

# JOSEPHINE COX



## THE WOMAN WHO LEFT

THE NEW BESTSELLER

JOSEPHINE COX



*The Woman  
Who Left*

headline

Copyright © 2001 Josephine Cox

The right of Josephine Cox to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in hardback in 2001 by  
HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in 2002 by  
HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 0 7472 6634 4

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Polmont, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING  
A division of Hodder Headline  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.headline.co.uk](http://www.headline.co.uk)  
[www.hodderheadline.com](http://www.hodderheadline.com)

## TO MY READERS (and Brenda!)

If any of you are thinking of travelling on British Airways, watch out for Brenda (she's the little one who smiles at you as you enter the plane).

The hostesses are wonderful. The service is exemplary (as you would expect) and the food on our particular flight was superb – hot and delivered with a 'Brenda' smile.

But our little Brenda is somewhat over-enthusiastic, so keep your eyes peeled for her, especially as she prefers to deliver your food right into your lap – and in your face, and your shoes, and seat (in my case it was piping-hot mushroom stroganoff).

But she does it with 'that' smile, bless her cotton socks, and afterwards loses no time in delivering you to the loo where she'll despatch handfuls of tissues.

If British Airways gets rid of our Brenda, I'll never fly with them again!

Keep it up, Brenda – you're a little gem. (You made my day, anyway.)

Out with the stroganoff and on with the smile, that's what I say!

# CONTENTS



## PART ONE

### SUMMER, 1952 – THE LEGACY

I

## PART TWO

### AUGUST, 1952 – NEW BEGINNINGS

289

## PART THREE

### WINTER, 1952 – CONSEQUENCES

375

## PART FOUR

### FORGIVING

413

PART ONE



SUMMER, 1952  
THE LEGACY



## Chapter One



The Vale of Salmesbury, Blackburn, Lancashire

THE OLD MAN'S voice carried on the summer breeze. 'There'll be blue skies over . . . the white cliffs of Dover . . .' he sang. When the song was done he took to whistling, for he was a fine whistler and proud of it.

'You there! Stop that dreadful noise!' the woman shrieked at him from her bedroom window, but he didn't hear. He was too engrossed in his whistling. It was a fine day and he was a fortunate man to be carrying on this trade, when others out there trudged the streets to work that brought them no joy.

For more years than he cared to remember, Mike Ellis had brought his horse and cart along Scab Lane, delivering milk to the isolated families who lived hereabouts. It was a job he had loved, and would be sad to leave.



## JOSEPHINE COX

All too soon, it would be time for him to put his feet up and let some other poor devil climb out of his bed at four in the morning. But that was a small price to pay for the sights you saw before the world came awake: foxes scurrying for their dens, hares leaping across the horizon, and every kind of night animal imaginable making for home and safety. At four o'clock on a summer's morning like this, the skies were unbelievably beautiful . . . shot with wide, scintillating swathes of colour that few men were privileged to witness. Enthused by his happy lot, Mike began singing again, this time in an even louder voice.

Exasperated, the woman bawled, 'Damn and bugger it, Mikey Ellis! Will ye stop that confounded racket!'

Hair on end and the sleep still on her, she hung out of the bedroom window. 'You know I can't be doing with all that noise first thing of a morning.'

'Away with yer, Mabel, ye old misery,' Mike replied with a grin. 'You'll miss me when I'm retired. Happen you'll get a young fella-me-lad as couldn't sing even if he tried, an' it'd serve ye right, so it would.' He drew the horse to a halt outside the white picket-gate. 'So, what'll it be today, then?' Climbing down from his seat he patted the horse and gave it a knob of hay from his pocket. 'Come on now, missus, let's be having ye. I ain't got all day.'

## THE WOMAN WHO LEFT

Gathering her wits, Mabel Preston gave a lazy yawn. 'Just you wait there,' she replied with a coy grin. 'I'll be down in a minute.'

While he waited, Mike talked to the horse, like the old friend he was. 'She's a bit of a sourpuss,' he confided. 'By rights, I should be on my way to Maple Farm instead of hangin' around here to be pounced on. Oh aye! I'll get a smile from Louise Hunter, so I will – and a slice of cherry cake with a mug o' tea to wash it down.' He thought of Louise, and his expression softened. She was a good woman. Over the years she had faced some hard times and seen them away like the fighter she was.

He glanced warily at Mabel's door. 'This one's different – fancies herself as every man's pin-up, she does. She'll be down here any minute now, hair combed and lipstick on, an' with a smile on her face that'd put the fear o' God into any man!'

The very thought made him shiver. 'By! She thinks I don't know that she's got her sights set on me. I'm telling ye, that there Mabel Preston's got it into her head that I need a wife now I'm on the point of retiring, but she's got another think coming. What! She'd be after me every minute of the day. "Do this, do that. Out the bed with ye, Michael, there's work to be done!" I can hear her now, God help me.'

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to him. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' He turned every shade

of pink. 'I wouldn't put it past her to demand her marital rights an' all.' His eyes rolled with terror. 'By!' he shuddered to the horse. 'It don't bear thinking about.'

Preparing to make his escape, he was brought to a sudden halt when she hissed in his ear, 'Right then, Mikey, show me what you've got to offer.'

Swinging round, he gasped in dismay; Mabel Preston in full sail was a sight to daunt the bravest of men.

'Well?' When she smiled, he instinctively took a step backwards.

'Well *what?*' Mesmerised by her false teeth which flashed blindingly in the bright sunshine, he found himself rooted to the spot.

'Oh, really!' Spreading chubby hands over ample hips, she gave an unexpected twirl and almost knocked him over. 'Don't pretend you haven't noticed my new dress.'

Hanging like a sack at the waist and so tight round the neck it made her eyes bulge, the dress in question was sickly-brown with great yellow sunflowers all over.

'Well, what d'you think?' She had no intention of letting him off the hook!

At that moment in time, with Mabel's fat face plastered in make-up and her lips plumped out by those dazzling but ill-fitting teeth, poor Mike didn't

## THE WOMAN WHO LEFT

know *what* to think; however he knew he had better compliment her, or his life wouldn't be worth living. 'It's . . .' He gulped. 'It's lovely,' he muttered lamely. 'Just lovely!'

'I knew you'd like it.' Beaming with pleasure, she dared to give him a juicy wink. 'Now then, you didn't answer me.'

By now, the milkman was shaking. 'Sure, I can't for the life of me recall what ye said.'

Sidling closer, she murmured, 'I asked what you had to offer.' Her bushy eyebrows went up and down, like a couple of ferrets ready to pounce.

When Mike was nervous he always stuttered. He stuttered now. 'I . . . don't know what . . . ye mean!'

The woman tutted loudly. 'Really, do I have to spell it out? *What have you got on your cart today?*'

Giving a great sigh of relief, Mike led the way to the back of the cart, where he threw off the tarpaulin to reveal a dozen sacks of potatoes, piled-up crates of milk, numerous boxes of freshly picked early plums and some large wicker baskets filled with newlaid eggs. 'You'll not get better wherever ye look,' he told her, and she knew it was the truth.

Mabel quickly selected a dozen brown eggs, four large potatoes and a bottle of milk. 'Will you come in for a cup of tea before you go?' She made one last, valiant effort to interest him in what she herself had

to offer. 'I've a home-made apple tart just waiting to be sliced.'

Before he could reply, the sound of voices raised in anger made them turn their attention towards the spinney. 'Sounds as though somebody's squaring up for a fight.' Losing no time and glad of the opportunity to escape her attentions, Mike ran towards the hedge. 'Stay back, Mabel,' he ordered, though not for one minute did he expect her to heed his warning.

Forcing his way through the bramble-hedge, he broke into the field behind her house. Mabel might have done the same but for the considerable width of her hips, not to mention the fact that the brambles could tear your skin to shreds.

'It looks like the Hunter brothers.' Keeping her distance, she peered through the hedge.

'*Stay back!*' Mike repeated, and this time she obeyed. 'I'll see what I can do. You away up to the farm . . . tell Louise her husband and his brother are out to kill each other.' When she hesitated he bellowed at her. 'Away with you, woman. *Now!*'

Trying her best to hurry, the poor woman slipped and fell right into a run of cowpats. Mike made no move to help her. This was no time for sympathy, he decided, not when the two men were already stripping off their shirts to settle the argument with bone and knuckle.

'Get on with ye!' he roared, and get on she did

## THE WOMAN WHO LEFT

15955617745  
until, red-faced and fighting for breath, she stumbled to the bottom of the hill leading to Maple Farm. Here she paused to gather her strength before continuing at a pace more suited to a woman of her generous size and years.

While Mabel made haste to break the news to Louise, Michael ran across the field to try reasoning with the two brothers.

'Clear off, you! It's none of your damn business.' That was Jacob, the eldest. Tall and thickset, with piercing blue eyes and long, untidy brown hair, he had already attracted a reputation for trouble.

The other young man was called Ben; shorter in stature than his brother, he had the same sturdy physique of their father before them. Dark-haired, with serious brown eyes, Ben was the more responsible of the two. 'Best do as he says,' he advised the old man. 'There's no reasoning with him. It's gone way beyond that. Me and Jacob . . . we've a score to settle. It's best we get it over and done with.'

The score he spoke of had to do with their late father and the accumulation of his life's work.

In spite of his years, Mike was not easily dismissed. 'The pair of youse should be ashamed of yerselves,' he raged, 'fighting and arguing, with your poor father lying in the chapel of rest not two miles away!'

When he took a step forward, Jacob suddenly

rounded on him with clenched fists. 'I warned you you old fool!' Rushing at him, he took the milkman by the throat. But then he was suddenly fighting his own corner, when Ben marched up behind him and, spinning him round by the shirt collar, landed a crunching blow squarely on his chin.

Enraged, Jacob ran at him, head down like a battering ram. When his head collided hard with his brother's mouth, the blood from Ben's split lip sprayed out like a crimson shower. 'Come on then, let's have you!' Beckoning with both hands, Jacob backed off, laughing and taunting as Ben wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Glancing towards the old man to make sure he wasn't hurt, Ben made one last plea to his brother. 'Mike is right,' he said. 'We shouldn't be fighting. Not now.' His sorry gaze went to the hills and the town beyond. 'What would *he* say?'

Jacob was like a crazy thing. 'I don't give a stuff for what he'd say. Happen he'd see you for the coward you are.'

Anger lit his brother's eyes. 'I've never been a coward in my life, and you know it!'

'You've *allus* been a coward. Only *he* wouldn't have it, would he, eh? Oh no! He thought the sun shone out of yer arse! Oh, but you were clever, I'll give you that . . . toiling the land and working with him hand in glove. The poor old sod didn't know

## THE WOMAN WHO LEFT

what you were up to, but I was wise to you.' The words spat out.

'What are you saying?' Ben's voice was tight with rage.

'What normal man would prefer to break his back working the land when he could be out in the big wide world, making his mark?' Jacob sneered. 'You stayed because you had in mind that one day all this would be yours.' Flinging wide his arms he embraced the land about them. 'You're a cunning bastard, Ben Hunter, but don't think you've done me out of what's rightfully mine, because I'll fight you tooth and nail all the way!'

'Out with it.' Knowing his brother from old, Ben sensed that Jacob was up to no good. 'What's your game, eh? *You* were the one who chose to leave all this behind. You didn't want it before and you don't want it now. I'll never see the day dawn when you roll up your sleeves and bend your back to hard work.' He shook his head in disgust. 'What you're after is selling it to the highest bidder, isn't that right?'

'None o' your business what I want with it. It's *mine* – that's all you need to know.' Ben had hit the nail on the head and that rankled. 'If you want a fight, I'll give you one, any way you like.' Though he feared his brother was more of a man than he would ever be.

Shamed by the whole sorry business, Ben gave



it one more try. 'Why can't you understand? Dad really loved this land,' he said softly. 'It was his whole life.'

'Pity!'

Ben knew there would be no peace until this was settled, so he laid down the terms. 'I love it, too. I don't know what Dad put down on paper, but I'll tell you this. If he's left it all to Mother, I'll stand by her, the same way I stood by him. And not for any reward, but because like Dad, I love the land and the way of life here. And I swear to God . . . if he's left me any part of this wonderful place, *you'll* never get your hands on it, not unless you're prepared to dirty them, the same as he did.'

Jacob laughed harshly. 'D'you really expect me to believe that you don't know what he put in his will? Liar! He'll have left you the lot, make no mistake; God only knows you've had years enough to persuade him. He thought I could never compare with you, so I never tried. There was no point.'

'You're wrong, Jacob. He knew you didn't like working the land and he came to accept that. Why d'you think he set you up with that delivery business? Good God, man! He even borrowed money against everything he owned, just so's you could have your big chance.'

'He wanted shut of me, that's why.'

'Don't talk stupid.' His heart heavy with emotion,