

ANNA  
JACOBS

*A Place  
of Hope*



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*Recent Titles by Anna Jacobs from Severn House*

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# A PLACE OF HOPE

Anna Jacobs



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## One

Emily Mattison picked up the phone, sighing when she heard her nephew George's voice booming at her. He asked her how she was but didn't listen to her answer. 'My mother's had a bad fall. She's sprained her ankle badly and wrenched her right shoulder. She can't manage on her own, so you'll have to come and help her for a week or two.'

'I'm afraid I'm not free. I've got something important on, something I booked months ago. Aren't you with her?'

'Yes, of course. But that's only by good luck. I was about to fly back to the Middle East to wind things up with my job there. I can't let them down because there's only me with the knowledge and background to hand over properly to the new guy.'

'What about your wife? Can't she look after Liz?'

'Marcia will be needed to pack up our possessions and furniture ready to move back to England. We have to be out of our house there by a certain date. So that leaves only you to look after my mother.'

Emily hesitated. She loved her sister dearly, but didn't enjoy staying with her because they were too different. Emily loved peace and quiet, while Liz was always chattering, and had to have music on in the background all the time, whether she was listening to it or not.

'Surely you're not going to ignore your sister's need, Aunt Emily?'

He was right, the rat. She couldn't leave Liz to cope on her own. Her sister was a weak reed at the best of times. 'Oh, all right. When will you be coming back to England?'

'In a week or two, just before Easter. They're still sorting out a new posting and I have leave they're insisting I take. You know what multinational companies are like.'

No, she didn't, thank goodness. And if they employed people like her bossy nephew in senior roles, she didn't want to know. 'I'll be there this afternoon.'

'Good. Mrs Potter from next door has agreed to stay with Mother till you arrive. Our plane leaves at lunchtime. 'Bye.'

Emily suspected that he could have got time off if he'd asked for it, but for George, the job came first, second and third. He was doing all right for himself, more than all right. He'd always had an eye out for ways of making extra money. She didn't know how his wife put up with him, though. For the money, probably. Like her husband, Marcia had expensive tastes.

Emily went next door to see her friend and neighbour. 'Rach, can you keep an eye on the house for me during the next couple of weeks?'

'I thought you were only going away for one week.'

'I can't go on the course now. Liz has had a fall and needs someone to look after her.'

‘Your sister has a son and daughter-in-law. Why should *you* have to give up your course? You’ve been looking forward to that antiques appreciation course for ages and it won’t be run again till the autumn.’

‘I know. Six months to wait. But George won’t look after Liz whatever I decide, and I couldn’t be comfortable, thinking of her on her own. She’s quite frail since she had that virus which affected her heart. And anyway, would you want him around if you weren’t well?’

Rachel’s shudder was eloquent. ‘How that man can be a relative of yours, I do not understand.’

‘Liz and I don’t share the same father, that’s how. I always comfort myself with the thought that George gets his arrogance from Mother’s first husband, not from my dad.’

Emily was on the road within the hour. She wished she’d bought the new car she was planning for, because this one was very elderly, but she just hadn’t got round to it. You felt when you retired you’d have plenty of time to do things, but so far she’d been non-stop busy, getting the house smartened up, ready to sell. She wasn’t sure where she was going to move, but she could put her furniture in storage and stay with her friend Rachel while she searched.

She’d retired early, at fifty-seven, as she’d always planned. She didn’t miss her work – well, not much – but she still felt herself to be at a loose end, and kept wondering if she’d done the right thing. Leon certainly hadn’t wanted to let her go and she missed him, too. They were still good friends. He’d been out of the country on a project but was coming back soon to head the special unit, then they’d catch up.

She went upstairs to pack. She’d been so looking forward to that antiques course. It was well known as a way of helping enthusiastic amateurs to cross into the industry. Of course, all the courses in the world wouldn’t give you an eye for a bargain, but she’d done rather well with her buying and selling so far, and she truly believed she had a gift for finding pretty items that people wanted to buy.

When Emily arrived at Liz’s house, Mrs Potter from next door gave her the instructions from the doctor and whispered, ‘Look, I know it’s none of my business, but your sister’s upset about the fall and that son of hers is no help. To listen to him, you’d think she was going to be permanently bedridden and will soon need putting into a care home.’

‘What? But Liz loves this cottage. She and Nigel bought it for their retirement just before he died.’

‘Try telling her son that. If you ask me, George sees only the money she’d get for it, because the area’s becoming so popular. And the house might be small, but it has a bigger than average garden, so would be perfect for a development project. It’d be snapped up like that one down the street.’

‘Thank you for telling me.’ Emily saw Mrs Potter out, then went up to her sister’s bedroom. Why was Liz in bed? With a sprained ankle, she’d be perfectly all right on the sofa, watching TV.

Her sister was white and shaken, weeping at the mere sight of her. After a gentle pep talk, Emily persuaded her to come down and sit in the living room.

‘George said I should stay in bed.’

‘Well, George was wrong. You seem able to limp around OK.’

‘I was very shaken by the fall.’

Liz seemed bewildered and dopey. Emily frowned. ‘Are they giving you painkillers?’

She nodded. ‘George asked the doctor to prescribe some strong ones.’

‘Painkillers can make you dopey. Paracetamol might be enough. Shall we try that?’

‘But George said—’

‘I’ve told you before that your son is too bossy and you shouldn’t give in to him.’ But Liz always did give in to stronger personalities. Her husband had done all her thinking for her and when he died, George had taken over.

After making them both a cup of tea, Emily sat chatting to her sister. ‘How did you come to fall?’

Her sister shuddered. ‘I tripped over a piece of wood in the garden. I’m usually so careful but I was watching two birds at the feeder. Blue tits, they were. So pretty. I couldn’t seem to get up again. Luckily Mrs Potter next door heard me calling for help and took me to hospital. I spent the night there under observation. How lucky that George was in England and could bring me home.’

‘It sounds to me as if your neighbour’s done most of the looking after.’ Emily couldn’t keep a sharp note out of her voice. ‘And George hasn’t *stayed* with you, has he?’

But Liz could never see anything wrong in what her son did. ‘He can’t let the company down. He’s such a good son. Since Nigel died, he’s taken care of all the business stuff for me. I can’t tell you what a load that is off my mind.’

Emily changed the subject as soon as she could. She and Liz would never see eye-to-eye about the way her nephew had taken over his mother’s life . . . and her finances. She suspected he was keeping Liz short of money, too, giving her only enough to live on as long as she was careful, yet Nigel had told Emily once that his wife would be extremely comfortable if anything happened to him.

Oh, well. What was the old saying their mother used to trot out? *There are none so blind as those who won’t see.*

A few days later George went through his mother’s mail, which had been forwarded to him in the Middle East as usual. ‘My aunt’s neighbour must be forwarding her mail to my mother’s house and of course they’ve come on to me.’

Marcia looked up from doing her nails. ‘You’d better phone your aunt and apologize.’

‘I might as well check them first to see if there’s anything urgent.’

‘You can’t open her mail!’

He grinned. ‘Oh, can’t I? I’ll only open anything that looks interesting, though. I can say I didn’t check the address and thought it was one of my mother’s letters.’ A moment later he waved an envelope. ‘This one is from a law firm in Lancashire. I wonder what they want with my aunt.’

Marcia rolled her eyes and went on filing her nails.

George read the letter, exclaiming, ‘Good heavens!’ Then he read it again.

By that time his wife had put down the nail file and was waiting to find out what he’d discovered.

‘This is from a lawyer in Littleborough. Remember that old cousin of Emily’s father? We met her once, Penelope Mattison?’

‘Not really.’

‘Wizened old thing, rather eccentric, lived in a tumbledown place on the edge of the moors. Anyway, it seems she’s died and left everything to my aunt.’

‘Lucky Emily. She’ll really be able to enjoy her retirement now, won’t she?’

He pulled a face. ‘I suppose she’ll fritter it away on those blasted antiques she loves so much. Wait a minute! There’s another letter enclosed.’

A minute later, he exclaimed, ‘I don’t believe this!’

Marcia waited.

‘A local developer wants the land and has made an offer for it.’ He whistled. ‘And a very juicy offer it is, too.’ He sat tapping his fingers on the table for a few moments. ‘I must persuade my aunt to let me deal with this. She has no idea of business and she’s far too soft to bargain well.’

‘I don’t think she’ll let you handle her affairs, George. She’s not like your mother.’ Marcia looked at her watch. ‘Do you want to ring her now, tell her about her inheritance?’

‘No. I’m going to think about it. Time enough to tell her when we get back, anyway. We’re going in a few days.’

‘George, you really ought to let your aunt know her mail has come here by mistake.’

His voice took on an edge. ‘Stay out of this, Marcia. I’m the money person, not you.’

‘But it’s not your money.’

He smiled. ‘It will be one day. I’ll make sure of that. After all, who else is there to inherit but me, her only nephew? And if she’s paying someone to manage her money, why not keep it in the family? I’m really good with money.’

‘You can’t be sure her money will come to you, and anyway, she’s very young for her age.’

‘She hasn’t got any other close relatives to leave it to.’

Marcia shook her head but didn’t protest any more. When George got that tone in his voice, best to leave him to do whatever he thought right.

She couldn’t see Emily agreeing to let him manage the money, though. Emily was very different from her sister. Confident and self-contained.

Two weeks after her accident, Liz was feeling a lot better and Emily was itching to get back home.

When the phone rang, Emily tried to read her book till Liz had finished, but couldn’t help overhearing.

‘How lovely!’ Her sister beamed with delight as she put down the phone. ‘George and Marcia will be coming back to England tomorrow and they want to stay here with me for a day or two.’

Too late for me to attend the course, Emily thought. Liz could have paid someone to help her with the housework and let her go to the course, but she’d begged her sister to stay.

‘I’ll go home first thing tomorrow and leave the spare bedroom ready for them. I have a lot of things to do and you’ll be all right for a few hours with Mrs Potter next

door.'

'Yes, I will. And George will be living permanently in England from now on, which is such a comfort. I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help, Emily dear. I don't know what I'd have done without you.'

'You're welcome.'

'I'm really looking forward to spending more time with them. Marcia is such a capable woman and always so kind to me, the best of daughters-in-law. Sometimes only women understand how you feel. Dear George thinks everyone enjoys his own robust health. He's so like his father.'

For about the hundredth time, Emily held back the words she really wanted to say: *for goodness' sake, stand on your own feet, Liz Pilby, and stop letting George run your life!*

The following day she was ready to leave by the time her sister got up.

'I don't know how you can do so much this early in the day,' Liz complained. 'Surely you've time to sit down and have a cup of tea with me first?'

Stifling a sigh, Emily joined her at the little table in the kitchen.

As soon as she could, she stood up. 'I'll just go and fetch the rest of my things from the bedroom, then I'll be off. I've changed the sheets for George and Marcia, and put the others on to wash.'

'You're very efficient. Like my George.'

Hah! If she thought she was anything like her nephew, she'd go and see a psychiatrist!

When she came down, Liz was looking worried. 'I think you'd better stay here tonight after all, dear. I just heard on the radio that there's going to be a bad storm later on.'

Emily couldn't bear the thought of spending another night in the small, cluttered cottage, where every sound echoed up the stair well. 'Oh, I'll be home before the storm breaks, I'm sure.'

She set off, feeling happier the minute she turned out of the street. She hadn't told Liz, but she'd arranged to have lunch with an old friend from work who lived half an hour's drive away. Knowing Jan, it'd be late afternoon before she got on the road again, but it'd be lovely to catch up.

It was even later than Emily had expected when she left Jan's house, but it'd only take her an hour or two to get back to Kings Langley.

The sky grew dark rapidly and the storm hit suddenly. Soon rain was beating down on the small car and visibility was poor. A traffic announcement interrupted the radio programme to blare out the information that there was a bad hold-up on the M25 due to a multiple car pile-up. Drivers were urged to avoid that stretch of the motorway until further notice.

Emily groaned as she heard the junction numbers involved. That was the route she'd intended to take. The traffic was always slow there, so the hold-up must be bad to warrant an announcement like that. She stopped at the first lay-by to program her satnav to cut across country by the most direct route.

Bad mistake. She soon realized it wasn't a night to be driving such an elderly vehicle along narrow country roads, but there was nowhere convenient to stop to

reprogram the satnav. She should have specified major roads to get her round the problem area. What if she broke down out here in the middle of nowhere?

A loud clap of thunder made her jump, and was it her imagination or was there a roughness to the engine's sound? Perhaps she should try to find a hotel or a bed and breakfast?

Headlights suddenly dazzled her. She looked in the rear view mirror, annoyed to find a car following her closely. Far too closely, especially in this weather! She pressed lightly on the brakes to warn it to stay back, but it drew even closer.

It was raining so hard, she couldn't see clearly what the idiot was doing and cried out in shock as the much bigger car suddenly pulled closer and deliberately nudged her vehicle, sending it dangerously close to the verge. She thumped her horn several times, yelling, 'Get back, you lunatic!'

It came close and nudged her car again.

She braked to let the idiot go past, which was presumably what the driver wanted, but he slowed down to match her speed, horn blaring. Now she was puzzled, as well as angry. What was the driver trying to do? She'd read in the papers of hooligans getting their kicks from nudging other cars, but had never expected to be the target of such an assault.

She braked harder, but not in time to stop the bigger vehicle thumping into hers again. As she struggled to keep control, it bumped into her hard enough to send her car careering right off the road.

She let out an involuntary shriek and braked hard, only just managing to avoid ramming a signpost. Her car came to an abrupt halt at an upwards angle on a muddy slope. For a moment she could only sit there, too shocked to think straight.

When she looked round, she saw the big car slow down ahead, sounding its horn and flashing its headlights on and off.

*It was as if it was celebrating running her off the road.*

Then it speeded up and vanished.

Her car radio was still playing, so she switched it off, but left the engine running, worried it might not start again. She tried to reverse slowly back on to the road, but her wheels spun in the mud and she couldn't gain any traction.

She pulled out her mobile phone to dial for assistance. Just then another vehicle came into view, slowing down as its headlights caught her car in their beam. It drew up where she'd gone off the road.

A man jumped out of the passenger side, coming to peer through her side window. He was about her own age, but not until a grey-haired woman got out of the driver's side and came to join them did Emily feel it was safe to let down her window. Well, she let it down a few inches, then it stuck.

'You all right, love?'

'Yes. Just a bit shocked.'

'Accidents do that to you.'

'Accidents!' She told him about the lunatic who'd done this to her.

He gaped at her. 'Someone did this on purpose?'

'Yes. Definitely.'

'I've read about it in the papers,' his companion said. She looked at Emily with sympathy. 'Joy riders daring each other to shove people off the road. The police are

looking for them, but they steal cars to do it in then vanish.’

‘Did you get their number?’ he asked.

‘What good would that do if the car was stolen? Anyway, I couldn’t see the number plate or even tell the make, except that it was a big four-wheel drive.’

‘Still, you’re not hurt, that’s the main thing. Let’s see if we can get you back on the road.’

‘I think the car’s stuck.’ She tried again to reverse with the same result.

‘Good thing I carry a tow rope.’ He turned and saw his companion already holding it out. ‘Thanks, love.’

He was very efficient and soon had Emily’s car back on the road, by which time they were both soaked.

‘There are some bad dents, so you’re going to need major work on the body, but the engine sounds all right.’

‘I doubt it’s worth bothering to repair the car. I was going to get a new one anyway.’

‘Have you far to go?’

She sighed. ‘Further than I care to drive on a night like this. I’m still shaky. I think I’ll look for a hotel. I can’t thank you enough for your help.’

He shrugged. ‘It’s a poor person who passes by when someone’s in trouble. I’ll follow you for a while to make sure you’re all right and that no other lunatics waylay you on these quiet roads.’

Emily drove slowly away and the couple followed her. When they reached a wider road with other traffic, they gave a toot of the horn and passed her.

This was definitely the last time she took a short cut along minor roads in the dark. Last time ever! What was the world coming to when hooligans deliberately tried to cause accidents?

Soon afterwards, she saw a lighted sign indicating a hotel and turned off the road into its car park. There were only a few other vehicles there. She looked round carefully before she unlocked her car door, but they were smaller than the one which had rammed her.

She grabbed her suitcase and ran across to the hotel, getting soaked over even that short distance. The place was small and looked rather run down, but it seemed clean and it’d do for one night. She didn’t want to drive on through the storm, which seemed to be getting worse by the minute.

A bored receptionist signed her in and pointed out the lift, then picked up a mobile phone and continued to chat to a friend.

If I was the manager here, Emily thought angrily, I’d soon improve customer service!

She found her room easily enough. It was on the second floor, very basic: bed, TV, chair and the tiniest possible en suite bathroom. Wind gusts shook the window frame and the door rattled in sympathy. It sounded as if someone was trying to get in and she went across to double check that she’d locked the door.

She winced as lightning flashed outside, followed by a clap of thunder so loud it hurt her ears. Thank goodness she hadn’t continued driving in such a bad storm. She checked the information folder. First things first. She’d better go downstairs and get something to eat before the café closed.

The lights flickered, then flickered again. She grimaced, praying there wouldn't be a power cut, because her torch was in the car. So was her computer and she wasn't going out to get it now.

She opened the door to check where the stairs were, finding them round the corner from the lift. The stairs were broad and elegant, Edwardian probably, but this corridor had only one light and the carpet was badly frayed in several places. In fact, the whole hotel felt like a set for filming a ghost movie.

She went back into the room, stared at herself in the mirror and sighed. No use trying to do more than tidy her hair. It'd been thoroughly soaked and was a flattened mess. Wrapping a pashmina over her cardigan, she set off for the café.

As she walked out into the corridor, the lights flickered again. She was definitely not taking the lift, didn't want to risk being trapped in it if the power failed.

Just as she got to the top of the stairs, the lights went out completely and she stopped moving. 'Damn!' she muttered under her breath. She stood still, hoping the electricity would come on again. But the seconds ticked slowly past and the lights stayed off.

She could see a faint glow coming from below, so decided to make her way downstairs by feel. After five steps, she turned the corner of the stairs, but caught her shoe heel in a frayed patch of carpet. She fell forward and reached out in the darkness for something to catch hold of.

She lost her balance, scrabbled desperately for the hand rail but her shoe wouldn't come free of the carpet, so she missed it. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. She continued to fall, her body twisting in the air and thumping into a wall so violently it knocked the breath out of her.

As she tumbled helplessly on, she hit her head on something, crying out involuntarily from the sharp pain. Then darkness swallowed her . . .

## Two

George picked up the phone, listened intently then said, 'I'm Emily Mattison's nephew. I'd be the closest relative in that sense. My mother is her sister, but she's too frail to deal with this.'

His wife and mother turned to stare at him in shock.

'Oh, dear!' He shook his head sadly. 'Yes, of course I'll come and see you. Tomorrow. Yes, I'll bring some clothes. Thank you.'

He put the phone down. 'Aunt Emily has been in an accident. She's in hospital in a coma. I think it'll be better if I go to see her first and deal with the formalities, Mother. You can go later, when we're sure she's going to survive.'

His mother gasped for air, then her eyes rolled up and she fell sideways on the couch.

Marcia quickly felt for a pulse. 'Just one of her faints, I think.'

'It's a good thing she has us to look after her. And now Emily is going to need our help, too.' He smiled at his wife. 'It's a good thing I didn't worry her with this property offer and inheritance stuff, isn't it? I'll take care of all that for her . . . if she recovers, she'll be very grateful.'

'If? Is she that badly hurt?'

'I'm afraid so.' He smiled again as he said it.

When Emily woke, she had trouble opening her eyes. A machine began beeping and she turned her head slightly to look towards it. She was hooked up to a monitor. Lights were flashing and the beeping hurt her head.

She must be in hospital. What had happened? She couldn't remember.

A face appeared beside her and with a struggle, she focused on it. A woman. A nurse.

'Emily?'

There was something in her throat and she could only manage a faint noise in response.

'Don't try to speak. Blink if you can understand me.'

She did that.

'Blink three times.'

By concentrating hard, she succeeded in doing this.

'Well done. You're in hospital because you had an accident. You fell down some stairs. Blink twice if you understand.'

She managed that.

'Excellent.' The nurse turned to look at the monitor again and spoke to someone nearby. 'Her vitals are improving.'

More discussion which Emily didn't manage to follow, then, 'I reckon she'll be able to breathe on her own soon.'

The words made little sense. The last thing she remembered was saying goodbye to her sister Liz.

She gave up trying to work it out. She was too tired.

The beeping was a comfort now. It proved she was still alive.

The next time she regained consciousness, Emily felt much more comfortable. The tube had gone from her throat, thank goodness.

‘Emily? Are you awake?’

She turned her head and saw a young woman in nurse’s uniform. ‘What . . . happened?’ Her voice sounded strange, a monotone, not at all like hers.

‘You fell down some stairs and ended up in hospital. You’ve not broken anything, but you were knocked unconscious. Could you tell me your first name, please?’

‘Em’ly.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Kings . . . Langl’y.’

She couldn’t manage to ask the questions she wanted to. Tears of frustration formed in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She couldn’t even raise her hand to wipe them away.

The nurse did it for her. ‘You’re going to be all right, Emily. Try to keep calm. Just give it a little time.’

She frowned, trying to remember falling. But she couldn’t. She had no memory of it, none whatsoever.

The soothing voice said quietly, ‘Try to rest now, Emily. You’ve done really well today. We’re very pleased with your progress.’

Jane watched her patient for a moment or two, feeling hopeful now of at least a partial recovery. You could never be sure with coma patients, though. Making a quick note on Emily’s records of what had just happened, she went back to the nurses’ station.

When the phone rang, she sighed, hoping it wasn’t another admission.

‘Intensive Care Unit.’

‘Reception. We have someone here who says he’s Emily Mattison’s nephew. He’s insisting on seeing her straight away. Can I send him up?’

‘I suppose so. She’s asleep, though.’

A couple of minutes later Jane heard the lift ping as it stopped. A burly man with close-shaven receding hair and what looked like expensive clothes stopped for a moment to look round, then strode towards the desk as if he owned the place.

‘May I help you?’

‘George Pilby. I gather you have my aunt here – Emily Mattison. I’m her closest relative. I was told she’s regained consciousness.’

‘I thought her closest relative was her sister?’

‘That’s my mother, who’s rather frail, so I came to see my aunt instead.’

Not *can I see her*? Jane noted. ‘You can only see her for a moment. She’s not fully conscious yet.’

‘Is she in her right mind?’

What a way to put it! ‘Your aunt answered to her name and asked what happened, so we’re very hopeful.’

‘Did she remember the accident?’

‘No. But that means nothing. It’s quite common with head injuries and comas.’

‘At her age, the memory loss can’t be good. And anyway, she was showing signs of becoming forgetful before it happened. Growing old is so sad.’

Old! The woman was fifty-eight, according to her driving licence. Jane didn’t consider that to be old and anyway, Miss Mattison didn’t look anything like her age. Her face was quite pretty, even with the bruises, and her dark brown hair was only lightly greying at the temples.

She accompanied Mr Pilby to the cubicle where Emily was being cared for, her vital signs still monitored night and day.

He stood looking down at his aunt, showing no signs of being upset, merely studying her carefully. ‘Will she regain her senses?’

Jane hurried him away from the bed. Who knew what coma patients could and could not hear? ‘We can’t tell yet, but it’s likely she’ll recover completely.’

‘Hmm.’ He stared round. ‘How long will she be here?’

‘A few more days perhaps, then she’ll be taken to a rehab unit for a week or two.’

‘It might be kinder if she died than if she recovered to face Alzheimer’s.’

‘We try to help all our patients to recover. And I’ve already told you that means nothing at this stage.’

‘But you’ll put on her records about my poor aunt Emily already having some problems. I don’t want anyone nagging her and upsetting her with questions she doesn’t understand.’

‘Yes, I’ll put it on her records.’

‘I’ll phone every day. It’s not worth coming again until she’s properly conscious.’

Jane watched him leave, glad she wasn’t dependent on help from such an unfeeling person.

When George got back to his mother’s house, he took her into the living room and sat next to her, taking her hand and patting it.

She looked at him apprehensively. ‘Emily’s not . . . dead?’

‘No. She may even recover, though in what condition they’re not sure. The accident is quite likely to trigger dementia, I’m afraid.’

Liz gasped and put one hand across her mouth. ‘Oh, no! Not Emily! She’s always been so clever. I *must* go and see her for myself.’

‘Not yet. She isn’t fully conscious. I don’t want you exhausting yourself unnecessarily. I think I’d better go and check her house, see that everything is all right there. Oh, and I need to get her car back. It’s apparently still in the hotel car park, so the key must be there. It wasn’t in her handbag with her house keys. Marcia and I will pick the car up on the way to Kings Langley.’

‘That’s very kind of you, George dear. Don’t forget to tell her neighbour who you are. She’s called Rachel Fenwick and she has a key to the house as well.’

‘I’ll do that.’

The following day George and Marcia set off after breakfast for Kings Langley.

‘We should be house hunting on our own behalf today,’ she grumbled. ‘I’ve had to cancel today’s appointments.’

‘We might not need to go house hunting. Someone has to keep an eye on my aunt’s place, so if it’s at all decent, we can move in. It’ll save paying rent for a few weeks, if nothing else. It’s quite easy to get to London from there. I looked it up on line. About twenty miles, with a station nearby.’

‘But how can we? Your aunt’s in no condition to give permission.’

‘Exactly. So she can’t refuse us. Besides, we’ll be doing her a favour, taking care of her house. You’re a wonderful manager. I’m sure you’ll be able to bring it up to scratch. Old people never keep their houses nice.’

‘I don’t regard your aunt as old. She’s very young for her age.’

‘You didn’t see her in hospital. She looks dreadful, as if she’s aged ten years. We’ll make a detour to pick up her car. Which do you want to drive? This one or hers?’

‘This one.’

Later, when they both drew up outside Emily’s house, he got out of his aunt’s car and studied the place.

Marcia joined him. ‘It’s quite pretty.’

‘Bigger than I’d expected, too,’ George said. ‘Much bigger than Mother’s house. My aunt probably has some decent retirement money. She’s never been a big spender. Let’s hope it’s not old-fashioned inside. We’d better go and get the key from this neighbour.’

‘I thought you had a key.’

‘I do. But I don’t want the neighbour coming in to poke around our things while we’re out, so I’ll pretend I haven’t got a key.’ He strode down the path of the house next door, ignoring his wife’s sigh.

The woman who opened the door to him seemed to be around his aunt’s age. She needed to lose a few pounds and dress to suit her years, he thought disapprovingly. He’d not let his wife get so porky.

‘You must be Rachel. I’m George Pilby, Emily’s nephew. I believe you have a key to her house.’

‘Yes. Is Emily worse? I’ve been worrying about her since Liz phoned to say she’d been in an accident. Your aunt usually keeps in touch.’

‘My aunt has been in a coma, and it’s not certain she’ll recover.’

Tears filled Rachel’s eyes. ‘Oh, no! Where is she? I must go and see her.’

He shook his head. ‘I’m afraid not. It’s only close family at the moment and anyway, she’s still not fully conscious. They’ve yet to find out whether there’s been any brain damage.’

She looked at him in horror. ‘Emily? I can’t believe it.’

‘We’ll have to hope for the best. Whatever the outcome, she’ll be in rehab for some weeks.’

‘Please tell me as soon as she’s able to have visitors. Where is she exactly? I’ll send a get well card and flowers.’

‘I’ll let you know when it’s worth making contact. In the meantime, my wife and I will be staying here to keep an eye on her house, so if you can let me have the key . . .’

‘Of course.’ Rachel went inside and came back with the key. ‘The mail is on the hall table. Emily asked me to forward her mail to her sister’s for a couple of weeks then keep it here.’

He took the key and walked away quickly. What a busybody! He hated neighbours who tried to live in your pocket.

The less this one knew about his aunt, the less she could interfere with his plans. He'd tell the hospital to allow no visitors except for him.

George smiled at Marcia and waggled the key, then went to open the front door of his aunt's house. He'd not visited it before, because she'd always come to his mother's, so he'd seen no point in going to her place as well during his brief visits to the UK.

They walked round in silence, then stood in the kitchen.

'Perfect,' he said. 'Smaller than I'd like, but nicely laid out and the furniture's good. She has some nice-looking antiques. I must check them out on line.'

'The house has a nice feel to it.'

'Yes. We'll move in tomorrow. I'm getting a little tired of sleeping in that uncomfortable bed at my mother's and sharing a bathroom with her.'

'Will your mother be all right on her own? Perhaps we should bring her here with us?'

'And perhaps we shouldn't. She'll be fine. She's coped perfectly well on her own while I've been overseas, after all.'

He picked up the mail from the hall table and started going through it. 'Ah! Another letter from that lawyer chappie.' He slit it open and read it, smiling. 'I'll have to let him know that I'll be taking charge of negotiating with the property developer.'

'But what if your aunt doesn't want to sell her new house? Anyway, you don't have power of attorney over her affairs.'

He scowled at her. 'I can still negotiate the sale and once it's clear that she's not going to recover, I'll get a power of attorney.'

'I'm always amazed at how directly you go for something when you want it.'

'It's the best way.'

'What if your aunt recovers?'

'I don't think she will. We shall have to wait and see.'

He stared out across the gardens. He'd planted a few seeds about his aunt's mental health being doubtful. He'd find a way to plant more. She was bound to be confused when she came out of the coma. Maybe he could ask for her to be sedated.

It'd solve a lot of problems if she didn't recover. His mother would inherit, surely? If she didn't, she could contest the will.

There was always a way to get something if you wanted it badly enough. You just had to find it and pay people, if necessary, to help you bend the rules.

He'd look after his aunt, of course. And his mother. Make sure they had everything they needed. But older people were best living simply and quietly. Everyone knew that.

The next day George went to the hospital again. On his own. He made his way to intensive care. 'How is my aunt?'

'Still drifting in and out of consciousness, I'm afraid, Mr Pilby.'

'I'll go and see her.'

By the time the nurse had caught up with him, he was standing next to his aunt. 'She looks worse than last time.'

The sister gaped at him. ‘She’s recovering well.’

‘She doesn’t look well to me.’

‘Please don’t say such negative things in front of her, Mr Pilby. We never know how much coma patients hear and understand, especially those who are recovering.’ She slipped round to the other side and spoke to the patient, as he should have done. ‘Your nephew’s here, Emily.’

‘I’m here to look after you, Auntie dear,’ he boomed. ‘Don’t worry. They think they can help you.’

The patient opened her eyes with a start, focused on him and frowned. ‘Go ’way, George.’

Jane didn’t allow herself to smile. From the patient’s expression, it was clear that George wasn’t a favourite relative. As for what he was saying, well, she had to wonder if he was deliberately trying to scare his aunt.

She’d seen everything in her job, from loving families to ones who couldn’t wait for their elderly relative to die. The latter weren’t always averse to nudging them along a bit, either. This guy definitely wasn’t the loving type. Was he one of the dangerous ones? She’d have to keep her eye on Ms Mattison whenever he visited.

‘Mother’s asked Marcia and me to move into your house, Auntie, to keep an eye on it until you’re able to go home. It’s very convenient, because we’ve not found anywhere to buy in England yet.’

Jane could see her patient getting agitated and struggling to respond, so moved to his side. ‘You’d better leave now, Mr Pilby. You’re upsetting her.’

He shrugged and allowed himself to be led away, not attempting a word of farewell or encouragement to his aunt. ‘I need to speak to her doctor now. See how disabled she’s going to be. This might make the dementia worse.’

‘I think Dr Spenser is still on the ward. Yes, there he is.’

Jane handed Mr Pilby over with relief, but could hear him haranguing poor Dr Spenser in the interview room right from the other end of the corridor.

That man was definitely hoping his aunt would not recover, she decided, presumably because he expected to inherit.

He seemed to have taken over his aunt’s house without anyone’s permission! It wasn’t Jane’s business to interfere, but she felt sorry for Emily Mattison, she really did.

The next time Emily woke, she felt more herself. There was no beeping apparatus beside the bed and she was hungry. She eyed the tube and stand, wondering what was being dripped into her arm, because she felt very dopey.

The nurse she’d seen before came in.

‘Good morning. How are you feeling today, Emily?’

‘Better. Hungry.’

‘That’s good. I’ll get you a light breakfast.’

‘How long . . . here?’ To her dismay, Emily could only speak in short bursts.

‘You’ve been here for two weeks.’

‘Two!’ Emily swallowed hard. ‘What’s wrong . . . with me?’

‘You fell down some stairs and hit your head. You were in a coma for a few days, but you’re recovering well.’