

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Mixed Blessings

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

For Venus Stanton, the attractive young vicar of Thurston, life could not be better. When she first came to this traditional parish, with its beautiful church and conservative congregation, many people found it hard to accept a woman priest. After a tricky start, however, she is now accepted by most of her parishioners, even though some people cannot and will not recognise her.

But vicars have their personal lives as well, although many people often forget this, and to the delight and surprise of the parish Venus is to marry Nigel, the doctor from the local practice. Her eleven-year old daughter Becky, after some misgivings, has accepted the idea and there is a joyous ceremony at the church, after which the happy pair set off for honeymoon in France. On their return, they try to settle down to their new life, but Venus soon finds that marriage, motherhood and her priestly duties do not always go together...

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About the Author

Also by Elvi Rhodes

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This book is for Fr Martin Morgan who, over several years, has made me aware of what a good parish priest is and does.

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ONE

VENUS WAS AWAKENED by the June sunlight streaming into her bedroom. She hadn't drawn the curtains last night - she couldn't think why - and the light was falling on to her face. But even before she opened her eyes, while she was still half asleep, she knew this was a special day, and in the same breath it came to her. 'It's my wedding day!' She said the words out loud.

No-one heard her. Why should they? The clock on the bedside table stood at ten past five: probably the whole country was still asleep. Certainly they would be in the Vicarage. Becky would be sleeping the deep sleep of a ten-year-old. She'd been late to bed last night and it would be a couple of hours before she surfaced. Ann, Venus's mother-in-law from her first marriage, might just be awake. In a way, Venus hoped she wasn't. *Her* first thoughts would almost certainly be of that other Saturday morning, almost twelve years ago, when her son had married Venus.

Dear Philip, Venus thought. And wherever he was - being a priest as well as his widow she knew where he was, wasn't believing in the hereafter part of her job description? - she knew he would be wishing her well. She lay still and thought about him for a little while, with nothing but love, and then her thoughts turned to Nigel, who, in a very few hours, she would marry.

There were times when she had thought this day would never come. She seemed to have been waiting for ever, though in fact it was only seven months since she had sought the Bishop's permission to marry Nigel. That, as a

priest serving in his diocese, she had had to do. In something as important as marriage he had to give her the go-ahead. He'd been very nice about it, not at all discouraging, but he'd said, 'It is not the fact that your young man is a Roman Catholic, but rather that you have known him only a short time, and as yet I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him at all. So you must be patient. And when the time does come -' he'd added, much to her delight, 'since you're a very busy lady with a parish to run it will come sooner than you think - I myself will marry you!' But then he'd always been kind to her.

'It will have to be in your own church, St Mary's, Thurston,' he'd told her. 'But since your young man is a Roman Catholic, I would expect you to invite Father Seamus to play a prominent part. I know Father Seamus quite well and I'm sure he'd want to do that.'

He'd been right about Father Seamus, Nigel's parish priest. He was most cooperative. He knew there was no prospect at all of him losing Nigel. When it came to Sundays, and any other day of obligation, she and Nigel, though both of them living and worshipping in the village of Thurston, would part company - he to St Patrick's, she to do her job as Vicar of St Mary's. They would take part in almost identical services, say the same prayers, hear the same readings from the gospels - but not together. They both felt strongly about this, that it was wrong - even sinful. It must seem as stupid to God, they'd agreed, as it did to them. But that's how it was and they must accept it.

It was far too early to get up. The wedding wasn't until noon and she didn't want to be mooning around, getting in everyone's way all morning, so not without difficulty she settled back against the pillows and allowed herself the luxury of simply thinking. Naturally, she thought about Nigel. He would still be in bed, unless he had had any night calls which had taken him out. She hoped he had made an arrangement with Sonia, his partner in the practice, that if

there were any calls she would take them. He was to take the inside of a week off from the practice – he hadn't been able to get a locum any more than she had managed to get another priest to take over St Mary's. There was someone for tomorrow but she had to be back in harness by the following Sunday. Mrs Nigel Baines I shall be then, she thought. The Reverend Venus Baines.

And this, she thought now, was the last time in the foreseeable future that she would lie in this bed alone. From today Nigel would lie beside her. When she turned to him he would be there, he would put his arms around her, he would hold her. She looked forward to that so much, indeed, she longed for it. The last six months had not been easy in that respect, but now they were almost over. And of course, the shared bed was not the only change their marriage would bring. There were others. For a start, Nigel would be obliged to move into the Vicarage because as incumbent of the parish this was where she had to live. Nigel didn't mind that. He had a small flat which he would be happy to leave. She had asked him if he was sure he wasn't marrying her just to get better accommodation. He'd said, 'Oh dear, you've seen through me! Actually, I was looking for a place large enough to take my piano in comfort. And my CD collection.' He was a music lover. Their first date had been to a concert in Brompton. Rachmaninov and Sibelius.

And then, of course, they would eat together, shop together, spend their leisure time together – not that, between a doctor and a parish priest, both busy, there would be acres of leisure – and, very important, she thought, we will look after Becky together.

Becky, as well as her best friend, Anna Brent, was to be her bridesmaid. For weeks now she had been wild with excitement about this. It was one of the things, Venus thought, which had reconciled her to me marrying again! Becky had been more or less allowed to choose the dresses.

Apricot silk, ankle length, a wreath of small flowers in the hair, silver shoes, small posies to carry, which were to be delivered from the florist later that morning. Anna's mother, Sally, had made the dresses and she would be getting the girls ready. What Becky didn't know was that Nigel had bought each of the girls a slender silver necklace with a pendant heart, as his present to them.

The best man, Angus Macdonald, a Scotsman with whom Nigel had trained, had travelled from the Yorkshire Dales where he and his wife shared a practice. Until yesterday, when he'd arrived in Thurston, though she'd heard a lot about him she'd never met him. She'd taken to him at once. It was a pity, he'd said, that his wife couldn't come with him. For one thing she had to look after the practice in his absence, and for another she had three small children. Angus was staying at the Ewe Lamb, which now had two rooms for letting. He would have stayed with Nigel except that Nigel's mother and his Aunt Veronica were there, having come over from Quilty, in Ireland, where Nigel was born and brought up. Both ladies were wild with excitement, especially Aunt Veronica, who had never crossed the water before. When Venus and Nigel had met them at Gatwick the previous day Veronica had been struck dumb by it all. 'Which won't be for long,' Nigel had said afterwards. 'Aunt Veronica could talk a glass eye to sleep!'

Looking back, she'd been a bit afraid Nigel's mother, when they'd become engaged, might not approve of her, that she wouldn't be happy about her son marrying out of his church. 'Don't worry!' Nigel had assured her. 'She's happy that I'm marrying at all! She thought it would never happen.'

'Why didn't it?' Venus asked him. She could hardly believe that he hadn't been snapped up, and she knew he'd had a relationship though it had been before he'd come to Thurston.

'Because I hadn't met you,' he'd said.

She looked at the clock again. It was still too early to get up. She would like to phone Nigel; ask how he was, tell him how much she loved him. Her mother would be horrified at the thought. It appeared – she had said it in no uncertain terms – that for the bride and groom to have any contact on the day of the wedding before the ceremony took place was to invite the worst possible bad luck. She had recited several instances, known to her, ranging from a broken leg (the groom) to being left at the altar (the bride). I'm not superstitious, Venus told herself, of course she wasn't, she wouldn't believe any of it, but better not risk it, eh? She wouldn't phone. Nor did Nigel phone her. Possibly his mother was of the same persuasion as hers.

She hoped Becky wouldn't waken too soon. It would be all go once she had. And then her mother would arrive and she'd be like a clucking hen with chickens – bless her heart for she meant well. She will drag my protesting father in her wake, Venus thought.

The gentlest knock sounded on the door. If she hadn't already been awake she wouldn't have heard it, but she could guess who it was and she was right. Ann entered, carrying a small tray set with one of the best china cups, a small pot of tea and a thick slice of brown toast with Cooper's Oxford marmalade.

'Good-morning, Venus dear! I didn't waken you, did I?' she asked anxiously.

'No, I've been awake a little while now,' Venus said. 'A cup of tea is exactly what I need.'

Ann poured it, no milk, no sugar. Venus sat upright and took it from her. 'Aren't you going to have one yourself?' she enquired.

'I already have,' Ann said.

There was a short silence while Venus sipped the tea, neither of them quite knowing what to say next. It was an unusual situation. Then Venus found her voice.

'I can't thank you enough ...' she began.

‘Whatever for?’ Ann said. ‘It’s only a cup of tea.’

Venus shook her head. ‘You know perfectly well I’m not talking about the tea. I meant I can’t thank you enough just for being here today. It wouldn’t have been the same without you, but I can imagine how you feel. Or think I can. It’s a phrase we use so slickly, and it’s often not true.’

‘It’s all right, love,’ Ann said. ‘I wanted to be here and it was good of you to let me come.’

‘I wouldn’t have dreamt of doing otherwise,’ Venus said.

They talked for a while – about how excited Becky was, about what a lovely, sunny day it looked like being in spite of the weather forecast, which promised otherwise – and then Ann said, ‘I’ll leave you to it, dear. I’m sure there’s no need for you to get up just yet. You have a long day ahead of you.’

That was certainly true, Venus thought. And before it all rushed in on her she must say her Office, which she must do every day, wherever she was. Today she would do it sitting up in bed, propped against her pillows. The psalm, the Old Testament and New Testament readings, all laid down for the day. Today’s chosen psalm, however, was full of woe and foreboding, totally inappropriate, since all she wanted to do was to praise God. Then, though she read that dutifully, she chose another to follow it, the very last in the Book of Psalms. That one said it all: ‘Praise the Lord ... Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.’

Now, she thought, I really must get up. She couldn’t bear to stay in bed another minute. In any case, Sandra the village hairdresser was coming to do her hair before she opened up her salon, and I must shower, Venus thought, before she can start on it. It was very kind of Sandra to offer because Saturday morning was probably the busiest time of the week for her. Most of the village ladies went to Sandra, though a few took themselves off to Brampton in search of something they reckoned would be more sophisticated – and would certainly cost more.

Naturally, she would not be wearing a veil, not for a second marriage. She had bought a hat. In fact, it was so large-brimmed that she wondered how she would receive all the kisses which would come her way. Especially from other large-hatted ladies. But didn't it go wonderfully with her cream silk, long-skirted suit and her beautiful, totally frivolous and fragile high-heeled shoes, on which she had spent more money than she'd ever spent on shoes in her life? They would probably be killing her before the end of the day, she thought.

She moved about stealthily in the silent house - presumably Ann had gone back to bed - and then she decided to take a turn round the garden. Missie had woken up the moment she'd heard Venus on the stairs and she'd already let her out into the garden in case she should disturb Becky. Even so early in the day it was pleasantly warm with the sun already bringing out the scents from the flowers, particularly from the roses. The irises were splendid; so tall, so stately. They thrived in this rather alkaline soil. She had once read somewhere that if one took the trouble to study the varieties and planted them in the right spots it would be possible to have one iris or another in flower on every day of the year. But then, every season had something to offer in the garden and June, perhaps, was the best month of all.

Missie was sniffing around enjoying herself. She was a six-year-old spaniel cross bitch, black-and-white, with drooping spaniel ears, lustrous brown eyes and a beautiful fringed tail. They had had her from the Rescue Centre and she was the light of Becky's life. Helping to plan the wedding, Becky had seriously wanted Missie to be one of the bridesmaids and on this Venus had compromised by saying that she could go to church as long as she was on the lead and in the charge of Grandma, whom she adored. Missie was a well-behaved, obedient little dog and Venus had often taken her to church, especially during the week,

so there should be no difficulty about that, she thought. Also, her father would take Missie for a walk over the Downs before the wedding. And in a weak moment, badgered by Becky, she had agreed that she might wear an apricot-coloured bow. Am I mad? Venus asked herself now.

Everything was so peaceful, not a sound anywhere – and then suddenly the peace was shattered. Becky had woken up and was hammering at her bedroom window, and Missie barking with excitement at the sight of her.

From that moment it was rush, rush, rush. Venus insisted that Becky should eat a proper breakfast. ‘I shan’t let you put on your dress until you’ve done so,’ she threatened. A resigned look on her face, Becky downed a bowl of cereal and most of a boiled egg.

‘And you have to eat as well, Mummy,’ she said.

Venus ate a slice of toast, reluctantly.

By the time they had eaten, Sandra was there to do Venus’s hair. Ann took Becky off. ‘I’ll look after her until Anna Brent and her mother arrive,’ she promised. Then as they were leaving the room, Mrs Foster sailed in, her husband walking a couple of yards behind her, like the Duke of Edinburgh behind the Queen.

‘Dad, when are you going to take Missie for her walk?’ Venus asked. ‘Do you think now – or later?’

‘I’ll do both, love,’ her father said. ‘Best be on the safe side.’ The truth was, he’d be glad to be away from all the fuss and palaver. He clipped on Missie’s lead and set off for the Downs. ‘I’ll not hurry back,’ he said. ‘You don’t need me here.’

Becky called after him as he went out of the door, ‘Don’t let her get all muddy, Grandpa!’

‘I won’t,’ he promised.

‘Your hair’s come up well,’ Sandra said a little later, looking over Venus’s shoulder at her reflection in the mirror.

‘Yes, I’m pleased with it,’ Venus said. Of course it would be mostly hidden under her hat.

While Sandra had been blow-drying her hair – fortunately she was not a hairdresser who talked all the time – she had thought about Nigel, wondered what he was doing at this moment. It wouldn’t be long now before they’d be together for ever. She hoped, oh, she did so hope, that she’d be the wife he’d always wanted, that she’d make him happy for the rest of his life. She loved him so much. She had loved Philip to the same degree, of course, and it had never seemed possible, though now it was, that she could do the same again.

And so the morning went. Sally Brent came and looked after the bridesmaids; Venus, after her hair was done, was taken over by Ann. Her mother inspected her father – who had now returned from his walks with Missie – checking that he was properly turned out. She was not actually heard to say ‘Have you got a clean handkerchief, Ernest?’ but it was certain she would have. Venus had already learnt, from the weddings she had done at St Mary’s, that it was the mother of the bride who was all-powerful on these occasions. Nothing was outside her jurisdiction.

Dead on time the cars arrived. Venus had protested all along that it was nonsense to hire limousines to take them the few hundred yards to the church. She would happily have walked, along with her family, but the thought had horrified her mother. ‘What would people think?’ she’d demanded. ‘We don’t want it to look as if we were doing things on the cheap, do we?’ Then with her usual common sense she’d added, ‘Besides, it could be raining cats and dogs – and where would you get a wedding car at short notice?’

Venus took a last, critical look at herself in the long mirror in the hall. I wish I had stuck at it and slimmed down from a size fourteen to a twelve, she thought. I wish I’d had gold highlights in my hair instead of simply a gold

rinse – not that it would show in church, but sooner or later the hat would have to come off. She couldn't go to bed in it. She wished she was six inches taller. Five-feet-two was so undistinguished. But the dress was lovely and her shoes were still wonderful and, as yet, not in the least painful.

When the bridesmaids came into the hall she turned away from the mirror to inspect them. They were perfection, the colour of their dresses suited both of them equally, even though Becky was dark-haired and Anna's hair a pale gold.

'I hope the Bishop won't be late!' Mrs Foster said as she saw Venus into the bridal car with Ernest.

'Oh, Mother! Of course he won't be late!' Venus assured her. 'He has to be in church before me. I imagine he's done a few hundred weddings in his time! He knows the drill.' But her mother had said just enough to sow the smallest seed of doubt in her. Supposing his car had broken down on the motorway? Supposing there'd been an accident? And supposing he'd been called to the bedside of a dying VIP in the church? Where would his loyalties lie?

'Don't be so bloody silly, Mavis!' Ernest said to his wife. 'Get yourself and Missie into your car or you'll be the one who's late!' It was a sign of his taut nerves, Venus knew, that he swore at her mother, and of her mother's that she took it without protest.

Missie, not to be outdone, had a fit of temperament and wanted to go in the bridal car instead of with Mrs Foster. She pulled on her lead, and barked. 'It's what comes of tying a fancy bow on a dog, dressing her beyond her station,' Ernest said.

And then at last Venus was walking up the aisle on her father's arm, and there was Nigel waiting. So was the Bishop, but it was Nigel Venus saw first. He half turned around and gave her a loving smile. He looked wonderful in his smart suit, Venus thought, though his reddish hair was still slightly untamed. He should have had it cut, but she

was glad he didn't. It made him look himself, and human. She smiled back at him and for a moment there was no-one in the church but the two of them. Venus knew at once, as sure as sure, that everything was going to be all right. Not just for now, but for always.

And then she looked at the Bishop. He had taken off his mitre and it had been placed on the altar by his chaplain (a kind of Lord-in-Waiting, though she always thought of him as a well-trained, rather superior nanny), who had relieved him of his crozier, the bishop's crook. Over a red cassock he wore a rochet, a shortish surplice, which went into the most beautiful bishop's sleeves, gathered in at the wrists and, as if that were not enough, a chimere, a sort of sleeveless coat, in red, open at the front so that his exquisite pectoral cross, set with amethysts and a ruby or two and lying against his breast, was in full view. His abundant white hair shone silver in the sun which streamed in through the window and fell directly on him, as if straight from heaven. Her swift thought was how glad she was that she'd decided against the long dress with bishop's sleeves which she'd at first planned for herself. Sartorially, she would have been totally outshone by him – as indeed she was now; there was no doubt about it. All these wonderful vestments, which in their ceremonial place, as today, she liked, dated from the time of the Roman Empire. They certainly knew how to dress! And as she knew well, they were not worn to enhance the Bishop, they were worn to the glory of God – though they certainly added to the shine of the wedding.

But the words of the service which now began, simple, forthright, intensely moving, saying everything which needed to be said, transcended all the finery, both the Bishop's and hers. They were from the heart, as were the prayers which were said by Father Seamus. Nigel's responses were firm and strong, and his Irish accent more than usually pronounced. She opened her eyes very wide,

trying not to let a single tear escape. She had little doubt that by now her mother would be in floods.

Everything, absolutely everything, went without a hitch. The bridesmaids, as well as looking enchanting, behaved impeccably, as in the end did Missie. When the ceremony was over the Bishop, having donned his mitre and been given back his crozier to pronounce the blessing, processed back down the aisle, preceded by the chaplain carrying the beautiful processional cross which, only now did Venus remember, had been given a long time ago by the Frazer family, benefactors of St Mary's over many generations. If the Hon. Miss Amelia Frazer, the last of the line, knew that it was being used at my wedding, Venus thought, she would not be pleased.

She and Nigel (her husband, she reminded herself!) stood outside the church door, greeting people – as did the Bishop. He was, after all, everyone's Father in God, not just hers. One or two guests who knew what was what kissed his splendid episcopal ring, but not many. That was not quite St Mary's, Thurston. And then it was time for the photographs and for these they moved on to the lawn in front of the church, which had been mown within an inch of its life.

When the photographs were over, and they seemed to take forever because not only had the official photographer been hard at it, doing every possible grouping so that no-one was left out, but almost everyone else seemed to have brought a camera to record the event, the guests moved towards the parish hall for the refreshments. As she'd been promised, everything was wonderful: the flowers, the food, there was even music. The Bishop introduced Venus to a pleasant, quietly dressed lady who, it turned out, was his wife. Venus thought she had probably looked the same when she was the wife of a young curate all those years ago, though it was difficult now to think of the Bishop as anything as lowly as that young curate. I daresay, Venus

thought, she long ago gave up the struggle to equal him dresswise.

Moving around by Nigel's side, she met Bertha Jowett. Bertha, until the last few months, had lived in the cottage which Venus's parents bought from her when she moved into a home because she could no longer look after herself. She hadn't thought Bertha would want to come to the wedding, but she'd accepted with alacrity, while making it quite clear that church services of any kind were a load of claptrap. From time to time Venus would visit her in The Beeches and the two of them would have a game of Scrabble, which Bertha invariably won. But then, Venus told herself, Bertha was in the front row when brains were given out. She was not one of St Mary's congregation, far from it. The very thought of being taken for such would horrify her because she was an avowed atheist. 'Though she seems quite to like me,' Venus had once told Nigel, 'she thinks I am seriously misguided, but you could say we are good friends.'

'I'm pleased to see you, Bertha,' Venus said now. 'I shall introduce you to the Bishop.'

'He seems a pleasant man,' Bertha said graciously. 'But I am not fazed by bishops. I have met several in my time. Underneath all that fancy dress they're mortal men.'

'You're looking very well, Miss Jowett,' Nigel said.

'And so are you, young man,' she replied, her eyes glinting.

Eventually, everyone took their places at the tables. The food and wine were delicious, the speeches, mercifully short. Angus Macdonald told a few anecdotes about Nigel which went down well. Then, to Venus's great surprise, the Blessed Henry said some rather nice things about her. Henry Nugent had been her senior churchwarden ever since she'd arrived in Thurston; always supportive, always on her side; she didn't know what she would have done without him. The Bishop and his lady ate little, joined in the

toasts, and then left. Soon after that Nigel and Venus left, going back to the Vicarage so that she could change. Her shoes had so far stood up to everything nobly, though whether they would have seen her through the dancing which was to follow later was another matter.

And then she and Nigel were driven to the airport to catch the plane for the short trip to Bergerac where they were to stay in a hotel overnight before driving in a hired car to spend their too-short honeymoon in the south of the Dordogne, where Nigel had been lent a house by one of his more affluent friends.

TWO

THEY ARRIVED AT the hotel in Bergerac, having picked up the hire car at the airport, with half-an-hour to spare before dinner and were shown to their room. The hotel had been recommended by Nigel's friend James, the man who was lending them his house. 'It isn't posh, but it's comfortable,' he'd said. 'And it's in the main street so it's handy for everything.'

Venus watched while Nigel signed their names in the register - Doctor and Mrs Nigel Baines - and tried not to look smug. They had not said they were on honeymoon, nor had Nigel ordered a bottle of champagne to be served in the bedroom - a dead giveaway, though whether of a legally married couple or an illicit weekend who could tell? In any case, neither of them needed champagne. Life was heady enough at the moment.

They looked at the huge bed, and then at each other. The question and the longing was there in their eyes. Why not now? Why not? Nigel took Venus into his arms and kissed her. He ran his fingers over the contours of her face as if she were a piece of precious sculpture. Then suddenly he said, 'No! Not now, my darling. We have all night. We have the rest of our lives!'

They went down to the dining room, where they ate a delicious meal, and when the meal was over they went to bed. And there the love they had for each other found satisfaction and rapture beyond anything they had dreamt of.

Next morning, after an early breakfast, they collected the car from the hotel garage, and drove off. Neither of them had ever been in the south-west of France before. The road from Bergerac to Bordeaux was a straight one and even on a Sunday it was busy with *camions* laden with wine for export, but after fifteen miles or so they left it, at a turning signposted 'Calmet'. Calmet had been described in the guidebook as one of the Dordogne's oldest *bastide* towns.

Driving into it Nigel said, 'It certainly looks as though it's been here for ever.' The *place* was bordered on all four sides by wide pavements, half-hidden under massive stone arches. Though the house James had loaned them was on the outskirts of Calmet, they made straight for the town centre because James had told them there was a Sunday Mass at eleven o'clock, which, on what was such a special occasion, they wanted to attend.

Even though Venus was not a Roman Catholic, because at the moment she was not in England she had been told, and chose to believe, that she would be allowed to take communion together with her husband. It was not so in England. Nigel's church would have forbidden him to do so at St Mary's, or Venus at St Patrick's.

The church was crowded and noisy and the Mass took place at the speed of light. The two of them walked up the aisle together and took communion standing side by side. This might be the only occasion for who knew how long that they would be allowed to do this and, especially at the beginning of their marriage, it meant a lot to both of them.

Afterwards they strolled around Calmet, stopped for a glass of wine at a pavement bar, and watched the world, or this lovely part of it, go by. Then they had lunch in a small restaurant, crowded with families of several generations.

'Does no-one in France eat Sunday lunch at home?' Venus asked.

The meal was wonderful. So many courses, but only a little of each. It was four o'clock before Nigel paid their

surprisingly modest bill, and they left. After that they bought eggs, milk, bread, fresh from the second baking of the day, cold meats from the *charcuterie*, and a few salad items. Then they picked up the key from the agent and set off to find the house, which was, they were told, three kilometres away up a narrow, climbing road. Blonde cattle, looking incredibly clean, grazed in the fields on one side of the road, and on the other side grew a crop of something Nigel said was maize. The house was a farm cottage, and spaced around it, but not too close, were four smaller houses and one or two barns. There was no sign of life from any of them.

‘Well,’ Nigel said, ‘James did promise it would be peaceful.’

There was a narrow strip of garden – badly in need of attention – at the front of the house. Beyond that the land sloped away for several acres, all of which were close-planted with sunflowers, now in full bloom; huge heads the size of plates, bursting with bright colour, waited to be harvested. Inside the house it felt chilly, but exploring the outhouses they found stores of wood, both sawn logs and kindling, so Nigel soon had a fire going.

It was the start of a wonderful week. In the daytime they walked or drove around the area, though never very far. They took picnics – fresh bread, local cheese, red wine, fruit. After dark, which came early so far south, they walked down to Calmet and ate in one or other of the small restaurants, then strolled back, hand in hand. Just to hold a man’s hand again, Venus thought, such a small thing in itself, was so comforting. At night they made love, and then they made love again, and finally fell asleep in each other’s arms. And in the mornings, they awoke to the delight of each other and everything renewed.

Not until towards the end of the week did they talk about home, and then it stole slowly back into their speech. Becky, staying with her grandparents, they agreed, would

be spoilt rotten. Nigel's mother and Aunt Veronica would be back in Ireland – 'Let's go and visit them in the spring,' Venus said.

'And as soon as we get back,' Nigel said, 'I must leave my flat and move everything to the Vicarage.'

'And after that, shall we give a dinner party?' Venus suggested. 'Who shall we invite?'

Nigel shook his head. 'Not too soon. I want you to myself for a bit longer. Later, yes.'

He was right, Venus thought. Between the demands of her job and his there would be too little time together.

Mostly, they talked about themselves: what they did as children, where they went to school, who had been their best friends, what they liked, what they didn't. They were eager to learn everything about each other; nothing was too small or too insignificant. Venus found herself able to talk about Philip and Nigel told her about his former girlfriends. It's OK to do that, Venus thought, because all we want now, all we will ever want, we will find in each other.

'In one way,' she said to Nigel on their last night in Calmet, 'I want this week never to end. In another way I am so looking forward to all the new things waiting for us.'

'But there'll still be the old ones,' Nigel said. 'They won't go away.'

'I know that,' she agreed. 'But we'll be doing them together, or if not actually *doing* them together, at least we can talk about things. Not that you will tell me about your patients, and not that I will tell you what's private to any of my parishioners – though I do remember a girl in a parish where I once lived who thought that after the Vicar had heard confessions he went home and had a cosy chat about them with his wife! "So what do you think Mrs Thompson's been up to now! You'll never guess!"'

In the end, Saturday came, and it was time to go home – and now, for both of them, there was something new, and

special, about that word. They were sad to leave, but not unhappy. Back in Thurston would be the real beginning of their new life together.

Early on Saturday morning, they drove to Bergerac and handed back the car at the airport. They had a good flight back and Venus's father, as promised, was there to meet them from the plane. Venus had hoped Becky might be with him but she wasn't.

'She went off with Anna and Sally to an animal sanctuary somewhere or other,' her father told her. 'And she's staying overnight with them. Your Mum would have come with me but we weren't sure how Missie would be in the car so she's stayed behind with her. Did you have a good holiday?'

'Wonderful!' they said in unison. 'Is everything all right in Thurston?' Venus asked.

'Well, I haven't heard anything to the contrary so I expect it is,' Ernest said. That's my Dad, Venus thought. Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.

He drove them first to his own home. Her mother must have been watching out of the window for them. She was at the door before they were halfway up the path, Missie at her feet.

'Welcome home!' she said with a beaming smile. Missie ran forward and tried to climb up Venus's leg, which somehow touched her even more than her mother's greeting. The first time I've been away from her, she thought, and she remembers me!

'Is everyone OK here?' Nigel asked. 'Did my mother and Auntie Veronica get off to the airport all right?'

'Of course!' Mrs Foster said. 'Dad took them to Gatwick and stayed with them until they had to go through to the departure lounge. They're two very nice ladies. Your mother's invited us to visit her in Quilty. We think we might go next year. Neither of us has ever been to Ireland. Would you like a cup of tea? The kettle's on.'

'A quick one,' Venus said. 'And then I think we should get back to the Vicarage.' The truth was, she longed to be in her own home, and with Nigel. She had always liked coming home after a holiday, but this was extra-special. She was disappointed that Becky wasn't around to greet them, but then she told herself she was being silly. Why should she have given up a lovely outing with Anna and Sally just to say 'hello' an hour or two earlier?

'Did you go to church on Sunday?' she asked her mother.

'Of course we did, and Becky with us,' her mother said. 'But we didn't go in for coffee.'

That surprised Venus. Her mother loved the coffee bit, the meeting with everyone, exchanging views. Gossip, in fact.

'The Reverend Swinton preached a very good sermon,' Mrs Foster said. 'Are you sure you won't stay for a meal? I've got a nice piece of ham.'

'I'm sure Venus and Nigel have things to do at the Vicarage, Mavis,' her father said firmly. He was good at understanding feelings.

'Very well, then,' his wife said. 'And it's been lovely having Becky. I'll bring her back in the morning, so you can see her before she goes back to school.'

Back at the Vicarage Venus thought how wonderful it was, walking up the path together, both of them belonging there. She handed the keys to Nigel so that he could unlock the door and let them in. She wanted him to feel right from the start that it was as much his place as hers. 'I suppose I should carry you over the threshold,' he said. 'Or perhaps should you carry me as it's your house?'

'It's *our* home,' Venus said firmly. 'Make no mistake about that.'

Everything smelt fresh and clean. Ethel Leigh had been at it with her lavender-scented polish. Venus had first met Ethel when her husband, Ronnie, died and she had buried him. They weren't churchgoers. It was Venus's opinion that

Ethel had made her life's work looking after Ronnie and their daughter, Marilyn, who now no longer lived at home. Wanting something to fill in the time after her bereavement, Ethel had gone to help Bertha Jowett move out of her cottage and into The Beeches, sorting diligently and tactfully through half a lifetime's accumulation of goods and chattels without once upsetting Bertha. Then Venus, seeing the magic she'd wrought there, had asked her to give her a hand in the Vicarage. Now she came every Friday morning for three hours. Venus couldn't afford it, but she would rather go short of food than not find the money to pay Ethel. She hated housework. But now, with two incomes going into the pot, it might be possible to have Ethel more often.

Nigel took the suitcases straight upstairs to the bedroom. Venus followed him with smaller bags. When they'd put them down they stood and looked at each other.

'We're going to be oh so happy, my darling!' Nigel said.

'I know!' Venus agreed. 'How could we be otherwise?'

Soon afterwards Nigel set off for his flat to collect his car and bring back his first load of possessions. His piano would have to be moved by experts. They had agreed to decide later exactly where everything would go. Most of the rooms were a good size and Venus hadn't brought a lot of furniture when she first moved to Thurston from Clipton. There would probably be room for whatever Nigel wanted to bring. The Vicarage had been built for a large family.

'I should ring Henry,' Venus said.

Henry had been a pillar of strength to her ever since she'd arrived in Thurston, in spite of the fact that he hadn't wanted her there in the first place. Or, rather, she wouldn't have been his first choice. It was doubtful, Venus had faced the fact, if there were many in St Mary's who had wholeheartedly and honestly wanted her. Their previous vicar, who had been in the post for more than twenty years, had retired because of age and a certain amount of ill

health. Nine months after he had left there'd still been no sign of anyone to take his place until she had come along, and brought with her the tremendous drawback of being a woman. She had often thought that the Bishop had leaned on them to have her. Her only value, she had sometimes felt in the beginning, was that she was qualified to perform baptisms, marriages and funerals. But to Henry's great credit, she thought now, once he had given in to the inevitability of having her, he had supported her through thick and thin. Henry was waiting to retire, had been even before she came on the scene. He had been churchwarden at St Mary's for eleven years and they had both agreed that this was too long.

He answered the phone at once.

'Hi, Venus!' he said. 'Nice to have you back!'

'Nice to be back,' Venus replied, though she was not sure that was one hundred per cent true. Just a few more days away would have been welcome.

'Is everything all right?' she enquired. 'How did last Sunday go with George Swinton? My mother said he preached a good sermon.'

'Oh, he did! He did,' Henry said quickly.

'But what?' Venus asked. There was something in his voice, something not quite right.

'It's just that ... I take it your mother didn't tell you?'

'Tell me what?' she asked.

'So I'd better,' he said. 'If I don't, someone else will. Miss Frazer was there.'

She bit back the words which rose to her lips. They were not suitable for a parish priest to utter. Miss Frazer had not set foot in St Mary's since she had had the letter from the Bishop, more or less warning her off.

'What did she do this time?' Venus asked.

'Nothing,' Henry said. 'Nothing.'

'Oh, come on!' Venus protested. 'She can't just have done nothing! It's not in her to do nothing!' And then it

dawned on her. 'Did she take communion?' she asked.

'She did,' Henry admitted.

'You mean she walked up to the altar, took the bread and wine, then walked back to her pew?'

'Exactly that,' Henry said. 'As good as gold. And when the service was over she left the church. Not a word out of her. She didn't go in to coffee.'

This is not the time to think about Miss Frazer, Venus told herself firmly, and I'm not going to do it now. This is a happy day, a happy homecoming which I'm not going to spoil. Sufficient, she thought, to know that if I had been at the altar she would, in whatever spectacular way she could think of, have refused to take communion. And because I am a woman. Clearly, Miss Frazer had found out that Venus wouldn't be in church last Sunday. And that, for the moment, Venus decided, is all I'm going to think about it now. She doubted it would be the end. The repercussions would still go on but she would deal with them as they arose.

'She put a fifty-pound note in the plate,' Henry said. 'I suppose to show us what we're missing.'

'But everything else was all right?' Venus asked.

'Oh yes,' Henry said. 'Well, just the usual. The organ's breaking down again; we had a heavy rainstorm last Tuesday and the water's coming in through the chancel roof. And Mrs Braithwaite fell and broke her ankle because of a pothole in the church path. We shall have to get that mended - I mean the pothole.'

'Much as usual, then,' Venus said.

'Much as usual,' Henry agreed. 'It's nice to have you back!' he repeated.

'It's good to be back,' she told him again.

'Is everything all right?' Nigel asked when she'd put the phone down.

'Oh yes!' she said. 'A few odds and ends, that's all. I expect you'll find some in the practice when you start on