

CHAPTER THREE

The promise of a brighter afternoon was short-lived. Banks of rain-sodden cloud gathering over Meeston Woods to the west were swept in on a blustery wind.

“Not much left to do now,” Gwen was saying, surveying the freshly stacked plates on the kitchen table with satisfaction. “Elsie and me can finish this lot off in no time.”

Elsie was busy drying the last of the plates, gazing out of the kitchen window. “Oh – there’s Robert,” she said. “He said he’d fix that apple this afternoon.”

Gwen craned her neck to see him. “There’s tea and sandwiches left if he wants some. Go and tell him will you, Elsie.”

“I’ll go,” Laura offered. The dull ache in her head had eased but left a fuzziness which made it difficult to concentrate. Escaping into the fresh air was suddenly attractive.

Outside, there was a raw edge to the wind that took her by surprise. The fine woollen fabric of her dress gave little protection against the sudden gusts, and she hugged herself close as she hurried down the curved steps into the

comparative shelter of the garden. There was a faint drift of drizzle in the air. “Mr Moray,” she called out. “There’s tea and sandwiches if you’d like to come in when you’re finished.”

The smart Mr Moray at St Wilfrid’s was transformed again into the man she recognised, his hair wind-blown and disordered, his tweed jacket with leather elbow patches showing signs of wear and tear, and his thick cord trousers mud-spattered at the bottoms from the thick clods on his boots. Although he must have heard her calling, he made no attempt to acknowledge her, concentrating instead on securing the wayward branch of the espalier against the trellis. Eventually, he turned to face her. “Thanks for the offer, Miss Driscoll,” he said in his soft Scots burr. “But I wouldn’t want to intrude.” His expression was a perfect blank.

“Goodness, Mr Moray, you’re not intruding!”

“No, if you don’t mind,” he insisted. “I’m not dressed for company.” He smiled apologetically and turned back to check that the remaining fastenings on the trellis were secure.

There was something odd about his refusal that made her persist. “Is anything wrong, Mr Moray?” she asked, wondering if her mother had been short with him again, as she so often was, resenting the time her husband spent with him in recent years. But for all her disapproval of him, she had never denied him access to the kitchen – as long as he removed his boots.

Mr Moray’s back remained stubbornly turned in her

direction and there was a long pause before he answered. “I got on well with your father, Miss Driscoll,” he said at last. “He was a great help to me ...”

She should have known. Old ghosts.

Ten years earlier, Robert Moray had left his roots in the North and arrived out of the blue to work for William Benyon at Nether Meeston Farm. He was a young man of twenty-five then, fresh-faced, with unruly chestnut-hair and melancholy green eyes. He was almost mad with grief – according to William’s wife, Ann – fleeing from places too close to the memory of his dead wife and child. He had taken up the tenancy of the smallest of the farm’s cottages on Nether Meeston Lane, a one-up-one-down affair with a kitchenette and bathroom added to it in a simple lean-to construction at the back. He had settled there, living his solitary life among the Meeston community, keeping largely to himself until that spring. It was common knowledge now, frowned upon in certain circles – not least by her mother who regarded the liaison as utterly incomprehensible – that he had taken up with Susan Holbrook, the infant teacher at St Wilfrid’s Primary, an attractive young woman in her late twenties who lodged at the Benyon’s. The relationship had begun, by all accounts, when he had offered to provide conifer branches in lieu of palm fronds for the Easter play Miss Holbrook was organising at the school. With the closeness of their respective places of abode, what had begun as a casual friendship had over time become something more serious, and seemed to be blossoming. There was even talk they might marry. “What she can

possibly see in a farm worker, I do not know,” Daphne had opined to anyone who cared to listen. “Such an educated girl too.”

Shortly after his arrival in Meeston, Mr Moray had started helping out at the Lodge, doing the heavy maintenance work in the garden on a casual basis. In return, Laura’s father had offered him the use of the large vegetable patch beyond the walled garden as an allotment. The produce he grew there was shared between the Lodge and himself – a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Ten years ago, Laura remembered coming home from school for the summer holidays and being surprised to discover old Mr Timms, the gardener at the Lodge for as many years as she could remember, had retired. In truth, for several years the job had not required someone full-time, but Mr Timms was not a young man. He had steadily become increasingly frail and allowances had been made, perhaps for too long. His sudden departure nonetheless was a shock to her, and in his place she found this strangely silent man, coming and going like a phantom, not given to much conversation beyond necessary politeness. She was fascinated by him. His past had an air of mystery about it that appealed to her over-active adolescent mind, and she hung around the garden that summer whenever she could, hoping he might be there. With the natural curiosity of a fourteen-year old, she was inquisitive to know more, but her father had been adamant – “Don’t ask him personal questions, Laura, it’s not kind,” – a rule she had dutifully followed then, and since, restricting her topics in those early

days to the wild flowers she picked as studies for her first attempts at water-colours, when he would help her identify those she did not know. But with the passage of time and her long absences at school, her curiosity died away. And by the time she left Hunters Lane at sixteen, her life was being directed towards Oliver and their future together. Hobnobbing with the casual gardener was frowned upon by her mother, and their paths rarely crossed for more than a few moments, limited to brief exchanges of commonplace greetings. So it had come to this: he was a familiar sight to her, but only as someone living on the margins of her world; someone who remained as much a stranger to her now as he had been ten years before.

A gust of wind caught her. She shivered, wishing she had brought a coat. He was still occupying himself checking the trellis, making no attempt to fill the awkward silence between them.

Despite her thoughts lingering on the warmth of the kitchen, she felt obliged to continue the conversation in the hope of persuading him into the house. The effort was something of a struggle, the words in her head unwilling to untangle themselves. "My father enjoyed talking to you about the garden," she began, adding pointlessly in view of the quantity of debris and leaf litter everywhere, "The shrubbery looks very fine just now." The drizzle was becoming more persistent. If he would not come to the house now, then so be it.

Unhurriedly, he finished refastening one of the ties. "Your father wanted something to last after he'd gone," he said,

turning slowly and very deliberately to face her, giving the statement an emphasis she could not fail to notice.

There was a brief moment when the full weight of his words failed to register before she felt herself shiver – not from any lack of warmth – but from the kind of dread that comes from the sudden discovery of something purposely kept hidden. Had she misunderstood him? “Did *you* know he was ill?” she asked, thinking the fuzziness in her head was making her slow-witted.

He stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and briefly studied the mud on his boots. “Yes,” he said. “Heart disease isn’t uncommon if you’ve had rheumatic fever as a child. But I expect you knew that.” He was looking straight at her now. A challenge?

She was nodding in agreement – a purely automatic reaction. She had known nothing of the sort. Neither, she was sure, had her mother. Daphne’s reaction to her husband’s death had been one of unmitigated shock. Foreknowledge would, at the very least, have blunted her reaction.

Why had her father confided so fully in this man? – she was asking herself behind a facade of bland acknowledgment. Why had he left his wife and daughter in such terrible ignorance? It was unforgivable!

The dull thudding behind her eyes was growing louder as the same thought wheeled through her mind over and over again: her father had *known* he was dying.

She began to feel very strange indeed. Light-headed. Aware of an intense focusing of her vision on the top button

of Robert Moray's shirt, and around it, a darkening halo threatening to engulf her.

"It's starting to rain," she heard him say through the roar of blood at her temples. "You should go in."

Her own voice came to her from a great distance. "Yes – yes, of course. You're right."

That was the moment, she decided later, her life began to change. Even as she stood, cold and damp, her mind still not fully engaged, not fully comprehending the enormity of his words, she knew the sudden revelation of her state of ignorance was more, much more than first it seemed. A box had been opened – and revealed beneath – another box.