

CHAPTER ONE

Agnes Borrowdale, seventy-five-years-old a week on Tuesday, hoisted herself onto the window sill and perched astride it, gripping the wooden frame. So far, so good, she murmured, still buoyed up by the surge of excitement. Then she turned her head from the safety of the room and peered down over the edge. Far below her dangling foot, blobs of yellow floated on a blur of green. She screwed her eyes tight shut, but it was too late: every muscle was quivering like snapped elastic. With a huge effort of will, she tilted her body towards the room and collapsed onto the pale pink carpet.

When her head stopped spinning she hauled herself up again and took a dozen faltering steps across to the bed. Without removing her trainers, she lay flat on her back and closed her eyes. 'In, two, three, four, five, hold your breath, and - out, two, three, four, five.' The bracing voice of that keep fit tutor had left its mark. After a few more deep breaths her heart resumed its normal, imperceptible beat.

Agnes stared up at the high ceiling. Strange that she'd not noticed this similarity to the bedroom she'd shared for half a century with Henry: the map of hair-line cracks in the grey-white plaster.

Sitting upright with her legs straight in front of her on the bed she contemplated her feet in their almost brand-new trainers, and became aware again of her quickening heart. Adrenalin, she reassured herself. It'll help me think straight.

One: she must not be seen by anyone in these clothes. Phyllis Mapperley, or some other member of staff was bound to be hovering near reception in the hall, and if she tried the back stairs she risked bumping into one of the cooks or cleaners. If she really was going to carry out her plan that day, the window was the only answer.

Two: The Harmony Home For The Young At Heart was built on a slope, so the first-floor windows at the back were in fact much closer to the ground than the ones at the front. Anyway, didn't heights always appear more daunting from above?

Three: this attack of vertigo had taken her by surprise. Once she'd prepared herself mentally, she'd be better able to cope. 'Mind over Matter', Henry always said.

'Now then, Lambkin...' His voice again. His idea of a joke: Agnus Dei - Lamb of God. She could almost feel warm air stirring like breath against her ear and cheek... 'More haste, less speed.'

Extraordinary, the way Henry's words still challenged her unspoken thoughts, after all these months: 'Is your journey really necessary?'

Agnes sighed, and wriggled down until she was staring at the ceiling again. Old habits... From the moment they'd met, Henry had taken over responsibility for decision-making. He'd seemed to listen to her suggestions, but somehow his arguments were always more persuasive. It had quickly become as natural to her as breathing to defer to his judgement.

Now, he was not here. She'd had to work out this plan unaided. Was that sudden attack of vertigo a warning sign from her own subconscious? Her mouth twisted into a wry smile. 'Subconscious! Just another word for conscience,' Henry would say.

Agnes sighed again. Her legs still felt as floppy as dough but her mind was racing. That series of phone calls - for days she had played them over and over in her head: Lucy, Monica, then at last, Jack.

She still found it hard to remember that Lucy was no longer 'daughter-in-law' - that she'd cut herself off with that deadly little prefix, ex. Even more ex now that she'd moved so far away with her new man. But Emily and Sam could never be ex. Though

Agnes hadn't seen them for almost a year, they would always be her grandchildren.

She'd been gazing at the ceiling unblinking for so long that her eyes were beginning to sting. Closing the lids made the gathered water spill out and trickle down towards her ears. She found herself unclasping tight fists as she raised her hands to wipe away the slithers of liquid. Not tears, as such. Of course not.

A dull humming started up in her right ear, like the echo of a dialling tone. The pay phone in the hall downstairs...

Monday. She'd finally plucked up courage to dial the Nottingham number. Early morning, but never mind how many coins the phone gobbled up. What else would she be spending money on now?

'Lucy? Is that you? Agnes here.'

'Who?'

'Agnes. Your children's...'

'Of course! Agnes! I'm so sorry. How're you doing?'

'I wondered if I could just have a little chat with Emily before she goes to school. It's so long since we've...'

'Agnes, it's ten to nine. We're late already.'

'Sammy, then. Perhaps I could talk to...'

'He's got nursery now, Agnes, remember? Mornings are not a good time, I'm afraid.'

But the evening had been no better:

'What a shame! I've just managed to settle them down. They'll be up all night if I disturb them now. I'll get them to ring you.'

'But I haven't actually got my own phone in this place, Lucy, and they don't really like taking messages here, so perhaps...'

'Sorry, Agnes. That's Sean - just got home, speak to you soon. No! It's only Agnes! Yes. I'm COMING!'

The following evening was the real start of it, the uneasy realisation that things were not right, that something had to be done.

'Oh! Sean! Er... good evening. Are the children...?'

'You deaf, or what? Who else would be making that bloody racket?'

'Good gracious, what a commotion! Perhaps if I could just talk to...?'

'Chrissake, Luce. Can't you get your kids to shut the fuck up?'

'Hello? Hello? Sean? Are you there still? Lucy?'

Agnes felt her stomach knot itself again, as she remembered how she'd listened, dry-mouthed, to the dead sound of the handset. What a two-edged sword the telephone was, the way it hurtled you into the middle of other people's lives, gave you a sudden, shocking glimpse, then shut you off in an instant. Like trains passing at high speed. Violence witnessed, with no possibility of intervention.

She'd made herself calm down. People used those words all the time nowadays. Sean's angry voice didn't have to mean... She could hardly expect Jack to go chasing off on a three hour drive and bundle his children into the car and... And what? Take them back to the house he shared with Monica? Apart from anything Monica might say, what actual rights did Jack have now? And how would Emmy and Sam react?

So she'd restrained herself from immediately dialling her son's number. She had to sound rational. In full possession of her wits. Anyway, better to wait an hour or so, just to make sure that he'd be home from work.

But later had not been late enough. Her heart sank when she heard Monica's voice. It galled her to remember how relieved she'd felt for Jack, finding just the person to restore his self esteem after Lucy's desertion. It hadn't taken Agnes long to see below the sweetly sensitive exterior to the bedrock of selfishness.

'Jack? In? Chance'd be a fine thing! Try tomorrow, Agnes.'

'This is urgent, Monica.'

'Urgent! What d'you think it's like for me, then? I mean, it's nine o'clock already and the girls are both out but I'm left here on my tod, as usual, pouring my own drinks - '

'I'm sorry about that, Monica. He really is working too hard at the moment, isn't he? Could you ask him to ring me as soon as he gets in?'

'I'll tell him, but don't hold your breath. Anyway, surely there's someone there who can sort things out for you? That place is costing us enough.'

'This is something private.'

'What sort of private? Jackie doesn't keep any secrets from me, you know.'

'Actually, I really do want to have a word with my own son.'

'Have to join the queue, then, Agnes.'

It wasn't till the following day that she'd finally managed to speak to Jack.

'Ma, For God's sake! Not at work, please!'

'But I have to talk to you, Jack. I'm worried sick about - '

'Can't it wait till Sunday, Ma? I'm coming over to see you then, remember?'

'I am still in full possession of all my faculties, thank you, in spite of what you might think. It's the children. That man of Lucy's. He's - '

'Look, there's nothing for you to worry about. Can't talk now. Ring me at home later.'

Then yet one more call in this frustrating series of attempts at communication.

'Of course it's me. Who else would it be? The girls are never in these days. No, Agnes, not home yet. Yes, I will remember to tell him you called.'

Now it was Saturday and still no word from Jack. Here she was, to all intents and purposes a prisoner in this so-called Harmony Home. Young at Heart? She'd never felt her age more than at this moment - weak-kneed and feeble. But there was no getting away from it, she must pull herself together and try again. She simply had to reach Nottingham today, check on Emily and Sam with her own eyes before Jack came to visit her.

It wasn't as though he didn't care. In his own way he was truly fond of his children. More demonstrative than Henry had ever been to him. Certainly more approachable than her own father. But would Jack take any notice of her fears, based only on that brief phone call to Sean, those few angry words? After all, he was already convinced she was losing her marbles. Wasn't that why he'd put her here in the first place?

Jack. Barely a trace of him left. Not her Jack. If she'd been told that DNA tests had proved he wasn't her son after all, that some time during his early twenties a switch had been made, and the real Jack, enquiring mind and spirit of fun intact was out there, roaming the world, it would have made more sense. How can a man of forty-three be older than his seventy-five-year-old mother?

When did it happen, this estrangement? It must have started a long time before the breakdown of his marriage to Lucy. But it wasn't till that terrible Sunday almost two years ago that she'd finally become aware of quite how unbridgeable the gap between them had grown.

Sunday lunch with her family had been the highlight of the week for Agnes, since she'd become a grandmother. Recently though, these occasions had been less regular. This time it was just the three of them, Henry and Agnes and Jack, wedged apart by the solid edges of the kitchen table. Jack arrived late, and without Lucy or the children, but he'd given no proper explanation for their absence.

'Delicious, my dear. Gravy perhaps not quite up to your usual standards, though. What do you think, son? Is it your mother that's slipping, or is your ageing father losing his taste buds?'

At least he's broken this wooden silence, Agnes thought, glancing from Henry to Jack, and back at her own plate. She suddenly felt as though she were outside her own body, gazing down at herself, her husband and her son, the three of them locked into their own private thoughts. And though she knew she would be able to make some light-hearted comment that would re-establish the habitual link with Henry, she was almost afraid to speak directly to Jack in case her words should echo back at her from his closed face, their meaning distorted.

His eyes, darting from side to side, had never seemed so dark - the brownish-black of a glacial lake. At last, barely moving his lips, he blurted out, 'Lucy wants a divorce.'

The right words, silences, gestures, how different things could have been. But Henry had switched into automatic preacher mode, the sanctity of matrimony, the possibility of reconciliation. Then Agnes's own words, like spilt milk. 'Jack, dear, do try to look at things from Lucy's point of view. You have to admit you've been rather neglectful recently, such long hours at work. Perhaps if you could just...'

By the time she'd risen from her seat and walked round the table to stand behind him and place her arms around his neck, the damage was done. It was like embracing stone.

'You've always been kind to me, and lovely with the kids, Agnes,' Lucy said when she'd phoned that evening, 'and of course, it's not that I've got anything against Jack himself, but...'

'But you only live once,' said Agnes, and Lucy had been totally oblivious of the irony in her tone and responded gratefully, 'Oh! You *do* understand! I'm so glad!'

The final blow had been delayed until Agnes was left to bear it alone. Two weeks after Henry's funeral, Lucy phoned with the announcement that Sean had got a new job in Nottingham. 'Head of Art. A really good school, ex-grammar. Just the break he's been looking for. We've managed to find a lovely house to rent till we've sold his. We will keep in touch though, I promise. Once we've settled in properly, you must come and stay.'

At the time, Agnes was too numbed by her own grief to take in the full implications of this news. Nights were the worst. More often than not, she'd pull down Henry's heavy coat from the cupboard in the hall, and curl up on the sofa with the tapestry cushion rough against her cheek, rather than haul herself up the stairs and climb alone into the bed they'd shared. Waking, stiff and cold at three in the morning. Wondering how many sleeping pills it would take. Thinking, no, not yet. I can't go like this. Turning on all the lights. And the wireless in the kitchen. Dance music. World news. Cleaning the oven again.

A few weeks later, when Jack had finally managed to sort out the tangled mess of his father's estate, there was more bad news. Sitting in the vicarage kitchen, sheaves of papers spread all over the table, he tried to explain the details of what had happened.

Agnes feigned interest in the rows of columns, the 'not-withstandings', the 'where-to-fors', but it was all a meaningless mass of words and numbers until Jack finished off, 'I'm sorry, Ma. You'll have the basic pension, and that's it. Lord knows what Dad was thinking of, trusting that old crook, Naughton. Just because he played the organ nicely. I told him often enough. You can't say I didn't warn him.'

She still hadn't fully grasped the extent of the disaster. 'No, dear, I know you tried. Still, what can't be helped must be shouldered. Other people manage, so I'm sure I can.'

'I mean,' went on Jack, 'even Dad should've realised there's no such thing as a free lunch. Honestly! Fancy believing in moral investments that not only guarantee a comfortable income for life but can somehow bring untold benefits to starving children in Africa! And to tie up the house in that way, after the church had let him buy it for such bargain price! I'm sorry to have to say this, but it was downright irresponsible. Not fair on you at all, having to cope with all this at your age.'

'I'm not senile yet. I'm sure I can manage my own affairs. And your father did what he believed was right at the time,' she added, a trifle sharply.

'Of course. I'm not saying... It's just, well. We have to think about what this will mean for you. No house. Virtually no money. You'll have to come and live with us.'

There was a long silence as Agnes began to absorb the implications of what Jack had told her. 'Us' meant Monica and her two teenage daughters in Jack's recently acquired house in Haywards Heath. They wouldn't want her, even if Jack did.

She glanced across the table at her son. He was examining the grain of the wood, tracing his forefinger along one of the straighter lines until it curved into a spiral, round and round and round, then back again. She'd not seen him do that since - oh - since he'd left home.

Home. Even without Henry, this was still home. Every room throbbed with his... not absence, exactly, more like *non-presence*. The way you can deliberately push the tip of your tongue hard into a new, raw gap between your molars, keeping alive the lost tooth for a little longer.

Worse still, this place seemed like her only remaining link with Emily and Sam. They'd not spent any time here since before Henry's death, but she still kept their beds aired, and their favourite toys and books displayed on their own shelves of the bookcase in the morning room. Just in case.

She pushed back her chair, walked across to the Aga and picked up the empty kettle. 'More tea, dear?' she asked, keeping her voice as light as she could.

She found herself smiling at the relief on his face. Poor Jack. Just like his father. Never did know how to cope with any form of emotional upset.

What choice had she got? And would it really matter where she lived, now that she had to leave this house? Looking on the bright side, moving in with Jack might well be the best way of getting to know him again. What was that expression they used these days? Bonding, that was it. And he might agree to drive her up to Nottingham, or even bring the children back down with him for the occasional weekend.

'What can't be helped must be shouldered,' she repeated. Then, hearing how those words might sound to him, continued gently, 'That's a very kind offer, Jack. I shall certainly give it some thought.'

