

## Excerpt from No Secrets

Marnie and Anne presented themselves at the vicarage to meet the new owners and discuss plans for redecoration. Anne drooled as they walked along the drive. Standing in front of the house was the smartest car she had ever seen.

‘Look at that, Marnie.’ Wide-eyed wonder.

‘Beautiful,’ Marnie agreed.

‘Is it a Jaguar?’

‘Certainly is.’

The object of their admiration had cherry red metallic paintwork and shiny alloy wheels, with cream leather upholstery and discreet inserts in walnut. It gleamed as if it had just rolled out of the showroom.

Marnie rang the bell and glanced at Anne. ‘I suggest you close your mouth now. The wind might change and you’ll be stuck like that forever.’

Anne’s jaws snapped shut and she grinned at Marnie. Angela opened the front door and greeted them in a low voice.

‘Come in. Mr Taverner’s on the phone. He’s just checking with his solicitor that they’ve exchanged contracts.’

‘Already? That was quick.’

‘Very businesslike, Mr Taverner. He doesn’t waste any time.’

Marnie mouthed, ‘Barbara?’

Angela’s voice became even quieter. ‘Upstairs, looking at the bedrooms.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘I’ve been tidying the place for days.’

They became aware that the murmuring that had formed the background to their conversation had stopped. A man came out from one of the reception rooms pocketing a mobile phone. He was wearing a short coat over a charcoal grey suit, a tie in bold stripes, and he beamed as he saw the newcomers in the hall.

‘Yes. Now I know you.’ He advanced towards Marnie extending a hand. ‘Little Venice, of course. Your mooring was up near the tunnel.’

‘That’s right ... *Sally Ann*.’

‘You were working on your boat, repainting her. Am I right? Do you still have her?’

‘You are and I do.’

With an apologetic wave of the hand he turned to Angela. ‘Everything’s in order. They exchanged contracts this morning about an hour ago.’

‘Oh, good.’

‘That was quick.’

‘Three weeks, Marnie, from accepting our offer.’

‘You’re not aiming to be in by Christmas, are you?’ Marnie’s voice betrayed her concern. Christmas was one month away, the worst time of year for getting any kind of project started.

‘No, no. Completion will take a while longer and we’d like the place to be redecorated first. I’m putting our London house on the market in the new year. If work could be completed in the spring, we’d move up then.’

Anne began making notes on her clipboard, and Charles noticed her for the first time. Marnie made the introduction.

‘This is Anne, my assistant, Anne Price.’

Anne struggled with clipboard and filofax to shake hands without dropping everything.

‘Hallo, Anne. Charles Taverner. All this looks very efficient.’

‘Her middle name,’ Marnie added.

‘Were did my wife get to?’

Angela indicated. ‘Mrs Taverner went upstairs. She said she wanted to look at the layout of the bedrooms.’

‘Ah, yes ... Barbara has plans.’ A conspiratorial smile. ‘She’s wondering about *en suite* arrangements.’ He turned to Marnie. ‘There are five bedrooms, you probably know, and a large bathroom on the landing. Barbara would like to convert that to three bedrooms, each with its own *en suite* bathroom. D’you think that might be achievable?’

Before Marnie could reply, Barbara appeared at the top of the stairs. The staircase was wide and curving, well-proportioned, with a mahogany handrail and balustrading. The woman who descended it looked as if she had just stepped out of the pages of *Vogue* magazine. All eyes focused on her as she made her entrance, head held high, shoulders back, placing each foot carefully and assuredly without looking down. She wore a long woollen coat in a shade of grey that perfectly matched her fashion boots, over a calf-length dress in pale grey cashmere, belted at the waist. Immaculately styled auburn hair completed the ensemble.

Anne had to be careful not to relapse into boggling mode. She kept firm control of her jaw muscles.

With one hand lightly touching the handrail, Barbara directed her attention towards Marnie, and a smile of recognition spread across her face. Marnie could almost feel the pride and admiration with which Charles regarded his wife. The words *exquisite* and *radiant* came into her mind.

Barbara advanced and kissed Marnie warmly on both cheeks. ‘It *is* you. When Angela told us you’d had a boat in London, I wondered if it was the person I remembered.’ A pleasing voice with no regional accent. ‘So nice to think we’ll have a friend in the village.’

‘So you did know each other, Mrs Taverner.’

'Oh, *do* call me Barbara ... sorry, unless you'd like us to address you as Miss Hemingway ... or even vicar, perhaps?'

'No. Angela's fine.'

'Well, Angela, to answer your question, we knew Marnie only slightly and that was just before we moved our boat down to Limehouse.' She looked back at Marnie. 'To call us friends might be a small exaggeration, but I know we're going to get on *really* well ... pick up where we left off. I hope we'll see a lot of each other.'

'We will if Marnie handles the redecoration,' Charles chipped in.

Marnie looked inquisitively at Barbara. 'Rather more than a redecoration by the sound of it.'

Anne raised her pen above the notepad, at the ready.

'I'm so sorry,' Barbara exclaimed. 'I didn't mean to ignore you.'

'I'm Anne, Marnie's assistant.'

They went through the fumbling handshake routine, and Anne again succeeded in not dropping her equipment.

'And you're going to take notes, are you?' The tone veered towards patronising.

'So far I've listed the remodelling to convert the existing bedrooms and bathroom to three *en suite* facilities ... depending on service runs, of course. And I've brought the Polaroid camera to make a record of what's here at the moment.'

Barbara turned to Angela. 'Only if that's acceptable to you, of course.'

'It's fine. Anne had already cleared that with me in advance.'

'Oh ... well ... I, I can see we're in good hands.'

They began the tour of the house, Barbara outlining her plans, Charles acquiescing in her wake, explaining about the exchange of contracts and the timing of arrangements, Marnie raising technical questions.

Back in the hall, Barbara stopped suddenly. 'I'll be bringing our boat up soon. I was wondering ...' The others waited. 'There's all the summer picnic furniture on board at the moment ... and the parasol ... rather a clutter ...'

Angela got the point immediately. 'You want somewhere to store it?'

Barbara put a hand on her shoulder. 'It would be a *terrible* imposition ...'

'Could it go in the garage ... or there's the shed in the garden?'

'That's *sweet* of you. Would you really not mind?'

'It's no problem at all.'

'Oh *thank* you, Angela. That would make the journey much easier. There are one or two other bits and pieces belonging to the boat ... my spare set of keys, for example ...'

‘They can go with the others on the key rack, if you like.’

‘Angela, you’re an angel.’ Barbara laughed prettily.

Everyone moved towards the kitchen where Angela made coffee, except Anne who set about taking photographs. Marnie saw with amusement that Angela had bought ground coffee in place of her usual instant brand.

‘Marnie, would you be able to liaise with specialist firms ... seeing as how you’re *in situ*? I know it goes beyond interior design but, for example, I’ll need the kitchen replanned and I’ll be asking some companies to submit layouts and costs.’

‘Sure. I take it we’re not talking local D-I-Y store or flatpacks here. You won’t want me to bring my own screwdriver?’

Barbara laughed. ‘I was thinking of Smallbone, Poggenpohl, Clive Christian ... firms like that?’

Marnie picked up the clipboard. ‘Anne would never forgive me if I didn’t write the names down.’

Angela, who had always regarded the house as perfect, was bemused by the whole exercise of converting the vicarage to a modern prestige home. She realised that during the planning tour a smile had been permanently fixed on her face. Its origin was a mixture of wonder at so much creative power being displayed, allied to the energy and dynamism of the chic woman whose character was going to be stamped on the house and change it forever.

Accepting her coffee – in the best china – Barbara leaned forward to speak to Angela, looking her straight in the eye. ‘I do hope you don’t find this ... insensitive or in any way distasteful. This is your home, after all.’

‘No, I don’t. It’s interesting. I like hearing your ideas and Marnie’s comments. I’ve never done this kind of thing before.’

‘Didn’t you plan the house as it is at present?’

‘No. That was my predecessor, Randall Hughes. He did it all.’

Marnie joined in. ‘Randall has a real flair for colour and texture.’

‘I can see that.’ Barbara walked to the kitchen door and looked into the hall. ‘There’s a boldness, a firmness of hand. I imagine him as a strong personality ... loads of self-confidence.’

‘Bang on,’ Marnie agreed. ‘He’s quite a character.’

‘And a charismatic preacher,’ Angela added.

‘I hope I’ll have the chance to meet him.’ Barbara’s tone of voice suggested that her interest was not in the field of liturgical practice or church doctrine. She was about to continue when she noticed that Angela was blushing.

Anne was coming down the stairs and stopped halfway. ‘I’ll take a shot of the hall from here. It’s a good view of the whole entrance.’ On impulse she turned the camera for another picture, this time of the rear passage from the hall to the kitchen. Barbara smiled up at her from the doorway.

'This is all very exciting,' Barbara exclaimed. She ushered Anne into the kitchen where Angela presented her with coffee and offered a plate of biscuits.

'Marnie, would you know where we could get one of those signs made ... a nameplate for the house? I've always wanted to live in an old rectory.'

'Actually, it's a vicarage, really.' Angela spoke quietly.

'Aren't they the same thing? I don't suppose anyone would notice the difference, do you?'

Angela was not inclined to go into an explanation of the distinction between a vicar and a rector. She spoke tentatively. 'Well ... I think ... strictly speaking, as it were ... it isn't allowed to use a name that refers to the previous use of this house.'

Barbara seemed puzzled. 'I don't think I follow ...'

Angela was clearly embarrassed. 'I meant ... a name like Old Vicarage – or rectory, of course – I think that kind of name isn't allowed by the terms of the contract. I believe there's some kind of ... restrictive covenant or something.'

Barbara looked over at Charles. 'Do you know anything about that, Charles?'

He reflected. 'I think I might've seen a clause of that sort in the papers somewhere.'

'Oh.' Barbara was deflated. 'I've seen lots of houses with names like that. Why shouldn't it be allowed?'

Angela shrugged. 'I don't know. I just remember hearing it being mentioned when the diocesan surveyor came to view the house and draw up the particulars. It seems to be one of the usual rules.'

The atmosphere in the kitchen had momentarily cooled. Then, just as quickly, it thawed. Barbara was smiling again, and everyone relaxed.

'Never mind. It's not a problem.'

Angela looked relieved. 'Good.'

'We'll wait a couple of months before getting the sign made. By that time everyone will've forgotten the rule and we'll be able to do our own thing. After all, what are rules for if not for breaking?'

Charles chuckled indulgently in the background. Marnie and Anne glanced hurriedly at Angela, who was blushing again.

'I see.'

'Don't spare it another thought, Angela. It will only be a sign on the wall – or on the gate – in a few months' time who's going to care what it says?'

'It's not really for me to say. It's just ... part of the agreement, the contract. I thought ...'

'It's not worth worrying about. Once we've bought the house and paid for it, what would the church want to do? I can't see the bishop sending round a gang of heavies to tear the sign down, can you?'

She was smiling brilliantly. Perfect white teeth and coral lipstick, beautifully cut hair that looked as if all its rich colour was natural. She laid a manicured hand on Angela's arm. A discreet and expensive perfume floated on the air.

'Don't worry. Everything will be fine.' The voice was soft and reassuring.

Angela managed a faint smile. She felt drawn in by Barbara's charisma and confidence. A saying flitted briefly into her mind ... *man makes plans, God laughs*. It was a modern slant on the older version: *man proposes, God disposes*. Now, that order seemed to be reversed. She suspected there was nothing anyone would do if Barbara went ahead and called the house *The Old Rectory*. In three weeks exactly the sale would be completed. In three weeks Barbara would have her house and would turn it into a magnificent home.

Angela did not know – none of them could know – that in three weeks Barbara would be dead.