

## Chapter 1

'Go past it, you daft bat.' Petra urged her horse on with her legs, but the mare had planted herself firmly on the verge, backed up against a Cotswold stone wall. She was rigid with indignation at the sight of a scarecrow in the garden on the opposite side of the lane, its lumpy body swathed in a psychedelic Boden kaftan, its head styled with a woolly hat and a Donald Trump party mask.

'I donated that dress to the fête's nearly-new stall!' Petra recognised it. 'I'd only worn it twice!'

'Not really your colour,' observed Gill, whose super-obedient dressage horse strode past in collected walk without a sideways glance.

'Not his either!' *said* Bridge, her young Irish pony dancing sideways and ramming Petra.

The mare stood firm, chestnut ears shooting llama high as she spotted another scarecrow in the garden next door, this one crammed into an old pinstriped suit, its head a pink balloon in a multi-coloured Afro wig.

Behind Petra, her two other hacking buddies were experiencing similar difficulties, hoofs clattering on tarmac, snorts rising.

'You've got to admire the village committee,' said Petra, calves nudging frantically. 'It's very bold to give this year's scarecrow competition a non-binary transgender theme. Come *on*, Redhead.' 'Gerronwithit!' Further back still, Mo gave the familiar cry, issued to stubborn cobs, cows, sheep and children. 'No offence, but he don't like the look of that dress, Petra.'

'It's better on the scarecrow than it was on me.'

The Saddle Bags, as they'd dubbed themselves, were out in the early morning, a regular midweek meeting. Gathered together

by Petra, they were mothers, wives, villagers and horse-owners, sharing a close bond of sisterly secrets and a love of peering over their neighbours' hedges. Together, they took to the lanes and bridle-paths around Compton Magna and Compton Bagot at least once a week to let off steam about husbands, hormones, horses and – very occasionally – horticulture.

'Don't you just love Open Gardens Week?' Petra glanced over her shoulder.

'Are the scarecrows always this disturbing?' asked Bridge, spinning around on her baby-faced grey youngster. A Belfast-born, shoot-from-the-lip hipster chick, she was their most recent recruit, a maverick incomer with black-rimmed specs, a home-made woolly beanie over her helmet and a constellation of star tattoos gathered on her wrists and ankles (she called them 'ermine marks'). Fearless and speed-loving, she'd only recently broken in her sharp little Connemara pony, who was, she liked to boast, a lot less paranoid than her volatile Polish husband.

'Our straw man is very dapper.' Tall, thin and gimlet-eyed, local vet Gill Walcote was in her early fifties but seemed to belong to a different era, when men tipped the brims of their hats. 'We chose a golfing theme this year. We've nicknamed him Sergio Gar-seagrass.' She was also a fan of extremely bad puns.

'The goat always eats ours.' Broad-berthed farmer's daughter Mo Dawkins let out her trademark laugh. She joked that the only time she got to sit down was on her armchair of a piebald cob.

'When I suggested to my lot that we make Worzel Gummidge, they all had to get their phones out to google him,' Petra told them. 'If he's not the very embodiment of Jon Pertwee, I'm docking their screen time.' She was constantly on the lookout for distractions from and inspiration for the racy historical romances she churned out in a shed in her garden, much of it coming from her opinionated chestnut mare, known simply as the Redhead, still stubbornly refusing to go past Donald Trump.

'Open Gardens Week used to be a lot better,' said Mo, whose lazy cob had ground to a halt in sympathy and the hope of a sly

mouthful of hedge, 'but the townies who've moved in now don't take village events seriously.'

The Comptons were idyllic outposts on the tip of the Cotswolds' northernmost Fosse Hills, jewels in the crown of an area affectionately known as the 'Bardswolds' for its proximity to Stratford-upon-Avon. Although small, it boasted an abundance of steeply wooded river valleys skirted with orchards and dotted with golden villages into which families ripe for change dropped sweetly each year. The area's grandest houses – stately Elizabethan and Jacobean piles hidden amid deer parks – had long attracted the super-rich in search of privacy a short helicopter flight from London and Birmingham, and actors settled in villages close to the RSC. In recent years, though, the Bardswolds' manors and rectories had been traded between media types, like Top Trumps, while its cottages attracted theatre-junkie retirees and thirty-something professionals, all leading a procession out of London to find more bang for their buck. Of the Fosse Hill villages, the small and much-photographed Compton Magna was the star, regularly outshining nearby 'ugly sister' Bagot, despite the latter's far longer history.

Although it looked centuries old, Compton Magna had been largely created at the whim of a local family to house their estate workers. With its golden houses grouped in a figure of eight around the Green, its two-room school, the duck-pond and the tiny Gothic Revival church tucked between tall yew trunks and ancient meadows with standing stones, it was a stage set in which squires, small-holders and cottagers had played no part. Beloved of film and television crews, Compton Magna had appeared in everything from costume dramas to tampon adverts, pop videos and a grisly crime series.

Heavily diluted by an influx of settlers aspiring to a gingham-bunting-Farrow-&-Ball English country life, the intense rivalry between the villages had lost its earthy edge. Open Gardens Week – dreaded by villagers and horse-riders alike – had become far more focused on the scarecrow competition and lavish cake-baking than on showing off one's sweet peas.

'It should be about the standard of the cornflowers, not corn men,' lamented Gill.

'We're not all green-fingered,' said Petra, knowing she was still classified as a 'townie' even after a decade living in the Cotswolds, more than half of it in this village. 'And it gets seriously expensive when you're shamed into spending a fortune at the garden centre at the last minute to make your beds look half decent.'

'One can't just click a ready-made herbaceous border on Amazon Prime, Petra,' chided Gill, her glossy bay horse now strutting past a straw man in a scream mask brandishing a scythe. 'I'm very proud of my achilleas this year, although last night's storm finished off the delphies.'

'Dad's been having terrible trouble with his osteospermum,' admitted Mo.

'Has he tried holistic medicine?' asked Bridge, whose little Connemara had now spotted the scream mask. Moments later, they shot off at speed across the Green.

'I thought you and Charlie had a gardener?' Mo asked Petra, as she gave her a lead past the offending scarecrows, the chestnut mare taking exaggerated antelope leaps.

'We had to let him go.' Petra hung on gamely as they pogoed from verge to verge. 'Kenneth next door accused him of sabotag- ing his floral hedge and it all got very tawdry. A Forsythia Saga,' she added, for Gill's benefit, and was rewarded with an appreciative hoot.

'Like gladioli, an absolute crime in a country garden,' tutted the vet, glaring at the garish front beds of one of the holiday cottages that overlooked the Green, as they waited for Bridge to lap its chestnut-shaded expanse and rejoin them, her trendy grey hair extensions matching the pony's white tail as both streamed behind them. 'And those hanging baskets are offensive.' She shuddered. 'Nothing lets down a village like a desiccated begonia at eye-level.' 'Don't be such a snob!' Petra had just bought several ready- planted, overpriced wildflower wicker ones from the farm shop to liven up Upper Bagot Farmhouse's austere façade. Husband Charlie had come home last weekend to find them dangling in

welcome and asked sarcastically for three pints of best and a return to Ealing Broadway. That had just made her like them even more and she now thickened her Yorkshire accent to *Last of the Summer Wine* creaminess in their defence. 'I bloody love mine.'

'They add a nice splash of colour,' agreed Mo, who had petunia-stuffed ivy-trailers outside her bungalow, as well as jolly pink fuchsias at the rundown DIY livery yard she ran at her parents' farm in the hope they would attract wealthy clients.

'What's your opinion on hanging baskets, Bridge?' Gill asked, as she came up alongside them again, the dappled grey rocking horse now blowing hard and still boggling at everything.

Bridge's eyes boggled too. 'My opinion is that if you keep talking to me about fecking gardening I'm digging out my body protector and joining the Life Hackers.' They were a rival riding posse, a bunch of daredevil pros and hunt members, none of whom idled along bridleways coffee-shopping about lobelias.

'Trust me, they're incredibly dull,' insisted Petra, who had ridden out with them. 'They might jump big ditches, but all they talk about is farming yields and racing form.'

'Well, I think they're ghastly,' said Gill.

'Not hunky Bay Austen and his merry men, surely?' Mo chuckled, looking pointedly at Petra.

'I was talking about hanging baskets,' Gill said archly.

'Petra's admirer is pretty offensive too.' Bridge scowled. 'All that bloodthirsty old-school-tie privilege.'

'He's not my admirer,' Petra grumbled, although she felt a frisson of delight at the mention of the handsome landowner. 'Our daughters are summer-holiday BFFs.'

'Does that make them BFFTSH?' queried Gill.

'Mo's in the same boat,' Petra went on. 'Those three girls are the unholy trinity of the Pony Club under tens.' Bella Gunn, Tilly Austen and their friend Grace Dawkins were currently so inseparable that their parents were forced to pass them around, like a spirits tantalus.

'Bay doesn't text me personally to invite Gracie for play dates, funnily enough,' sighed Mo.

‘Must have lost your number,’ Petra deflected. ‘Really, there’s no flirtation between us.’ She fell silent as, with regrettable timing, a Land Rover appeared through a gate further along the lane, an arm dangling from the driver’s side, checked shirt rolled up to reveal Riviera-tanned skin, heavy Tag watch and glinting signet ring. It lifted in greeting as the driver spotted the riders in his wing mirror.

Heart racing, blush rising, Petra waved back as he roared away, two retrievers swaying in the back.

‘Admit it, he’s your hot new SMC,’ teased Bridge, the Safe Married Crush being a Saddle Bags rite of passage.

‘Please let’s not bang on about it.’

‘Beats fecking gardening.’ The Connemara, catching sight of a whole family of lop-sided scarecrows in one garden, started to go backwards. ‘Oh, heck.’

‘Ride on my inside,’ Gill ordered briskly, blocking the pony’s escape and half passing her against the verge.

As the foursome moved into a brisk trot past the monsters, Petra quashed a suspicion that Gill might be shadowing the grey to hide Bridge’s pink flowery wellies. They made an incongruous pair, school prefect with a naughty pupil, but that was true of all the Bags – one reason she was so absurdly fond of this particular friendship group, her lovely horse collective.

The Bags’ conversations had got a bit prosaic lately, mind you. Petra wished something exciting would happen in the village to give them something new to talk about. A few scarecrows hardly measured up to the Bardswolds’ big-cat sightings, the transgender vicar or Eyngate Hall being used as a location for a Richard Curtis film last year. It was also a far cry from the intense era of hot-headed Bridge almost leaving husband Aleš on a weekly basis, or Mo’s dilemma when she thought her elderly parents were no longer coping as crisis followed crisis. Even dry-humoured Gill was usually guaranteed to keep them agog with tales from the equine clinic she ran with her cycling-fanatic husband Paul, a hub of local horse gossip and marital discord, but it had been a very dull summer.

The Bags had a rule: what's said in the saddle stays in the saddle. It was why they could all speak about their marriages so openly, sharing secrets with unswerving support, understanding and gales of laughter. Petra owed it to them to liven things up a bit, especially as she'd been the one to introduce the idea of the Safe Married Crush, their way of cheerfully deflecting from those neglectful husbands. Emotional infidelity didn't count, she'd told the Saddle Bags cheerily. Feeling attracted to someone other than one's spouse was as healthy as reading an escapist novel – or, in her case, writing one; you were secure in the knowledge that it was all in the mind. Now that her marriage was nearing the end of its second decade and lovemaking had waned to high days and holidays, Petra always tried to keep at least one SMC on the go, an instant guilt- and calorie-free heart-warmer. She justified these innocent infatuations by thinking of them as research. Inspiration for historical erotica was hard to come by when one's entire life sometimes felt like a never-ending rota of drop-offs and pick-ups, co-ordinating the complicated demands of her teenage and tweeny children, commuter Charlie, and their menagerie of animals, often at the expense of her own fading career. The Safe Married Crush unleashed something wild in buxom, smoky-eyed Petra, which helped her write steamy fiction, as well as immunising her against her husband's indifference.

None of the Bags took the crushes seriously – Bridge's on sleazy farrier Flynn was a cause of much hilarity, Mo's on devilish lurcher-enthusiast and lamper Jed Turner more so, Gill's on the oleaginous local MP an obvious smokescreen – but they were a source of fun during lean periods, comforters that helped them through the long weeks between *Poldark* series or anything starring James Norton, especially if one's husband was only home at weekends, as Petra's was. Until recently, her secret whim had lain safely with London theatre director Kit Donne but her eye had been drawn inexorably to Compton's dishiest farmer.

Bridge was right: she did have quite a big crush on Bay, but it was at a very delicate stage. The whole point of a Safe Married Crush was that it was innocent, and this one felt unnervingly

reciprocal. The texts had been bouncing back and forth all summer, *all the best Petra* and *regards Bay* quickly becoming 'Pxx' and 'Bx'. They'd be carving their names in tree trunks next.

Lusting after Bay Austen was hardly an exclusive gig. Many village wives were in Petra's SMC team. The sexy, roguish agricultural entrepreneur had long been the local pin-up, a good-looking charmer, whose cool *Dragon's Den* business head had breathed new life into the family farm, turning his parents' large arable holding, with its fishery and shoot, into a huge money-earner. Compton Manor Farm was now a Mecca for craftsmen, holidaymakers, yummy-mummies and foodies, with its business units, farm shop, micro-brewery, yurts and Wagyu cattle, while its small, exclusive shoot was legendary. Taking a gun at one of the Austens' cliquy invitation-only days had long been an ambition of shooting-mad Charlie; celebrities and royals were reported to be regulars, along with enough City hedge-funders to enclose the Square Mile in privet and – most importantly to Charlie, whose occasionally ragged career at the Bar relied heavily upon old-school ties in the Legal 500 – a great many high-flying, crack-shot solicitors. His enthusiasm for an alliance between Bay and the Gunn family made her crush even more awkward: Charlie had even been overheard loudly encouraging the dashing farmer to buy Petra's books for his very beautiful, very bored wife.

Bay had bought Petra's entire backlist – *Got one for all the family! B* – then teased her when he found out how racy the plots were: *Kept them all to myself. Up all night reading, I am officially your biggest fan. Bx*. A handsome, bouncy Labrador of a man, constantly waggy-tailed and encouraging, he was hard to put on a discreet pedestal. It had been so much easier to harbour her longing for Kit Donne, who visited his cottage so rarely that it was like fancying a distant celebrity. He'd once owned the Gunns' farmhouse yet had no idea who Petra was. Bay, by contrast, had her number on speed-dial, a terrible reputation as a flirt and a way of looking at her that made her feel sexier than she had in years.

'You got an idea for your new book yet?' Mo huffed beside her.

'No, but I've a feeling it's going to have lots of bedroom scenes.' She grinned.

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'So have you gone to bed yet, mate?' Ed Gunn hung upside down off his bunk ladder talking into his phone camera.

'No, mate. How cool was that game? Those dudes in the States were Clash of the Clans pros, then when the Aussies joined us, I cracked open a Monster. Still buzzin'.'

'Same here! It's, like, da boss flipping it, yeah?' He gave the camera eye a sideways-V peace sign. 'My olds have no idea what I get up to whe—' The phone was plucked out of his hand, the Skype call to a school friend abruptly ended. 'What the fuh?'

'Did you ask permission to use my phone?'

Ed glared up at his older brother, a thin-lipped mask behind an overlong fringe, sixteen-year-old disciplinarian to thirteen-year-old upstart.

'It's not your phone, bro. It's Dad's old one.'

'Which he gave to *me* when he upgraded.' Fitz tossed aside his forelock, eyes narrow.

'Yeah but you're still using Mum's old iPhone, so the BlackBerry is up for grabs.' Ed turned the right way up, with effort, and clambered down from the ladder. 'Mine's jank, you know that, and the webcam's broken on my laptop. That thing's fully loaded and going to waste.'

'Not the point.' Fitz put it into his dressing-gown pocket. 'The point is, Dad gave this to *me*. And you went into my room, went through *my* stuff, and took it without asking.'

'Chill.' Ed held up his hands, then slouched out of his room to go downstairs for Frosted Flakes and FaceTime on his mother's tablet instead. 'I saw in your bedside drawer by the way. *Kinky*.'

Fitz lobbed a pillow after him, knowing his brother had seen nothing more incriminating than a few flash sticks, torches and old trading cards. The most perverted thing in there by far was the phone, but he'd made sure its darkest secret was protected

with a password that even geeky genius Ed would never crack. Their father was a dolt with technology, which was why Fitz had seen what he had on there. He was still working out what to do with it.

He went up to the attic floor and put the phone back in his bedside drawer. Last night, while his brother was gaming with geeks around the world, Fitz had lain awake trying to work out what to do for the best. He was still no closer to an answer. He was Perseus squaring up to slay the monster without winged sandals or reflective shield.

Named William, after a grandfather he'd disliked intensely, he had somewhat pretentiously adopted the name of his mother's old college, Fitzwilliam, to differentiate him from the three other Williams in his year at boarding school. He was a sporty high achiever, socially aware and determined to be a big mover and shaker in human-rights law. Good-looking, charming and manipulative, he'd entered his GCSE year in every first team and top set, with captain's badges and colours striping his blazer lapel, his parents' golden boy, predicted to wipe the board with straight A stars come the summer. He'd worked blisteringly hard all year to maintain his momentum. Last term that had been turned upside down. Now Fitz was on borrowed time.

Grabbing the phone back out of the drawer, he swiped past screens and passwords to the app, typing *You bastard!* and sending it. Then he went to wake his sisters.

Carly had eight-week-old Jackson asleep on her shoulder, like a hot, damp gym towel, a heavy weight that shifted as she spilled out breakfast cereal for Sienna and Ellis, both squabbling furiously over who got which bowl.

'Want Toe Nauts!' toddler Sienna yelled, gripping tightly onto Captain Barnacle with both hands. Just out of her high chair, she was taking a full-body approach to dining.

'Peppa Pig is for *girls!*' insisted Ellis, a diehard Octonauts fan

who at four already had a bias against all things pink. Carly blamed Great-granddad Norm, the Turner family's very own Vito Corleone, who greeted the little boy from the confines of his wheelchair with shadow-boxing grimaces and said things like 'Who's my big tough man, then?'

The Turner family's real big tough man – three feet taller and sixty kilos heavier than his scowling son – was still in bed.

Leaving the children under ceasefire as they shovelled up sweet, milky treats, she took Ash a mug of tea. When he had been in the army, he'd always been the first up. Now day-to-day life reminded Carly of the weeks he'd been away on exercise in a different time zone, Skyping sleepily at two a.m. to find him squinting in broad daylight.

Curtains still drawn, their bedroom was a sultry, shadowed hangover den.

He stretched back, muscles moving beneath tattoos, a smile flashing through the stubble. Then he spotted Jackson and frowned. 'Put him in his cot and get back into bed, bae.'

'I can't. I'm taking the kids out.'

'It's half seven.' He yawned at the bedside clock.

'They've been up since six. I've been up all night. They want to see the foals.'

'You want to see them, you mean. Ellis just wants to go to the playground with his cousins. I was the same growing up.'

Carly smiled vaguely, already aware that the Turners were far from the welcoming new regiment she'd hoped for – she didn't share their bond of Traveller's blood, which Ash claimed that decades of settling in one place and marrying out could never dilute. The horde of Turner kids, almost all much bigger than hers, was a close-knit bunch, currently ruling the village playground through the long school holidays, teens by night, tweens by day. She worried Ash was undergoing a similar Jekyll and Hyde transformation as old friendships were resurrected, his clan reabsorbing him as he shook off army discipline and embraced a more nebulous timetable. Unlike Carly, whose days revolved rigidly around the kids and her two part-time jobs, Ash

had no fixed routine until his college course started in September, his social life an increasingly exclusive one that existed outside normal hours. They'd moved into the Orchard Estate three months ago, and Carly was still struggling to learn the names of his nocturnal gang of drinking friends and the many family members who were now neighbours, none of whom had shown much interest in her.

'Where did you get to last night?' She'd kept her voice deliberately light.

'Out with the lads. You knew that.' 'Until after four?'

He took a sip of tea and grimaced as it scalded his lips. 'Didn't fancy walking back in that storm.'

Thunder and lightning had ripped back and forth along their Cotswold ridge most of the night. It had made it impossible to settle Jackson, whose colicky screams had doubled under the onslaught, his brother and sister waking too.

'Ended up at Flynn's,' he said now. 'Lost sight of time, you know.'

'Yeah, I know.' She stooped to kiss him, feeling his tongue against her teeth, which she kept clamped together in a placating smile. Carly didn't trust Flynn, the village's double-denimed rock- god throwback, an old school friend of Ash, recently divorced and out to prove he could do whatever he liked – mostly watching box sets and drinking home brew at antisocial hours. Having been married to the army for eight years, Ash was out to prove much the same thing.

Jackson let out a bleat of protest, spine arching.

'Have some more kip,' Carly told Ash. 'I'm working lunchtime, remember? I'll leave them with your mum. We'll all get out of your hair.' It had grown wild since he'd quit the army, loose black curls springing up where there'd been a number-four buzz-cut. Carly's Facebook friends oohed and aahed about how handsome he was whenever she shared a family selfie, but she missed her clean-cut soldier.

He'd left the army four months ago, having served Queen and

country long enough to receive his eight-year bonus. Despite a reputation for rebellion and a few close shaves with the military police, he'd done his regiment proud, received campaign and service medals, and was, his commander told him upon discharge, the very body of a soldier.

Once Ash had made a decision, there was no discussion, no argument, no blackmail that could alter it. Carly had tried every trick she knew on the body of the soldier she loved, running through her full emotional and sexual repertoire – not easy with a huge baby bump and a molten lump in her throat – before she resigned herself to the fact that army life was over.

She paused on the stairs now, her halfway hiatus between nocturnal Ash and their wide-awake kids, Jackson heavy and hot against her collarbone, the stairs carpet a Cadbury purple that showed every dust particle.

Ash insisted it had always been his dream to settle with his family in the village where he'd grown up. 'This will be our forever-after,' he'd promised Carly, when they'd first walked around number three, almost asphyxiated by bleach and Febreze, compensated by every upstairs window looking out to fields and woods and allotments.

Carly was good at moving house. An army daughter then wife, she'd done it countless times, and she was still only in her twenties. But this time they'd moved all alone without the regiment around them. And she wasn't sure she'd wanted forever-just yet.

Ash's elder sister had organised a council house for them. Carly was wary of Janine, a sister-in-law-unto-herself, whose possessive, controlling hold over the family was an unwelcome part of life. It was Janine's three-bed semi in which she and Ash now lived, number three Quince Drive. Carly hadn't quite worked out the deal. The Turner family rented at least nine of the Orchard Estate houses from the local authority, but the names on the tenancy agreements bore no relation to their occupants. Janine lived in Granddad Norm's four-bedroomed link-detached on Damson Road, with three teenage children, only one of whom was hers.

She had never married. After Robbie Williams and nail art, the biggest love of her life was little brother Ash.

Propping Jackson in the crook of her arm, Carly clenched her fists, trying to discharge the static electricity in her fingertips. She'd felt a sense of foreboding since the storm had passed, chest tight, hands tingling. She'd suffered from it all her life, sometimes so bad that she could barely pick up a cup for the scalding heat in her fingers, the fire in her lungs making her mute. Her mum had called it a 'healing gift' and said it came from her grandmother. She'd been tested for asthma as a child, later high blood pressure and heart arrhythmia when pregnant, but her palpitations and hot hands were medical oddities, dismissed vaguely as psychosomatic stress.

She pressed one flaming palm to her cheek now, trying to absorb the heat. It must be because she was worried about Ash. He pretended all was well, but his temper was quicker, his tall tales longer, their conversations briefer. Her fusilier was in danger of turning into a short-fused liar.

Downstairs, Captain Barnaby's and Peppa's faces had reappeared at the bottom of two bowls.

'Are you ready to go and see Spirit?' They'd nick-named their favourite foal after the Disney horse because he was the same unusual colour that they called 'buckskin' in the movie but was labelled 'dun' in the old encyclopaedia of horses Carly had bought at the village fête.

Ellis and Sienna grabbed carrots from the vegetable rack, fighting over the biggest, then dropped down to pull their wellies onto the wrong feet. As they did so, Carly caught the glint of gold jewellery and a flash of tanned thigh as Janine paused at the side gate, pink talons scrabbling at the bolt as she let herself into the garden. A stranger to doorbells, Janine preferred the proprietorial stealth of bursting in through the back door on dawn raids.

She ran her cleaning business, Feather Dusters, like an East End protection racket, with mops and Henry Hoovers in place of firearms. She had the monopoly on domestic and commercial contracts in the village and guaranteed cheap labour from family

members. Carly's work-rate was twice that of most of Janine's team, meaning she was always in demand for the rota. While she hoped to find a job that would give her a break from the Turner family, she appreciated the extra money, and the kids were coping fine with their nan looking after them on the days she worked. But today she had a waitressing shift at a local hotel and didn't want Janine to strong-arm her into calling in sick so she could help her bring up a weekend cottage's wet-room grout like new.

Never had two children been inserted into a double buggy faster, the baby carry-sack and nappy bag hooked on to each handle. Carly jumped into her trainers as she unlatched the door and – ignoring the sulphurous waft of cheap perfume coming in through the cat-flap and a muffled voice calling, 'Only *meee!*' – made her getaway through the front door, Jackson still asleep on her shoulder.

Even though it was further to walk to see the foals, she pushed the buggy straight for the path that ran alongside the allotments, avoiding the only road out of the estate. It passed next to the playground from which she could already hear the first of the day's loud screams and tribal cries – fist-bumps, headlocks, swing-throwing and insult-trading among the under-sixteens.

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As the Saddle Bags trotted along the main lane leading out of Compton Magna, a car engine approaching behind them made the horses' ears prick back. It was travelling far too fast, Abba booming out from within.

'Brace yourselves, it's Pip Edwards!' Gill thrust up her crop hand to ask the driver to slow down as they regrouped to a single-file walk, swinging around in their saddles as a small blue hatchback careered into view.

The car raced towards them, the riders hurriedly flattening their horses tight against the steeply banked verge below a row of thatched cottages, setting off a barking dog. Bridge's grey pony

barged forwards in horror, springing up the bank and cowering under the mossy eaves.

As the car roared past, 'Knowing Me, Knowing You' at full blast, the horn gave a cheerful beep that sent Petra's chestnut mare up the bank too, dislodging a hanging basket. It landed neatly in her arms, like a trophy bowl at a horse show. It contained a set of door keys.

'What is it with that woman?' she complained, hanging it back up while the Redhead snacked on a window box. 'You'd think she'd drive more carefully past horses, given she works at the stud.'

'Pip Edwards has no horse sense whatsoever,' said Gill.

Petra gave Bridge a lead, carefully slithering down the bank, leaving long hoof tracks in the storm-pummelled turf. Behind her, Bridge's pony jumped clean off the top, like a newcomer at the Hickstead Derby.

'Isn't she a groom there?' asked Petra, as they rode on. Pip Edwards had appeared on her radar around a year ago as part of a short-lived local writing circle she'd agreed to help. Petra often saw her little blue car race past her driveway as it flew along the lane between Compton Bagot, where Pip lived in a bungalow that had belonged to her parents, and Compton Magna, where she worked at the august old stud. Its big-barrelled mares and bounding foals were as much a village landmark as the standing stones in the church meadows they were riding past now.

'Goodness, no.' Gill drew back her chin. 'Officially Pip's the Captain's part-time housekeeper. Unofficially she's a private carer who co-ordinates his healthcare visits, cooks him nice soft food and monitors his gout.'

'She runs a service locally for old folks,' Mo elaborated. 'Shopping and baking cakes for them. Home Comforts, it's called.' 'That's a kind thing to do,' said Bridge, as the grey barged ahead.

'She's a menace around horses,' said Gill, catching up to block out the wellies from a passing commuter, all the Bags waving gratefully as the car slowed. 'She "helps" old Lester, the stallion

man, on the yard in her spare time, but she just holds him up – and the stud’s hopelessly understaffed as it is. All the vets dread her being there on a visit, fussing around and getting in the way. We call her the Understudy.’

As they rode on, they looked across the hedged fields to Compton Magna’s famous stud, a vision of honey-coloured, horse-filled loveliness – apart from the car now speeding along its distant furlong of poplar-lined driveway.

The Percy family had run the stud for more than a century, breeding quality hunters and hacks. Small, blond and fierce, far more interested in four legs than four walls, the beauty of their home was largely wasted on its occupants. The splendour of their horses, however, was legendary.

‘I’d work there.’ Bridge sighed. ‘Sod HR.’

‘Not an easy man to work for, the Captain,’ said Mo. ‘How Lester’s stuck it out all these years is a mystery. Must have the hide of a Hereford bull.’

With its Queen Anne symmetry, as perfect as a tapestry sampler, the Captain’s house was considered by many to be the loveliest in the Compton villages. To its left was a high-walled Victorian kitchen garden filled with beet and carrots. To its right, two Cotswold-stone stable-yards, gleaming from cobbles to clock-towers, led out through wide arches to a hundred acres of curving pasture, with a hidden valley, bluebell woods and bubbling brooks, the very embodiment of green and pleasant. Jocelyn Percy, its paterfamilias, known to all as the Captain, was a widower in failing health who rarely ventured out.

‘The place is surviving on a shoestring,’ Gill told them, in an undertone. ‘Ann Percy was the only one who could ever balance the books and that was mostly to rest her gin glass on, God rest her soul. He’s quite lost without her.’

‘How long ago did she die?’ asked Petra.

‘It must be coming up for two years,’ Mo recalled. ‘There was a fire, wasn’t there, Gill?’

‘That’s right. Not long after Pip started.’

‘Maybe she bumped her off,’ whispered Bridge in mock-horror. Petra adopted a movie trailer voiceover tone: ‘Her ambitions to become the next Mrs P knew no bounds. Her path ruthless, her victims stood little chance – especially if she was at the wheel of a Nissan Micra.’

'It's like *Kind Hearts and Coronets*,' chuckled Mo.

'Maybe she and old Lester are in cahoots,' Bridge suggested excitedly. 'The Fred and Rose West of the Comptons.'

'You lot are *awful*!' Gill gasped, her eyes glowing.

Petra grinned, relaxing at last as the Bags refocused from Safe Married Crushes and hanging baskets to village scandal again.

