

**NO 3**  
**Part 3**  
**ALL CHANGE**

Book keeping. Now, it's a decent enough way to earn a living and it's served me well but it can get a bit overwhelming at times. You know what I'm saying here, don't you? So many people leave everything to the last minute and there are loads of accounts that have the same deadline, so you can end up having to work a twenty hour day. The upside is, of course, that there are periods when you get quite a lot of leisure time.

People are very variable in the preparations they make, as you might expect. Some of them pitch up with everything so well organised that all you have to do is feed the figures into the computer and it does it all for you. Others arrive on the doorstep with two or three bags of receipts, no indication what they're for or whether they're really business expenses at all. I mean, I have my doubts about Snickers bars, cans of cola and salt and vinegar crisps, if you're making your living as a maths tutor or heeling shoes. But it's not really up to me to decide, so I just do my best.

It'd been one of those really hectic times, when there'd hardly been the chance to wash my undies or make a sandwich, so I'd not been down the hill for what felt like ages but was really only a couple of weeks. The 'For Sale' notice at No. 3 took me by surprise. Who'd done that, I wondered? I made a note of the estate agent's phone number and resolved to get in touch with them. Maybe Fiona would like to come and visit it with me. Not that we could buy it, of course, but it still intrigued me, in spite of my apprehension at the thought of returning. If we were going there legitimately, nothing about the place could spook me. Could it?

As work had been so full-on, all I really wanted was go to the park and chill out listening to music or reading chick lit. I wonder why it's so denigrated as a genre? I mean, it takes a bit of doing to write something that holds people's attention and they're full length novels, so can't be run off in the odd half hour between doing the ironing and making supper. I know they're a bit formulaic but that's not the point. Not to me, anyway. At least you know there's a happy ending on the way and the two main people will end up in each other's arms. Aaahhh.

So, Fiona and I went to the estate agent – Gloria James - and booked a viewing. She made the appointment for exactly half an hour after the previous one, so she wouldn't have to make two trips. There hadn't been a lot of interest in the place, so she said. Maybe that's because of the general state of disrepair. It'd cost a small fortune to get it to most people's idea of habitable, as it was quite a big house – five bedrooms and four reception rooms – and it was falling apart. I feel like that sometimes, don't you? You get up from the chair and expect to have left your leg behind or at least a foot or a couple of toes. The passage of time, I expect. I don't remember feeling like that when I was twenty.

It was news to me that there were any big houses like that round here at all. Most of them seem pretty pokey. It'd be an expensive job to sort it out and in spite of the general run down character, it was still a lot of money being asked. Gloria said it'd have to be a cash buyer. Something to do with mortgage companies not wanting to take risks but she didn't tell us what the risks might be. Said that she'd give us all the gen if we liked the house enough to consider moving into it. I guess she thought we were a couple.

We got there on the dot of the appointed hour, just in time to see the previous viewer leaving. He was a chap in his forties, I suppose, with a pleasant, open sort of face that looked a bit weather beaten, like he worked in the open, on a building site, maybe, or the bin lorries. He was one

of those types that looked fit and healthy and could eat for England and still remain trim. I recognised him from somewhere but you see so many people around, it's never really something you can be sure of, is it? Anyway, I said hello and all the usual social niceties, which he returned before going on his way.

Gloria – or the Big G, as Fiona had nicknamed her, on account of her being the boss - took us round the house herself. It was a total tip. No point in telling you the details. Suffice it to say that whoever lived here, whenever that might have been, wasn't house proud. But as ever, the garden was beautiful and full of the splendour of the season.

She showed us the outbuildings next and the big shed was as immaculate as the house was unkempt. There were loads of CDs all neatly shelved that I hadn't noticed when looking through the window, some unused and lots more in neat covers, all beautifully designed and presented with the names of the performers and the programme. I could have stayed there for hours but Gloria didn't have time, so we went to the smaller shed. That, too, was perfect. Sparse, as I'd discovered when feeding the cats but on closer inspection, it'd been used at some point as a library. Behind heavy curtains were literally hundreds of books, all neatly lined up in subject order, starting A for Architecture and finishing with Z for Zoology. The authors in each section were in alphabetical order, too. This was getting more spooky by the minute.

Fiona asked her who was selling the house and if she could tell us something of its history but she was very cagey, said it was all being done through a solicitor somewhere in Northumberland and the owner was keeping out of it all. Anyway, we'd overrun our half hour slot, so we said our goodbyes and told Gloria we wouldn't be thinking of making an offer on the place. She didn't look that surprised but I suppose secretly, she'd have liked the commission.

Life carried on its usual humdrum fashion. I've got no complaints and didn't have then, either. In my experience, excitement is overrated. I always glanced over at the house when I passed but the For Sale sign stayed where it was and Gloria's car was never there, so it seemed there wasn't much hope of anyone buying it.

Then, one Thursday afternoon, I was coming back from the supermarket loaded up with shopping, when the guy who'd been viewing the place was coming down the drive. I wondered if he was considering buying it, so I called over to him and he came across to talk to me. He told me that he goes to the house twice a week to manage the garden, always taking his own equipment; and early every morning he goes over to fill up the bird feeders. He's never seen his employer but his money is put in an envelope which he takes out of the box containing the bird food. He tops it up once a week with cash provided by whoever pays his wages. He got the job through a friend who'd moved to Ireland and he hadn't been told anything about the place before he started beyond what his duties would be and how he'd be paid. The same arrangement is still in place and he viewed the house because he was intrigued by it all, especially by who it was who clearly cared about the outside of the property but was happy to live in a ruin.

Before we parted, we looked over at the house. I could have sworn there was a face at the window but it's easy to be fooled by shadows and shards of light and it could simply have been a question of seeing what you hope to see. I turned to the gardener and said goodbye, maybe we'll bump into one another again. I looked back once more at the window – I don't know why - and the curtain had been drawn. I picked up my shopping and returned home.

I guess there are some things in life we're simply not meant to know.