

# Wild Oats

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Jamie Wilding thought it ironic that, of her somewhat epic journey from South America, the final leg from Paddington to Ludlow had been the most traumatic. She'd missed her connection at Hereford, and the next train had come to an agonizing standstill in the wilds of the Shropshire countryside for no apparent reason – at least, none was given. By then she'd been travelling for over twenty-four hours. Now, with judicious use of her elbows and a certain ruthlessness, she finally managed to push her way through a dithering gaggle of American tourists, extricate herself from the train carriage and alight on the platform. She was tired, dirty, hungry and thirsty. As she struggled out of the station with her rucksack, she prayed there would be a taxi. There was. 'Bucklebury Farm, Upper Faviell,' she told the driver, and flopped into the back seat wearily. The smell of the driver's cigarette combined with the sickly smell from his Wallace and Gromit air freshener turned her empty stomach, but she didn't care. She was nearly there.

The cab nudged its way slowly through the midday traffic and up the hill to the town centre. Jamie feasted her eyes on the familiar buildings: the black and white timbered edifices bowed down with age juxtaposed with the more gracious red brick frontages introduced in Georgian times. She wondered which she preferred, then decided it was the contrast that was so charming.

As they pulled into the town square, the farmers' market was in full swing. Stalls with gaily coloured awnings to protect them from the summer sun were crammed with vegetables: rows of cauliflowers, creamy white, luminous green and purple, enormous pods bulging with broad beans, punnets of voluptuous red strawberries. Other stalls were selling delicious-looking pies and jams and cakes; local honey; pots of herbs to take home and plant; handmade ice cream thick with raspberries or ginger or chunks of bittersweet chocolate. Someone was cooking free-range sausages on a portable barbecue to entice customers: the smell drifted in through the cab window and made Jamie's mouth water. She was ravenous. There'd been no buffet car on the train. Her last meal had been an unedifying airline breakfast in another time zone. She was tempted to ask the driver to stop, but knew that would just be prolonging the agony. It was something she could look forward to after months of meagre and monotonous rations: coming to the market, chatting to the stallholders, trying their samples, coming home with a basket groaning with fresh produce. As the traffic nudged along, she caught sight of Leo the cheesemonger, with his mop of unruly black curls, deep in conversation with a customer, talking her through his mouth-watering selection of wares, paring off slivers for her to try. You could have a full-blown meal just by sampling what was on offer at Ludlow market, starting with marinated olives, moving on to cured meats and home-baked breads, finishing with a slither of lemon tart or apple cake.

At the far end of the square the castle overlooked the bustling scene with an air of benevolent superiority. It had, after all, been there the longest, long before Ludlow became renowned as a gastronomic and epicurean mecca. Tourists swarmed over its ancient ramparts, armed with lurid ice-creams and guidebooks, spilling out of its magnificent gates to discover the rest of the town's treasures.

At last the cab was free of the traffic. It crossed over the river and on to the road

that led to the Faviells. As they sped along the winding lanes, hedgerows thick with emerald greenery, Jamie felt the faint drumming of butterfly wings against the wall of her stomach. Why was she nervous? She was coming home, that's all. She had no need to be nervous.

Yes, she did. After all, she had no idea what to expect on her return – what she was going to find, how she was going to be received. Or what she would do and sad presented her with the worst-case scenario. Give her a rope bridge to cross or an unbroken horse to ride and she had nerves of steel. But when she wasn't sure what to expect, her courage seemed to fail her.y. Jamie always feared the unknown, because her imagination worked overtime an

Only too soon they arrived in Upper Faviell. The village hadn't changed, which was hardly surprising, as it hadn't changed for as long as Jamie could remember. The hanging baskets at the Royal Oak were sporting a blue and white colour scheme this year, compared to yellow and red the year before, and there was a new 'Please Drive Carefully Through Our Village' sign, but otherwise it was the same as it had been when she'd left, almost a year ago now.

Half a mile outside the village, on Jamie's instruction, the driver pulled into a gateway. Weeds and grass poked through the cattle grid; the sign that would have told passers-by that this was Bucklebury Farm was overgrown with brambles.

'I'll walk from here,' Jamie told the driver, and thrust a crumpled tenner at him. Heaving her rucksack back on to her shoulder, she stood for a moment, heart thumping, knowing that by walking this last quarter of a mile she was delaying the moment of reckoning yet again.

She trudged down the drive, a simple track flanked on one side by orchards and on the other by pastures dotted with grazing sheep. Her feet kicked up the dust of earth dried by the midday sun, but the heat was nothing compared to what she had endured over the past few months. Instead, she relished the gentle breeze that swished through the boughs of the trees and set the buttercups, sprinkled like gold dust over the fields, nodding furiously. Eventually, two stone gateposts and another cattle grid pronounced the entrance to the farmyard, whereupon the track became tarmac and led past a decrepit hay-wain and a magnificent Victorian stable yard, before coming to a halt in front of the house itself.

Bucklebury Farm embraced the two styles of architecture that typified Ludlow. The oldest section was seventeenth-century black-and-white timber, irregularly shaped and peppered with leaded windows. The floors inside were wooden and leaned at alarming angles, the rooms were predominantly wood-panelled, the ceilings low, the staircases winding and narrow and crooked. Upstairs, one frequently had to bend to avoid concussion on a beam or a sloping roofline. Overall, it gave one the impression of being on board a rather cosy ship. In the late nineteenth century someone had obviously found its confines claustrophobic rather than charming, and had made a red-brick addition to the house that was stout and square and perfectly proportioned, allowing a rather grand staircase, a large dining room, a study and some sensibly sized and shaped bedrooms. Jamie infinitely preferred the older part, where her bedroom was tucked into the eaves up its own little staircase. The windows were tiny but gave a magnificent view of the rolling countryside, and in the distance she could see the ramparts of Ludlow Castle standing guard over the town.

Ignoring the imposing front door, with its arched fanlight, that was only ever opened to people who didn't know any better, she made her way around the side of the house. She couldn't help noticing a general air of neglect about the place: the lawns and hedges were badly in need of attention, and the vegetable patch, once immaculate with its regimented rows of carrots and cabbages and lettuces all neatly netted to protect them from the rabbits, had become rampant and choked with weeds. But then, her father had never taken any great interest in gardening. Never mind; she could bring things back into order soon enough.

As she walked past the kitchen garden to the back door, a brace of Jack Russells came tearing round the side of the house with a volley of barks, leaping up at her with muddy paws, stumpy tails wagging furiously.

'Parsnip! Gumdrop!' She dropped to her knees and embraced the pair of them as they sniffed at her in disbelieving delight. Overwhelmed by their greeting, she was struck by the absence of a further presence. Their vanguard would once have been followed by her mother vainly calling them off; the little dogs were the one thing over which Louisa seemed to have no control. They were notoriously quite the worst behaved dogs in the county, over-indulged and under-disciplined, saved from being thoroughly dislikeable by their ebullient mischief and effusive welcomes. Now, Jamie noticed, they could both do with a good bath and needed their nails clipping. If she needed any further reminder that her mother was no longer here, then this was it...

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