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THE VISITORS' BOOK

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An Orion paperback
First published in Great Britain by Orion in 1997
This paperback edition published in 1998 by
Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 0 75281 556 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

For Steve, Amanda and Ned Lay,
who go to The Cottage at weekends.

I would like to acknowledge the help of the following people:

Louise Allen-Jones

Kari Allen

Anne-Louise Fisher

Carolyn Mays

Kathy van Praag

and I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable help and advice of a mother of two profoundly deaf children who has asked not to be named.

Some people live their whole life and never see anyone die, but she was only four years old when she witnessed two people drown.

She should have been asleep. She had been tucked up in bed for hours. The curtains were open and because the moon was almost full she could see everything in her bedroom as if it were day.

She heard voices outside. Shouting. She struggled to push aside the bedclothes and stood up on the bed. Now she could see out of the window to the house next door.

She saw three people she knew running across the grass, chasing each other. One of them was a woman and she had no clothes on. They pushed and pulled each other and all the time they were moving closer to the river. They reached the back and seemed to be fighting. As she watched two of them fell in.

The next day everyone was talking about it, ignoring her, dismissing her if she tried to say something. So she kept quiet and listened instead. They talked about two of the people she had seen and how terrible it was that they were dead.

But they never mentioned the third who was still alive. Maybe she had imagined it.

PART ONE

I

Victoria Hissey was in a state.

Her beloved godson Orlando, whom she adored and thought of as her own son, had swanned off to the Caribbean and returned less than a month later with a brand new bride whom he claimed to have met on a beach. And he expected Victoria to behave as if nothing untoward had happened. Life would go on as usual.

Well, it wouldn't. Not a chance.

Lindy. For some reason the name irritated Victoria. It sounded frilly. It was not the name of someone who could be taken seriously. At least not by Victoria. She'd met Lindy only once, briefly, in London. Pretty, in rather a shy way. Not frilly as it turned out. Mousy-brown hair, dead straight but well cut in a shiny bob. Safe, classic, inexpensive clothes, a Benetton angora sweater, a Marks & Spencer skirt. Well, that could change with Orlando's money. But the girl was on the small side with rather short legs and there was nothing Orlando's money could do about that.

And now Orlando had brought her down to The Cottage at Laybridge for the weekend with the assumption that Victoria would show her what was what. Except Orlando had no idea what that entailed. Nor, although it was something that went with The Cottage, did he have a clue as to the existence of The Visitors' Book. But Lindy,

as his wife and the woman now in charge of The Cottage, would have to be told about it.

Victoria picked up the phone.

'Lindy? Hello, it's Victoria Hissey. I wondered if you'd like to come up to the house and have a cup of coffee with me? Don't bother with the car. There's a short cut via the Bluebell Walk. It's so pretty at this time of year. Just go out of The Cottage, turn left and follow the lane until you see the house. Shall we say eleven?'

Five minutes later it began to rain. Victoria stared out of her bedroom window at the meadow across the river and wondered how the sheep could be so oblivious to the wet as to go on chomping away at the grass. She watched them moving closer and closer to the riverbank, bumping into each other. God, they were stupid! A massive empty field all around them and they had to huddle together and fight for one small area of grass. If they moved any closer to the river they would undoubtedly fall in, and if there was heavy rain for days and the river rose and there was flooding, they would all be swept away.

Victoria allowed herself a secret smile of satisfaction at the thought. She had not been raised in the country. She had come to live at Laybridge as a result of her marriage, and while she had adapted to country life with relative ease, she remained eternally irritated by sheep.

Victoria was a widow, merry when she'd had a few but otherwise rather solitary by nature, which suited her life as a writer. She wrote long historical novels setting them all at Laybridge House in Wiltshire and basing her characters on the ancestors of her late husband, Hugh Hissey. Laybridge had been built in the latter part of the sixteenth century with magnificent views over the river Lay.

Victoria was currently embarked upon a book whose story was based on the week in 1651 when Charles II had taken refuge at Laybridge and was kept secretly for six nights before riding on to Shoreham and taking ship for France.

Guilt had been the reason Victoria had remained in the country following Hugh's untimely death; guilt and, later, her plant centre. Two tumours, one on the brain and the other on the spine, had been discovered in April 1984 and he had been dead by the end of June. They had been planning a small party to mark their twentieth wedding anniversary. He had been only forty-four. Now, seven years on, Victoria still missed him even though he had driven her mad. The hero of her latest book was, she realised, Hugh inasmuch as one could imagine Hugh as Master of Laybridge in the seventeenth century. All Hugh's pedantic neuroses and excessive caution were played out in the character of Henry Hissey (she kept the family name even though her books were fiction – it was good for publicity, her publishers told her), who was totally against the idea of harbouring Charles II for a week. Henry Hissey worried and fretted and whined in Victoria's book, just as Hugh would have done, and remained impervious to the romance and excitement of playing a part in helping his king. It was his wife, Kate, who masterminded the whole thing in defiance of her husband. Kate, Victoria realised, was based on her mother-in-law, Hugh's mother Sarah, who had risen masterfully to the occasion during the Second World War when Laybridge had been requisitioned by Salisbury Hospital.

And, in truth, Victoria delighted in Laybridge and its magnificent gardens. After Hugh's death when she had discovered exactly how much it cost to keep Laybridge

going in the style to which she had become accustomed, and how utterly useless Hugh had been at harvesting the family money, Victoria had looked around for a way to avoid delving further into her capital. She had her writing but after fourteen books her sales were mysteriously dwindling. Ironically it was her publishers who came up with the solution to her potential financial problems. Victoria's long-standing editor had finally retired and a new one was proposed. This time it was to be a man and a rather young one by the sound of it. They had telephoned with news of his double first in history at Cambridge and listing endless credentials which Victoria had interrupted with: 'Don't bore me with all that rhubarb. Why don't you send him down to have lunch with me?'

The young man, Toby, had been too nervous to go on his own and had requisitioned another young editor, Lucia, to accompany him. The lunch was a huge success. Not because Toby impressed Victoria. He didn't much, but she knew she could see off any editorial argument he might attempt about her work and, these days, that was really all that mattered to her. After fourteen books she couldn't be doing with anyone taking a pencil to one of her manuscripts. She knew what was wrong with them and she knew she was the only one who would be able to fix it. It was Lucia who had surprised her. Victoria was fascinated by the pair of them. They were clearly having an illicit affair and she began to ply them with wine in the hope of loosening their tongues so that she could prise the details from them. Victoria was not a gossip. In fact she was proud that she could be relied upon to be discreet. But she was forever torn between her natural inclination to be anti-social and her desire, as a writer, to be party to

the secrets of other people's lives. But Lucia was not forthcoming with details of her sex life. She asked instead for a tour of the gardens and as Victoria led her along the avenues of apple trees, through the rose garden and down to the River Walk, Lucia suddenly asked: 'Why don't you start a garden centre here, a plant centre?'

'I am not a plantswoman -' Victoria began, only to be cut short by Lucia's enthusiasm.

'But it would be so wonderful for your novels. Think of the publicity! Everyone would flock to buy plants and wander round the gardens and all your books are set here. They could be on sale. Buy a copy of your latest book and get a free plant. Plus there's you and the Hissey family history all tied into the books. You could have garden fêtes with celebrities to open them. You could even write a gardening book for me ...' Lucia was getting quite carried away.

Victoria took advice. She hired someone to establish and run the plant centre for her. She exercised her charm to its full extent on Harold Farley, head gardener at Laybridge for thirty-five years, and finally won him round. Victoria knew perfectly well that Harold's had been a token resistance. At seventy, he would welcome taking more of a back seat. He had done little more than oversee the work done by other gardeners for years and provided he retained the nominal title of head gardener, he wouldn't really care what happened.

A year later her publishers launched her new book at the opening of the Laybridge Garden Centre and once again she began to sell, although, as Victoria well knew, it was all cosmetic. The new book was no better than the

last. There was only one thing – or, rather, one person – that would free her to write again with real passion.

At the opening, Victoria made a speech beginning with the words: 'I am not a plantswoman but ...'

It became her catchphrase. She became obsessed with the garden, interfering wherever she could, much to Harold Farley's annoyance, heralding any suggestion she made with the words: 'I'm not a plantswoman but ... don't you think the laburnum arch is becoming just a bit too intrusive?'

Laybridge and Victoria prospered. Such a venture as the Laybridge Garden Centre could never have seen the light of day had Hugh lived, Victoria realised. Hugh would have worried the idea into the ground, old misery that he was, instead of allowing it to blossom and bear fruit.

And then she would remember the other reason she had stayed buried in the country. Bruno Manners and the guilt she harboured about her relationship with him, an affair that had begun long before Hugh's illness and continued until his death. It was ridiculous, she knew, but remaining at Laybridge and continuing to maintain Hugh's home as it had been in his life time helped to assuage the pain she feared her obvious love for Bruno must have caused her husband. For Hugh had known all about her and Bruno. Of that, she was certain.

Hugh Hissey's best friend, Guy Manners, had been just like him: unassuming, pedantic, cautious, nervous and kind. They had differed only in their choice of wives. Daisy Manners was dark and lithe and brittle.

Guy's brother Bruno was the black sheep of the Manners family. He hadn't exactly been expelled from

Radley but once he had sat, and failed, his A levels, it was made clear to his father that they were no longer interested in accommodating Bruno as a pupil. He went to London and found himself a job on a newspaper. Guy went up to Cambridge where he met Hugh and they read history together. It was 1959. Four years later Guy, trembling with pride, brought a beautiful dark-haired girl home for Christmas and Bruno, playing the role of smooth young journalist to the hilt, had seduced her by New Year's Eve. Hugh, who had been invited to stay with the Mannesers for the New Year's Eve celebrations, witnessed everything when he walked into the bathroom he was sharing with Bruno. Bruno and Daisy were lying on the floor. By the time they had realised someone had come in, Hugh was gone. They never knew who had seen them and Hugh never mentioned it to Guy.

Two months later Guy proposed. Daisy was twenty. It was all rather messy, and the only time in Guy and Hugh's friendship when they had words. Hugh begged Guy not to go ahead with the marriage. Daisy would make Guy's life utterly miserable, he said. Hugh knew that it really didn't matter to Daisy whom she married. She would continue to sleep with whoever took her fancy. Marriage wouldn't make a jot of difference. A husband would be expected merely to provide her with financial security. But to Guy, Daisy was an exotic butterfly he had captured against all odds. He couldn't let her get away. He would never find anyone like her again.

It was in the first year of Guy and Daisy's marriage that, estranged from Guy and feeling particularly vulnerable, Hugh met Victoria. Many years into their marriage he was able to look back and ask himself if he had fallen for the

tall, moody girl because she had been the opposite of Daisy. She was not a flirt like Daisy. She did not smile easily, but when she did it was worth waiting for and that, Hugh decided, was why he fell in love with her. He liked to make her laugh. That he rarely did, since his talent to amuse was almost non-existent, entirely escaped him.

When Daisy gave birth to a boy and insisted he be called Orlando, Guy terminated the rift between himself and Hugh by asking Hugh to be Orlando's godfather. At the christening, Victoria, by now Hugh's fiancée, saw Bruno Manners for the first time and although he never said a word to her she understood what it was to fall in love and that what she felt for Hugh was merely affection.

She didn't see Bruno again for twelve years.

Now, just when Victoria had finally decided it was high time to bury the memory of her affair with Bruno and settle down to a life of relative calm in the country, it looked as if that fool Orlando was going to cause chaos by bringing home a totally unsuitable bride. What Orlando had done was unthinkable: met a perfect stranger in the Caribbean and married her without apparently giving it a second thought. Under different circumstances Victoria would have been titillated by the romance of it but this was a little too close to home. She would be the one who would have to pick up the pieces when it fell apart.

Victoria adored Orlando Manners. He was completely irresistible to all women unless they were allergic to near impossible good looks, exceptional charm, a degree of endearing helplessness and a large private income. His grandfather, like Hugh Hissey's father, had been a landowner who had invested shrewdly to safeguard the