

CHAPTER 1

OK, SO I DIDN'T INTEND TO BUY A CASTLE. It was the row of quarrymen's cottages, the last remainders of the slate quarries that still scar the hillsides grey, right up into the horseshoe curve of Snowdon itself, that caught my eye on that clear, sharp winter's morning of my fifty-second birthday.

Now, a chick I am not. I am too old to be sentimental; too mature to be fluffy. It was my businesswoman's head that eyed those cottages, without the faintest thought passing through of preserving or restoring anything.

The cottages stood in the photograph in the window of Griffiths and Jones, Estate Agents, on the sunny side of Llanestyn High Street. They were shown to be perched on a picturesque hillside you would never guess – from a casual glance, at least – was marooned by ice in the winter, with gales howling in from the Menai Straits, straight from crossing the sea from Ireland all the rest of the year round.

They were tumbledown and neglected, with small, square extensions from the Seventies at the back to house both kitchen and bathroom, and the long, narrow gardens in front were overgrown and wild. To my eyes they were perfect.

Potential. That was always my strength, so Robin, my most trusted surveyor, always told me: the spotting of potential, however obscure and unlikely. 'The Miss Marple of Snowdonia', he called me, in the years when I lived in Kingston-upon-Thames: looks harmless, with the long hair and the Indian-print skirts, but hiding the mind of a razor, is what he said he

meant. Since I had not yet spotted a grey hair amongst the brown (or 'rich chestnut', as my sister Cadi calls our mutual colouring), and had never been near a hat in my life, I was not entirely sure this was intended as a compliment.

But we go way back, Robin Lloyd Jones and I: way back to Llanestyn Primary, and many a bleak year in between, and I could forgive him almost anything. So I'd phone, and he would come down and give his professional opinion of my purchases with a detached, faintly amused, eye.

Not that I minded: detached amusement is a male defence mechanism when it comes to a female who unexpectedly shows brains, I've often found. Besides, it saved me from ever feeling obliged to sleep with him. Never sleep with a business partner: they never respect you afterwards, however smart your trouser suit and however sensible your heels the next day. Believe me, I know.

It was Potential that had saved us, the children and me, thirty years ago when Terry, (husband, erstwhile business partner) discovered a belated whiff of the Sixties and went off to Find Himself.

'But I'm leaving you the house, Elissa,' he said, his large, soft eyes darker than ever with the hurt of my irrational fury.

'The mortgage and the bills, you mean.'

'You've got your job. And your parents will help out, they're very good like that.'

Which they had been when the business somehow went belly-up amongst the flurry of a baby, who then became a toddler to occupy the day while his new little sister disturbed the night. But that was excruciatingly embarrassing, however nice they were about it, and not really the point. Mam and

Dad were not by any means rich, and they had their own lives to lead, and their own futures to think of. Besides, weren't we meant to be the grown-ups by now?

'You always manage, Elissa. It's what I admire about you. You were always so much stronger than me.'

Of course, nowadays experience has wrinkled the corners of my eyes and sharpened my vision no end. Nowadays, I'd tell him where to stick his admiration. Back then I was twenty-two. I thought I was so grown up and knowledgeable. I look at twenty-two-year-olds now and see they are still children: faces soft and unformed. Great flesh tones, but still clinging to their mother's milk for all their air of unassailable sophistication, egos fragile in the cold wind blowing outside the pampered warmth of the nest.

'And it isn't as if I've left you for another woman.'

Even then, that statement made me wonder what on earth I had ever seen in him. If he'd left me for another woman he'd have at least been a cad, a sod, a bastard. Leaving me in order to find a Higher Truth left me amongst the ignoble dross of humanity who can't think beyond where their next meal is coming from, and are content to chew the cud of ordinary existence.

Being twenty-two and swamped in the bewilderment of life, motherhood, and being grown up at all, I squashed the thought as that of an unfeeling cow, and therefore unworthy of me, and lapsed into feelings of inadequacy. My children screamed in public, spilled chocolate down their clothes and mine, and I couldn't even keep a husband for more than a couple of years: I cringe at the humiliation of it all, even now.

So Terry left, with only a rucksack and a change of clothes, and went to Find Himself. I've no doubt this also led to finding plenty of nubile young women without stretch marks on their bellies, milk oozing from their nipples, and no sign of interest in sex or philosophy or the heavy trials of his day, and overcome by an overwhelming desire for sleep.

I tried not to think about that. But I couldn't avoid the postcards to the children from Paris, the Swiss Alps, a Greek island or so, Pisa, Pompeii, and Dubrovnik: all the places he and I had been, with rucksacks on our backs, in those brief years we were together before Merion and Katie had been born. Later, these progressed to game reserves in Africa, the mountains of the Andes, and an aerial view of New York. I couldn't compete with those. He had outstripped me in knowledge of the world; in daring and self-fulfilment. There was no doubt about it: here were the pictures to prove it.

And, meanwhile, I plodded on. I paid the mortgage, kept the old banger on the road, and helped the children with their first day at school, then the first day at secondary school, and homework. I had coffee with friends, and visited my mother in Llanestyn as often as I could afford the petrol. The usual kind of things.

Then Katie followed her brother into secondary school, and I discovered Potential. I'd decided to sell the house, and take the mortgage to a smaller one, where I could pay it off quicker and be free from peddling Life Assurance so that someone else could make a lot of money, and I could make a very little, so very much of which was swallowed up in child-care.

I looked around. Did the sums. Then, watching Merion and Katie playing with the tent in the garden one day, I had a blinding brainwave. One of those moments that can change your life for ever.

I read everything I could find on mortgages, interest, tenancy agreements and property management – no Internet in those days, of course – and then phoned Robin back in Llanestyn. We moved to a smaller house, all right, but I didn't sell a thing. Instead, I got tenants to pay the mortgage. You see, I had spotted that our new little house needed a bit of attention, but not that much. Then I could let it out, too, and move on. Onwards and upwards.

'Property is always a wise investment,' Robin remarked, approvingly, when I came back to visit Mam for a weekend, and she tried to set the two of us up. Well, we were both single, now, weren't we? I was still all hedgehog prickles as far as romance was concerned. But Robin and I had a closer bond than my mother could ever have imagined. Scarlett O'Hara had always been my favourite heroine: like her, I had discovered the hard way that money is the key to survival in an uncertain world. And the Eighties was a very uncertain world, I can tell you.

I used my eye for Potential to the full. I was going to make damn sure that the kids and I never had to ask for help again, and I would never, ever, wake in that darkest hour before dawn (3 am, summer and winter), and imagine the electricity cut off, the bailiffs at the door, and the urine-drenched arches under Hungerford bridge beckoning us into their cardboard boxes as home.

I always did have a vivid imagination; always did imagine the worst. Nothing like a vivid imagination for the worst to sharpen the mind. But then I was a Fifties child, born in the shadow of the nuclear blast that would obliterate us all. And it would happen, it could. From the moment I could listen with a conscious ear to the adults around me I heard them talking about war, bombs falling. The war they never thought would really happen, not even when Uncle Wynn saw the barrage balloons rise above London as the first sirens went.

Uncle Wynn had been in the East End when the bombs fell. Uncle Gareth had been a fireman in Birmingham. He was on leave, he used to tell us, visiting friends one night, in the peace of the Worcestershire countryside, when they saw the red glow in the sky that was Coventry burning. Imagine that: an entire city burning.

That was real. Uncle Gareth had seen it, so it must have been. He would talk about it sometimes to Mr Ernst, from down the road, who had been in Hamburg when the British bombers went over and left a firestorm of their own in their wake. The fire that grew, and grew, he said, and sucked everything into itself as it howled and raged through the streets, and out into my dreams.

Neither of them ever talked about such things with Miss Rosenstern who, like Mr Ernst, had somehow drifted to Llanestyn, and the wild reaches of the Snowdonia foothills, after the war. I would pass her as she sat on the park bench, her bags all around her, permanently packed and ready to go. Mam said Miss Rosenstern had come from a place called

Auschwitz, where the unthinkable happened. Which made the atomic bomb, and the end of life-as-we-know-it, thinkable with every plane that cruised low overhead.

Which, living within easy distance of at least one RAF base, made for a highly nervous childhood.

I have no intention of having a nervous old age, if I can help it. Hence the cottages. My properties had all gone up in value over the years. I'd put first Merion, and then Katie, through University and into jobs, and their first houses, and set aside enough for at least one marriage apiece. This was my time now.

So I'd sold up in Kingston-upon-Thames – where we had only gone to further Terry's career prospects, between that unfortunate business venture of ours and Terry going off to Find Himself – and come home to Llanestyn. The proceeds were going into properties up here. Some to rent out, and the rest for the lucrative tourist market. Plus a nice little cottage with a garden for me to potter around in for my old age.

Which was when the fateful cottages made their appearance in the window of Griffiths and Jones, Estate Agents, and lured me inside.

'Tanybwlch Cottages?' said the young man who, according to the friendly and informative label on his desk, was Mr Jones. Mr Aled Jones. A very young Mr Jones, with the pale, rather pickled complexion of too many hours under fluorescent lights, interspersed with too many business lunches, topped off by too many evenings in the Snowdon Arms. He looked just like his dad did at that age.

Even at school, we'd all known Gareth Jones would end up rich. He was a tedious, plodding sort of a child, dwelling in the safe anonymity of being neither noticeably bright, nor noticeably naughty. But Gareth's dad was Mr Aneurin Jones of Griffiths, Williams and Jones, as it was then, before that unfortunate business of Mr Williams and Mrs Aneurin Jones, which had never been lived down by anyone.

Gareth Jones had always been heading for riches and his smart, custom-built mansion on a hillside below Snowdon, complete with tennis courts and a swimming pool, and an enormous garage to house his collection of four-by-fours, a Volvo, an Aston Martin and several BMWs. Young Aled Jones was clearly heading the same way.

Now, I considered, was probably not the time to let slip that his father had invited me on several occasions to become the third Mrs Gareth Jones, before he discovered that young wives were less troublesome – at least for as long as the glamour of the swimming pool and the holidays in Spain, and as many lavender-coloured leather sofas as the heart could desire, held out. I could so easily have been Aled's wicked stepmother. *Bechod.* I smiled at him sweetly.

'That's right. Tanybwllch Cottages. I'd like to see the details, please.' I saw his eyes slide past towards the young couple who had come in after me. Double income, no kids, first-time buyers, no chain. Anxious to get on the property ladder, and new to the game. I could see he was safely pocketing the commission already. 'If you don't mind,' I added, somewhat louder.

'Ah, yes.'

I was, I thought, just a little sadly, an old woman to him. I'd passed him several times in the streets when I came back to visit Mam over the years, but he clearly had no idea his eyes had ever passed over me at all. To his youth, I fell into the amorphous mass of middle-aged and elderly females who pass invisible. We take no leading role in films or poster campaigns – not unless we are sanitised, digitally smoothed out, and smiling benignly on the youth around us. Aha! But what they forget is that the best secret agents are the ones nobody notices. Besides, years ago I resolved to give up anxiously seeking approval from everyone I met, and have never looked back since (well, almost).

'I'm afraid they are not being sold singly, madam. It's the entire row.'

'I am aware of that. I'd like to see the details, please.' His eyes travelled briefly over my un-ironed trousers, my comfortable old fleece and walking boots, and my still-long hair, with the roots showing, tucked hastily into an old velvet scrunchy. And no, he did not notice that I still have some pretty decent curves on me ('voluptuous' has been the enthusiastic verdict from more than one discerning male of my, um, acquaintance), and that my skin is really not that bad at all, considering. Ah, well.

Aled's father had always flaunted even more money than he had got, and it was clearly beyond Aled himself that anyone with the kind of cash that could buy a row of even the most derelict of cottages would not be encased in an Armani suit and pearls. But the quickest way to get rid of me was to hand over the details and bear down upon the young couple before they had a chance to escape.

'Of course, madam.' He turned to the filing cabinet at the back of the office. My eyes followed him, unthinkingly, as you do.

And there it was. I was bowled over. Breathless. My heart pounding in my chest, and shivers going up and down my spine. This was love: deep, wonderful, perfect love.

And I just knew I was never going to recover, not for as long as I lived.