

The Old House on the Corner

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Chapter 1

Victoria looked out of her bedroom window at the new estate where Macara Removals & Storage used to be. It was only a tiny estate, surrounded by a shiplap fence, and comprising just seven houses; two mock black-beamed Tudor detached with four bedrooms each, a pair of redbrick semis, and three small, double-fronted bungalows, neatly rendered and painted white, set around a communal, oval-shaped lawn with a freshly planted willow tree in the centre.

To her left, out of sight, there was a row of garages, one for each house. Victoria's own house, more than a century older than its neighbours, was in a corner facing the road. The pretty garden was packed with sweet-smelling lavender, broom, and dazzling pink peonies, hidden behind a thick privet hedge. Golden ivy covered the walls and had curled itself around the chimneys.

At only half past six on a beautiful July morning – a Saturday – all the curtains were closed and there was no sign of life until two sparrows landed on the willow tree, madly fluttering their wings and making the lacy tendrils shiver delicately.

She had wondered how the builders would persuade people to buy properties crammed so closely together: no front gardens unless you counted the narrow strip of grass barely two feet wide, and not much behind either, but the new development had been christened Victoria Square, giving it a posh, exclusive sort of air, and all had been sold long before the building work was finished. Six were occupied – one bungalow was empty and waiting for the new owners to move in. Three even had names; the detached ones were called Hamilton Lodge and Three Farthings, and one of the bungalows was Clematis Cottage – the tiny green shoots in tubs each side of the front door might well be baby clematis, Victoria couldn't tell from this distance. The remaining four properties were, so far, unnamed and making do with numbers.

There were some faded photographs in the loft, a century old, showing the land when it had been like a miniature park, full of trees and shrubs and winding paths and even a statue or two. This was before her great-granddad, Fraser Macara, had started a removal business and covered it with tons of concrete, leaving his wife only a fraction of her lovely garden.

First, there'd been just four horses and two carts, but the firm had quickly expanded until the horses and carts had trebled and the animals were accommodated in a row of ramshackle stables. Not long after the First World War, the company had been equipped with lorries – there were photos in the loft of these too; boxy, top-heavy vehicles parked at an angle in a neat row of eight about a metre apart, the drivers wearing coat overalls and bowler hats and standing to attention beside their cabs. It was Macara Removals' claim that they were the first company of its kind in Liverpool to convert to mechanized transport. The stalls had been removed from the stables, furniture instead of horses had been kept in the run-down building, and the words '& Storage' added to the company name.

'What would you say if you could see the place now, Gran?' Victoria mused aloud. 'We should have done this ages ago. Think of all the money we would have had!'

Things had been tough since Granddad had died leaving behind loads of debts that Gran had been determined to settle. Granddad hadn't had his father's flair for business. The company had been a burden he'd found too heavy to bear and had been going steadily downhill for years.

Something was happening in the square. Three Farthings' front door had opened and a woman emerged, clutching what looked like several envelopes. Victoria had become friends with the developer and knew most people's names. The woman was Mrs Williams, her husband was a motorcar salesman, and they'd just moved from a place called Lydiate on the outskirts of Liverpool. They had two children, a boy about twenty and a girl a bit younger.

Mrs Williams went next door to Hamilton Lodge and put an envelope through the letterbox. She did the same to the other five houses. 'I wonder if the Williams are throwing a party or something, Gran.' Victoria still talked to her grandmother, even though she'd been dead for more than two years. 'Oh! If it's a party, she must be inviting me?' Instead of returning home, Mrs Williams had left the

square and, a few minutes later, the letterbox at the front gave its rather rusty clatter.

Victoria shot downstairs, still in her nightie, and opened the door just as Mrs Williams was walking away, having deposited a postcard on the tatty doormat. 'Hi!' Victoria beamed.

The woman nearly jumped out of her skin. 'Good morning, Miss Macara. I hope I didn't disturb you.'

'No. I've been awake for ages. Me Gran was an early riser and I don't think I'll ever get used to sleeping in.' She picked up the postcard. 'A barbecue! Thanks, I'd love to come. Would you like a coffee? I was just about to make some. Or tea, if you'd prefer.'

Mrs Williams's face creased into a worried frown, as if she'd been asked to solve a major world crisis. 'I really should be getting home.' Then her expression cleared. 'Oh, it'll be ages before the others wake up. Coffee would be nice, thank you. I'm glad you can come to the barbecue – bring a friend if you want. You're my first acceptance. I thought it was about time we all got to know each other.' She sniffed, rather pathetically. 'Kirsty, she's my daughter, is all for it, but my husband thinks I'm a terrible busybody and my son, James, is inclined to agree.'

'You're nothing of the sort.' Victoria led her visitor into the kitchen, flooded with sunlight. 'I think it's a brilliant idea, except I won't have much time to get to know people. I'm off to America a week tomorrow. Sit down and I'll put the kettle on.'

'Oh, I say! What a lovely big room. It's like being in a time warp.' She immediately looked flustered. 'I hope you didn't mind my saying that. Some people might regard it as offensive. What I meant was . . .' She ran her hand through her short, untidy hair. 'What I meant was . . .' She paused again, unable to find the words.

'I know exactly what you meant,' Victoria said soothingly. 'It is in a time warp. Gran didn't approve of change unless she saw a reason for it. She liked the kitchen the way it is, with a nice deep sink and wooden draining boards. The gas cooker's ancient, but she wouldn't be parted from it, although she bought a fridge, and there's an automatic washing machine and a spin dryer in the outhouse and a great big telly in the parlour – the parlour's even more old-fashioned than the kitchen. Me, I don't care what the place looks like as long as it's cheerful. Mind you, once Gran died, I bought meself an electric kettle and a microwave.' She filled the kettle and switched it on. 'Sit down, Mrs Williams,' she said, nudging a chair when she became

aware the woman was still standing in the middle of the room, looking lost.

'Call me Rachel.' She sat on a creaky pine chair and leaned her elbows on the creaky pine table. 'It's got loads of character,' she whispered, glancing admiringly at the yellow and white gingham curtains that Gran had made, the grey slate floor, the pine dresser that took up half the wall and was filled with crockery that didn't match, most of which had been there since before Victoria was born. The window sill was full of pot plants.

'I'm Victoria or Vicky, I don't mind which.'

'I'll call you Victoria. It's such a pretty name. Is the square called after you?'

'Yes.' There wasn't much that could make Victoria blush, but she blushed now. She was a tough young woman, unfashionably sturdy, with beautiful skin, thick black curly hair and fearless brown eyes that regarded the world with an unflinching stare. 'The developer didn't tell me until everything had been settled, the name approved by the council, that sort of thing. He thought I'd be flattered, but it makes me feel dead uncomfortable, like having a statue erected in my honour.'

'I'd be embarrassed too.' Rachel Williams seemed the sort of person who would be embarrassed easily. Her eyes were pale and nervous and looked as if they were used to tears. She gestured all the time with her hands, as if she hadn't enough confidence in the words themselves, or her voice, to convey what she meant. A sad cotton dress, badly in need of ironing, strained against her stout figure and there were spaces between the buttons down the front. Her large feet were encased in mannish leather sandals. 'Have you got a job in America?'

'In New York, yes. I'm really looking forward to it.'

'I bet you are. I've only been abroad a few times, mainly to Cyprus where my brother lived. It must be nice to be young, have the world at your feet sort of thing.' She looked at Victoria enviously. 'I've never done anything exciting with my life.'

Victoria snorted. 'You got married and had two children, didn't you? That's more than I've ever done. And I'm not all that young. I'm twenty-seven.'

'You don't look it.'

'Well, I am.' The kettle boiled. Victoria got to her feet and made the coffee. 'Do you take milk and sugar?'

'Just milk, please.' Rachel's head drooped. 'My husband and children don't think much of me.'

Rachel Williams was beginning to get on Victoria's nerves, but she had a kind, generous heart and felt more sorry for her than irritated. The woman was badly in need of a kick up the behind. Having no idea how to respond to this rather gloomy assertion, she said the first thing that came into her head. 'Your children are very lucky to have a mum. Mine died when I was only two. I only know what she looked like from photos. Then me dad left because he couldn't cope and I came to live with me gran and grandad.'

Rachel looked as if she was about to cry. 'I'm so sorry. What did your mother die of?'

'Cancer. She was only twenty.'

'That's awful. You must have been very unhappy.'

'Not a bit of it,' Victoria said cheerfully. 'I suppose I was sad at the time, I can't remember, but I've been dead happy ever since living here.'

'Gosh! I do admire you for not giving into things. I give in at the drop of a hat.'

'Well, you shouldn't.' Victoria hoped she didn't sound too brusque. She thought it was time to change the subject. 'Have you spoken to any of the neighbours yet? I haven't had the opportunity. I only left work yesterday – for good, that is. Next week, I'll be getting ready for America.'

'The people in Hamilton Lodge seem very nice.' Rachel perked up a bit. 'Gareth and Debbie Moran, though I can't help but wonder how such a young couple managed to afford such an expensive house. He's something to do with computers: a database developer, whatever that is. Frank, that's my husband, said he wouldn't earn all *that* much.'

Victoria grinned, showing a mouthful of strong, white teeth. 'I'm in the same field meself, except I design websites. *I* didn't earn all that much either, although I will in America. Maybe the Morans have got a big mortgage.' She felt slightly guilty for receiving such a whacking great sum for the land, thus adding thousands of pounds to the cost of each property.

Rachel Williams said sadly that she couldn't understand computers. Her children had one, Frank used one at work, but she was hopeless. Before she could list all her other inadequacies, Victoria

forestalled her by asking if she'd met the people in Clematis Cottage on the other side of Hamilton Lodge.

'Mr Burrows? He seems very nice, but I didn't meet his wife, she's an invalid. I've spoken to the pretty girl in one of the semis, Sarah. She has two young children and a baby. I got the impression she'd just separated from her husband and the poor girl doesn't seem able to cope. I offered to babysit if she ever wanted to go out. The Irish family in the semi next door keep very much to themselves, and so do the couple in the other bungalow, number seven. Have you seen them? The woman looks about forty and she's absolutely beautiful.'

'I haven't seen her, no. I saw the girl called Sarah. She looked terribly harassed. She has a hyphenated surname, Rees-James. The Irish family are the Jordans and they have two teenaged boys. I don't know who's in the other bungalow.' A speculator had bought number seven with the intention of renting it out and the empty bungalow had been the last to be purchased: she had no idea by whom. 'If you're wondering how I know so much, it's because I'm dead nosy. I inherited it from me gran. She was the nosiest person in the world. I was dead miffed, being at work and missing everyone moving in.'

'You're just interested in people, that's not being nosy.' For the first time, Rachel allowed herself a brief smile, though it quickly vanished. 'Anyway, I hope they all come to the barbecue. If it's a wash-out, Frank will only say, "I told you so."'

Tell Frank to go screw himself, Victoria wanted to say, but it didn't seem exactly tactful. 'I'm sure it will be fun, even if everyone doesn't come.'

'I thought we could have it on the communal lawn. We could put up a big tree there at Christmas, have firework parties, and that sort of thing.' Her voice trailed away. 'I suppose people will think I'm just being a nuisance.'

'I think you're marvellous. And if Gran were here, she'd think the same. It's really nice, getting everyone together, making friends. I almost wish I wasn't going to America and could become part of it.'

Rachel's cheeks flushed and her watery eyes brightened. Victoria wanted to throttle Frank Williams for not offering his wife more encouragement. Gran had always taught her she could do anything she wanted and Victoria had grown up believing this to be true.

In Three Farthings, Rachel found Frank in his pyjamas in the

kitchen reading a magazine. 'The kids are still asleep. Where have you been all this time?' he enquired in his booming voice. He was a big man, six feet tall, and heavily overweight. He was fifty-two and his sandy hair was rapidly receding, exposing more and more of his red, shiny scalp. Despite these signs of ageing, women continued to find him attractive, mainly due to his brash, outgoing personality and the fact that he flattered them mercilessly.

'I've just delivered the invitations to the barbecue,' Rachel said meekly, knowing he would disapprove.

'And woken everyone up in the process,' he sneered.

'I was very careful not to make a noise, Frank,' she stammered. 'I slid the cards through the letterboxes as quietly as I could.' He was only being awkward. Normally, he loved entertaining.

'It took you long enough. It was barely daylight when I heard you leave.' He grinned, but it wasn't a very nice grin. 'You woke *me* up.' Everything he said held an accusation or criticism of something she had, or hadn't, done, making her feel that she would never get anything right.

'I'm sorry, Frank. The reason I was so long is I've been talking to Victoria Macara in the old cottage. She's ever such a nice girl, old-fashioned. She's works with computers, like Gareth next door; a web designer, I think she said.'

'An old-fashioned web designer?' Frank guffawed. 'Bit of a misnomer if you ask me.'

'Well, it's true,' Rachel said doggedly. 'Anyway, she thinks the barbecue is a brilliant idea.'

'I'm glad someone does.'

Rachel sighed and glanced around the dazzling white kitchen with its gleaming surfaces, matching cupboards and stainless-steel sink. It looked very clinical, like an operating theatre. 'Later, when we go to the supermarket,' she said, 'I'll get some plants for the window sill.' She wouldn't tell Frank she wanted her smart new kitchen to look a bit more like Victoria Macara's time warp, he'd only laugh.

The sound of the doorbell took them both by surprise. Rachel went to answer it and found a tiny girl outside wearing only a grubby vest and knickers. She carried a teddy bear close to her chest. It was Sarah Rees-James's eldest child, Tiffany, who was four, and as heartbreakingly pretty as her mother.

'Good morning,' Rachel said brightly.

'Mummy's dead,' Tiffany announced in a matter-of-fact voice. 'I can't wake her. I want a glass of milk and there's none in the fridge.'

'Oh, my God!' Rachel's hand went to her throat. 'Did you hear that, Frank? I'm going over there.'

'I'll be there in a minute,' Frank replied tersely, 'as soon as I'm dressed.'

'What about my milk?' Tiffany wailed when Rachel raced down the path and across the lawn to number one where the front door was wide open and the house looked as if a hurricane had swept through it, although it had been the same when Rachel had glimpsed inside the other day. There were dozens of cardboard boxes and plastic bags in the hall and living room waiting to be emptied. She ran upstairs, doing her best to avoid the clothes and toys left dangerously on each stair, into the front bedroom, where Sarah lay, face down in a froth of frilly bedclothes, wearing a dirty T-shirt, and apparently dead to the world.

Rachel shook the inert woman vigorously and after a while a groan emerged. 'You're alive!' she gasped, sinking thankfully on to the edge of the bed.

Sarah groaned again, turned over, and screamed when she saw Rachel, whom she hardly knew, sitting on her bed. 'What the hell are you doing here?' she demanded shakily.

'Tiffany said you were dead. She gave us a dreadful fright.'

'I was asleep,' Sarah said in a croaky voice, 'fast asleep, having a lovely dream. I didn't drop off until about three o'clock. Alastair's teething. I need some of that stuff you dab on gums, I can't remember what it's called, and baby Aspirin and Calpol and hundreds more nappies, but before I can buy anything, I have to get money from somewhere. Are there any cash machines around here?' She sat up, swung her legs out of bed, and looked around the untidy room, as if expecting to see one amidst the jumble of bottles and boxes on the dressing table.

'I'll find out,' Rachel said helpfully. 'There's bound to be some on Smithdown Road. If not, I'll lend you some money. And my husband and I are going shopping later. We'll get the stuff for you and anything else you need.'

'Thank you, you're very kind – I can't remember your name. I've no idea where Smithdown Road is. I don't know anything any more,' she wailed. 'And I need all sorts of other stuff: a kettle, for

instance, and an iron, not that I know how to use one, and one of those big flat things you fry things in.'

'My name's Rachel, dear, and what you need is called a frying pan.' She patted Sarah's hand. 'Smithdown and Allerton Roads are no distance away. They're full of shops and there's a lovely big park directly behind called the Mystery where the children can play when they get older. You'll find this a really convenient place to live. Liverpool city centre is only a bus ride away. It's hardly worth taking the car.'

'This time last week, I lived in a seven-bedroomed house and had a nanny for the children. I'm finding it hard to get used to this – but I *will*. I've promised myself that I will.' Sarah brushed back her thick, fair hair with a determined gesture. Her dishevelled appearance, and the fact that she smelled a bit, couldn't disguise how lovely she was, with perfect bone structure and huge blue eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes. Her legs were long and brown and as perfect as her face. She wore brief shorts to match the T-shirt. It was one of those modern sleeping outfits – Rachel's daughter, Kirsty, wore the same sort of thing.

Frank arrived. He came bounding up the stairs and into the bedroom, puffing slightly. 'It's bloody hot out there,' he panted. Rachel noticed the way his eyes narrowed calculatingly when he saw the long-legged Sarah. It was a look she'd seen before. Frank had always been a flirt, but it was only recently he'd started to have affairs. Sarah would be perfect for him: just separated from her husband and feeling very vulnerable – and living right under his nose.

'Well,' Frank drawled. 'You're clearly not dead. That's a relief.' Sarah smiled tremulously and fluttered her eyelashes.

'Where's Tiffany?' Rachel enquired.

'I woke up Kirsty, she's with her.' Frank didn't even look at his wife, having eyes only for Sarah's shapely breasts – the nipples were enticingly visible through the thin cotton top.

A little boy came wandering in, completely naked, sucking the corner of a scrap of blue blanket. It was Jack, who Rachel remembered was two and a half.

'Oh, hello, darling.' Sarah regarded him listlessly. 'Is Alastair still asleep?'

'Alastair not there,' Jack said through a mouthful of blanket.

'Perhaps he went walkies with Tiffany,' Frank suggested.

'He's only seven months old,' Sarah screamed. 'I've just remembered. I had him in bed with me. I might have smothered him.' She dragged back the duvet to reveal a plump baby lying with his face buried in the pillow. 'Alastair, darling.' She picked up the baby and clutched him to her chest. 'He's still breathing,' she announced tearfully.

'Thank goodness.' Rachel suddenly felt very tired and wanted to go home. Sarah Rees-James and her offspring were very wearing.

She therefore wasn't quite sure how it happened that, two hours later, Frank drove to the supermarket with a list of groceries, accompanied by Sarah Rees-James, while Rachel was left to look after the children. Why couldn't Sarah have written a list and looked after her own children? Come to that, how come the two women hadn't gone and left the children with Frank?

Why didn't I think of that before? Rachel wondered, too late.

Anna Burrows was sitting up in bed when her husband came in with breakfast on a tray. 'There's some children playing on the lawn, Ernie. They're awfully sweet.'

'I hope they're not making a noise,' Ernest growled. 'That's why we moved, to get away from the noise.'

'Only of never-ending traffic, darling. I love the sound of children playing,' she said wistfully. The Burrows hadn't been blessed with children. All they had was each other. She surveyed the contents of the tray. 'I'll never eat all this, Ernie. Just the toast will do fine. Oh, you've got gooseberry jam, my favourite,' she added gaily when she noticed his disappointed face. 'You have the fried stuff. I know you can find the room.' He had the appetite of a horse.

'If you're sure, luv.' He took the plate. It held only a single sausage, one slice of bacon and an egg, but Anna seemed to be eating less and less these days. 'Would you like to go for a walk later? It's a lovely day outside, going to be another scorcher.' They'd hardly been out since moving to Clematis Cottage a week ago – it had been Anna's idea to give it a name. He'd been too busy laying carpets, arranging furniture, putting up curtains, making the house perfect for his beloved wife. Ernest was eighty-one, but had the health and strength of a man half his age, as well as a full head of silver hair and all his own teeth. He only wore glasses for reading.

'I'd love to go for a walk. I'm longing to see where we're living now. Can you get the lid off this jam for me?'