be back and forward to your Chambers every five minutes.”

Liam turned off his phone. “No, no, no, just in emergencies.”

Jo frowned.

“Promise,” said Liam. “Right, if you’re ready, let’s go on holiday. Next stop, Polgissy.”

“Ha, you hope,” said Jo. “You watch, there’ll be tailbacks as soon as we get to the hotspots.”

“Well, not necessarily, the brochure did say it was quiet, for those wanting to unwind. It was one of the reasons we chose it if you remember.”

“Hmm, we’ll see,” reposted Jo.

“You’re such a sceptic.”

“No, just realistic. If something seems too good to be true, then it usually is.”

Liam smiled. “Come on guys, let’s get this show back on the road.”

The family exited the Services and headed for the car. The sun was now making its presence felt. It was a glorious summer’s day, the end of July, and the excitement of a holiday put everyone in a good mood.

They made themselves comfortable and buckled up.

“Just check the Sat Nav,” said Liam and the dashboard screen lit up with a map, the predicted mileage, and journey time. “Hm, no reports of any jams. We may be lucky.”

Jo turned and addressed the children. “Anybody want water?”

“No, thanks,” said Zack. Farrah shook her head, eyes firmly concentrating on her games console.

With about fifty miles to go, Liam was virtually on autopilot. The Sat-Nav with its digitalised voice was providing occasional updates; the radio was playing in the background. Thoughts of work and the recent court case was still on his mind; it would take a few days before he could switch off.

As a major trunk road, it was a dual carriageway. The verges were lush and verdant. Woods, farmland passed by; the scenery was spectacular. Jo was admiring the views, relaxing in the warmth of the sun as it streamed through the windows.

BANG!

From nowhere, something hit the windscreen and bounced into the road. Blood was smeared down the glass. Liam, momentarily disorientated, instinctively braked. The car behind flashed its headlights. He quickly composed himself, acknowledged the following vehicle, and accelerated away.

“God, that made me jump,” said Jo. “What was it?”

“A crow, I think. A dead crow now,” said Liam.

He was shaking as he started the washer to remove the mess on the windscreen.

“Dad, what was that?” said Farrah drowsily, from the back seat.

“Just a bird, Far.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

The incident had certainly woken up Liam; he was still shaking.

“Isn’t it bad luck to kill a crow?” asked Jo.

“Well it is for the crow,” replied Liam and chuckled anxiously. “I think that old wives’ tale referred to a magpie.”

“Ah, yes, you could be right,” said Jo.

It was nearly two hours later; the Volvo was on a minor road, being directed by the comforting voice of the navigation system; there seemed to be little traffic. Thoughts of dead crows had been left behind.

“How much further?” asked Jo. “I could do with the loo.”

“And me,” shouted Zack.

“Me too,” added Farrah.

“Yes, ok, I could do with stopping too. According to the Sat Nav, it should only be five minutes. Look, there’s the turning, ‘Polgissy two miles’.” Liam pointed to an old road sign, one of the white ones with black script; it was leaning down slightly.

“Well, that was a good spot,” said Jo.

“Yes, I’m not sure why the Sat Nav didn’t pick it up.”

Liam indicated left and made the turn.

They were immediately surrounded by an impenetrable forest of trees, thick with foliage.

“Good grief, this is a bit narrow,” said Liam.

The carriageway was only wide enough for one car. There were passing points every hundred yards or so where the verge had been worn to accommodate two vehicles. The trees seemed to be enveloping them.

“Yes, I can see why the brochure said it was off the beaten track; no one’s found it yet,” said Jo and started to laugh.

Liam’s attention was suddenly drawn to the dashboard. “That’s strange…”

“What’s the matter?” asked Jo.

“The Sat Nav’s gone blank. Look, there’s no map.”

Jo stared at the dashboard screen. “Yes, you’re right.”

“It’s probably why it didn’t pick up the turning. I wonder if there’s a Volvo garage about. I can get it checked out.”

“You’re kidding, I bet the nearest one’s Plymouth… or Penzance,” said Jo.

“Hmm, yes, you’re probably right. I’ll check the website later and see.”

Jo turned around. “Are you two ok?”

“I don’t like all these trees,” said Farrah. “They’re scary.”

“Don’t worry, Far, we’ll be out of them soon,” said Liam. “Look, it’s brighter ahead.”

“It’s like we’re in a tunnel,” said Jo. “Feels weird.”

Moments later they were out of the trees.

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” said Liam. “What the…? Where’s this come from?”

“Fog? In July? Now that is weird,” said Jo, leaning forward and looking up at the sky.

“I can hardly see a thing. It must be the hills.”

The car slowed to little more than walking pace.

“What’s that?” asked Liam, pointing to a shape, just visible on the left-hand roadside through the white murk. It was an object covered in creeping ivy. Jo dropped down the window to take a closer look.

“It’s the village sign, Polgissy.”

“Hmm, well it looks like we’ve arrived.”

“Someone needs to clean the ivy off that sign; it’s hardly readable.”

“Look, the fog’s clearing. Wait, what’s that?” said Liam.

Lian slowed the car again. The high verge had dropped for about three feet and was festooned with ribbon, flowers, candles and cuddly toys; there was a metal container with a lit candle inside.

“Oh, it’s one of those roadside shrines. I don’t know why people do that; it’s just too morbid for words,” said Jo. “Look there’re teddy bears as well as flowers; must be a child, how sad.”

“Can you turn off that game, Zack? Your Dad’s trying to concentrate,” said Jo.

“It is off.”

Jo turned around and could see the game console on the seat.

“What’s that noise?” said Jo.

“It sounds like children playing,” said Farrah.

“I can’t hear anything,” said Liam and pressed the accelerator.

Jo dropped down the window. “It’s stopped now.”

“I think you were imagining things.”

“I did hear something. So did Far, didn’t you Poppet?” Jo turned to her daughter.

“Yes, Mom, children’s voices.”

“Hmm, it’s a mystery, probably ghosts,” said Liam, and chuckled.

Jo had moved on and was looking at the sky. “I can’t believe how the weather’s changed; there’s hardly a cloud.”

The road had widened, but not by much, and, after some wasteland, the first cottage appeared on the right-hand side. The dwelling was stone-built, one would say of typical Cornish design; a two-up, two-down cottage. It had been whitewashed and, having left the fog behind, it shimmered in the sun. It marked the start of a very steep downwards hill.

“Look, guys, there’s the sea,” shouted Jo.

Before them, the ocean stretched out into the horizon, azure blue, shimmering in the sun. There was a modest harbour with a few small fishing boats bobbing at their anchorage inside, then a short piece of sand before the sea wall and the road. Flocks of seagulls peppered the sky and foreshore; many lined up on the breakwater taking a breather from their scavenging.

The village was surrounded by hills and steep cliffs as if protecting it from outside forces. Telegraph poles were the only blot on the landscape. Wires seemed to criss-cross the village in all directions.

The children unbuckled their seatbelts, leaned forward and peered over the front seats.

“Hey, that looks so pretty,” said Farah.

“Can’t wait to swim in that,” said Zack.

The downhill road continued. Liam’s foot was firmly on the brake to prevent it careering forward. It was flanked by more cottages of a similar design to the first, and went on for about a quarter of a mile before they reached the bottom, at which point the road turned sharp right and ran parallel to the sea wall. There were double yellow lines. Liam noticed them.

“Ha, not quite the land that time forgot. I see the council have made their presence felt. We need to park somewhere and find out where we need to collect the keys.”

“Look, there’s a pub,” said Jo, and pointed to the line of sea-front properties on the right. It stood out from the rest of the cottages.

“They should have parking, hopefully,” added Liam.

“Yes, and a loo,” said Jo. “There, between the pub and the next house, there’s a sign. It says, ‘Car Park’.”

“Got it,” said Liam and turned cautiously into the narrow drive to avoid scraping the car’s wing mirrors.

It opened into a small car park, with room for about ten vehicles. Liam pulled into one of the many vacant spots. The only other car was a ten-year-old Skoda which looked like it had seen better days.

“Doesn’t look very busy,” commented Jo, seeing the empty spaces.

“No, you’re right,” said Liam, as he got out of the car. “Come on guys, let’s go and explore.”

He stretched his back before picking up his wallet from the glove-box.

The family got out of the Volvo and Liam aimed the fob at the car. The indicators flashed to confirm locking. They turned left out of the car park, and walked the short distance to the pub entrance.

“Can we go and see the sea?” said Zack, excitedly, looking across at the small harbour to the right.

“Yes, later, let’s get a drink first and something to eat. We can use the loos, too.”

“Oh, that’s quaint,” said Jo, looking up at the swinging sign above the door. “‘The Crab Pot’, how unusual.”

The sign looked worn and very old with a painting of a crab pot, confirming its name.

The narrow doorway was low and Liam instinctively ducked as he walked in; although he might just have managed it without the stoop. Inside, the pub was dark after the bright sunshine and it took a moment to adjust their eyes. There were no other customers.

“What would you like to drink?” whispered Liam, still stretching his back. There was no reason to whisper, but for some reason, it seemed appropriate.

“Oh, I think a G and T is in order after that journey.”

“What about you, Zack?”

“A Coke, please.”

“And me,” said Farrah.

“I’ll get the drinks, find a seat,” said Liam and went to the bar.

The bar counter was lit with small ceiling spotlights which cast downward shadows. A man entered the serving area from a back room. Liam squinted to make eye contact. The man's face was lined with significant bags under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept for a week. Thin wisps of white hair protruded from underneath a flat cap. He was dressed in dungarees and a white shirt, resembling a fisherman. He approached Liam.

"Yes, m'dear, what can I get you?" The dialect was soft, and typically Cornish.

"Two Cokes, a G and T, and half a lager," responded Liam.

Liam looked around the pub; it seemed like someone's front room. There were a few, maybe ten, wooden tables with cast-iron legs and matching chairs on a stone floor. Wooden beams ran along the ceiling, signs of a bygone age. The walls still retained tobacco stains from a time when the pub would be filled with smoke from cigarettes and corncob pipes.

The counter was also wooden, a stained hardwood, which glistened from years of polish. Two long towel mats protected it from spills.

The landlord dispensed the drinks and lined them up on the counter.

"Do you do food at all?" asked Liam.

"I can do you a sandwich or two; we don't do no 'ot food."

"Is there a restaurant around here?"

"What in Polgissy? Sorry."

"Not even a fish and chip shop?"

"Not much call for one of them. We don't get many visitors, being a bit cut-off, like."

"What about shops? There must be one of those."

"Aye, at the end of the road by the hawn, Mrs Trevelyan's, but you'll need to look sharp; she closes at five."

Liam checked his watch, twenty-to. He had no idea of the meaning of the word 'hawn' but said nothing, not wishing to appear stupid.

"Right thanks."

"Do you want a tray for the drinks?"

"Oh, yes please."

The landlord reached under the counter and pulled out a circular metal tray, decorated in the emblem of the owning brewery. Liam paid for the drinks. "Where are the loos?"

"Toilets're just through there," replied the landlord, pointing to a door the far side of the bar.

Liam returned to the family. A red-coloured, padded bench seat ran along the far wall, and Jo and the children had made themselves comfortable on a table in the corner. There was a small circular window, the size of a porthole, with a view of the road and harbour beyond. Zack was kneeling on the bench, looking through.

"The loos are over there," said Liam, pointing to the door indicated by the landlord. "I don't know what you want to do for food; they only do sandwiches here. He says there's a shop up the road but they close at five."

"Well, we'll need something more substantial than sandwiches, I'm starving."

"Look, I'll go and see what they've got; you can look after the kids," said Liam.

"No, it's ok; I know what we need. I don't suppose there'll be any food in the cottage. I'll do an essentials shop; milk, butter, bread, cereals, and see if they have any ready meals, something quick. I don't want to be cooking all night. It's a good job we bought the tea and coffee."

"Yes, ok, you better get going."

"I'll just pop to the ladies."

"Ok, I'll look after the stuff," said Liam.

Jo got up and was quickly joined by the children and headed for the toilets.

A few minutes later, she collected her rucksack from the bench-seat and headed for the exit. Liam took a sip of his beer and turned to Zack.

“So, what do you think?”

“It’s a bit dead,” he replied.

“No, you wait there’ll be loads to do, you’ll see.”

“Do you want some crisps?”

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” said Zack.

“Yes, please, Dad,” said Farrah.

Liam went back to the bar via the gents. The landlord had retired to the back room and returned seeing there was custom.

“Yes, m’dear.”

“Three packets of crisps, please.”

“Any particular flavour? We got all sorts now.”

“Just plain, please.”

The landlord returned to the back room and produced the snacks. Liam paid.

“You don’t know where I can find Mrs Thornton, do you? I need to collect some keys.”

“You’re staying here then?” His voice had an inflection of surprise.

“Well, yes, that’s the general idea. I need to pick up the keys from a Mrs Thornton it said in the letter, only my Sat Nav’s on the blink.”

“Aye, they don’t work ’round ’ere; no signal, you see... no internet, neither.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we don’t ’ave no signal down ’ere; it’s the hills, you see. We’ve been onto Council, like, but they don’t do nothin’. Low priority, they said, too expensive.”

“The squire next to the old rectory’s got internet. ’Ad to pay for it, mind. ’Ad to dig a trench, they did, all the way to the main road, took weeks.”

“Oh, I see.” Liam’s face was etched with disappointment and was thinking through the implications. He had hopes of keeping in touch with his Chambers, despite his promise to Jo.

“So, where you stayin’ then, only we don’t have no hotels here?”

“Er, my wife’s got the details. I can’t remember, off hand. Hmm, let me think. Yes, Pendle Cottage, could it be that? Is that right?”

“Pendle Cottage? Are you certain?”

“Yes, I think so. As I said, my wife’s got the folder with all the details in it.”

The landlord, deep in thought, picked up a glass and started wiping it with a cloth.

“Oi didn’t know they was renting it out, but I knows someone’s been doing it up. Been up for sale since January. Not been able to sell it, I expect. Mind you, I’m not surprised.”

“Why’s that?”

“The murders.”

“Murders!?”

“Aye, back in January it were; terrible goings on. About the same time as those Morgan girls were killed.”

“Murders, you said? But that’s dreadful.”

“Aye, that it were.”

“So, what happened? If you can tell me.”

“Folk ’round ’ere don’t like to talk about it much. It were in the newspapers, though. We had people from Plymouth, even Exeter, all over, down here, journalists an’ that. Oi ’ad to order in more ale.” His voice tailed off.

“Oh, I’m sorry. What about, the girls? You mentioned something about the girls.”

“Oh, aye, that was only a couple of days later, it was. Mrs Morgan over at Fairland Cottage; she were a writer, ’ad twin girls, her did. Beautiful they was, just six-year-old - Meli and Clementine. So ’appy they was. Hit by a car; bowled over like nine pins.”

The landlord looked down, clearly upset.

“Where was this?” said Liam, ignoring the man’s distress.

The landlord looked up; his eyes were bloodshot. “Just as you comes in from the top road. There’s flowers an’ things up there.”

“Oh, yes, we saw them when we came in. That’s so sad”

While Liam was finding out more about the village, curtesy of the landlord, Jo walked along the row of cottages towards the shop. Several of the houses had their front doors open allowing passers-by to look inside. It seemed most belonged to fishermen, judging by the crab and lobster pots visible.

Jo reached the shop; it wasn’t quite what she was expecting, visualising a typical convenience store. It was a converted cottage with the downstairs transformed into a shop. A faded ‘Bero flour’ advertisement on the side of the building, probably dating from the nineteen-forties, was the only indication of a retail establishment.

The front door was open, with an umbrella-holder containing about twenty fishing nets wedged against it to stop it from closing. Immediately in front of her was a carousel containing faded picture postcards of the surrounding countryside and Cornish scenes. Jo took a quick glance; there seemed to be no cards featuring Polgissy. She was intending to send one back to her mother. There were also no buckets and spades one would normally associate with a seaside store, but there was a small stock of fishing equipment, Jo noticed.

With limited natural lighting, just the one side window, the interior was quite gloomy and not particularly conducive for a retail experience. To the left, below the window, were a series of wooden pallets containing fresh vegetables, then a freezer cabinet. A wide variety of tinned food was displayed on the right-hand side, including soups, baked beans, spaghetti and so on. The serving counter was

immediately in front of Jo, with an array of chocolate bars and other confectionery, placed strategically in front of it to encourage impulse buying.

The figure behind the counter had been sitting on an old stool and stood up with difficulty when she detected a customer.

“Wasson, m’dear, can I help you?” Jo had been scouring the merchandise and the greeting startled her.

“Oh, hi, yes, I need something for dinner. Do you stock any ready-meals?”

“Only frozen, I’m afraid, m’dear. Should be some in the freezer cabinet, next to the ice creams.”

“Thanks,” said Jo, and started rummaging through the produce. The range was not great but there were three shepherds’ pies at the bottom which looked like they had been in there for a while judging by the ‘snow’ sticking to them. Jo was in danger of falling in head first but managed to retain her balance and extricated herself from the freezer clutching the items. She also took a tub of ice cream, then approached the counter.

“I need some bread, milk, and, er, breakfast cereals.”

“Right you are m’dear. I keeps the milk in the fridge; won’t be a minute. How many pints?”

“Four, if you have them.”

“Aye, should have. The cereals are in the corner.” She pointed to the appropriate section.

Jo scanned the selection, no muesli, just Corn Flakes, Puffed Wheat, and a few other traditional brands. She picked up a packet of Sugar Puffs and started to read the ingredients; salt and sugar content were both red. She tutted and picked up a packet of Shredded Wheat; not great but it would do.

“There’s some porridge at the back,” came a voice from the counter.

“Oh, thank you, yes.” Jo replaced the Shredded Wheat, picked up a box of porridge, and took it to the counter.

Jo could see the woman more clearly. She looked like she was in her late-seventies and moved in a laboured fashion, as if every action was painful. She was dressed in a blue overall, which would be

fashionable in the nineteen-sixty's. Her demeanour was not typical of someone running a shop; her expression was dour, straightforward to the point of rudeness.

“Will that be all?”

“Oh, sorry, bread, yes, mustn't forget that, and butter. We'll need some toast to keep us going in the morning.”

“Aye, butter's in the fridge.” The woman seemed annoyed she had to make another journey to the refrigerator. She returned with a loaf of bread and the butter.

“Do you have any sliced?” asked Jo.

“Sorry, all gone; this is the last of it till Monday. We don't get delivery on a Sunday.”

“Oh, ok that will have to do.”

“Will that be all?”

The giant clock behind the counter, which looked like it may have come from a railway station, clicked over to five o'clock.

“Yes, thanks. Do you have a carrier bag, please?”

“Aye, I have somewhere; need to charge you for it, though. It's the Government, not me.”

“Yes, that's ok, no problem.”

The woman started putting the produce in a large plastic carrier bag.

“Staying local are we?” she said as she started to key the amounts into the till.

“Yes, Pendle Cottage. Do you know it?”

She stopped abruptly.

“Pendle Cottage? Are you sure?” Her face was one of concern.

“Yes, wait, I've got the brochure somewhere.” Jo rummaged in her rucksack and pulled out the document. “There, Pendle Cottage.”

The woman stopped loading the carrier bag and stared at the photograph on the front. “Hmm, they should have pulled it down; some folks ’round ’ere reckon the place is cursed.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Oh, no reason.” She noticed Jo was holding a debit card. “I’ll just get the machine.”

The transaction was completed and the woman handed Jo the bulging carrier bag.

“Mind how you go,” said the woman and followed Jo to the front door.

Jo had stepped onto the street and turned to say something to the woman, but the door slammed shut. She could see the woman changing the hanging sign from ‘open’ to ‘closed’.

Jo was in deep thought as she walked back to the pub. To her right, on the other side of the road, lobster pots had been stacked on the sea wall. She couldn’t remember seeing them earlier.

She entered the pub and squinted until her eyes once again became accustomed to the gloomy interior. She saw the family in the corner.

“Hi,” said Liam as Jo approached. “How did you get on?”

“Not bad; at least we won’t starve. Actually, we better get going. There’s some frozen stuff in the bag; it’ll start melting.”

“Yes, we’re ready. The landlord’s given me directions to Mrs. Thornton’s; it’s not far.”

The family approached the exit just as the landlord came out of the back room.

“Thanks,” shouted Liam and waved.

“Mind ’owye goes,” said the landlord.

The family left the pub to be greeted again by bright sunshine.

“So, where’s this place then?” said Jo as they turned right. She was holding the carrier bag in her arms and not by the handles.

“Just along here. Do you want to dump the shopping?” said Liam.

“No, it’ll be stifling in the car; I’ll manage,” said Jo.

They continued walking along the narrow pavement towards the grocery store. Liam was looking at the row of cottages.

“He said there was an alleyway just before the shop. A nip, he called it.”

They walked a few more yards. “Yes, here it is.”

“Do you know, I never noticed that. I must’ve walked right past it,” said Jo.

“Well, it’s not that obvious, why would you? Second cottage on the right, he said.”

The family turned up the narrow path; it was just wide enough for a car. Ruts in the compacted ground suggested it had been used for that purpose. It was predominantly grass and weeds.

On the right-hand side there was a row of three terraced cottages. There, ‘Brook Cottage’, that’s it. Wait here; I’ll go and see what’s happening.”

There was a small crazy-paved footpath leading to the front door. Liam noticed a net curtain twitch and the front door opened before he reached it.

“Hello, you must be Mr Drake.”

Liam did a double take. She was much younger than he was expecting, probably the same age as himself, attractive, with long dark hair, and dressed in skinny jeans and a tee shirt.

“Oh, yes, and family,” said Liam pointing to Jo and the kids at the top of the path. He chuckled. The woman waved.

“I’m April Thornton, pleased to meet you. Do you want to come in and have a cup of tea? You would be very welcome after that long drive.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I think we need to get settled in. We’ve got some shopping that needs to go in the fridge.”

“Yes, ok, just a minute.” The woman went back inside and returned with the keys and a piece of paper.

“There’re the keys and some information. Oh, yes, while I remember, you’ll need some change; the electricity’s on a meter, under the sink. Pound coins.”

“Oh, thanks for the warning, I’ll stock up.”

“The sheets are fresh on this morning, and I’ve put some basics in the pantry; you’ll see. If there’s anything you need, just let me know. Unfortunately, there’s no mobile phone signal in the village, but there’s a phone box just on the corner; it’s close to the cottage. My number’s on that slip of paper.”

“That’s very kind. Where do we go?”

“Oh, yes, of course. It’s along here till you get to the shop, then turn right.” She indicated with hand signals. “It’s up a bit of a hill, then about two hundred yards, there’s a turning to the left which leads to the church, you’ll see it; take that turn. Then just after the church the road bends to the right; you’ll see the phone box I mentioned, on the corner of a cul-de-sac; the cottage is right in front of you. You can’t miss it.”

“That’s very kind, thanks; I’m sure we’ll find it.”

The family left the cottage and headed back to the car. A few minutes later, Liam was driving along the road next to the sea wall. The tide appeared to be on the turn. They passed the shop and immediately turned right, as instructed, up the steep hill. The road was not much more than a car’s width wide with cottages on either side. Pebble-dashed concrete walls separated their small frontages from the street.

After a short distance, they reached the church turning and made a left; the small ancient spire was in view. There was a patch of ground adjacent to the church wall, presumably for cars. The road passed by to the right and then the telephone kiosk appeared.

“There, that must be it,” said Liam, pointing to the object, and turned right into a cul-de-sac.

In front of them was a thatched dwelling, set back from the road.

With a chimney stack on one end, it appeared larger than the other cottages in the village. The windows were traditional but looked as if they had been recently painted. There was a patch of lawn at the front, encased by a three-foot high trellis fence. It all looked neat and tidy.

“Well, we’ve arrived,” said Liam, as he parked up outside.

“It looks like it backs onto the trees,” said Jo. “There’s not much daylight at the rear.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean,” said Liam surveying the landscape. “Let’s get our things inside, and we can have a look around.”

There was a small gate which opened onto a paved footpath to the front door, less than fifteen yards away.

“Dad,” said Farrah, in one of her pleading voices. She was also looking at the house. “I don’t like it here; it’s spooky.”

“No, Far, it’ll be fine when you get used to it; you’ll see.”

Liam grabbed one of the large suitcases from the back of the Volvo and led the way down the path. He took out the keys from his pocket. The front door was old and latch-opening but a more substantial lock had been added later together with a letterbox.

Liam opened the door and went inside; the family followed, each carrying some luggage.

The door opened directly onto a large lounge. A mix of smells greeted them, furniture polish and a hint of paint. There was something else, too, not particularly pleasant.

“It’s a bit stuffy in here, I’ll open a few windows when we’ve got settled,” said Jo.

The ‘lounge’ was tastefully furnished, and decorated in a neutral magnolia colour. The centre-piece was a brown, patterned three-piece suite with matching cushions. There was a dining table, big enough for four people and accompanying chairs, and a bureau in the corner. An electric fire dominated the right-hand wall in what looked like the original fireplace. The chimney had been blocked off but the brick flue was still visible rising up through the ceiling.

Zack looked around the room, his expression, one of horror. “Where’s the TV?”

“Hmm,” said Liam. “It doesn’t look like there is one.”

“What? But I thought all houses had TV’s.”

“Not in Cornwall, it seems. But, hey, maybe that’s a good thing; we do spend too much time watching it. We can make our own entertainment.”

Zack was not for appeasing. “But what are we supposed to do?”

“Oh, I’m sure there’ll be lots to do,” said Liam, positively. “Come on let’s take a look upstairs.”

“I need to put this shopping away before it spoils,” said Jo.

“Yes, ok, let’s check the kitchen first.”

There was a door at the back of the room in the left-hand corner, which Jo opened. Again, it was spotlessly clean, not particularly big, but with most of the usual appliances including an electric cooker, sink, and drainer. There was a microwave on top of the worktop.

“Oh, there’s no washing machine. Looks like we’re going to need to find a launderette,” she exclaimed, with a hint of complaint.

After the sink, there was a side door with frosted glass panels which opened to the back garden. The fridge was next to another door which Jo opened.

“Oh look, a pantry, how quaint,” Jo observed.

She opened the refrigerator door. “Oh, no, it’s not working, the electricity’s off.”

“Yes, it will be. Wait, let’s put some money in the meter.”

Liam opened the cupboard under the sink and, sure enough, the electricity meter was situated just to the right of the downpipe. He took out three pound coins from his pocket and fed them into the slot. Immediately the kitchen light came on and the fridge burst into life.

“I don’t think it will take too long to start cooling. It’s not a bad size; there’s plenty of room for your shopping,” said Liam, and moved out of the way so Jo could get to it.

Jo started to unpack the carrier bag and placed the perishable contents in the fridge, then went back to the pantry to investigate further. “Oh, that’s good; there’s some bread, and vegetables. There’s some tinned stuff, too. How thoughtful.”

“Come on, guys, let’s check upstairs,” said Liam, leaving Jo to look after the kitchen.

There was a door at the other side of the lounge. Liam opened it and to the left, a flight of stairs.

He manoeuvred the suitcase to the bottom, then started lugging it to the first floor. The wooden staircase was steep and covered with a carpet tile on each step. They creaked and groaned under the weight as Liam progressed slowly upwards.

He reached the landing. There was a large bedroom to the left which overlooked the front of the house and two smaller rooms to the right. Beyond the master bedroom was another door which turned out to be the bathroom. Liam took a quick peek, then turned to Zack and Farrah who were still stood at the top of the stairs.

“Hey, kids, choose your rooms, but no fighting, eh?”

Zack made a beeline for the first door. “I’ll have this one; Far can have the other.”

There appeared to be no disagreements and Farrah took her bag with her bits and pieces next door.

Liam had a quick check of the main bedroom. It was as advertised in the photo in the brochure, a large double bed, dressing table, and wardrobes. The walls were plain, nondescript, and the smell of paint more obvious. He went to the window and opened it. He could see the church spire and more trees, and, shimmering in the distance to the left, the sea.

He left the suitcase next to the bed and went into Zack’s room.

There was a single bed and tall boy; the décor matched the master bedroom. Zack was looking out of the window.

“So what do you think?”

“Yeah, it’s cool. What’s that?”

Liam joined him. There was an overgrown garden with an ancient sycamore tree against the boundary wall at the end of a crazy-paved path about a hundred yards from the cottage. Immediately to the left was what looked like an outbuilding of some sort. The other side of the dry-stone wall was a small cemetery. It was surrounded by trees.

“I don’t know; I can’t make it out. We’ll go and take a look when we’ve unpacked.”

Just then Farrah came into the room, sobbing.

“Whatever’s wrong, Far?” said Liam.

“I don’t want that room; There’s somebody in there.”