

MAY

'Damn, damn, damn, damn, *damn!*' Slowing to a halt, Jenny snatched up the map from the passenger seat and checked the name on the signpost. Yes, as she'd feared, she was headed in the wrong direction. *Again.* Her map-reading skills were minimal, but then she was used to Patrick navigating.

Furious at the thought of him, she wrenched at the steering wheel and tried to turn the car round in the narrow, rutted lane, but succeeded only in stalling the engine and eventually landing up with her back wheels in the ditch.

'Look, for God's sake, get a grip,' she muttered to herself, winding down the window and taking in a few deep breaths. The air was warm and scented, the hedgerows were frothing with cow parsley, and the fringes of the field beyond spangled with polished buttercups. Yet she was polluting both the weather and the scenery with her own toxic cloud of anger and frustration. If she only managed to calm down, she could still enjoy this lush May afternoon, despite the fact she was incorrigibly lost. Everywhere she looked, different shades of green were eagerly unfurling: thrustful shoots of new spring wheat; translucent, tender beech leaves; lusty nettles rampant in the hedge. There was no sound except the birds: sweet, silvery trills and deeper, husky notes, neither of which she was able to identify. It was Patrick who was the authority on birds.

Sighing, she restarted the engine and, having extricated the car from the ditch, retraced her route until she reached a fork in the road. Should she go straight on or bear right? By now she was so thoroughly confused, she might as well decide by tossing a coin. If only there were

somebody to ask, but for the last few miles there hadn't been a single sign of human habitation, just fields and woods unfolding on either side, until they lost themselves in the hazy blue horizon. It was as if she had reached a land where no one lived, not even sheep and cows. And, as she squinted at the map again, she had a sudden strange suspicion that this was territory *beyond* maps, and that Patrick might be wreaking his revenge by dissolving all its boundaries and landmarks, in order to trap her in its coils.

Shivering, despite the heat, she made herself drive on, opting for the right fork, but regretting her decision once the road began to peter out into a narrow, puddled cart-track. However, she followed it for half a mile in the hope the track might lead on to a farm, only to be thwarted by a heap of ancient farm machinery, rusting where it lay, and blocking any hope of further progress. Was Patrick working another ominous spell, picking up whole villages and transferring them to distant counties, so that she would never, ever reach her destination; never find Briar Cottage, or its owner, Phyllis Potts? If so, she was doomed to spend the entire weekend driving round in endless circles, in an empty country devoid of humankind.

Briar Cottage.

Dusk was falling, so she could barely make out the letters on the gate, but she traced them with her finger to make absolutely certain. Yes - Briar Cottage – no mistake. And she had to admit it did look rather idyllic, with its thatched roof, whitewashed walls, and riot of flowers in the overgrown front garden. Yet it was with a sense of trepidation that she walked up to the door. Inside, it could be different: dark and poky; even dirty or dilapidated. Several of her friends had rented cottages on spec, only to be severely disappointed. One unlucky couple had even encountered bed-bugs, and returned home covered with bites.

She prayed the key would be there - under the brick, behind the small stone cat, as Mrs Potts had promised. If not, it would mean driving another seven miles, and dragging the poor woman from her supper or her bed.

No need for that, thank God. And, as she slid the key into the lock and opened the front door, she let out a sigh of sheer relief. Even in the gloom, she could see how clean and comfortable the place was. And, once she'd switched the lights on, she stood surveying the cosy sitting-room, with its flagstone floor and brightly patterned rugs; its broad-shouldered, squashy sofa, piled with patchwork cushions, and the charming lattice windows looking out to a sweep of shadowed hills. Only one thing missing – Patrick.

Determined not to dwell on him, she explored the cottage further, admiring the solid pinewood cupboards in the kitchen, and the matching table, complete with welcoming fruit-bowl. The fridge and oven both looked new, in contrast to the dark oak beams, hung with strings of onions and bunches of dried herbs, as if she'd driven not to Shropshire but to Provence.

Elated, she bounded up the stairs. The bedroom had a high brass bed, covered with a splendid quilt, hand-stitched from squares of silks and velvets in a kaleidoscope of greens and golds. Bugger Patrick! Let him stew. She could enjoy herself without him in this enticing little haven.

Returning to the sitting-room, she unzipped her bag and unpacked the provisions she'd brought for this first evening, all seriously affected by the long drive in the heat. The loaf of bread was already dry and stale, the chicken pie smelt tainted, and the cheese was sweating yellow droplets through its wrappings. Well, she'd dump the lot and feast on the fruit in the kitchen: a veritable cornucopia of peaches, plums, apples, pears and grapes. And, as for the wine, she would simply drink it warm. She was too tired to go and chill it; too tired to lift a

finger. All she intended doing for the moment was to stretch out on that sofa and toast the fact that she had actually arrived.

She had barely swallowed a mouthful of Chardonnay, when she heard a car drawing up outside. She tensed, fingers gripping the glass. Patrick! In pursuit of her. Perhaps he'd come to apologize. Or to announce that things were over between them and he was returning the eternity ring she had given him just days ago. 'Eternity' seemed heavily ironical in light of this morning's quarrel.

She sat frozen where she was, listening to the rat-tat-tat on the door. Then, suddenly, she leapt up to her feet. She *had* to see him, if he'd driven all this distance. Even if he were burning with resentment, they could discuss things, make it up, spend the night together in that benevolent brass bed.

Flinging open the front door, she came face to face not with Patrick but with a small, plump woman, dressed in gumboots and a denim skirt; her ship's prow of a bosom emphasized still further by a tight, ribbed sweater in a bilious shade of yellow.

'Phyllis Potts,' she announced. 'You must be Jenny. Pleased to meet you.'

'Oh ... hello.'

'Sorry I couldn't be here when you arrived. I always like to greet my guests in person, but you *did* say afternoon.'

'Yes. My fault entirely.' She was still reeling from the disappointment; trying to switch her thoughts from tangled sheets to twisting roads. 'I tried to ring you several times, but -'

'I know. You got the answerphone. I've just picked up all your messages. Poor you, getting lost - and lost with a vengeance, by the sounds of it! Pity I wasn't at home, then I could have given you directions. But one of our bullocks got loose and created havoc in the

vicar's precious flowerbeds. Why it *had* to be the vicar, when his wife's the keenest gardener in the village, God only knows!

Jenny laughed, warming to this woman. 'Come in,' she said, 'and have a glass of wine.'

'No, I won't disturb you. I'm sure you and your gentleman friend would prefer to be alone.'

'He's, er, not here.' She cleared her throat, opting for a lie. 'He ... went down with some virus thing. One of those bugs that come on out of the blue. But we didn't want to cancel, so ...'

'Oh, what a shame. I'm sorry. But I'll leave you in peace, in any case. You must be deadbeat after all that driving. I'll just fetch a few things from the car, then I'll be on my way. I made you a cake, which I meant to bring round earlier.'

'A cake? How kind!'

'Well, I was baking anyway. I just hope you've no objection to chocolate sponge.'

'Sounds wonderful! I love anything with chocolate in.' This must be Wonder-Woman – home-made cakes, overflowing fruit-bowls ... 'Can I help?' she asked as Phyllis dived towards her car.

'No, you stay where you are.'

When she reappeared, Phyllis was holding not just a cake-tin but a large bunch of hawthorn blossom, wrapped in a sheet of newspaper. As its pungent, curdled scent began choking through the room, Jenny shrank against the wall, feeling instantly faint. Phyllis was saying something, but it was her mother's voice she heard: a series of hysterical shrieks exploding in her ears.

'You stupid little fool! Don't you realize it's unlucky to bring my blossom inside?'

'But I *picked* it for you, Mum. It's a present. For your birthday.'

‘Present? Are you mad? That stuff’s a curse, and brings sickness and death to any house it comes to. Get it out! Get it out, before we’re all struck down!’

‘But it took me hours to -’

She was silenced by a slap across her face, a face already scratched and smarting from the thorns. She had braved those thorns to please her mother, who never had the money to buy flowers for herself. Yet now she was being punished: stinging blows raising great red patches on her legs.

She fled, the bunch of hawthorn still clutched against her chest. Its prickly stems seemed to be clawing at her dress, tearing holes in the flimsy cotton fabric, which would bring another thrashing from her mother. Ramming the evil things into the dustbin, she slammed the lid on top and stood, sobbing, in the back yard, terrified by what she’d done.

Two days later, her grandmother fell ill. By Sunday, she was dead. ‘*Your* fault!’ her mother howled.

‘Jenny, are you OK? You’ve gone quite pale.’

She clung to the wall for support. The whole room had started spinning as she watched her grandma’s coffin lowered into the grave, heard spadefuls of earth thud-thudding on the lid, and God’s harsh voice accusing from the sky, ‘Your mother’s right. *You* killed her!’

Somewhere, in another world, her arm was gripped securely and she was being led across the room and sat down on a chair. Disoriented, she opened her eyes; saw not black-garbed mourners, but an expanse of yellow sweater.

Phyllis’s voice seemed to come from far away. ‘Whatever’s wrong?’ she asked. ‘You’ve gone all cold and sweaty Are you sure you haven’t caught that bug – the one your boyfriend has?’

Jenny gave a shaky laugh. ‘No, I...I’m fine. I haven’t eaten since breakfast, so it’s probably just hunger-pangs.’

‘Well, let me get you something – a sandwich or ...’

‘No, honestly - ’ Jenny broke off in confusion. Why say ‘honestly’, then lie? She almost *wanted* to admit the truth, having kept this shameful secret for over twenty years. ‘It was actually the may blossom,’ she blurted out, blushing as she spoke.

‘The *what?*’

‘That hawthorn you brought in. I can’t bear it in the house.’ And she began recounting the whole story, hardly knowing why she was confiding in a stranger, when not even Patrick or her closest friends knew that she had caused a death.

‘So, you see, I’ve always lived in terror of the stuff.’ There was a relief in having confessed, a relief overlaid with shame. Wasn’t it absurd to have allowed a guileful superstition to entrap her since the age of eight?

Phyllis clearly thought so. ‘But that’s *nonsense*, Jenny,’ she said in her emphatic voice. ‘Your mother was completely wrong. And so are all the other folk who think may blossom’s unlucky.’

‘But if it’s such a widely held belief, it must have *some* foundation.’

‘Well, it all sprang from the notion that Christ’s crown of thorns was made from hawthorn twigs. So, because it caused Him suffering, people assumed it must be bad. But there’s an equally strong tradition that says it’s actually a sacred tree that brings blessings and good fortune, on account of the fact it touched Our Saviour’s head.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really. And long before Christianity it was seen as beneficial. Way back in Greek and Roman times, people used to carry it at weddings, as a token of good luck for the newly married couple. And they tied it to babies’ cradles, to protect children against sickness and death.’

‘Just the opposite, you mean, to what my mother said?’

‘Absolutely. And, on a more practical level, it’s been used in herbal medicine for centuries. In fact, one of my friends is a practising herbalist and she was telling me the other day how versatile the plant is. It cures heart conditions, kidney problems and a whole host of other things, she said - even insomnia and depression.’

‘Well, I suppose we’d better drink to that,’ Jenny said uncertainly, reaching for the Chardonnay. ‘Please do stay and have a glass of wine.’

‘OK, why not? The old man’s watching the football, so he won’t miss me for a bit. But I suggest we cut the cake, so that you’re not drinking on an empty stomach.’

While she went to fetch a knife, Jenny approached the bunch of may blossom, lying on the dresser. The tiny flowers might look innocent enough, but for her they were still treacherous; the stems fiercely armed with spiky thorns, which seemed all the more malicious for being concealed beneath such handsome, glossy leaves.

Phyllis returned with a knife, two plates and a second glass. ‘I see you’re reassessing the hawthorn,’ she smiled, cutting two large chunks of cake, and passing one to Jenny. ‘And so you should! Us country folk see it as an emblem of hope, because it marks the end of winter and the coming of spring. And it’s called the lovers’ flower, because of its long association with marriage and fertility. And, actually, when you come to think about it, the smell *is* quite earthy, isn’t it?’ She gave a sudden throaty laugh. ‘Perhaps that’s why your mother couldn’t stand it, like Cromwell and the Puritans. Too sexy for them by half!’

Jenny chewed her cake reflectively. ‘Well, she was certainly puritanical. In fact, sex was never mentioned in our house. Though she must have had her fair share of it, since she produced six children in as many years!’

Phyllis gave another booming laugh. ‘I’m one of five myself – all girls. And things got pretty hairy, I can tell you, with seven of us crammed into our tiny house. But I used to

escape every summer to my Auntie Bridget's place. She lived in the wilds of Ireland and always invited me to spend the month of August with her.'

'My boyfriend comes from Ireland.'

'Oh, really. Which part?'

'Not the wilds. He's a Dublin man. But he's interested in all the old traditions.'

'Well, he'd have loved my Auntie B. There was nothing she didn't know about mythology and folklore. That's how I first learnt about the may trees. She had a couple growing near her house and she believed the fairies lived in them. In fact, it's a common belief in Kerry that the Wee Folk favour hawthorns and protect any land they grow on. In return for their protection, she used to plait these crowns of may blossom and leave them out for the fairies overnight. If the crown was gone by morning, it meant the fairies had approved of it and would shower blessings on the house.'

'Phyllis, surely you can't believe that?' Jenny put her glass down with unnecessary force.

'Who knows? There are lots of things we can't explain, but that doesn't mean they're not true.'

'It depends on what you mean by truth.'

'I can't define it, Jenny, and nor, I suspect, can anybody else. But the older I get, the more I think we should be open to possibilities beyond logic, reason and even common sense.'

In the ensuing silence, Jenny's mind was less concerned with logic than with her absent lover. Her former anger was now curdling into guilt. If she were honest with herself, the appalling row had been more her fault than his. She had yelled at him with no cause whatsoever, beyond the fact she was stressed and overwrought. But that stress was due to work, and to the problems with her mother, so it was quite unfair to take it out on *him*. On the

other hand, he had definitely overreacted in refusing to come away. That was punishment too far. 'More wine?' she asked, making a deliberate effort to concentrate on Phyllis rather than on Patrick.

'No, I'd better be getting back. But are you sure you're OK? You still look a bit washed out.'

'I'm fine now, thanks. And it was really good to meet you.'

Phyllis lumbered to her feet, grabbed her car-keys and the cake-tin, then picked up the bunch of hawthorn. 'I'll take this out of your way. I intended putting it in a vase on the bedroom windowsill, but I don't want to give you nightmares!'

'No, leave it,' Jenny said, surprising herself even more than Phyllis. 'If it brings blessings to a house, well ... I could do with some at present.'

'Are you sure it won't upset you?'

'Yes,' Jenny said, with more conviction than she felt. 'And thank you for the delicious cake. Thanks for everything.'

Once Phyllis had gone, she sat sipping her wine, aware of the cloying scent of may blossom, now heavy in the air. That smell had always seemed a stench, rather than a fragrance: the rank and rancid stench of death. Phyllis saw it as sexual, but for *her* it was oppressive, and no way would she allow it in a bedroom. All she was taking upstairs was a mug of hot milk and a Mogadon, to help banish thoughts of Patrick.

At 2 a.m. she was still awake, since neither milk nor sleeping pill had worked. Instead she felt both restless and exhausted; her body craving sleep, whilst her grasshopper mind continued jumping from one worry to another. She longed to phone Patrick, just to hear his voice, but was it really fair to wake him in the early hours? Besides, anything she said in her present vulnerable state might only make things worse.

Dragging herself from bed, she stood by the window, staring out at the darkness. The silence was so intense, she actually missed the traffic that droned more or less continuously past their London flat. At least it made her feel connected to a busy, purposeful world, whereas here she seemed superfluous, a mere speck in the vast landscape.

Her stomach rumbled suddenly, reminding her that all she had eaten in the past twenty-four hours was a bowl of Shreddies and a slice of chocolate sponge. Maybe she'd go and raid the fruit-bowl and have another cup of milk.

Halfway down the stairs, she was assaulted by the smell of may, now more pungent still. She hesitated, a surge of fear rising almost instinctively, as the odour seemed to seep into her pores. Struggling to ignore it, she went on down to the kitchen, helped herself to plums and grapes, warmed more milk, then took her midnight snack into the sitting-room.

She sat munching plums and sipping milk, one wary eye on the hawthorn. It was wilting now and some of the frail white blossom had already fallen on the floor in milky drifts. If it really cured depression and insomnia, she ought to take it up to bed with her. And she was certainly in need of help from a so-called lovers' flower, to heal the rift with Patrick. He was the only man she had ever loved, which made their present separation all the worse.

On impulse, she got up, unwrapped the bunch from its newspaper, hands shaking as she did so, and took it into the kitchen. Hunting through the cupboards, she eventually found a vase, filled it with water and thrust the hawthorn in. After all, if a plant had been considered sacred since Greek and Roman times, and in a score of different countries, could all those varied cultures be universally wrong? Perhaps, in the cold light of day, Phyllis's tales of blessings and good fortune would seem completely fanciful, but here, in this deserted place, in the spooky middle of the night, anything seemed possible. Even Yeats had believed in fairies, for God's sake, and *he* was considered a leading intellectual. In fact, was it any more

rational to believe in God (as some three-quarters of the world did) than to believe in the powers of the Wee Folk?

Self-consciously she glanced around, as if in search of invisible presences – powerful spirits that could rescue her relationship. If Patrick took her spiteful words to heart, she might have destroyed all chance of a future life with him.

The thought was so unbearable, she snatched up two twigs of hawthorn and began frantically trying to plait them into a crown - an act of desperation, and totally illogical. Yet making offerings to the fairies had worked for Phyllis's aunt and, as Phyllis herself had pointed out, there might be truths and possibilities *beyond* the grip of reason.

Fashioning a crown, however, was much harder than she'd realized. The recalcitrant twigs didn't seem to want to bend, but kept obstinately springing back at her, thwarting her attempts to twist them into a circle. Having dislodged clouds of blossom and scratched herself on the thorns, she finally went in search of pliers and some string. Both took a while to locate and, even with their help, the resulting crown looked decidedly skew-whiff and sadly short on blossom.

Yet it was with a sense of real achievement that she carried it upstairs and left it on the bedroom window-ledge. Whatever else, she had overcome her fears to an incredible degree: not only handling the loathsome plant, but actually tolerating its presence just outside the windowpane. Even without the agency of fairies, there was magic in the fact that she had broken the hawthorn's spell, at last.

She was woken by rays of sunshine nuzzling at the curtains, as if clamouring to come inside. Opening her eyes, she reached for her watch: 12.25. Impossible! To have slept for over nine hours in a strange bed, in an unfamiliar house, and without Patrick's comforting presence beside her, was something of a miracle.

Bemused, she went downstairs to the kitchen, where she was confronted by the mangled remains of the hawthorn, sitting on the table beside the pliers and the string. Only then did she remember the crown, feeling immediately embarrassed by her credulity last night. How could she have been so gullible as to go along with some Irish superstition?

Having made a cup of tea and demolished another slice of cake, she returned upstairs to wash and dress. As she drew back the bedroom curtains, she noticed to her astonishment that the hawthorn crown had gone. She stared at the empty window-ledge, rubbing her eyes in disbelief. The crown *must* be there; it must be! The ledge was too high up for any prowling cat or fox to have dislodged it, and too wide for it to have fallen off. Nor could it have blown off, since there hadn't been a breath of wind last night, and the weather was still sultry and quiescent. None the less, she peered down at the ground below, to make absolutely certain, but there was no sign of any prickly circlet, or even broken twigs. Could some bird have carried it off - a buzzard or a crow, perhaps? But that made no sense either. No creature would be tempted by a tangled mass of thorns.

She sank down on the bed, totally perplexed. Other questions were jostling in her mind. Why did she feel so different: upbeat and energized, whereas normally if she took a sleeping pill, she would wake fuzzy and lethargic? And all the worries oppressing her last night – the anguish over Patrick and the future of their relationship – seemed to have completely disappeared. She was no longer even anxious about the impasse with her mother, or the mounting pressures at work. It was as if every problem in her life was now open to solution.

Suddenly, on impulse, she began hurling things into her case and pulling on her clothes. There wasn't time to wash. She had to drive back *now* – this instant – to activate the blessings showered on this morning. Those blessings were indisputable - as strong, as real, as the beating of her heart, though transmitted through some agency she couldn't understand. If

she tried to claim they had been granted by the fairies in return for a hawthorn crown, she would be derided as a crackpot. She *had* no explanation; couldn't even begin to say how the crown had vanished, or why she felt so extraordinarily empowered. All she knew was that if she went home straight away, her bond with Patrick would not only be cemented, but endure throughout the span of both their lives.

Seizing her case, she ran downstairs, scrawled a note for Phyllis, grabbed her bag and jacket and slammed the door, replacing the key beneath the brick before getting into the car.

As she drove off down the winding line, she suddenly spotted a bank of hawthorn in full bloom; the mass of creamy flowers resembling a lacy wedding veil flung across the hedge. She hadn't even noticed it when she'd arrived here in the dwindling evening light. But now it was shining in the sun; its heady scent attracting bees and butterflies.

Stopping the car, she scrambled out and started picking armfuls of the stuff – a child again; a London child, with no trees near her home, delighted by the prospect of free flowers. Now, as then, the thorns tore her dress and scratched her hands, but this time she didn't care. She was returning not to punishment and thrashings but to happiness and peace. Hawthorn was the flower of love, and she had a strong, deep-seated instinct that the minute she got home, Patrick would rush to greet her – and greet her with a ring.

The wedding would be next May, with the hawthorns in full bridal attire, bestowing sacred blessings on the marriage.

And, as she drove away – to Patrick - she saw herself reflected in the mirror: a shower of blossom-confetti in her hair.