

## CHAPTER 1

### *A House*

Gwenda Reed stood, shivering a little, on the quayside.

The docks and the custom sheds and all of England that she could see, were gently waving up and down.

And it was in that moment that she made her decision—the decision that was to lead to such very momentous events.

She wouldn't go by the boat train to London as she had planned.

After all, why should she? No one was waiting for her, nobody expected her. She had only just got off that heaving creaking boat (it had been an exceptionally rough three days through the Bay and up to Plymouth) and the last thing she wanted was to get into a heaving swaying train. She would go to a hotel, a nice firm steady hotel standing on good solid ground. And she would get into a nice steady bed that didn't creak and roll. And she would go to sleep, and the next morning—why, of course—what a splendid

idea! She would hire a car and she would drive slowly and without hurrying herself all through the South of England looking about for a house—a nice house—the house that she and Giles had planned she should find. Yes, that was a splendid idea.

In that way she would see something of England—of the England that Giles had told her about and which she had never seen; although, like most New Zealanders, she called it Home. At the moment, England was not looking particularly attractive. It was a grey day with rain imminent and a sharp irritating wind blowing. Plymouth, Gwenda thought, as she moved forward obediently in the queue for Passports and Customs, was probably not the best of England.

On the following morning, however, her feelings were entirely different. The sun was shining. The view from her window was attractive. And the universe in general was no longer waving and wobbling. It had steadied down. This was England at last and here she was, Gwenda Reed, young married woman of twenty-one, on her travels. Giles's return to England was uncertain. He might follow her in a few weeks. It might be as long as six months. His suggestion had been that Gwenda should precede him to England and should look about for a suitable house. They both thought it would be nice to have, somewhere, a permanency. Giles's job would always entail a certain amount of travelling. Sometimes Gwenda would come too, sometimes the conditions would not be suitable. But they both liked the idea of having a home—some place of their own. Giles had inherited some furniture from an aunt recently, so that everything combined to make the idea a sensible and practical one.

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Since Gwenda and Giles were reasonably well off the prospect presented no difficulties.

Gwenda had demurred at first at choosing a house on her own. 'We ought to do it together,' she had said. But Giles had said laughingly: 'I'm not much of a hand at houses. If *you* like it, *I* shall. A bit of a garden, of course, and not some brand-new horror—and not too big. Somewhere on the south coast was my idea. At any rate, not too far inland.'

'Was there any particular place?' Gwenda asked. But Giles said No. He'd been left an orphan young (they were both orphans) and had been passed around to various relations for holidays, and no particular spot had any particular association for him. It was to be Gwenda's house—and as for waiting until they could choose it together, suppose he were held up for six months? What would Gwenda do with herself all that time? Hang about in hotels? No, she was to find a house and get settled in.

'What you mean is,' said Gwenda, 'do all the work!'

But she liked the idea of finding a home and having it all ready, cosy and lived in, for when Giles came back.

They had been married just three months and she loved him very much.

After sending for breakfast in bed, Gwenda got up and arranged her plans. She spent a day seeing Plymouth which she enjoyed and on the following day she hired a comfortable Daimler car and chauffeur and set off on her journey through England.

The weather was good and she enjoyed her tour very much. She saw several possible residences in Devonshire

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but nothing that she felt was exactly right. There was no hurry. She would go on looking. She learned to read between the lines of the house agents' enthusiastic descriptions and saved herself a certain number of fruitless errands.

It was on a Tuesday evening about a week later that the car came gently down the curving hill road into Dillmouth and on the outskirts of that still charming seaside resort, passed a For Sale board where, through the trees, a glimpse of a small white Victorian villa could be seen.

Immediately Gwenda felt a throb of appreciation—almost of recognition. This was *her* house! Already she was sure of it. She could picture the garden, the long windows—she was sure that the house was just what she wanted.

It was late in the day, so she put up at the Royal Clarence Hotel and went to the house agents whose name she had noted on the board the following morning.

Presently, armed with an order to view, she was standing in the old-fashioned long drawing-room with its two french windows giving on to a flagged terrace in front of which a kind of rockery interspersed with flowering shrubs fell sharply to a stretch of lawn below. Through the trees at the bottom of the garden the sea could be seen.

This is *my* house, thought Gwenda. It's *home*. I feel already as though I know every bit of it.

The door opened and a tall melancholy woman with a cold in the head entered, sniffing. 'Mrs Hengrave? I have an order from Messrs Galbraith and Penderley. I'm afraid it's rather early in the day—'

Mrs Hengrave, blowing her nose, said sadly that that didn't matter at all. The tour of the house began.

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Yes, it was just right. Not too large. A bit old-fashioned, but she and Giles could put in another bathroom or two. The kitchen could be modernized. It already had an Aga, fortunately. With a new sink and up-to-date equipment—

Through all Gwenda's plans and preoccupations, the voice of Mrs Hengrave droned thinly on recounting the details of the late Major Hengrave's last illness. Half of Gwenda attended to making the requisite noises of condolence, sympathy and understanding. Mrs Hengrave's people all lived in Kent—anxious she should come and settle near them . . . the Major had been very fond of Dillmouth, secretary for many years of the Golf Club, but she herself . . .

'Yes . . . Of course . . . Dreadful for you . . . Most natural . . . Yes, nursing homes *are* like that . . . Of course . . . You must be . . .'

And the other half of Gwenda raced along in thought: Linen cupboard here, I expect . . . Yes. Double room—nice view of sea—Giles will like that. Quite a useful little room here—Giles might have it as a dressing-room . . . Bathroom—I expect the bath has a mahogany surround—Oh yes, it *has*! How lovely—and standing in the middle of the floor! I shan't change *that*—it's a period piece!

Such an enormous bath!

One could have apples on the surround. And sail boats—and painted ducks. You could pretend you were in the sea . . . I know: we'll make that dark back spare room into a couple of really up-to-date green and chromium bathrooms—the pipes ought to be all right over the kitchen—and keep this just as it is . . .

‘Pleurisy,’ said Mrs Hengrave. ‘Turning to double pneumonia on the third day—’

‘Terrible,’ said Gwenda. ‘Isn’t there another bedroom at the end of this passage?’

There was—and it was just the sort of room she had imagined it would be—almost round, with a big bow window. She’d have to do it up, of course. It was in quite good condition, but why were people like Mrs Hengrave so fond of that mustard-cum-biscuit shade of wall paint?

They retraced their steps along the corridor. Gwenda murmured, conscientiously, ‘Six, no, seven bedrooms, counting the little one and the attic.’

The boards creaked faintly under her feet. Already she felt that it was she and not Mrs Hengrave who lived here! Mrs Hengrave was an interloper—a woman who did up rooms in mustard-cum-biscuit colour and liked a frieze of wisteria in her drawing-room. Gwenda glanced down at the typewritten paper in her hand on which the details of the property and the price asked were given.

In the course of a few days Gwenda had become fairly conversant with house values. The sum asked was not large—of course the house needed a certain amount of modernization—but even then . . . And she noted the words ‘Open to offer’. Mrs Hengrave must be very anxious to go to Kent and live near ‘her people’ . . .

They were starting down the stairs when quite suddenly Gwenda felt a wave of irrational terror sweep over her. It was a sickening sensation, and it passed almost as quickly as it came. Yet it left behind it a new idea.

‘The house isn’t—haunted, is it?’ demanded Gwenda.

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Mrs Hengrave, a step below, and having just got to the moment in her narrative when Major Hengrave was sinking fast, looked up in an affronted manner.

‘Not that I am aware of, Mrs Reed. Why—has anyone—been saying something of the kind?’

‘You’ve never felt or seen anything yourself? Nobody’s *died* here?’

Rather an unfortunate question, she thought, a split second of a moment too late, because presumably Major Hengrave—

‘My husband died in the St Monica’s Nursing Home,’ said Mrs Hengrave stiffly.

‘Oh, of course. You told me so.’

Mrs Hengrave continued in the same rather glacial manner: ‘In a house which was presumably built about a hundred years ago, there would normally be deaths during that period. Miss Elworthy from whom my dear husband acquired this house seven years ago, was in excellent health, and indeed planning to go abroad and do missionary work, and she did not mention any recent demises in her family.’

Gwenda hastened to soothe the melancholy Mrs Hengrave down. They were now once more in the drawing-room. It was a peaceful and charming room, with exactly the kind of atmosphere that Gwenda coveted. Her momentary panic just now seemed quite incomprehensible. What *had* come over her? There was nothing wrong with the house.

Asking Mrs Hengrave if she could take a look at the garden, she went out through the french windows on to the terrace.

There should be steps here, thought Gwenda, going down to the lawn.

But instead there was a vast uprising of forsythia which at this particular place seemed to have got above itself and effectually shut out all view of the sea.

Gwenda nodded to herself. She would alter all that.

Following Mrs Hengrave, she went along the terrace and down some steps at the far side on to the lawn. She noted that the rockery was neglected and overgrown, and that most of the flowering shrubs needed pruning.

Mrs Hengrave murmured apologetically that the garden had been rather neglected. Only able to afford a man twice a week. And quite often *he* never turned up.

They inspected the small but adequate kitchen garden and returned to the house. Gwenda explained that she had other houses to see, and that though she liked Hillside (what a commonplace name!) very much, she could not decide immediately.

Mrs Hengrave parted from her with a somewhat wistful look and a last long lingering sniff.

Gwenda returned to the agents, made a firm offer subject to surveyor's report and spent the rest of the morning walking round Dillmouth. It was a charming and old-fashioned little seaside town. At the far, 'modern' end, there were a couple of new-looking hotels and some raw-looking bungalows, but the geographical formation of the coast with the hills behind had saved Dillmouth from undue expansion.

After lunch Gwenda received a telephone call from the agents saying that Mrs Hengrave accepted her offer. With



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a mischievous smile on her lips Gwenda made her way to the post office and despatched a cable to Giles.

*Have bought a house. Love. Gwenda.*

‘That’ll tickle him up,’ said Gwenda to herself. ‘Show him that the grass doesn’t grow under *my* feet!’

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