

It was always chilly in Ling Cottage, no matter the weather outside. Tonight was a mild, moonless evening in late March, yet Clemmie was shrouded in woollen layers as if it was winter. The house harboured a damp sort of cold that seemed to get into your very essence – into your bones, your blood, your soul.

Clemmie frowned and looked round, convinced she'd heard something. Prue had left a short while ago to drive the last of the Women's Guild ladies into the village, no doubt then being persuaded inside for tea, since she still hadn't returned home. Although the village was little more than a mile away, on nights like tonight, when the moors that surrounded the house were swallowed up by the darkness, Ling Cottage could feel very far from civilisation indeed.

'Hello?' she called. 'Is somebody th—'

A feline figure slunk from the darkness and wove itself around her feet, purring.

'Oh. It's you, puss.' Clemmie bent painfully to tickle her old tom Nelson between the ears and he rewarded her with a cold nose pressed against her calf.

So the decision had been made. With Mother gone, Prue had installed herself back at Ling Cottage, and life had carried on.

And Prue was right, Clemmie told herself as she moved a stack of letters – all opened once and carefully resealed – back into their correct place. It was good that they should keep each other company. They were in their mid-seventies now. The age of love affairs had long passed and they were all the family each had. Loneliness in old age was a terrible thing.

She lifted a yellowing letter from her pile and frowned. It looked as though . . . could it have been? The colouring on the lip of the upper flap looked different. As though the seal had been broken, then regummed and stuck back down.

Well, that was crossing the line. Going through her letters – her private papers! Clemmie slammed the drawer of the mahogany cabinet shut, relishing the satisfying *thunk* it made as it slid back into place.

*Thunk . . .*

White pain blossomed in Clemmie's brain, casting its roots far down into her body, and she heard herself scream.

That one, she thought as she stumbled on to her hands and knees, had been a lot less satisfying.

With an effort she pulled her fogged vision upwards to her attacker, standing over her with weapon poised to strike again. But the numbing pain was too great for surprise as she stared into familiar eyes.

The next blow came. And then another, darkness dogging its heels, and . . . oh dear. Such a lot of red, red blood, soaking into Mother's Turkish rug.

Prue did so hate mess.

