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Starting Over

Written by Sue Moorcroft

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Starting Over

Sue Moorcroft



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PROLOGUE

□ (Priority)

Subject: Wedding ...

From: Olly<ollygray@ollygray.co.uk>

Time: 18:14

To: Tess<tess@tessriddell.co.uk>

Tess,

No easy way to say this so will be direct.

Given it loads of thought and the idea of moving in with you & your messy workroom has got to me. I've gone cold on the wedding.

You're normally the first to walk away from a bad situation but this time it's me that's recognised the issues & I think you'll be glad I did, some day.

I've spoken to the travel agent re the honeymoon. I expect you will want to see to the return of the prezzies & whatnot, as I won't be around. Am taking a contract in Scotland for a couple of months – good opportunity. As soon as I send this I'll be out the door.

No point talking, anyway. My mind's made up.

Sorry.

Married bliss is just not me.

Love

Olly x

CHAPTER ONE

Tess's vehicle stopped as if a giant had slammed a door in its face.

Metal screeched, glass crashed, the seat belt wrenched the breath from her body and the airbag thumped her in the face.

Then, slowly, the bag deflated.

And everything went quiet apart from the ringing in her ears.

She found herself gazing into the flatbed of the breakdown truck she'd been following for the last two miles. Her windscreen had dissolved into a million crystals twinkling in her lap, on her chest, on the floor, on the dash and on an Izmir Blue bonnet bent up like a broken beak. One wiper twitched in mid-air. The rain that, until now, had been pounding on her windscreen, began to pound on her.

'*Shit!*' she croaked.

A man ran from the breakdown truck, dark curls swinging around his eyes as he leant through the space where the windscreen used to be. 'Are you hurt?'

'My face is hot,' she mumbled.

'Yeah, airbag. But you seem to be breathing and thinking. Sit still.' He fished out a phone.

'Don't ring anyone. I'm fine.' She swivelled her head from side to side, flexed back and legs, then pushed at the driver's door. It groaned outward, allowing her to fumble out of the seat belt and slither gingerly onto the road where the rain burbled into a gully.

The man glared, phone still poised. 'What are you *doing*? You could have a spinal injury!'

She pointed to her legs. 'Working!' Checking her nose for blood, her hand came away wet only with rain. She didn't think it was the rain that was blurring her vision, though.

'You need checking over.' He seemed not to feel the torrent that flattened his hair and rolled down a hard-cut face and into blue eyes. If he needed two shaves a day it looked as if he seldom bothered.

Tess tried again to flex. Her back felt as if she'd just done a bungee jump. She hunched her shoulders. 'I don't like hospitals. Look, sorry I didn't see you stop, I turned on the heat and the windscreen misted. My insurance will cover your truck OK.'

He glanced at where her Freelander was gnawing at his breakdown truck. 'Doubt you've done more than add a couple of new scratches to the wrecker. It's your Freelander that's bent.' He narrowed his gaze on her once more and his voice softened. 'Better go to hospital, you know.'

She shook her head. And winced. 'You're from a garage, right?' She indicated the sign on the side panel of the truck. 'MAR Motors is the garage in Middledip, isn't it? At the Cross.'

'Yes. You're not local, are you?'

'Just moving in – to Honeybun Cottage.' Not that that was any of his business. 'Can you give me a tow?'

He grimaced. 'You'll sue me if it turns out you've got a cracked neck.'

'I won't because I haven't!' she snapped. 'But the Freelander's undrivable. I'd appreciate a tow. If I have to call someone else I'll be sitting here in the rain for hours.'

He hesitated. Then sighed. 'Come on, then!' Ungraciously, he installed her in the passenger seat of the wrecker before spending ten minutes clanging around at its rear, while Tess sank her swimming head on a seat that smelt of old oil and closed her eyes.

Finally, he climbed back into the cab, shook the rain off his hair and drove her the

remaining mile or so to Middledip village. As the breakdown truck began to rumble along, he flipped his thumb in the direction of her poor Freeland. 'Were you fond of it?'

'Loads. Everyone said it was a posy vehicle – I was living in London. But I love it. What's left of it since it hit your truck.'

'Nobody forced you to run it up my backside,' he pointed out, disagreeably.

Tess's head was pounding and sudden tears pricked her eyes, blurring the already blurred raindrops that drummed on the windscreen and hissed beneath the wheels, bouncing and bubbling off the expanse of tarmac at the centre of the village, where three roads converged at the point known inaccurately as the Cross, and where there was a building with the sign: 'MAR Motors'.

Wordlessly, she eased out of the cab and squelched across the forecourt, following her disagreeable saviour out of the deluge and in through a long run of folding doors. The floor was painted grey, like the pit garages at the motor races on television.

An office chair stood in front of a computer. He nodded at it. 'Sit there while I have a look at your car, then we'll talk about what to do.' He raised his voice to a masked figure welding under a ramp at the back of the garage. 'Jos! Can you get her a cup of tea? She's had a prang. Pete! Give me a hand, will you?' A man uncoiled himself from under the bonnet of a little red sports car, pushing back floppy fair hair, smiled at Tess and ran to help at the back of the breakdown truck.

Aching and shaking too much to object to being ordered about, Tess gazed out through the hammering rain to where an old-fashioned van in baker's livery graced the forecourt along with two old cars. Not banger-type old but 1950s old, all grinning chrome grills, candy colours and swiping tail fins. The forecourt looked like a classic car show.

She let her chin sink onto her fist and once again closed her eyes. What a crappy beginning to her fresh start.

Jos, welding mask discarded, wiping his hands on his overalls and stamping about in motorcycle boots, rattled cups and filled the kettle. His long dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail and he had a beard like Hagrid, not the trendy goatee worn by so many men she'd known in London. He brought her steaming tea in a mug with the MG logo on the side and an open pack of sugar with a spoon sticking out.

Through the strands of dripping hair she managed a smile, even as she shivered. 'Thanks.'

His eyes were gentle. 'Ratty'll soon get you sorted.'

Presumably, he meant the disagreeable man. She made a face. 'Ratty? Yes, he is, a bit.'

The eyes smiled. '*Rattenbury*.' And pointed to the 'M. A. Rattenbury' sign on the wall.

'Oh. I get it.' The owner of the blue eyes and black curls was the boss. She should've known.

In a few minutes, he was back. Draining a mug of tea, he bent over the computer, so close that Tess could feel the chill of the rain from his arms and shoulders. The sleeves had been cut from his T-shirt to exhibit small tattoos. Sculpted by physical work, he was a different breed from Olly with his designer labels and career in IT.

She jerked her gaze away.

She was done with men. She was here to concentrate on getting better, on freeing herself of the lassitude that had left her vegetating these past months.

He tapped the computer screen. 'Want me to book it in?'

Her mind flipped to Channel 4 documentaries about tow bandits. Maybe he'd stick her with a £500 bill and she wouldn't be able to argue because she'd *asked* him to bring the

Freelander ... 'Wouldn't it be better at Land Rover?' she enquired dubiously, through her headache.

He tapped the screen again, harder. 'Yes! There's their number – ring and arrange for it to be fetched.'

Belatedly, she realised that what he'd called up on the computer was the contact details of the Land Rover main dealer in Bettsbrough.

He turned to a toolbox, obviously having a hundred better things to do than deal with her any further.

She didn't need his tight expression to tell her she'd been out of order. Having run up the arse of his truck and demanded he rescue her, she supposed it would, actually, have been polite to put the resultant business his way. And starting at square one with another garage suddenly seemed exhausting. 'Actually ... I'd like to book it in here for the repair.'

A flash of those hard eyes. 'Probably better at Land Rover.'

She propped her head back on her hand. 'So you can't do it here, at your garage?'

'I can do it, but it'll be *best* at Land Rover.'

He was annoying, scraping through his tools and not wanting her business. 'It'll be *convenient* to have it done here.'

'Oh shi-- book it in, Pete. Sheet it up until we can bring it inside.'

In silence, Tess watched as Pete and Jos fixed a faded blue tarpaulin over where the windscreen used to be, to direct the rain away from her front seats.

In silence, Ratty worked at the bench.

The Freelander looked so forlorn all bashed, squashed and abandoned on the forecourt. Tess groaned. 'All my gear's in the car.'

He glanced up. 'Anyone you can call?'

She sighed. 'Not really.' It sounded so sad.

Silence. Then, 'OK! Just to Honeybun Cottage? I'll bring the van round.'

It was shameful, really. The situation was all her fault and yet she sat in the echoing chill of the garage and watched the three men like ants in the rain, transferring her sacks of clothes and boxes of books into the back of a van. But concrete was setting into her muscles, her head clanged and she felt so sick.

Boxes, cases, bags, a behemoth of a computer and awkwardly large printer ... Finally, Ratty had everything transferred to the van, what seemed to be all the worldly possessions of the accident-prone owner of the Freelander.

Impatiently, he loped back over to the doorway. 'Anytime you're ready ...'

He watched the woman hunch her shoulders against the rain and clamber stiffly into the front seat, obviously prepared to endure the tortures of hell rather than admit that she was hurting. Her hair was a sodden rope and her T-shirt clung interestingly. During the short, rattly journey she stopped shivering only long enough to offer, 'It's this road.'

'Yep, this is Little Lane all right.' He nodded. 'What happened to the commuters who had Honeybun after Herbie died? Mortgage rate get them?'

'I suppose. I bought it as a repo. My father's field of expertise.'

'Profiting from someone else's bad fortune.'

'Like you, fixing breakdowns?' Her face was tight with irritation.

He half smiled. 'Got me. But repair's not my market.'

'Really? But you are going to fix my car?'

'When you get the OK from your insurance company.' He turned in between the gateposts of Honeybun Cottage and pulled up as close to the kitchen door as possible,

beside a lawn full of clover and daisies. He knew these cottages and the way the door opened straight into the house. 'They'll probably tell you that it has to be done by Land Rover. I'll dump all this crap in the kitchen, shall I?'

For the first time she smiled, and it lit her face like a sunbeam on a stormy day. 'You're a regular Sir Galahad.'

Trotting to and fro from van to kitchen, he got wetter and wetter, until he was really tired of it. He didn't suggest the woman should help, though, because she was so pale that a dusting of freckles was standing out across her nose. Then he saw her rubbing her eyes and blinking. 'I think you're concussed,' he said shortly, piling four black bin bags, round and puffed with clothes, beside the kitchen table.

She pressed her palms to her forehead. 'Probably.' She turned both her palms into a *Halt!* sign. 'But I'm not going to hospital.' She picked up one bin bag and one overnight case. 'This is all I need for the first night. I'm going to be incredibly rude and ungracious but do you mind if I go to bed?'

'No prob.' He waited until she'd clambered up the twisting staircase before adding under his breath, 'You seem pretty good at being rude and ungracious.'

CHAPTER TWO

A bottle of milk. Then a pot of jam. Now a bunch of chrysanthemums, incurved yellow petals silky under Tess's fingertip.

Somebody, a reader of too many magazine stories maybe, was leaving daily gifts on her doorstep.

The sun lit the reddening leaves drifting on the brisk breeze into Little Lane and suddenly she wanted to move, go, get into the fresh air instead of hiding like a mole in its hole. Out. It wasn't as if she was accomplishing much indoors, fiddling with the arrangement of her new workroom instead of actually producing any work. After two days her headache and swimming vision had improved, but her neck still felt as if she had an overdose of Viagra stuck in her throat.

As an illustrator, she was used to working from wherever she lived but Honeybun Cottage didn't feel like home, yet. Her new home. Her new hidey-hole.

Her parents' house in Middleton Stoney was once home, also her garden flat in Finchley. The house she'd owned with Olly in Brentwood should've been home.

She was away from Olly.

And away from her parents, James and Mari.

She especially wanted to be away from her father, who had taken an uncomfortably philosophical view of what Olly had done, saying, 'He must have had his reasons.' James had always got on well with Olly.

When Olly changed his mind about loving her forever, her first instinct hadn't been to run to her parents; but she had wanted to be just about anywhere except that house where every empty room reminded her of what Olly had done.

And then she'd been ill and her parents' house had been the obvious place for that, good or bad, depending how you looked at it. But now she was living in Middledip where she knew nobody. And she was glad.

Honeybun Cottage was small and sweet with its uneven walls, black doors, wonky lattice windows and mossy tiled roof. James had negotiated for much of the furniture, which The Commuters had bought in turn from the estate of the previous owner, no doubt the 'Herbie' that the garage man, Ratty, had referred to. Desperate to discharge frightening, escalating debt, they'd settled for a stupid price for the carved oak furniture.

'But,' she warned the old walls, as she listened to her footfalls on the quarry-tiled floor, 'don't get too used to me. I don't always stick around. Sometimes, I like being away from prying eyes.'

The first time had been when her looming A levels stressed her out. She'd reappeared in time for the exams; but had been where no one knew or cared why she was there, long enough to acquire the taste for the delicious, naughty distance from real life. Four days in the Cotswolds, here. A month in France, there.

She found her purse and gave into her compulsion to escape the house. She'd go shopping; she'd enquire about who might have been leaving kind offerings. Village shop proprietors were omniscient.

At the Cross, opposite MAR Motors, the sign over the shop door read 'A. & G. Crowther'. The door pinged open to reveal shelves to the ceiling, a middle-aged lady and a girl with twin enquiring expressions above smart grey smocks.

'You're from Honeybun! Seen you going in and out.' *Gwen Crowther* the lady's badge

declared.

Tess hovered on red and grey vinyl tiles. 'That's right.'

'Settling in all right? Nice little place, Honeybun. What can I get you, duck?'

'Apples, please, a bag. And oranges.' She didn't look at the biscuits, waiting to seduce. Away from Mari's sugar-stocked kitchen she was going to make room in her waistbands. 'Tomato soup. And a loaf.'

Before parting with the change, *Julie* – said the other name pin – and Mrs Crowther closed in adroitly on the subject of Tess. 'And do you work, duck? An *illustrator!* An artist, really, then? Never known an illustrator, have you, Julie? What do you illustrate?'

Tess shuffled. 'Folk tales, animals and dragons. Kids' stuff, whimsy.'

'Books 'n' that, then?'

'And cards.' Looking over at the racked cellophaned greeting cards, Tess recognised some of Crowther's stock. She pointed quickly. 'That's one of mine.' Little wolves dressed in breeches and aproned frocks, with toothy grins and feathered ears. The card company was a useful source of income, providing bits and pieces between commissions of book work obtained by Kitty, her agent. The wolves had recently been reproduced on mugs as well, another fee.

Olly had wanted her to design something funky, had urged her to try and break into CD covers, implying that her chosen market must be of a lesser quality. CD covers came under design, not illustration; there were few openings and little money in it – but trust Olly to ignore little things like that.

Mrs Crowther gaped. 'Get away!'

'Really? *You* drew that? Oh, sign one for me!' Julie, flicking back her long blonde bunches, snatched up a birthday card and stripped away the wrapping. 'Where's a pen? You don't mind, do you?'

'Course not.' Tess wiped her palms on her jeans, scribbled *Best wishes, Tess Riddell* self-consciously on the front, alongside the 'T' inside the little star that she added discreetly to her illustrations.

She was out of practice at being sociable, felt worn out by such beady interest. But, as supposed, Mrs Crowther could pinpoint the likely giver of gifts. 'That'll be Lucasta Meredith at Pennybun Cottage, I'll bet! That's her style.'

'Where's Pennybun?'

Mrs Crowther snorted with amusement. 'Next door to you!'

'I didn't know there was anything but trees next door to me – ' She scurried aside as Mrs Crowther rushed to the door to help drag in a tandem buggy, disregarding Tess instantly. 'Hello Angel! *Hello* Toby, hello baby Jenna!'

The little boy in the front seat of the buggy looked up at Tess. 'My daddy's in prison.'

His mother corrected him gently. 'Preston.'

Tess smiled politely and made for the door.

Breaking off simultaneous conversations with the pretty mother and sturdy son, Mrs Crowther called after her, 'Fifty steps past your gate, my duck, you'll see old Pennybun Cottage.'

As the door swung behind her, she heard, 'Is that the new one from Honeybun?' She grinned. Looked across at the garage; scowled.

Last night, Jos had dropped in an invoice for the tow into the village. Jos was nice, she couldn't stay wary with him for more than the two minutes it took him to pull out a chair and invite himself for coffee. The biker gear disguised a real sweetheart.

Must pay, next stop.

That abrupt, sarcastic man. Yuk. She could always write a cheque, pop it through the door when they were shut? Yes, she'd do that.

'No, you won't!' she muttered crossly to herself. 'He doesn't worry you! You can deal with annoying gits, you're not a wimp.'

Crossing the forecourt, she took a good look at her Freelander, still under the tarpaulin, and almost bowled into Ratty, right by the door. Damn, the surly pirate. She'd hoped to deal with one of the others.

She whisked out her credit card. 'I've come to pay my bill.'

'Great.' He glanced up from the falling-apart manual in his oily hands. 'So your insurance company insisted on the repair being done by Land Rover? They're picking it up later.' His voice was clipped, accentless.

She flushed. 'You were right about that.'

He grinned. He looked more relaxed today. 'They'll do a good job. And if your policy allows for a courtesy car ... well, I haven't got one. But there was no chassis damage and the engine still runs. It's just cosmetic stuff, bolting on the new panels and lights – looks worse than it is. Feeling OK, now?'

She pushed back her hair that was blowing out of its clasp. Flushed, self-conscious under his intent gaze. 'A bit stiff. Nothing to worry about.' Then, as an afterthought, 'Thanks for asking. And for delivering my stuff.'

'No prob.' He returned to his reading.

He gave her time to march away across the forecourt.

Then, 'She paid,' Ratty told Pete's legs. 'Funny woman.' He turned a page that was no longer attached to the manual. 'Amazing colouring, hasn't she? When her hair was wet it looked nothing special. But it's extraordinary – kind of amber.'

'Who?' Pete's hollow voice floated up through the engine compartment and out of the open bonnet of an MG Midget.

'The funny woman from Honeybun who pranged the wrecker.' Not auburn, not blonde, somewhere between. Long, long hair swung carelessly in a thick ponytail. *Turquoise* eyes, like in a romantic novel. Alive, those eyes, in a face bearing the slightest sprinkling of freckles. Unusual, she was. A pair of studs in one ear, a pair of big hoops in the other, gold bands, some patterned, some plain, all without stones, on every long, upturned finger but not the thumbs.

'But "funny"?'

A pause. 'Interesting.'

Pennybun Cottage proved to be snuggled into the trees only a few yards from the end of Tess's garden. A mirror image of Honeybun Cottage in a teeming garden of big white daisies, golden rod, the last hollyhocks taller than herself, papery old laburnum pods rustling as she wandered to the door, obligatory deepest red rose around the doorway ...

'Good morning, dear! You're the new one –'

' – from Honeybun,' she agreed. Before she'd lifted her hand to the door, before she'd completely made up her mind to knock, even, the door was opening and Lucasta Meredith was waving her in like an old friend. A silvery chignon complemented a dress patterned in eight shades of blue, a stick propping up a walk that had become a jerky dance. Lucasta scarcely looked capable of walking round to Honeybun with her little gifts.

Tess was ushered into a parlour of hanging plants, glass and ivory ornaments, with a floral cottage suite nestled in the middle.

'Tea? Coffee? Sometimes you younger ones prefer ... ?' Lucasta swung open a spindly-legged black japanned cabinet, exhibiting a fine selection of bottled lagers and alcopops.

Tess grinned to see club-trendy booze where she'd expect sherry. 'Tea's fine.' She flicked a glance at her watch. She hadn't meant to get involved in a tea ceremony. If she'd thought at all, it was that she'd offer quick thanks for the doorstep gifts and go home.

To do what? Wander round in circles achieving very little? Maybe think about a card illustration but not begin it? She gazed at the dull sheen elegance of a Liberty pewter tea set complete with raffia handles. She must start work. Over the past year she'd lost the habit.

Along with the tea in tiny cups of eggshell china, Lucasta produced crudités and cheese dip, chips of carrot, celery and red pepper. One old lady who'd broken away from petticoat tails, evidently.

And she admitted happily to being the doorstep-gift giver. 'Just to make you welcome, dear. Are you meeting people?'

'Not really.'

'I said to Miles that the young lady had moved into Honeybun. Do try the peppers, I grew them, Miles watered them for me. Or do you prefer biscuits? I always worry that they clog the heart.'

Tess let Lucasta shoulder the bulk of the conversational burden as she munched and sipped, Lucasta lifting the pot in both knobbly knuckled hands, wincing, to refill the dinky cups. 'Are you feeling better? And is your vehicle mended now?'

Oh God. A nosy neighbour.

She fidgeted. She didn't need to be overseen, explanations expected, she shouldn't have come. How long before she could slink away? 'Not yet.'

'Miles said, when I asked if he'd met you, he said your motor needed to go for repair.' From Lucasta's twinkle, it seemed likely that she knew how the Frelander had come to grief.

'Miles?'

'Miles Rattenbury. It's so nice, don't you think, people restoring those old cars? Come from all over to MAR Motors so Miles can sort their precious MGAs or Cadillacs.'

Ah. The old American cars on the forecourt, the ageing Jaguar. 'So he specialises in old cars?'

'Old cars, fast cars, funny cars. It's where the money is, Miles says. Fascinated by anything with an engine when he was young, always hanging round Carlisle's place to have a go with the tractor or mess around with someone's car.' Lucasta waved a matchstick of carrot. 'Making a complete nuisance of himself whenever he could get into the paddock at Silverstone.'

'His parents, Lester and Elisabeth, they would've liked him to follow Lester into law, perhaps, or accountancy. But no.' She tipped out the final few bronze drops from the teapot.

'And Miles did a year of an accountancy course but he hated it, dear. *Hated* it. Used to come home and be simply miserable when it was time to go back. So one day, he didn't.'

Crunching celery, Tess considered. Miles Rattenbury; Ratty, sarcastic grumpy guts. But her impressions were shifting slightly. Strip away the tattoos, the sleeve-discarded T-shirts and the oil stains and the well-spoken, educated son of a solicitor began to come into focus.

The anniversary clock on the china cabinet rang the hour softly. Interrupting herself, Lucasta reached for an ivory box and took out a tablet. 'Mustn't forget.' The last draught from her tiny cup. 'Stupid thing. Getting old.'

Before she'd realised she was going to, Tess said, 'I had to take tablets for ages ...' An uncontrolled bleed, that's what the hospital had called it, that terrifying, consciousness-sapping deluge of blood. She waited for a stream of questions but Lucasta just tutted sympathetically.

'Horrible for you.' A frail-boned hand bestowed a momentary, butterfly touch. Then Lucasta launched into a dry monologue about the trials of growing old. 'It's such a bore! I was quite lively, in my day, but I need to write everything down, nowadays.' She flipped open a floral-covered pad of lists and notes in gorgeous script. 'I don't know where I'd be without my notebook. Look here, "put chicken in oven by 10.30 a.m.". How silly can you get?' More pages. 'And here, debating whether to move to sheltered accommodation.' A sudden creaking laugh over a page split into 'plus' and 'minus' columns.

Tess looked, waiting politely for when she could make her excuses.

Lucasta smiled, skin as soft as rose petals, eyes faded to nearly grey, smiled gently. 'I've rattled on! I won't keep you.'

On her feet like a dog hearing its lead clinking, Tess paused at the front door. In the interests of graciousness, she ought to offer something in return for the little gifts. 'You know where I am if you need anything.'

Lucasta creaked another laugh, tapping her stick. 'Miles keeps an eye, though I've *told* him there's no obligation. I'm used to looking after myself, my husband and I kept separate establishments.'

Wrong-footed, Tess managed only, 'Really?'

Grey-blue eyes gazed across the garden. 'It's what we did in those days. Live apart, remain married. Pointless. Wasting our lives.' Another touch of the fragile hand. 'At least there's Miles.'

Tess escaped, wondering what Miles Rattenbury had to do with anything.

And then, as she walked the few yards home, there he was, black curls swinging across his forehead, turning into the lane. A raised hand, perfunctory. She returned the smallest possible wave and bobbed through her own gate.

Workroom. To kid herself that she was doing some work she opened two new files, side-by-side, on her Mac. The first headed *Every Day*, the second *Overall*. Under *Every Day* she began a list, just like Lucasta's: *work, correspondence, walk, shopping, read*.

Moving to *Overall* she typed: *be positive, stop looking back, relax, phone home sometimes, go out, give in to the Curse when you have to, don't eat sugar, don't buy a television, get on with your life*.

Back to *Every Day*: *eat sensibly*.

A burst of energy, another new file, *To Do*. A quick glance around the workroom. *Roughs for book jacket, ideas for two new Wolf drawings*.

Back to *Overall*, and *finance*. Royalty cheques had come in whilst she'd been ill. Funds were accumulating. Grandmother leaving her capital had helped start the ball rolling; James's dealings had improved her position. And, of course, she was successful. She sometimes forgot that.

Under all three headings she added, *SURVIVE WITHOUT OLLY!*

With the lists stuck up on the wall, she got down, finally, to sorting the boxes, pads, portfolios and spilling folders.

At bedtime she wrote *begun by roughs*, and ticked *phone home*.

'Did you realise ... ?'

Tess woke from her dreaming study of the rippling countryside's geometric browns

and late dusty yellows and greens. Shook her head to clear the image of the baby that never was, that had never focused or grasped puffs of air with starfish hands. Never cried. Never fed. Never been a warm weight in her arms.

The baby that had quit her body and, minuscule and unformed as it had been, left an awful, gaping hollow in its place.

The man, striding up the hill in waxed jacket and green gumboots, glared from under a mop of brown floppy hair. Tess rose, warily. He didn't seem too pleased to see her.

'You've left the footpath.'

'Oh, I'm sorr--

'I'll have to ask you to leave. My father thinks all walkers are hell-bent on ignorant destruction.'

She flushed. The morning's sketches had eaten the day until she'd dashed out to grab a last slice of autumn daylight. She'd so enjoyed the walk, the wind whisking her spirits, that she'd forgotten that large bits of countryside belonged to people.

Embarrassed, she turned to battle through the long grass up the hill. Then realising the entrance into the copse lay to the right, changed direction. Or did it? She changed again. Halted.

Then the man was at her side, brown eyes kinder. 'I've startled you. But we've had such a packet of trouble recently, my father gets so infuriated! We've had travellers on the land, crops spoilt, place turned into a furniture dump.'

He had an attractive smile. Tentatively, smoothing stray hanks of hair back behind her ears, Tess tried out her own smile in response. 'I didn't mean to trespass.' Watched, with satisfaction, his eyes become interested. Nice eyes, too.

He seemed now to be recovering his manners. 'Let me walk you a little way.' He led her towards an opening that Tess now recognised quite plainly as the way home. 'Are you visiting the village? Oh, *you're* the new one from Honeybun!'

By the time they'd stumped back along the uneven footpath, pace slowing as conversation quickened, and he'd delivered her to the edge of the village, she was laughing and chatting as if they were old friends. She'd learnt that his family, the Carlyses, owned the estate, and that he, Simeon, helped with the management, 'mainly by keeping out of everyone's way'. He let his arm brush against hers as they walked, and made shameless use of his terrific smile.

And, somehow, she found herself agreeing to let him take her to the bonfire night on the estate later in the week. 'All the village'll be there, beer and hot dogs, great night.' He glanced at his watch. 'Must go! Pick you up at six on the fifth?'

Marching up Port Road and Cross Street, Tess assessed Simeon Carlisle. Pleasantly friendly compared to Miles Rattenbury, he'd liked her, had been aware of her body, she'd caught him peeking. When she'd glanced back as she walked away, he'd been staring after her. Balm to her flattened ego.

He seemed harmless. Having a Seriously Nice Man interested in her would cheer her up a bit.

Absorbed in these thoughts, she stopped abruptly when she reached the bronze stone and slate roof of the village pub, The Three Fishes. She'd managed to turn the wrong way up Main Road.

But the pub looked inviting. Tubs of ivy, lights shining into the dusk, the sound of a guitar. *In you go, then.* Mmmm ... is it a good idea? *Yes, no one's going to bite you!*

Initially, the buzz of after-work drinkers seemed welcoming enough. Someone was playing the guitar and singing a song that she'd heard Sting sing. But, as she stepped

resolutely into the front-room atmosphere, she saw that it was Ratty, cradling the guitar, perched on a stool with his back to the bar. When he saw her, he stopped singing. The buzz halted as sharply.

Every head turned. *It's a bad idea.*

She froze. *Smile! Order a drink, nod at the men from the garage.* The sudden silence had not been – could not be – planned to make her feel like an intruder.

But ... Spinning suddenly, she ducked her head and blundered back through the door, hands clammy, heart bumping. She wasn't ready, yet.