

Wild Oats

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Extract

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I

Jamie Wilding thought it ironic that, of her somewhat epic journey from South America, the final leg from Paddington to Ludlow had been the most traumatic. She'd missed her connection at Hereford, and the next train had come to an agonizing standstill in the wilds of the Shropshire countryside for no apparent reason – at least, none was given. By then she'd been travelling for over twenty-four hours. Now, with judicious use of her elbows and a certain ruthlessness, she finally managed to push her way through a dithering gaggle of American tourists, extricate herself from the train carriage and alight on the platform. She was tired, dirty, hungry and thirsty. As she struggled out of the station with her rucksack, she prayed there would be a taxi. There was. 'Bucklebury Farm, Upper Faviell,' she told the driver, and flopped into the back seat wearily. The smell of the driver's cigarette combined with the sickly smell from his Wallace and Gromit air freshener turned her empty stomach, but she didn't care. She was nearly there.

The cab nudged its way slowly through the midday traffic and up the hill to the town centre. Jamie feasted her eyes on the familiar buildings: the black-and-white timbered edifices bowed down with age juxtaposed

with the more gracious red-brick frontages introduced in Georgian times. She wondered which she preferred, then decided it was the contrast that was so charming.

As they pulled into the town square, the farmers' market was in full swing. Stalls with gaily-coloured awnings to protect them from the summer sun were crammed with vegetables: rows of cauliflowers, creamy white, luminous green and purple, enormous pods bulging with broad beans, punnets of voluptuous red strawberries. Other stalls were selling delicious-looking pies and jams and cakes; local honey; pots of herbs to take home and plant; hand-made ice cream thick with raspberries or ginger or chunks of bittersweet chocolate. Someone was cooking free-range sausages on a portable barbecue to entice customers: the smell drifted in through the cab window and made Jamie's mouth water. She was ravenous. There'd been no buffet car on the train. Her last meal had been an unedifying airline breakfast in another time zone. She was tempted to ask the driver to stop, but knew that would just be prolonging the agony. It was something she could look forward to after months of meagre and monotonous rations: coming to the market, chatting to the stallholders, trying their samples, coming home with a basket groaning with fresh produce. As the traffic nudged along, she caught sight of Leo the cheesemonger, with his mop of unruly black curls, deep in conversation with a customer, talking her through his mouth-watering selection of wares, paring off slivers for her

to try. You could have a full-blown meal just by sampling what was on offer at Ludlow market, starting with marinated olives, moving on to cured meats and home-baked breads, finishing with a slither of lemon tart or apple cake.

At the far end of the square the castle overlooked the bustling scene with an air of benevolent superiority. It had, after all, been there the longest, long before Ludlow became renowned as a gastronomic and epicurean mecca. Tourists swarmed over its ancient ramparts, armed with lurid ice creams and guide-books, spilling out of its magnificent gates to discover the rest of the town's treasures.

At last the cab was free of the traffic. It crossed over the river and on to the road that led to the Faviells. As they sped along the winding lanes, hedges thick with emerald greenery, Jamie felt the faint drumming of butterfly wings against the wall of her stomach. Why was she nervous? She was coming home, that's all. She had no need to be nervous.

Yes, she did. After all, she had no idea what to expect on her return – what she was going to find, how she was going to be received. Or what she would do and say. Jamie always feared the unknown, because her imagination worked overtime and presented her with the worst-case scenario. Give her a rope bridge to cross or an unbroken horse to ride and she had nerves of steel. But when she wasn't sure what to expect, her courage seemed to fail her.

Only too soon they arrived in Upper Faviell. The

village hadn't changed, which was hardly surprising, as it hadn't changed for as long as Jamie could remember. The hanging baskets at the Royal Oak were sporting a blue and white colour scheme this year, compared to yellow and red the year before, and there was a new 'Please Drive Carefully Through Our Village' sign, but otherwise it was the same as it had been when she'd left, almost a year ago now.

Half a mile outside the village, on Jamie's instruction, the driver pulled into a gateway. Weeds and grass poked through the cattle grid; the sign that would have told passers-by that this was Bucklebury Farm was overgrown with brambles.

'I'll walk from here,' Jamie told the driver, and thrust a crumpled tenner at him. Heaving her rucksack back on to her shoulder, she stood for a moment, heart thumping, knowing that by walking this last quarter of a mile she was delaying the moment of reckoning yet again.

She trudged down the drive, a simple track flanked on one side by orchards and on the other by pastures dotted with grazing sheep. Her feet kicked up the dust of earth dried by the midday sun, but the heat was nothing compared to what she had endured over the past few months. Instead, she relished the gentle breeze that swished through the boughs of the trees and set the buttercups, sprinkled like gold dust over the fields, nodding furiously. Eventually, two stone gateposts and another cattle grid pronounced the entrance to the farmyard, whereupon the track

became tarmac and led past a decrepit hay-wain and a magnificent Victorian stable yard, before coming to a halt in front of the house itself.

Bucklebury Farm embraced the two styles of architecture that typified Ludlow. The oldest section was seventeenth-century black-and-white timber, irregularly shaped and peppered with leaded windows. The floors inside were wooden and leaned at alarming angles, the rooms were predominantly wood-panelled, the ceilings low, the staircases winding and narrow and crooked. Upstairs, one frequently had to bend to avoid concussion on a beam or a sloping roofline. Overall, it gave one the impression of being on board a rather cosy ship. In the late nineteenth century someone had obviously found its confines claustrophobic rather than charming, and had made a red-brick addition to the house that was stout and square and perfectly proportioned, allowing a rather grand staircase, a large dining room, a study and some sensibly sized and shaped bedrooms. Jamie infinitely preferred the older part, where her bedroom was tucked into the eaves up its own little staircase. The windows were tiny but gave a magnificent view of the rolling countryside, and in the distance she could see the ramparts of Ludlow Castle standing guard over the town.

Ignoring the imposing front door, with its arched fanlight, that was only ever opened to people who didn't know any better, she made her way around the side of the house. She couldn't help noticing a general

air of neglect about the place: the lawns and hedges were badly in need of attention, and the vegetable patch, once immaculate with its regimented rows of carrots and cabbages and lettuces all neatly netted to protect them from the rabbits, had become rampant and choked with weeds. But then, her father had never taken any great interest in gardening. Never mind; she could bring things back into order soon enough.

As she walked past the kitchen garden to the back door, a brace of Jack Russells came tearing round the side of the house with a volley of barks, leaping up at her with muddy paws, stumpy tails wagging furiously.

'Parsnip! Gumdrop!' She dropped to her knees and embraced the pair of them as they sniffed at her in disbelieving delight. Overwhelmed by their greeting, she was struck by the absence of a further presence. Their vanguard would once have been followed by her mother vainly calling them off; the little dogs were the one thing over which Louisa seemed to have no control. They were notoriously quite the worst behaved dogs in the county, over-indulged and under-disciplined, saved from being thoroughly dislikeable by their ebullient mischief and effusive welcomes. Now, Jamie noticed, they could both do with a good bath and needed their nails clipping. If she needed any further reminder that her mother was no longer here, then this was it . . .

She'd been working in California when it happened. An American family who had hired her to look after

their first child when they'd lived in London, had her flown over to San Francisco when number two arrived. It had been a very happy few weeks; the baby was an angel, Marin County was heaven and the Knights treated Jamie like one of their own. For the first time, she was seriously tempted when they begged her to stay on. It was one of her golden rules, why she'd chosen maternity nursing over nannying, that she never got attached to a child or a family, that she only stayed eight weeks maximum, and that once the mother had recovered from the birth and the baby had settled into a routine, she was gone. That way, she could be sure of her freedom. She could pick and choose her jobs, and never be at anyone else's beck and call.

Her father Jack had phoned on a Sunday morning, when they were all about to set off for brunch at a harbour-side restaurant in Sausalito.

'It's your mother.'

Jamie could tell by the strain in his voice that something was badly wrong.

'What is it?'

'She . . .'

'What?' Jamie couldn't keep the irritation out of her voice. It was one of her father's more annoying habits, not being able to get to the point when there was something unpleasant that needed saying.

'The doctors say she probably won't make it through the night.'

Jamie was stunned into silence for a moment, then delivered a barrage of questions.

‘What do you mean? Why? What’s the matter? Has she had an accident?’

Jack gave a heavy sigh in response.

‘She’s got cancer, Jamie.’

To say Jamie was shocked was an understatement. Her mother couldn’t have cancer. She was never ill. At first she told herself there’d been some mistake, that the phone would ring and Jack would tell her to relax, Louisa had made a recovery, her notes had been mixed up with someone else’s. But when kindly Dr Roper, their GP, had called ten minutes later, Jamie could tell from the tone of his voice that the situation was as grave as Jack had outlined. Louisa had been diagnosed with secondary cancer six weeks ago. It had reached her lymph nodes. There was nothing on God’s earth to be done.

Jamie had tried valiantly not to become hysterical, but the harsh reality of being thousands of miles away with her mother on the brink of death made it hard. The Knights booked her a flight, repeatedly reassured her that she wasn’t letting them down, helped her pack and drove her to the airport. Mrs Knight slipped her a couple of Valium for the journey. Jamie didn’t dare take them. She wasn’t sure what effect they’d have. And if she got there, and her mother was still alive, she wanted to be fully aware.

As hard as Jamie had willed the plane to go faster, the hours had slipped through her fingers. As she waited for her connection at JFK, she called home. Dr Roper broke the news as gently as he could: Louisa

had passed away during the night. She sat on the final eight-hour flight numb with shock. Someone, she couldn't remember who even now, had met her at Heathrow and driven her home on what had become the most pointless journey of her life.

Even worse than her mother dying had been what she perceived as her father's betrayal. Perhaps that had been the easiest way to deal with her grief, to displace her anger on to Jack. She was incandescent with rage, and vented her fury upon him with little or no thought for his own feelings. Why on earth hadn't he warned her? Phoned her? Called her back home as soon as they knew the awful truth, the moment her mother had been diagnosed? He put up a weary defence.

'It was what she wanted, Jamie. She wanted you to remember her as she was. She didn't want you to see her sick.'

Jamie couldn't accept his justification.

'What do you respect?' she'd stormed. 'The wishes of someone who's about to die? Or the feelings of the person who's got to live with it afterwards?'

'Don't think it was easy for me, Jamie.'

'I don't understand. I *don't understand*.'

'You wouldn't have wanted to see her. There was no point, believe me. It was harrowing. She wasn't your mother . . .'

'I'd like to have been given the choice.'

There was no point in railing at him. He stared catatonically into the middle of the room, eyes

red-rimmed, the beginnings of a beard that Jamie had been shocked to see was white. Jack the dandy shaved twice a day, and smelled of spicy, woody aftershave. Now he was beginning to have the waft of an old man who hadn't bathed for several days.

She tried to remember the last time she'd seen Louisa. She'd spent a weekend at the farm just before she went to California. Had her mother known she was dying then? She tried to recall her mood, whether she'd said anything significant, whether she'd held on to her a fraction too long when she'd kissed her goodbye. But as far as she could remember the weekend had been the usual glorious whirl of dogs, horses, people, music and endless food and drink that was Bucklebury Farm, just the tonic Jamie always needed after a gruelling few weeks looking after a newborn.

The funeral was hideous. The church was packed, the vicar effusive in his eulogizing, the profusion of flowers giving off a sickly scent. Jamie took the Valium Mrs Knight had given her for the plane journey. She didn't want to sit next to Jack, but how could she not? She didn't want people surmising, conjecturing. Her mother deserved a gracious send-off, not to be a source of gossip. Back at the house, she supervised the funeral tea like an automaton, desperate to snarl at people for their sympathy and platitudes. Nobody, thank God, said it had been a shame that she hadn't made it back in time to say goodbye. Nobody was

that insensitive. But Jamie couldn't help wondering if perhaps they were all thinking it.

She'd barely spoken to her father, and when she did it was only to consult him on practicalities. They'd operated as islands, moving like ghosts around the farmhouse, praying for each day to end as soon as it began. A week after the funeral, when she'd replied to all the letters of condolence, chosen the gravestone and tidied away the most evident of Louisa's possessions – the gumboots by the backdoor, the Agatha Christie on the coffee table, the few of her garments in the washing basket – she bought the *Rough Guide to South America*, spent a couple of hundred quid in Millets on sturdy outdoor wear and a rucksack, and booked a one-way flight to Peru.

Perhaps it had been irresponsible. It was certainly running away. But she couldn't stay at home, burning with resentment at Jack, expecting her mother to walk in through the door at any moment. And she couldn't work. Numb with grief, she didn't trust herself to be in charge of a newborn baby and a hormonal mother. Hers was a job that took patience and tact and a strong constitution for what could be weeks of interrupted sleep.

More than anything, she was angry. With whoever it was who'd taken her mother away – God, presumably, though Jamie wasn't a great believer. With her mother, for not having the will to fight. But most of all with Jack, for not having the strength and the foresight to

go against Louisa's wishes. It was typical of him, to go with whoever shouted the loudest and not stand up to them. Out of sight, out of mind. Anything for an easy life. That was Jack.

She phoned the agency to say she would be indefinitely unavailable. They were sympathetic, but keen to get her working again as soon as possible. She was one of the best maternity nurses on their books. With her youth and energy, new mothers found her sympathetic rather than intimidating, and looked upon her as a friend rather than someone to be in awe of. But Jamie couldn't give them an idea of when she would be back.

Over the ensuing months, Jamie toured her way round Mexico, Peru, Ecuador and Nicaragua in search of peace. Once every few weeks, she steeled herself to phone home and check up on Jack. They would have a stilted, awkward conversation, not helped by the time delay on the line. Jamie would hang up hastily, her conscience salved for another couple of weeks.

But over the past month, as the shards of grief in her heart had gradually started to melt and the pain began to fade, Jamie had a sudden feeling that the time was right to come home. She'd climbed to the top of Machu Picchu and there, on top of the world, standing amongst the clouds, she could almost believe she was in heaven itself. She'd never been a very spiritual or fanciful person, but somehow she'd felt as if her mother was there beside her; as if Louisa was

telling her that it was all right, that she was all right, and that it was time for Jamie to go and make her peace with Jack. And Jamie had climbed back down feeling stronger, convinced that ten months was long enough to stay away from someone you knew you had to forgive in the end . . .

And now here she was. The back door was slightly ajar, suggesting that her father was in, though they had never been tight on security. Locks and keys weren't part of the Wilding lifestyle. Jamie breathed in as she pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold, almost expecting the smell of freshly baked soda bread or one of Louisa's casseroles to rise up and greet her. Instead, there was the odour of cigarette smoke and bacon fat. She frowned – her father only ever smoked cigars. Then she stopped short.

The kitchen was undoubtedly Bucklebury Farm's greatest selling point. Nearly thirty-foot long and fifteen wide, it had a high vaulted ceiling, crisscrossed with beams, and a limestone floor. The walls were painted a dusky pink, and were smothered in ancient farming implements. An antediluvian range lurked in an inglenook fireplace at one end, and a huge moose head reigned over the scene in regal bemusement – he was a relic from someone's past, though no one knew quite whose. In the centre was a hefty oak table, usually bearing a pile of unanswered post, car keys and a battalion of jars containing jam, honey, Marmite, pickles, mustards and chutneys. For as long as Jamie

could remember there had always been people sitting at this table, enjoying a morning coffee, a midday beer or an early evening glass of wine, sharing wit, wisdom and salacious gossip.

Today was no exception. Bent over the newspaper, deep in concentration, a cup of tea at his elbow, was a bare-torsoed man. His hair was somewhere between long and short, whether by design or because he couldn't be bothered to get it cut, Jamie couldn't be sure, but he'd tied it back with a bandanna. He was stripped to the waist, his body tanned and sinewy, not an ounce of spare flesh upon him. As he looked up, a pair of brilliant aquamarine eyes met hers.

'Who the hell are you?' She knew she sounded incredibly rude, but she'd been taken unawares. She'd been steeling herself for a confrontation with Jack. She hadn't been prepared for a half-naked stranger in the kitchen. For some reason – his exotic bone structure, the colour of his skin – she expected him to reply in a foreign accent. Who was he? Some asylum-seeking Eastern European her father was employing at slave wages to maintain the place? Because if so, he wasn't doing a very good job of it.

But the voice that answered her was unmistakably English. A laconic, lazy drawl with the insouciance that only public school could provide.

'I could ask you the same question.' He tipped back in his chair, revealing cut-off jeans and long, bare legs. He'd clearly been doing some sort of menial task: Jamie noticed his hands were filthy, and as he pushed

his fringe back from his forehead with the back of his hand he left a streak of dirt across his skin. Then he took a drag from a Disque Bleu smouldering in the ashtray, surveying her through laughing eyes. Jamie scowled.

'For your information —' she began, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

'I know. It's obvious. You're Jamie.' He grinned. 'My, how you've grown.'

Jamie stared at him, a memory battling its way into her consciousness, like a poor swimmer struggling to the surface of the sea. In her mind's eye was a boy — well, a youth, perhaps sixteen or seventeen — with the same laughing eyes as the man before her now, but with shorter hair and a lighter physique, sitting on a floating pontoon in red bathing trunks, confident in the knowledge that every female over fifteen and under fifty was gazing at him with longing. Everyone except her, of course.

'Olivier?'

She was rewarded with a smile of acknowledgement as Olivier stubbed out his cigarette and got to his feet. He was going to hug her, Jamie realized, and she dropped her rucksack just in time to reciprocate. His embrace was easy, familiar, and despite herself Jamie relaxed; it could have been yesterday that they last met, instead of fifteen years ago.

'I'm sorry,' he was saying. 'I shouldn't have teased you like that, but I couldn't resist.'

'You never could,' countered Jamie, wondering

if perhaps lack of sleep and food was making her hallucinate. Olivier Templeton, here, in their kitchen?

Their fathers had been best friends – inseparable soulmates, until they'd fallen out all those years ago. Yet here was Olivier, holding court as if he owned the place. Even Parsnip and Gumdrop had settled themselves under his chair, clearly quite comfortable with his presence.

Jamie composed herself as best she could, wriggled out of Olivier's grasp and smiled.

'So . . . what are you doing here?'

'I came to give your father my condolences. He . . . wasn't in very good shape. I stayed around for a while to make sure he was all right.' He grinned ruefully. 'I keep forgetting to leave.'

Jamie blinked. This was certainly a turn-up for the books. How on earth had the hatchet come to be buried between the Wildings and the Templetons? She didn't want to ask, as she wasn't sure she was ready for the answers. And she had a feeling, judging by the lightness of his tone, that Olivier didn't really want her to probe. They both shared a history that was forbidden territory, for the time being at least.

'Let me make you a cup of tea. You must be shattered.' Olivier moved over to the sink, grabbing the kettle en route. Jamie felt totally bemused – he was offering her tea in her own house, as if she was a visitor and he the host. She accepted, despite herself, and watched in amazement as he filled the kettle, produced two clean cups from the cupboard and emp-

ried the pot of its last brew in preparation for the next.

'Your father will be pleased to see you,' remarked Olivier easily. 'He's missed you.'

He made it a statement, not a reproach, but nevertheless Jamie felt on the defensive. Had they talked about her? What had been said? Paranoia crept up and tickled the back of her neck.

'Where is he?'

'At the races.'

That figured. Some things didn't change. Olivier handed her a cup of steaming tea.

'So. How was South America?'

'Amazing.'

He raised an amused eyebrow.

'That's it? Just . . . amazing?'

Jamie managed a smile despite herself.

'I could go on for hours. Trust me, once I've started, you'll wish you'd never asked. If you're really unlucky, I'll show you my slides.' She took a slurp of tea. It was heaven. 'This is divine. It's the first proper cup of tea I've had for nearly a year.'

'Is that what made you come home? Tea deprivation?'

The fact that his query was masked with a joke made her feel uncomfortable. Those piercing eyes were very perspicacious. And she didn't know whether she could trust him, or quite what his game was. There were too many pieces of the puzzle missing for her to confide in him just yet. Instead, she made a rueful face.