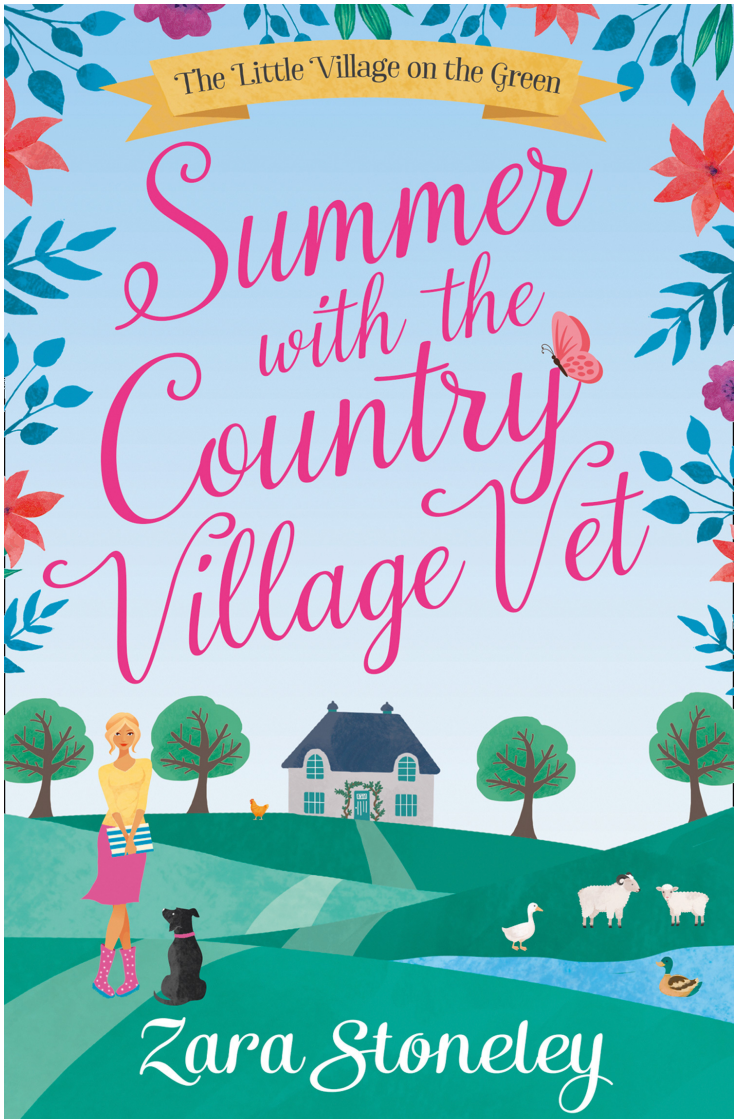

The Little Village on the Green
Summer with the Country Village Vet
Zara Stoneley

Zara Stoneley

Summer with the Country Village Vet

Аннотация

‘All the ingredients for a perfect, summery read…it really captured my heart’ Cressida McLaughlin‘Sprinkled with oodles of charm…I simply adored this book’ Christie BarlowFall in love with a brand new cosy romance series from bestselling author Zara StoneleyWhen Lucy Jacobs is made redundant from her inner-city teaching job she fears her career is over. Teaching is all Lucy knows and she's determined to get back in the classroom as fast as she can.Except the only job on offer is at an idyllic village school in the middle of nowhere – Lucy's idea of hell. Where are the disadvantaged kids who need saving, where is the challenge?But as Lucy finds herself welcomed into the warm-hearted community of Langtry Meadows, she begins to realise new challenges await – like frogs in the classroom, a rather difficult donkey, and a very brooding local vet…Local boy Charlie Davenport has his own issues about living in the close-knit village of Langtry Meadows. His private life is already fuel for the well-meaning gossips and the very last thing he needs is to get close to the new school teacher…no matter how lovely she is.But as summer days drift away Langtry Meadows weaves its magic, Charlie and Lucy both get the chance to turn over a new leaf and start anew…maybe with each other?A fun, romantic story to make

you smile and long for your own country escape.Praise for Summer with the Country Village Vet:'Like a summer breeze, gently warming your heart…be prepared for love, laughter and escapism' My Chestnut Reading Tree 'A zingy, romantic and fabulously heartwarming book … My ultimate summer read' Petra Pippa Q

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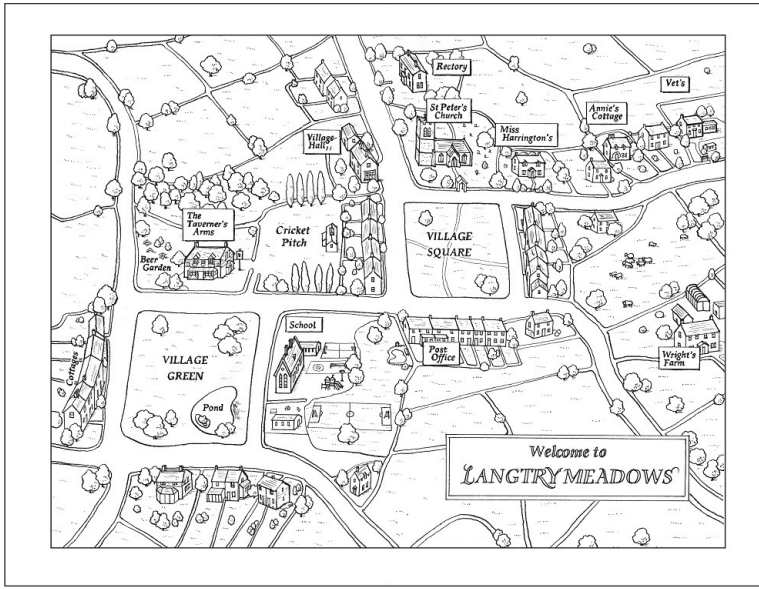
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'It takes a big heart to help shape little minds' Author unknown

To Anne, a teacher with a big heart.



A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up this copy of *Summer with the Country Village Vet*, I hope you enjoy your visit to Langtry Meadows with Lucy and Charlie!

This book has been waiting to be written for a long time. I've always loved animals (I dreamed of being a vet and following in the footsteps of James Herriot), and you may have noticed that all my books feature at least one four-legged friend. But when I started writing, one quote kept springing to mind -

'Never work with children or animals' *W. C Fields*

I can quite understand the sentiments behind these words! Both can be unpredictable, scene-stealing, mischievous, temperamental – and never quite do what we expect (or sometimes want), but don't we love them for it? They enrich our lives and touch our hearts. Young children and animals don't judge; they give unconditional love, they forgive, teach respect, acceptance, and loyalty. They look to us to do the right thing, to take care of them – and can sometimes give us optimism, and a reason to keep going.

In short, they give us hope – and a few tears of laughter and sadness along the way as well. Which I hope this story also does.

Happy reading!

Zara x

Prologue

Three little words with the power to take her straight back to her childhood.

Termination of employment.

Lucy Jacobs stared at the words which were shouting out so much more. Failure. Not good enough. You don't belong here. And she was suddenly that small, abandoned child in the playground again. Unwanted. Unloved. Alone.

Swallowing down the sharp tang of bile, she blinked to clear her vision. Smoothed out the piece of paper with trembling fingers that didn't seem to belong to her. Nothing seemed to belong to her, everything was disjointed, unreal. Even the weak, distant voice that she vaguely recognised as her own.

'No.' Taking a deep breath, she shook her head to dismiss the image. She wasn't a scared child. She was a grown woman now. 'This is a mistake.' Slowly the world came back into focus, even though her stomach still felt empty. Hollow. 'This has got to be a mistake. You're kidding me?' Her words echoed into the uncomfortable stillness of the room.

The man opposite gave the slightest shake of his head, as though it was a silly question.

She'd never liked this room, or more to the point she'd never liked *him*.

Nobody got sacked on a school inset day. Did they?

She blinked hard, trying to ignore the way her eyes smarted and transferred her gaze to the carefully regimented line of pens, before forcing herself to look back up at *him*. David Lawson. The headmaster of Starbaston Primary School.

Not looking at him would be admitting defeat.

He looked back at her through cold reptilian eyes and still didn't say a word.

'But I've just finished my new classroom display!' It was a stupid thing to say, but the only logical thought that was penetrating her fuzzy brain. 'Ready for tomorrow.' Tomorrow, the first day of term.

He finally shifted in his seat, his lips thinned and he stared at her disapprovingly. Then sighed. 'You always do plan well ahead, don't you?'

He said it as though it was a failing. Lucy felt her back straighten and her eyes narrowed, forcing the tears back where they belonged.

The fingers of dread that had been curling themselves into a hard lump in her chest were replaced with indignation. How dare he! The display was a triumph.

Last year's fluffy lambs and cute rabbits had led to a cotton wool and glue fiasco she never wanted to repeat. How was she supposed to know that a six year old would come up with the idea of dipping the rabbit tails into the green paint pot intended for spring grass and stick the resultant giant bogey up his nose, and every other boy in the class would copy him? No doubt when

she was old and grey the smarty pants would be a great leader, probably of some union that would bring the government to its knees, or more frighteningly he could become prime minister.

She'd learned from her mistake, and this year she'd been clever. With the help of Sarah, her never tiring classroom assistant, she'd cut a flower out for every single child and gone for the theme of April showers and May flowers. They had spent most of the day stapling the petals up on the boards, awaiting the children's smiley self-portraits to be added in the centre over the next couple of weeks.

It had been hard work. It had been a total waste of time.

She stared at the headmaster, wishing she could wiggle her nose and make him disappear. He peered back over his glasses at her, and steepled his fingers, in much the same way he did when he was faced with a Year 6 girl who thought school rules about make-up (or more precisely the lack of it) couldn't possibly apply to the top class, or Mrs Ogden who'd said if her Storm wanted to have white hair and pierced ears what did it have to do with him?

The head didn't understand X-Men, he didn't understand the society he was living in, or the staff who worked so hard to give the children a chance to live a better life. He understood balance sheets, not feelings and aspirations.

'As you know,' he paused, politician style, circled his thumbs – which right now she had a childish urge to grab hold of and bend back – 'we did request offers for voluntary redundancy earlier in the year, but nobody,' the thumbs stopped moving, and he

studied her as though she was at fault, 'came forward, and so unfortunately…'

'But you can't… I mean, why me?' She crossed her arms and frowned. 'I need this job, I've just bought new curtains.' Gorgeous, shimmery, floaty new curtains. And it was more than curtains: she'd bought a whole house. A house that had stretched her to the financial limit, but given her the greatest feeling of satisfaction (apart from getting all of Year 2 to sit on their bottoms and listen at the same time) ever. Ever.

'The Ofsted inspector labelled my lesson outstanding.' She made a valuable contribution, she worked hard.

This just couldn't be happening.

'You can't sack me.'

He tutted. Actually tutted, and looked affronted. 'We,' that flaming 'we' again, as though it meant he wasn't responsible, 'aren't sacking you, Lucy.' He paused again, politician style. 'You are being offered an excellent redundancy package.'

'Well that's different then.' He nodded, missing the sarcasm. 'So offered means I can turn it down?' She wanted to launch herself across his tidy desk and strangle him with his fake silk tie. It might be a sackable offence, but that didn't matter now. Did it?

He carried on smoothly, oblivious of her evil intent. 'No, I'm sorry it doesn't. As I've just explained, we did ask for volunteers, and as nobody put themselves forward we have had to make a decision. We've followed the correct procedure.' There was an unspoken 'so don't even think about challenging the decision'.

'I don't care about procedures.' It was getting close to a toss-up between losing her temper and shouting, or bursting into tears. She bit down on her lip hard. No way was she going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her collapse into a mushy mess. That would be the ultimate humiliation. Even beating the getting sacked in the first place bit. 'I've got a mortgage.'

He sighed as though she was being unreasonable. 'I am sorry, Lucy. We do understand, we all have commitments, but unfortunately we,' why did he keep blaming 'we' when it was very clearly his decision? He never had liked her, 'have to make cuts. It's inescapable. As you know education has been hit as hard as anybody.' She caught herself nodding in agreement, and froze back into position. 'We have tried to do this as fairly as possible, and as the most recent addition to the staffing at the school, then I'm afraid you were the—'

'But what about Ruth?' It came blurting out of her mouth before she could stop herself. She really didn't want to point the finger at anybody else, but this was her future at stake.

'We need to balance the accounts Miss Jacobs,' oh God, he'd reverted to calling her Miss, there was no way out of this, 'and as Ruth is very much a junior member of staff, her salary is, how do I put this? Commensurate with her experience.' He put his hands flat on the desk and leaned back, mission accomplished. She'd never particularly liked David Lawson, with his slightly pompous air, and sarcastic comments if anybody dared interrupt his staff meetings to offer constructive criticism, but now there

was something stirring inside her that was close to loathing.

'And my experience doesn't count for anything? You employed me because—'

'It's a fine balancing act, my dear.' Now he'd moved on to patronising, which he probably thought was consoling. 'It's complicated.'

'Try me.'

'The finances of the school are not something you should concern yourself with, Lucy.' He shook his head. Back to calling her Lucy and adopting his avuncular uncle act.

Obviously, she was smart enough to take responsibility for developing the young minds that would be tomorrow's leaders, scientists and all round wonderful people, but he did not consider she had the mental capacity to understand the balance sheet of a primary school. Despite the fact she had a maths degree.

'Now, you are bound to be upset and need to let this sink in, so to avoid any unpleasantness I had somebody clear your belongings from your classroom. There's a box at reception, I'm sure everything is in there, but if there's anything missing please do call Elaine and she will arrange delivery.' He stood up, smiled like a hyena about to pounce, and held out a hand. Which she automatically shook, then realised she'd conceded defeat. 'I do wish you well Lucy, you've done an excellent job with your little people and another school will benefit hugely from our loss.' He withdrew the hand, obviously relieved that his ordeal was over, and hers had just begun. He'd handed over the baton. 'And here

is a letter with the terms of your redundancy, I'm sure you'll find it all in order. Close the door on the way out will you please.'

He'd already sat down again, his head dipped to study the papers on his desk so that he could avoid her. She'd been dismissed.

Lucy stood up and was shocked to realise her legs were trembling. Her whole body was quaking. She fumbled with the door handle, tears bubbling up and blurring her vision, her stomach churning like the sea in a storm. This wasn't her. She didn't do wobbly and tears in public.

She felt sick.

***

Lucy put the surprisingly small box, which represented two years of tears, tantrums and triumphs (usually the pupils, occasionally hers) at Starbaston Primary School on the kitchen table. She could scream loudly and set next doors dog off barking, or she could make a cup of tea.

The bright, modern kitchen had, until now, given her only pleasure, but now she felt flat as she switched the fast-boil kettle on and dropped a tea bag into the 'Best Teacher' mug that Madison, a Year 2 pupil, had presented to her last Christmas.

She stared out at the small but immaculate patch of garden, *her* patch with not a weed in sight, and the hollow emptiness inside her grew.

Around the edges of the neat square of grass, the crocus shouted out a bright splash of colour, goading the pale nodding

heads of the snowdrops. Soon the daffodils would appear, and she'd already bought sweet pea seeds to sow with her class (the only flowers many of them would see close up) so that she could bring a few of the seedlings home and brighten up the fence that separated her garden from her neighbours.

She'd had it all planned out. She'd had her whole life planned out.

Tea slopped out of her mug as she stirred it mindlessly, the events of the last year spiralling on fast-forward in her mind, and bringing a rush of tears to her eyes.

They brimmed over and she scrubbed away angrily at them with the heel of her hand. Tea and sympathy was one thing, tea and self-pity was altogether different. Pathetic. She needed to get a grip. This was just a blip, things like this made you stronger, more determined. The failures were what made you who you were; the only people who didn't fail were the ones that never did anything.

The garden blurred as she wrapped her hands round the mug and took a deep breath, willing the lump in her throat to go away. If she hadn't moved to Starbaston, if she'd just settled for her old, mundane job with no job prospects she wouldn't be jobless. But she would never have been able to buy her home either.

Buying this house had been the biggest, best, scariest thing she'd ever done. She'd only been teaching at Starbaston for a year when they'd given her the promotion they'd hinted about at the interview. She'd got home from work, re-read the letter about

twenty times, let out a whoop and started looking at the estate agents. Not that she didn't already have a good idea of the houses for sale in the area.

She'd scrimped and saved ever since she'd graduated, well even as a student, rarely going out and only buying clothes that she really needed, determined to have enough money for a deposit on a small house in her bank account ready for the day that her income level meant she could take the plunge. And she knew exactly what she wanted, and had a pretty good idea of the size of salary she needed to afford it. It would be hers. Nobody would be able to take it away. She'd never again feel like she didn't belong.

Her friends had laughed, but Lucy knew it was the right thing for her. She'd been eight years old when life as she knew it had been ripped into shreds. When her and Mum had moved from their comfortable village home into a scruffy rented terraced house with peeling paint and neighbours who peed on the fence. She'd lost everything: her dad, her dog, her lovely room, even her best friend. She was a nobody; nobody wanted her, and she didn't belong anywhere.

She'd wanted her home back. She'd wanted her mother how she used to be – always there when she needed her, in the playground each day with a smile when she came out of school. She'd wanted her dog, Sandy, to play with. She'd wanted her room with all her books and toys, her garden with the swing she'd sit on for hours. She'd wanted her friend Amy to sit with her

under the big tree in the school playground. She'd even wanted her dad back, even though he could be cross if she made a mess, and insisted she practise the piano every day.

Instead she'd been alone.

Her mother always out, working all hours in dead-end jobs trying to make ends meet, and never having time to tidy or clean the embarrassingly messy house. She'd kept her own room tidy, because Dad liked tidy, and maybe he'd come to see them if she kept it nice. She'd dreamed that one day he would, and he'd take them home and everything would go back to normal.

He never came. Gran told her to forget him; he'd remarried. Her lovely bedroom belonged to somebody else now, and there was no going back.

Amy never replied to her letters – her mother probably wouldn't have let her visit their scruffy new home anyway. And the kids at her new school laughed at the way she spoke and wouldn't let her join in with their games, turning their backs on her if she ever dared pluck up the courage to edge her way over to them. She gave up in the end.

Life got better when she moved to high school and found friends. In the big impersonal city school she felt less alone, there were more people like her – struggling to find a place to belong.

But she still lived on the roughest estate, in the scruffiest house. And she promised herself that one day she would have a decent job, and a house of her own. A clean tidy home, on a clean tidy estate where she felt in control, a home that nobody

could take away from her.

And the sacrifices had seemed worth it. Until now.

How could this have happened to her? She'd done everything right, she'd worked hard, she'd had a plan – and had been discarded, thrown out because she was *too* qualified. *Too* expensive.

She wiped the fresh tears away angrily. Except this time it was different. She was in control, she wasn't some kid who had no say in the matter, and she *did* belong here. She did.

She fished into the box that represented her time at Starbaston and pulled out a pen pot (empty), a packet of 'star pupil' stickers, a box of tissues, a spare pair of tights, an assortment of plasters, notepad and then spotted a slip of paper. Which had been placed so the eagle-eyes of the headmaster's secretary didn't spot it.

'*Can't believe they did this to you, don't know how I'll cope without you Miss Crackers. Love Sarah x*'

The lump in her throat caught her unawares and Lucy crumpled up the note in her fist and hung on to it. It had been one of their many jokes, she was Miss Cream Crackers after little Jack, he of the hand-me-down uniform and mother with four inch heels and a scary cleavage, had declared on her first day at the school that 'he could only eat them Jacobs cracker things with a lot of butter spread on them or they made him cough' and did she make them when she got home from school?

Jokes got them through the day.

She didn't know how she was going to cope either. The feeling

inside her wasn't just upset, it was more like grief, as though a chunk of her hopes, her future, had been torn from her heart.

The cup of tea wasn't making her feel better. Halfway through her drink the feeling of grief had subsided, but it had been replaced with something worse.

She thought that she'd left the waves of panic behind – along with the spots, teenage crushes and worries that she'd never have friends or sex – but now they started to claw at her chest. She closed her eyes.

She just had to breathe. Steadily. In, out, the world would stop rocking, her heart wouldn't explode, she wasn't going to die. Everything would be fine.

She would think about this logically. Sensibly. With her eyes shut.

The redundancy money would cover the bills for a while, but she urgently needed to find another job before it ran out. There was no way she was ever, ever, going to go back to living in that horrible neighbourhood she'd been brought up in. It hadn't been her mother's fault that she hadn't time to keep on top of the house or garden, and that they could never afford anything new, but Lucy wanted her life to be different.

Putting her mug of tea on the table, she flipped open her laptop. She wasn't going to mess around, or waste another second.

She'd show David bloody Lawson. She'd get another job, a better job, a job where the headmaster wasn't a self-satisfied

arse who didn't give a monkeys about his staff or his pupils. Blinking away the mist of unshed tears she typed two words into the browser 'teaching vacancies', and hit the enter key with an angry jab.

***

Lucy opened her eyes with a start. It was dark. One cheek was damp and plastered to her keyboard. She probably had an imprint of the keys on her face. She sat up slowly and blinked.

The outside security light, which must have woken her up, went off and plunged the kitchen into darkness.

She sighed and stood up, wincing as a pain shot between her shoulder blades. Her back felt stiff as a board, she had a horrible dry taste in her mouth and her hair was sticky against her cheek from either dribble or tears. Or both. So, life was going well. She'd only been jobless for a few hours and look at the state of her.

So much for the no tears strategy, she'd failed there as well. But did crying in your sleep count?

This would look better in the morning. It had to. Before falling asleep she'd looked at every conceivable (and inconceivable) teaching vacancy website and come up with a big fat zero. The trouble was, teachers were being laid off faster than they were being taken on. And even supply jobs were thin on the ground, as an increasingly large number of people (many with more experience than she had) competed for them.

She looked into the biscuit tin. My God, had she really

emptied it, eaten every single one, even the broken bits? She was going to be fat as well as jobless.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow would be better. She'd be thinking clearly. She'd find a new job. She'd be back on track.

Chapter 1

Lucy slowed the car to a halt. Did the satnav really want her to turn down this road?

Turn left. Yep, it did. *Turn left.*

'Okay I heard, but you're kidding me?' The stern voice didn't reply, but her phone did. It buzzed. Maybe it was a last minute reprieve, the agency with a much better job offer back in civilisation.

She picked the mobile up. No reprieve, more a reminder of her old job, the challenges that came with working in a city centre school.

The life she loved.

She suppressed the groan, and smiled. Didn't they say the positivity of a smile was reflected in your voice?

'Hi Sarah.' She really didn't have time to chat, but she knew what the classroom assistant from Starbaston was like. Persistence was her middle name. If she didn't answer now she'd be getting another call mid interview.

'How are you doing, babe?' Sarah's normal sing-song happy tone was tinged with concern. Okay, so maybe her megawatt smile wasn't having the desired effect.

'Fine, fine.'

'Really? Then why haven't you rung?'

'Well no, well yes.' Fine was relative after all. 'I've got an

interview, in fact I'm just on my way.'

'That's fab.' Her words hung in the silence. 'Isn't it?'

'I think I'm lost.'

'You always were crap at following directions, babe. Why aren't you using that satnav you got?'

'I am.'

Sarah giggled. 'And you put the right place in and everything?'

'I put the right place in and everything. It keeps telling me I need to turn left here for Langtry Meadows and it's this tiny lane.'

'Where? Lang what?'

'Exactly.' The back of beyond. 'Some village not even my satnav has heard of. Oh God, I'm throwing what's left of my life away.'

'No, you're not, you're making a new one, a better one. Away from this stink hole and loser Lawson.'

'But I don't need a new one.' She'd quite liked the life she already had. New house, nice car, job.

'Yes, you do, Lucy. The old one's gone.' That was telling her.

'Thanks for reminding me.'

'You know what I mean, Loo. There's something better out there. Believe me,' she sighed dramatically, 'lots of better things.' But Sarah didn't have a mortgage to pay, bills. She lived with her mum. 'You're the one that always tells me everything happens for a reason. I miss you, you idiot, but you're better off somewhere else.'

'I know I am Sarah.' She gazed through the car windscreen.

Right now all she could see were fields and it was making her feel uneasy. Not a lump of concrete, or even person, in sight. 'But maybe not buried up to my armpits in cows.' She had passed plenty of cows, and was pretty confident there'd be some in Langtry Meadows – if she ever found the place.

'Better than being buried in this shit. We'll be back in special measures while twat face is still busy working out which politician to invite over for dinner next.'

'Should you call your boss twat face?' Just talking to Sarah made her feel more positive.

'You will never guess what he's just spent a huge chunk of our bloody budget on.'

'Probably not.' Lucy glanced at her watch. 'Not teaching staff, that's for sure.' She needed to get to this interview, seeing as it was actually the only thing between her and eating nothing but baked beans for a very long time.

'A metal detector.'

'What, for the kids to look for money?' The parents would be battling to borrow it every weekend.

'No, you idiot, a scanner type thing to check them on the way into school.'

'You cannot be serious? Okay Starbaston is a bit rough, but the kids are still more into flicking paper planes than knives.' She paused. 'They're kids, innocent.' Well maybe not all that innocent. But…

'But he doesn't know that, does he? He's a wanker. The man

buys a frigging metal detector. In a primary school when he won't even give us any more money for tissue paper and glue.'

'Or teachers.' Lucy couldn't help adding that, and sounding bitter.

'Aww babe, I know, he's an arse. But that's what I mean, there just has to be somewhere better than this.'

'I know.' Lucy sighed. 'But am I ready to be buried in the countryside? I'm not brain dead, just redundant.'

Sarah giggled. 'So it's a proper village, in the countryside and everything?'

'In the countryside and everything, I think.' It looked very countryside from the picture on the website. 'If I ever find it.'

'You can join the WI and bake cakes.'

'How old do you think I am you cheeky cow? Anyhow I can't bake to save my life, watching Great British Bake Off is the nearest I get to making a cake, I kill every plant I touch—'

'Apart from cress heads.'

'Apart from cress heads,' she was good at that, she could grow cress in an eggshell or on scratchy green paper towels as well as any five year old, 'and the only time I tried to knit I ended up cross-eyed with my needles knotted together.' She'd thrown the whole lot in the bin and wondered how on earth she'd ever thought yarn-bombing was a sensible thing.

'So you're not doing an escape to the country, then Loo?'

'I'll be planning my escape out. I'm glad you're finding this so hilarious.' It was cheering her up though. 'Anyhow I haven't got

the job yet, I'm just going for an interview.'

'You'll get it, they'll snap you up. You go girl.'

'And it is just a cover job for next half-term, so you can stop imagining me in a headscarf and wellies.'

'Spoilsport. You never know, you might meet some phwoar farmer and want to make babies with him and breed cows and stuff.'

'Sod off Sarah.' She was grinning, she knew she was. 'Thanks though. I love you.'

'Love you too, babe. Let me know how it goes.'

'Sarah?'

'Yeah?'

'Don't tell Lawson about this.' Not that he'd even remember who she was.

Welcome to Langtry Meadows. Lucy breathed a sigh of relief as she passed the sign, and checked her watch again. She'd made it, with ten minutes to spare.

Not that it looked exactly promising. So this was it. Fields to the left, fields to the right, oh and hedges. And more fields. Shades of green she'd forgotten existed. Oh yeah, and cows.

No. Be positive. She was having a new adventure. A nice, restful temporary job while she recharged her batteries, jiggled her life plan a bit, before taking the next step.

She'd served her apprenticeship, sailed through her Newly Qualified Teacher year, been promoted and was soaring up the ranks heading for Senior Leadership Team and eventually Head

and this was all just a blip.

David Lawson would have never had her on his leadership team, he hated her. So she'd had a lucky break.

A holiday in the sticks. Yep, that was how she'd have to look at it. A holiday. A six week break filled with spring flowers and chubby-faced village children.

As the road narrowed she slowed down and felt some of the tension ease away. She had to admit that the second she'd entered the village even the hedgerows seemed prettier. The green was broken up with frothy white hawthorn blossom, and the grassy verges were sprinkled with yellow, pink and violet flowers. Something inside her lifted, and all of a sudden she felt more positive.

The road narrowed slightly more, if that was possible, and then curled round to the left. She held her breath as she rounded it, gripping the steering wheel, half expecting to collide with a tractor coming the other way. But what hit her was something quite different.

Lucy leant forward until her chin was practically balanced on the steering wheel, and stared at the scene ahead.

She'd been following the winding country lane, concentrating on the road, for what seemed like miles, and now all of a sudden *this* had opened out in front of her, bringing an unexpected lump to her throat.

The perfect picture-postcard village green.

Ahead the road forked to the right and left, cupping the pond,

green and cascading willow tree in a gentle embrace. Drawing up at the side of the road, she pulled the handbrake on and got out of her Mini, stretching out the kinks that had settled into her back and shoulders.

Right now it didn't seem to matter that she didn't actually want to work in the countryside. She felt like she'd slipped Alice-in-Wonderland style from her own busy life, into a different world. Except in her case it was like being thrown back to her childhood. The good bit, before it had all gone so disastrously wrong.

The happy times were just a cloudy, indistinct memory though, buried under the weight of unhappiness. And now she'd been forced back, into the type of world she'd happily avoided until now.

The narrow lanes, with high hedges and dappled shade had demanded a level of concentration which didn't mix well with the jitters that had been building in the pit of her stomach, and if she hadn't been so doggedly determined to make this work she would have ignored her satnav and done an abrupt U-turn back to the safety of the city. But she hadn't, and now she wasn't quite sure if she was happy, or wanted to curl up and cry.

She'd done a very efficient job of blanking out her early childhood and the village she'd grown up in. And now this blast from the past had knocked the wind out of her sails even more effectively than redundancy had.

When they'd moved she'd missed her home, not the village. All her friends had gradually drifted away, apart from Amy,

leaving her marooned on an island made for one. They'd stopped inviting her to their parties. Dad had said she was like her mum – a city girl – and would never fit in properly, but he'd make sure she was okay. Then he'd abandoned her too.

She bit down on her lip. The week they'd left the village of Stoneyvale had been the worst of her life. She'd thought that being the only girl in the class not invited to Heather's party had been bad. She'd run all the way home from school, then rushed up to her bedroom with Sandy, shut the door and cried into his fur until her face was all blotchy. But then it got worse. Two days later Sandy had gone, and her mother had taken her to a new, horrible place.

She could still remember that feeling in the playground. The pain in her stomach, the ache in her throat. Knowing that Dad was right. Everybody hated her.

There was a giggle and Lucy blinked, dragging her thoughts back to the present. A little girl, her arms wide like a windmill was chasing a duck across the green. A woman was watching her, and even at this distance Lucy could sense the proud smile on her face. It could have been her, once, with her own mum. Before things had changed.

Now, this gentle reminder of how it had once been was hurting far more than the gruesome thoughts that often interrupted her sleep.

She didn't want to go back to not belonging. To being the odd one out. She wanted to be that little girl again, happy, secure.

The view misted over before her eyes and Lucy wiped her arm angrily across her face to get rid of the threatening tears, gulping down the upset that was bubbling up in her throat.

Okay, maybe it wasn't as simple as the picture she'd painted for Sarah, the story she'd sold herself. Working in a village wasn't on her life plan for a purpose, and it wasn't just down to promotion opportunities. It was down to control. Being able to live the life she wanted. Going forward not back. Not feeling shunned by a close community that didn't like outsiders.

The old familiar feeling of panic started to snake up from her stomach, wrap itself around her heart and throat, making it hard to breath. This was *not* the village she had been brought up in. She clenched her fists and tried to stop the trembling that was attacking her whole body. She'd gone from calm and admiring the view, to feeling agitated and out of control in seconds, which was why she never looked to the past. She had to get a grip.

All villages weren't full of small-minded petty people. They didn't all hate people they'd decided weren't good enough, didn't belong. Places like this could be restful, pleasant, not bathed in an undercurrent of foreboding. She closed her eyes, counted slowly, willing herself down. Her mother had always been on edge back then, just before they left, expecting the worst, and that fear had grabbed hold of her as well. Leaked into the corners of her life.

She'd never found out what that worst was, but whenever she thought of country life she thought of that. Unease.

Lucy wanted to jump back into her car, head back to her nice

safe home and the life she'd made for herself. The anonymity of city life. But she couldn't. It wasn't an option right now.

She took a deep breath. It *would* be an option one day soon. This was just a temporary solution until she got life back on track. Which she would do. She wasn't her mother.

This was so not why she'd qualified as a teacher though. She never wanted to relive her old idyllic life, the nice part before it all imploded. Before her dad had decided they weren't good enough and discarded them, thrown them onto the rubbish heap. Just like her so called friends had done. Just like David Lawson had done.

She hadn't deserved it as a kid, and she didn't deserve it now.

Oh God, she was being ridiculous. Sense of foreboding my foot. She'd been reading far too many scary books, it was no wonder the panic attacks were coming back. She was in a perfectly nice, tranquil village where the worst that could happen was she'd get bored to death.

The loud quack made her jump. Or she might get pecked to death. A very indignant mallard looked up at her. 'Well, I haven't got any bread if that's what you're after.'

The duck tipped his head on one side, then blinked in disbelief before raising himself as high as he could, on surprisingly long legs, and shook his feathers vigorously. He settled back down onto the grass and for a moment she did feel like that long forgotten happy child again. She was sorely tempted to kick her shoes off and step onto the thick inviting carpet of green grass, to

stroll over and sit beneath the soft dappled shade of the weeping willow and watch the ducks. Which was far better than collapsing in a pathetic, bubbling heap. But she couldn't do that either. Not now.

Instead she let her gaze drift over the haphazard array of cottages, and settle on the large building at the top end of the green. Even at this distance she could tell it was a pub, which meant… she looked to the right and spotted it. An old red-brick building which was instantly recognisable as the picture on the website. Langtry Meadows Primary School.

It was nothing like the old school she vaguely remembered attending. She wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt, ignoring the slight tremble in her fingers, and took a deep breath. She could do this. It was just a job. She belonged here as much as the next person, she was a teacher now, not the child who couldn't live up to her father's expectations.

His words echoed in her ears, as though he was there. She couldn't escape them. 'It's not real, Lucy. Nobody cares about you,' he'd given a small sad smile, 'they only bother with you because I'm your father. If I wasn't here you'd see how useless you really are, just like your mother.'

She hadn't believed him at first. But it turned out he'd been right. Her dad was always right. After they'd moved, not even her best friend Amy had said goodbye, or replied to Lucy's letters, or come to see them in their new home. But neither had Dad. It was as if she'd never existed.

She closed her eyes and took an involuntary step backwards. Away from the green, the memories.

'Hey!'

Lucy clasped her hand to her chest and spun round at the harsh male tone. It couldn't be her father, not here.

'Move.'

He was bigger than her father. Taller, stronger, and even as her brain was telling her to fight off the hand that was reaching out towards her, he was rugby tackling her, taking her with him. Sending her off balance. She flapped her arms wildly, and was pretty sure from the grunt in her ear and the sharp pain in her wrist that she'd smacked him across the head as they staggered back locked together.

'What the—?' There was a loud clang and she shrank back against him as a large horse (how the hell had she not heard that coming?), galloped past so close to her car that the stirrup iron caught the wing mirror of her car. She was dimly aware of the rider grappling with the reins, of a shouted apology, a whoosh of air and brief whiff of sweating horse.

Then nothing.

Lucy clung on to the arm that was wrapped around her. Her knees were trembling, in fact her whole body was shaking in sympathy with the pounding rhythm of her speeding heartbeat. She'd hated horses ever since her father had insisted she should learn to ride. They were so big. So scary. So many feet and big teeth. They could kill you and not notice. This one nearly had.

'Ouch.'

She suddenly realised she was digging her nails into the strong forearm, gripping on for dear life. And she was leaning against the safety of the firm body behind her as if she knew him. Which was kind of awkward.

Oh God, that warm breath against her neck was doing weird things to her. She closed her eyes, which made things worse as all her senses seemed to home in on his slightly woody scent, on the fact that the well-muscled arm was part of a very firm body. It was obviously delayed shock that was making her this hyper-aware.

'Christ you've got a good left hook.' She twisted, glanced up. Mistake. Dark, concerned brown eyes were looking down straight into hers as his lips practically brushed against her cheek. Full, dry lips.

He rubbed the side of his head with his free hand, a rueful smile tugging at the corners of his generous, very-kissable, mouth.

They were practically in a clinch, well the closest she'd been to a clinch for quite some time. Oh hell. She swung back to face the front, before he realised just how close she was to actually kissing him.

She was pretty sure she made a kind of squeaky noise, and she was more than sure that she'd shoved her bum into his crotch so they were now spooned in the kind of post-sex intimate position that you just didn't do with clothes on. Or in broad daylight with

a stranger.

He froze, then leapt away from her as though he'd been stung – almost throwing her off balance again.

'Sorry.' His tone was nearly as clipped as his action, and when she half-turned he was studying a spot about six inches above the top of her head. 'You were in its path. Bolting horses can run blind.'

Wow, he *was* tall, dizzyingly tall, and solid looking.

'Oh.' Suddenly light headed she bent over and rested her hands on her knees, and was shocked when he squatted down and peered up at her, studying her intently as he threaded his fingers through his mussed up hair.

'Are you okay? Do you need to sit down?'

She blinked at the soft tone which was in total contrast to the brusque edge she'd heard seconds before.

'Fine, I just need to get my breath.' She tried to smile. 'I'm not used to being almost run down by galloping horses.' Or being grabbed by strong, attractive men. There was a bit of a shortage of them in city centre primary schools. Sexy men, and horses. Not that he was responsible for her current light headedness – that had to be the danger, the nearly being killed. The thrill…. No, not thrill. Danger. Adrenaline – that was the word she was looking for.

'Don't apologise. I would have a sit down if I were you, shock can have a strange effect.'

Something was having a strange effect, but she had a horrible

feeling it was more to do with finding herself pressed against the groin of a man, than the risk of a trail of hoof prints being left across her body.

'You look pale.'

She felt pale. Avoiding his gaze she glanced downwards. Bloody hell, his blood supply seemed to have redirected round his body again and headed southwards, right into the spot she'd been nestled against. She looked back up guiltily, straight into his eyes. Mistake. Maybe she was better shutting her eyes, concentrating on her own blood flow which seemed to be located solely in her heart which was still hammering away ten to the dozen.

He wasn't reacting to her, it was a male thing. Danger turned her into a wobbly blancmange, and men into, well into, well it could just turn them on.

'Hey.'

He was still waiting for a reply, and probably worried she was going to keel over on him. 'I'm fine. Thank you.' She studied his feet. Much safer than looking at his groin, or into his eyes.

'Good.' He stuck his hands into his pockets. He knew. The earth just had to swallow her up, whisk her away. 'Great, well if you're sure you're okay, I'll be off.' He stepped back almost nervously. 'Work to do.' He was doing his best to edge past her, squeeze between her and the car. She stepped back, feeling awkward. 'Sorry about grabbing…'

'No problem, thanks for…'

'Sure.' And he spun on his heel, and was off before she could say another word.

Lucy sank down against the bonnet of her car and watched as he set off down the road, his long legs swallowing up the ground as though he couldn't get away quickly enough. Wow. Nobody on Emmerdale looked like that, or on The Yorkshire Vet, or on Countryfile. Not that she really watched programmes like that. Home makeover programmes were more her thing.

She glanced at her watch out of habit. 'Bloody hell.' She'd almost forgotten what she was doing here, she was going to be late for her interview. She was never late for anything. Ducking back into her little car she started up the engine and pulled out. Following the left hand fork, she passed the Taverner's Arms, and then pulled up outside the school that lay just beyond it.

Smoothing her hair down with a slightly shaky hand, she tucked the loose tendrils behind her ears. All she had to do was remember to breathe and be natural, confident. Everything she wasn't feeling.

But she could do this with her eyes shut. She knew she could. Teaching in a small village school had to be easy after the day-to-day battles she'd fought in a failing city centre one.

It was fine, if she didn't get this job there would be others.

Lucy had applied for the temporary cover position at Langtry Meadows out of a sense of desperation. She'd actually wondered how the hell she was going to be convincing in an interview. One, she didn't want to work in a village, two she wanted to work

within commuting distance of her home, and three she was over qualified for the post. But as she got out of her car and gazed in awe at the pretty primary school she realised she actually wanted this job. Maybe if she could do this, she could banish her past forever. Not just hide the hurt, but beat it down. Face up to it, and prove it no longer had a hold over her.

Which made it all the more nerve-wracking. She couldn't ever remember feeling quite this nervous, but that was probably because all of a sudden she knew it mattered. Really mattered.

Colourful stepping stones marked a path across the playground, leading up to a doorway which had 'Boys' etched into the arched brickwork above. She stared up at it – wondering if she'd somehow been transported back in time – when a young woman, with cropped trousers, a floaty blouse and paint covered hands appeared on the step.

'Hi there! You must be Lucy.' The woman smiled. 'Come in, come in. Oh, don't worry about that.' She'd followed Lucy's gaze. 'This school was built back in the days when they thought pre-marital hand-touching was a sin, we've got a girl's entrance over there.' She pointed to another entrance at the other end of the playground. 'We use that for open days, and everybody dives in through this one the rest of the time. You'll have to excuse me, I've been helping Reception Class with finger-painting.' She wriggled red and yellow fingers, and Lucy felt some of the flutters disperse. Just some. 'Mrs Potts is about somewhere, she'll show you round while I get myself cleaned up. Good journey?'

She paused for breath and Lucy smiled back.

'Great thanks.' Better not to mention the wrong turnings.

'I'm hopeless, I always get lost even with a satnav. I'm Jill by the way, classroom assistant and chief bottom wiper. I won't shake hands – not with fingers like this. If you sign in there and grab a visitor's badge I'll find Liz, she's probably gone to buy some biscuits. Best part of an interview day,' she grinned, 'candidates have biscuits and we get to finish them off, we usually get bourbons and cream custards, much better than the normal digestive biscuits. Ah, here she is, I'll leave you in her capable hands, and get back to painting caterpillar pictures. Catch you later.'

Liz Potts was frighteningly capable. After checking that Lucy had signed herself in properly, and had made a note of her car registration correctly, she gathered up her bunch of keys and set off on the introductory tour of the school at a speed totally at odds with her appearance. She reminded Lucy of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. Which could have been down to her rather rounded appearance, sharp nose, and tiny feet. Or the speed they were scuttling down the corridors at.

Lucy was being whisked through the school with a ruthless efficiency, and a nod to left and right at various classrooms which Mrs Potts seemed to consider superfluous to teaching.

'Reception and Class 1 here on the right… and the dining room is there… this is our little library… Class 2 here, rather a big intake, it must have been a bad winter.'

'Sorry?' Lucy craned her neck, trying to peek inside at the children who seemed remarkably engrossed in their work.

'Snow, a hard winter always results in a flurry of autumn births don't you find?'

It had never occurred to Lucy, but there again there was probably less to do here than in the middle of Birmingham, which very rarely saw snow anyway.

The corridors seemed eerily quiet compared to what she'd been used to at her previous school, although that could have been partly down to the fact that it had been a modern build with thin partition walls and echoing areas between them – whereas this was a delightfully solid looking brick built affair that appeared to have been part of the village for years.

'Er, yes, well.' Easier to change the subject. 'Do you have a Wi-Fi connection throughout the school?'

'Wi-Fi?' Mrs Potts actually paused, very briefly, so that an unprepared Lucy had to swerve, before they picked up speed again. She was more than used to chasing round after young children, and dashing round a classroom to avoid catastrophe, but it was the sheer determination of the woman as she darted down the corridors that had caught her by surprise.

'You've got wireless throughout the school? An internet connection?' Flat shoes were obviously going to be a necessity here, if she took the five week cover position.

'Oh good heavens no, dear.' Mrs Potts pursed her lips and shook her head dismissively. 'That isn't how we do things here.'

Oh hell, she'd been right. They probably wouldn't even have interactive whiteboards. It would be old-fashioned style teaching, which was about as progressive as old fashioned granny knickers and string vests.

'We've got chickens.'

Lucy came to a stop, then she had to dash after her tour guide who was steaming ahead, had flung a door open and as far as Lucy was concerned might well dive through it and disappear. 'Chickens?' God, she was out of breath, this was worse than Sports Day.

'And a wonderful vegetable patch. Come along dear, I'll show you.' Mrs Potts glanced at her watch, her pace never faltering. 'We are rather pushed for time as the children are waiting to interview you, they've been preparing all week.'

Lucy frowned, this all seemed rather over the top for a temporary post, in fact it was exactly what she expected in an interview for a permanent position. It seemed that the school took its staffing very seriously indeed. Mrs Potts had picked up speed, marching across the playground with Lucy running to keep up, to where a small patch of rather worn grass was fenced off, with what had to be a wooden chicken coop inside. 'We do have computers in the classroom plugged in,' she gave Lucy a stern look which suggested she didn't approve, 'for teaching purposes, but they can't learn about responsibility by looking at those, can they? Now if the monitors for the day forget to shut the hens up at night, they won't repeat that mistake again, will they?'

'Won't they?' Lucy stared at the small wooden building, and a rather scraggy chicken gave her a beady once-over then proceeded to peck at the dirt.

'Of course not.' Mrs Potts looked at her as though she was a simpleton. 'The fox will get them, won't it?' She made a cut throat gesture that looked slightly sinister, as she headed back across the playground and Lucy scurried after her.

'It will?' The sense that she'd entered some kind of tranquil backwater where life was idyllic started to disperse.

The drive up the M6 motorway had left her frustrated and tense (sure that she would be late, and she was never late), and then she'd lost her way twice which had left her with sweating palms and the start of a headache, but the moment she'd entered the village the stress had started to ebb away and as her shoulders had relaxed she'd eased back on the accelerator and started to appreciate the pretty flower strewn hedgerows.

By the time she'd reached the well-kept village green with its swathes of bright dancing daffodils the pounding in her temples had stopped. Momentarily.

Until she'd taken an unwanted tumble back to her childhood, before being unceremoniously tossed to the curb by a very big man. With a firm grip, tousled hair and gorgeous eyes. Oh hell, now all she needed was for him to be one of the parents and word would soon get round that she was up for a grope with any passing strangers. Not that she'd actually kissed him. Luckily. But she had rubbed herself against him. And wriggled against his crotch.

What the hell was she was letting herself in for?

'It certainly will. Foxes can be relied on.' They ground to a halt, and Lucy nearly cannoned into her. 'Believe me, the children only make that mistake once. And we have the vegetable patch of course.' Mrs Potts was on the move again. Of course. At Lucy's previous school they'd settled for egg shell men with cress hair, and a sunflower growing competition. And her sweet peas. Something caught in her throat at the thought of the seeds in their packets waiting to delight her class who had very little colour in their lives – apart from Pokemon and Marvel heroes.

'Picking their own beans is far more rewarding than a gold star on a chart, and if the slugs or rabbits eat their lettuces well there's a lesson or two to be learned, isn't there? Oh now would you look at the time! Come on, chop, chop, we've got a lot to fit in today.'

It was no wonder the staff were happy to be treated to an extra portion of biscuits, working here would burn more calories than a double dose of Zumba followed by a Spin class.

Chapter 2

'We don't normally take on temporary staff, but we're in rather a difficult situation, and you do seem ideal for the job. We need somebody who will fit in, and I'm sure I speak for everybody else when I say I think you'll slot right into life at Langtry Meadows Primary School.' Timothy Parry, the head teacher looked round the table for confirmation.

A bearded governor leant forward – his forearms on the desk and an earnest expression on his face – then suddenly smiled, showing a chipped tooth. 'The children loved you. Always a good sign, that is.'

Lucy wasn't sure 'loved' was the right word. Her second worst nightmare scenario (after being sacked) had to be a lesson where a child turned out his pocket to reveal an astoundingly large amount of soil and worms. The child in question, a chubby farmer's son called Ted with bright blue eyes and a pudding-bowl haircut had then tried to present her with the longest worm he had, 'to match her long hair.' He'd stretched it out so that it dangled ever closer to her head. Assuring him that the other applicants would be devastated if she accepted, she'd persuaded him to deposit the wriggling but rapidly drying out creature into a jar, for release into the wild at break-time.

'I'm Jim Stafford. I've seen more interviews than you've had hot dinners my dear, and I'm telling you, you're spot on.' The

governor leaned forward even further and tapped the back of her hand, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial level. 'Ted Wright's father used to be the Head of Governors and he takes it very much to heart does our Edward if anybody upsets his little Teddy.'

Ahh, so that explained that one. Diplomatic relationships with parents was an essential part of the job that unfortunately had been barely touched on during her teacher training, and she'd had to learn fast.

Timothy coughed, politely regaining control. 'Edward would normally be here himself, but I'm afraid he had other commitments.'

'Sheep.' Jim tapped the side of his nose knowingly.

'Sheep?'

'Lambing time love.' He nodded wisely. 'Busy time is spring.'

'A masterstroke to slip in the animal welfare implications, as well as showing such equanimity to your fellow applicants.' A thin, well-dressed woman with her hair scraped back into a severe bun chipped in, steering them back onto the matter at hand. Lucy had a vague idea that she'd been introduced as the former deputy-head, '*now retired, but very active in the community*'. 'One of our interviewees abandoned his post after Daisy produced a frog from her pocket.' There was a disapproving tut lurking just behind the thin lips. 'What does he expect in the countryside? Honestly!'

The nearest to wildlife Lucy had seen in the classroom at her

previous school had been head lice, at least frogs didn't make her want to scratch her head in sympathy – which the sight of nits always had.

The interview with the school council, the pupils, had been the most astounding part of this whole process. At all her previous interviews, the children had asked well-thought out (and no doubt prompted) questions about positive reinforcement and community spirit – the children at this school had been more interested in her reaction to frogs, whether she agreed with Alice's dad that 'those buggers sat behind desks had no right to tell him when he could cut the sodding hedges', and what she thought about the country pong in the air following the liberal slurry spraying over the weekend.

It had taken all of Lucy's self-control to stay in her seat, and to resist putting a peg on her nose. She was not a country girl; she didn't like mess, unpleasant smells, or any kind of large livestock in the immediate vicinity. She really had never ever considered when hedges were cut (but maybe the 'buggers' had the bird's welfare at heart?) and she really did wonder what she was letting herself in for. But now that she'd got over the initial shock of being cast back to her childhood, and been able to rationalise that it wasn't the same after all, she'd been able to admit to herself that the village was really the most gorgeous place. Ideal for a week's chilling out kind of holiday, but what working here would be like could be a different matter altogether.

Except it was simple. She was saving her house, her future.

She had to concentrate on that. This was a short term solution, for a few weeks cover. It would be good for her, help her lay some ghosts to rest, and then she was sure something more suitable would turn up. All would be well. She'd be back on track.

'Oh no, what a shame.' She dredged a weak smile up, thinking herself lucky that she'd only had to cope with worms, and tried to remember which one Daisy was.

'That lass is just like her dad.' Jim chuckled. 'I remember when he brought his ferret in to school, took it out in the middle of the 11 plus exam. Teacher was as calm as you like, whisked it away and stuck it in a cardboard box. Shame of it was that the bugger had eaten his way out by the time we'd finished, whole school had to join in the search.'

Quoting health and safety rules probably wasn't the right response. 'Well children will be children.' She crossed her fingers under the desk, hoping that if she got this job neither frog nor ferret would find its way into her classroom.

Luckily the head teacher shuffled the papers on his desk and coughed, to regain control of the meeting. 'They certainly will. Well I'm sure I speak for everybody when I say we'd be delighted if you could start as soon as possible, Miss Jacobs, or may we call you Lucy?' He was totally unlike any of the head teachers she'd come across in the city: older, kinder, owner of a bow-tie, a very well-worn tweed jacket with actual elbow patches the likes of which she had only ever seen on TV before, and he hadn't mentioned account balancing or issued a single rule about the use

of blu-tac or staple guns. And she was pretty sure that the only type of metal-detector would be the handheld type for use on the school field, in search of ancient coins rather than knives and knuckle dusters. 'Your references are excellent, and I really feel you could bring new vitality to our little school whilst maintaining a positive and kind outlook. Now we mentioned to the agency the first day of next term, after the Spring break. Would that suit? Does that give you time? Monday is a teacher training day, so we quite understand if you can't start until Tuesday.'

Relief flooded through Lucy, who hadn't realised quite how tense she'd been. It would mean she'd only been jobless for a half-term, and so far she'd been able to juggle her finances without eating too deeply into the redundancy money.

'The first day of term sounds excellent, Monday is fine, and please do call me Lucy. I'll have to find somewhere to stay though.' She frowned, that bit did concern her. From what she'd seen it was a fairly small village and she hadn't spotted a single 'Room for Rent' or even a 'To Let' sign. 'I need to look for a small hotel,' she cringed inwardly as she said the words, 'or see if there are any rooms to let.' She really did need somewhere impossibly cheap or she'd be struggling to pay her mortgage and buy food as well. Bye bye fruit smoothies and hello boil in the pot noodles.

'Ahh yes, you live well out of our area don't you? We're honoured you chose our school Lucy, it's not many teachers will uproot themselves, and don't worry about finding a place to stay. I'm sure we can help, Jim?'

'I know just the place.'

She looked at the governor in surprise. 'You do?'

'I do. Come on, you gather your stuff up love,' relieved of his governor's role Jim relaxed visibly and his careful diction was replaced with a gruff rumble, 'and I'll take you to meet my sister Annie.'

'Oh,' the head held his hand up, 'do introduce Lucy to Charlie Davenport if you see him, her first challenge can be persuading that young man to come in and chat to the children. He's been surprisingly adept at avoiding me,' he winked at her, 'you, my dear, can be our secret weapon.'

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Annie was as round and cuddly as Jim was tall and stringy, had a mass of greying curls held back by two clips adorned with big red flowers, and was wearing a flowery t-shirt that seemed to be fighting a losing battle to keep her bosom under control. She was sitting behind the counter in the village post-office-cum-general-store, filling in a Sudoku puzzle which appeared to have more crossing-outs than numbers.

'Well now isn't this a nice surprise. I was just thinking there'd been a mass evacuation and nobody had told me.' She gave Jim a hug and smiled at Lucy.

'Annie, this is Miss Jacobs, Lucy. She's filling in for little Becky and,' Jim paused theatrically, 'looking for somewhere to stay.'

'Oh my goodness,' Annie clapped her hands together and

beamed as though she'd just found out she'd picked the winning numbers in the lottery, 'now isn't that a stroke of luck? Chocolate éclair or egg custard, love?' She pointed at the display of cakes. 'There'll be a new lot in tomorrow so these need eating up. Sit down, sit down. I'll make us a nice cup of tea and we can have a chat, been run off my feet I have.'

Jim rolled his eyes and gestured to Lucy to sit down on one of the stools behind the counter. 'Annie is off to the Caribbean, not that I understand why.'

'Well you wouldn't, would you Jim? He's a real home bird is my brother, about as adventurous as a goldfish in a bowl aren't you love?' She passed Lucy a mug of tea, and put her own on the counter so that she could concentrate on her cake which was oozing cream faster than she could scoop it up. 'Well love,' she patted Lucy's knee with her free hand, 'me and my husband have always wanted to go travelling, and we promised ourselves that once the kids finished university we'd be off. So we are.' She smiled, a broad beam of a smile. 'I've been looking for somebody to look after the house and not had any luck up until now, and all the tickets are booked and everything. It's my last day behind this counter, then we've a few days of packing and Bob's your uncle.'

At least, Lucy thought, as she tackled her egg custard, she wasn't expected to speak.

'We're planning a year away, although it could be longer if I get my way, how long will you be here, duck?'

'Oh I'm sorry. I'm only planning on the half term, it's only

a temporary position.' Lucy tried not to spit out pastry crumbs. 'In fact,' she wasn't quite sure what to say with Jim the governor listening in, 'I do love my own home and I'm hoping a local job comes up soon.'

There was a bit of a splutter from Jim's direction.

'But Langtry Meadows is wonderful,' she added hastily.

'I reckon you won't want to leave once you get to know the kids.' Lucy watched transfixed as half the cake disappeared into Jim's mouth, and was swallowed in an instant. 'They're a grand bunch, and the village isn't bad either.' He looked pointedly at his sister. 'Even if some people do have some strange notions. So, that's settled then, you'll move into our Annie's house and look after things?'

Things? That seemed a strange way of putting it.

'Well if that's okay, I mean I suppose you do really want somebody longer term? And er, how much is the rent, it's just…'

'Oh no that sounds splendid, we won't be charging much rent love because it really is a big relief off our minds knowing everything will be looked after properly.'

Everything?

'It was quite a worry at first, wondering how we'd manage because I'm not really into rehoming, and then Jim here came up with the idea of house-sitting. Not a total dollop are you love?' she grinned affectionately at her brother, who looked quite pleased with himself. 'And now you've come up trumps again, finding young Lucy for us. You stay as long as you want my

dear, and don't you worry about what you can afford, we'll work something out.'

'Sorry, rehoming? House-sitting? I thought you were renting out…'

'Oh yes love, don't you worry. The house is all yours. There's a bit of a condition attached though, which is why we're only asking for you to settle the bills and keep on top of the garden.'

She could do gardens, no problem at all.

'We need you to look after the animals, but I can tell that won't be a problem to somebody so organised, you look so efficient dear, and a school teacher is perfect. If you can cope with those kids, then my lot will be a walk in the park. More tea?'

Lucy put her hand over the top of the mug. 'I'm sorry, you've lost me. I've no problem at all with a bit of gardening, I'm more than happy to do that and pay the bills, keep everywhere tidy, but animals?' She'd never even had time to look after a hamster, let alone 'animals' whatever that meant.

'Oh, didn't our Jim explain?' She tutted at her brother. 'There's the cat, Tigger, then we've got a few chucks, they're no trouble at all, and Pork-Chop the pig of course.'

Of course. And what the hell were 'chucks'?

'He does like a bit of company and a walk round the green now and then but he's no bother at all if he's got his harness on, oh and little Mischief.'

'Mischief?'

'The pony, love, I mean once the kids outgrew him we couldn't

just sell him could we? Is that it Jim?' She frowned, doing a mental check of her menagerie. 'Oh and Gertie, silly goose me,' she guffawed at her own joke, 'how could I forget her? Right then, I'm so glad that's settled, a weight off my mind.' She licked cream off her finger. 'I'd take you up there and show you round, but I can't get away until 5pm. Jim can take you for a quick shifty, can't you, dear?'

'I certainly can, and our dear headmaster asked if I could introduce her to young Charlie, let her try out her skills of persuasion, so we can pop in there too.'

Annie chuckled, a rolling sound that seemed to come from the very centre of her. 'He's not daft our Timothy. Good luck with that then dear, I'm sure you stand more chance than all those other old codgers, though I think he even managed to duck out when they sent Jill. Always did have a stubborn streak in him, that one.'

'I'm sorry, who is this Charlie, and why do I have to talk to him?' Lucy looked from Annie to her brother Jim. It was all very well being labelled the headmaster's 'secret weapon', but so far she hadn't a clue who this man, that she was supposed to be persuading to come into school, was. Maybe he was a famous author, an artist, a great and shy inventor?

'Charlie Davenport.' Annie nodded as though that said it all.

'The new veterinary surgeon.' Jim chipped in.

'Well you say new love, but he's no stranger is he?' She smiled at Lucy, 'Charlie grew up here in Langtry Meadows, lovely little

kid he was, bright as a button and cheeky with it. His dad used to be a partner in the practice, then he took early retirement and they moved away. Lovely to see young Charlie back again,' she paused, 'although he doesn't seem that sure himself, if you know what I mean.'

Lucy wasn't sure she did.

'Old Eric has always come into school once a year without fail to give the kids a bit of a talk and they love it, but this fella's been a bit elusive.' Jim carried on as though he hadn't been interrupted.

'Eric?'

'Aye, Eric. He's the vet that runs the place but he had a bit of a mishap so Charlie's helping out. He's a nice enough chap, but tricky to pin down, so we're relying on you and,' he coughed, 'your ahem feminine wiles if I'm allowed to say that in this day and age.'

Lucy stared, not quite sure what she should say, and Annie recognising the look of panic changed tack before her house-sitter had a chance to scarper. 'Well now, look at us chattering away and not letting you get a word in. So, what's a wonderful young lady like you doing looking for a new job? I'm surprised anybody would let you go.'

'I've been made redundant actually.' It was the first time she'd said the words out loud. She'd purposefully skated round the issue when talking to her mother, but now it didn't seem quite such a terrible admission.

'Oh the fools, I can tell just by looking that you're a wonderful

teacher. You've got a way with you, hasn't she Jim?'

'You aren't wrong Annie. She has. Kids loved her, and even Liz Potts couldn't find fault.'

'Well if Liz can't find anything to complain about then that says it all.' Annie seemed to take that as conclusive proof, and it gave Lucy a desperately needed boost. Up until now she'd thought of herself as fairly self-confident, but the whole business at Starbaston School had knocked her more than she'd dare admit even to herself.

'I did love it at my old school, it wasn't easy but it was very satisfying. It was put in special measures by Ofsted just before I was taken on, and we all worked so hard to turn it around.'

'I'm sure you did, dear.'

'We put new plans in place, and worked to make the classrooms brighter. When the Ofsted inspector came back she was amazed at the transformation.' Lucy didn't like to boast, but she'd been proud of what they'd achieved with hard work and the way all the staff had pulled together after a few changes. 'She said she'd never seen such a turn-around in such a short space of time. It was worth all the late evenings at school, and all the weekends we spent putting together a new strategy and lesson plans that took into account the capabilities of all the children. I mean, they're such a mixed bunch and it's really important we do our best for all of them, isn't it?'

'Now I don't want you to take this the wrong way, lovey.' Annie was looking at her in a disturbingly measured way. She put down

her mug of tea. 'But it sounds to me like you've been taking it all a bit too seriously, a girl your age needs to lighten up and have a bit of fun.' She held up a hand to still Lucy's objections. 'There's more to life than spending evenings in a classroom. Now I can tell you love your job, but nobody on their deathbed ever said they wished they'd spent more time at work, did they?'

Lucy stared at her. Maybe it did sound all a bit boring, and work, work, work. But that was just how it was. Annie looked back, her gaze never wavering.

'Well *you* won't, will you sis?' Jim broke the uncomfortable silence.

'I certainly won't, it's all about balance.' She put her hands on the counter and levered herself up. 'Ahh well, no rest for the wicked. Lovely to meet you Lucy, now Jim'll have all your details won't he? What with him being a governor and all, I'll sort out the keys with him and then you can move in the weekend before you start, can't you? We'll be gone before you get here, but don't you go worrying about that,' Lucy hadn't been about to, 'we'll sort something out. Such a shame you're not staying for longer, love, but beggars can't be choosers can they? Now what did I do with that newspaper?'

Annie's cottage was a few minutes' walk from the school and as different to Lucy's modern, new-build semi-detached house as was possible.

Where she had an immaculately tended front lawn and moss-free block paved driveway, this was a riotous array of spring

colour – plants competing for space as they tumbled over each other (and the narrow uneven cobbled path) in disarray. Her fingers itched for pruning shears and a ball of string, but she had the feeling that taming this front garden would be like maintaining the Forth Bridge.

Lucy forced her gaze beyond the garden, to the cottage that lay in its midst. From a distance it had looked picture perfect, but now they were closer she could see that the paint was flaking from the window frames and the thatch was looking rather old-man thin in places. It still looked incredibly sweet though, despite the fact that she was sure there would be draughts from the single glazed window and no doubt inside it would be a higgledy-piggledy mess that was nothing like the tidy order she loved. She could imagine the flowery and cracked mismatched pottery, and the worn chairs that no doubt showed traces of cat hair. But a change was always as good as a rest, and looking on the bright side it really could be quite an idyllic spot if the sun shone.

'Think it will suit then?'

'It's lovely, Jim.'

He grinned, showing off the chipped crooked tooth.

'Shall we go in and…?' She reached for the gate latch and had only opened it a fraction when an enormous white bird came hurtling round the corner of the house. 'Bloody hell.' Slamming it shut she jumped back, nearly colliding with Jim.

'That'll be Gertie.' He nodded.

The bird flapped its wings indignantly sending flower petals

in all directions and stuck a bright orange, sharply pointed beak in their direction.

'Gertie?' She was pretty sure she'd gone nearly as pale as the bird which had fixed her with a very black, beady glare.

'Aye. Gertie the goose.' Jim had barely flinched. He tapped his watch pointedly. 'I'd show you round, but I've got business to attend to.'

Hmm she bet he had.

'All you need to do is wear our Annie's boots for a few days and little Gertie will be putty in your hands. Imprinted on those she is.'

Little? In what world could you describe this goose as little? 'Imprinted?'

'Aye, imprinted.' He looked at her as though she was an underachieving student. 'First thing it saw when it hatched was those bloody bright pink wellingtons that our Annie likes to parade about in, poor bugger thinks they're its mother.' He guffawed and Lucy felt herself drawn to this big, friendly man, who the moment he'd left the school had dropped his governor's hat (and voice) and become Annie's brother with a slight country burr. 'Well now, you can meet the rest of the menagerie when you move in if that's okay with you? Annie will leave full instructions and I'm always on hand if you need me. Well, I'll love you and leave you if that's alright?'

'Of course, yes, I'm sure you have things to do. It's very kind of you to show me round, and I'll see you when I move in then?'

'My pleasure, Lucy. Oh, and you've got the vets practically next door,' he pointed over her shoulder. 'Old Eric had himself a bit of a run in with some cows and he's laid up for a while, but our Charlie seems to be shaping up well enough, chip off the old block. His dad was a good man, popular. The lad's a bit of a dark horse these days mind, keeps himself to himself,' Lucy thought that could be a problem for anybody here, 'but I'm sure you'll soon win him over,' he winked, it was the second wink of the day which was a bit worrying, 'you'll be getting plenty of opportunity.'

'I will?'

'Oh aye, our Annie is always in and out, I reckon she keeps that practice going. Although since our Charlie came back I've heard from Sal that bookings have soared.'

'Really?' She didn't know what to say to that.

'Just like his dad, he is. You'll see.' He tapped the side of his nose and chuckled in a most un-Jim like way, reminding her of Annie. 'So any problems he's on the doorstep, though I'm sure you'll cope. Now would you credit it,' he paused, and it seemed he'd completely forgotten that he was in a hurry, 'there's the man himself. No time like the present, let's introduce you to Charlie and you can ask him to do that school visit.'

Before Lucy had a chance to object, Jim had her elbow and was guiding her down the lane and across the small car park that fronted the veterinary surgery.

Protruding from the boot of a hatchback car was a very long

pair of legs encased in brown trousers, and what she had to admit was quite a trim rear. Not that she was looking.

Jim coughed loudly, and Charlie straightened abruptly, banging his head with a clunk on the tailgate, which trembled, rose up then bounced back down giving him another wallop for good measure. Lucy flinched. He swore. Not in the loud, clutching-her-head way she would have done, but in a much more teeth-clenched, restrained manner.

He backed out slowly, then he straightened up and she knew before he'd even turned round. How could she not recognise that arse?

It was him.

A pair of brown, familiar eyes stared straight into hers. Definitely him.

His hand instinctively went up to the side of his head, just as she wrapped her own hand round the wrist she'd used to whack him. Well not *used* to whack him. That suggested intent, and she'd never intended anything. It hadn't even been self-defence, her brain had barely registered she was under attack until she'd been in his arms. She gulped. Clutched against his firm body.

'You!'

He didn't sound pleased. Not that she could blame him, knock 'em dead wasn't supposed to mean literally, and so far it was looking like she'd been aiming to give him concussion. And she hadn't been trying to knock-him dead in any sense actually.

Not that he wasn't attractive. Very. To the point that she'd

nearly snogged him. Oh God. The heat rushed to her face. She had to say something. Stop gawping.

'You're not, you can't be…' This could not be Charlie Davenport, the vet. The man she was going to be seeing a lot of. The man she'd gyrated against in full view of the rest of the village (well anybody who might have strayed onto the green, or been peeping round net curtains) before they'd even been introduced. The man Jim wanted her to use her feminine wiles against. Wiles she was pretty sure she didn't possess. Not that she'd ever use them in that way.

This was bad. This was embarrassing. This explained a lot.

He was the village heart-throb. If he made a habit of rugby-tackling every woman he came across it was no bloody wonder. No, that wasn't fair. He'd been saving her.

'Charlie,' Jim butted into her thoughts, probably a good thing, 'let me introduce our new teacher, Lucy. Lucy Jacobs. And Lucy this is Charlie Davenport.' He frowned, looking from one to the other of them, obviously realising at last that she hadn't been struck dumb by his awesomeness, there was more to it than that. 'Have you already met then? I thought you said…'

'Not really, well yes, well we've not been introduced.' This wasn't going well. 'I didn't know this was Charlie, he er, rescued me earlier today.'

Jim chuckled and she stared at the ground, hoping a handy chasm would open up and she'd fall in. It didn't so she risked glancing back up. 'Told you he was popular, rescued you my

foot.' He obviously thought this was hilarious. 'What did you do then lad? Sweep the young lass off her feet? Not that I'd blame you. I'd have done the same myself a few years ago.'

This was getting worse by the second. And she'd accepted a job here. She had to be mad.

'I didn't really do anything.' She watched mesmerised as Charlie threaded long fingers through his dark curly hair and tentatively rubbed the spot that had been in collision with his car. 'That horse of Holly's bolted again, and, er Lucy was in their path. I just nudged her out of the way.'

Their gazes met, a slight quirk of humour tugged at the corner of his mouth. The feel of his solid, warm hand at her waist seemed to be imprinted into her body. She could feel it now, smell the smoky, earthiness of his scent. It was almost intimate. She folded her arms around her body to stop the shiver of awareness, then realised she was being defensive and dropped them to her sides. Stared at his left ear, which was much safer than looking into his eyes or at that sexy mouth.

'Ah, thought I heard a bit of a clattering through the square earlier on, them cobbles don't half ring when she belts over them.' Jim smiled broadly. 'Well you two will be seeing a lot more of each other, I'm sure.'

Charlie looked warily from Lucy to Jim, then back again. 'Nice, to erm meet you properly, Lucy. Welcome to Langtry Meadows.' He held out a hand, there was the briefest touch of warm fingers then it was back safely in his pocket. 'Sorry Jim,

but I'm in rather a hu—'

'Now then, not so fast lad, our Lucy has a favour to ask, haven't you Lucy?' Jim prodded her in the ribs. She'd always thought *she* was pretty direct, but Jim would beat her hands down any day.

'Well I'm sure it can wait if Mr Davenport is busy.'

'No time like the present, if you don't mind me saying.' Jim folded his arms as though he was here for as long as it took, then jerked his head in Charlie's direction. 'Go on, ask him, lass.'

She did mind him saying. But it seemed rude to say so, and there really wasn't any harm in sorting it out here and now. That would be something to tick of the list, even if it was a minor accomplishment. 'We can discuss it properly when I've moved in, but, well we, I, well I understand the practice sends somebody in to the school to chat to the children at this time of year.'

'And?' He was looking at her blankly.

'Well, if we could arrange a day?'

He frowned.

'Early next term? For you to come…'

'Oh, no.' He held a hand up, a barrier between them, and if she hadn't been so aware of him she wouldn't have noticed the slight tremble. He shoved the hand back in his pocket. 'Sorry, that's Eric's domain, I'm afraid I—'

'Oh well fine, we can wait…'

'They look forward to it.' Jim rubbed his beard and gave the vet his 'governor's look'.

'I'm sure as soon as Eric returns to work…'

'Aye, I'm sure he will, he's a generous man is Eric.' He gave the vet a pointed look. 'But Spring's the time we like to do it, and,' his eyes narrowed, 'after Easter, I'm sure your old man would expect you to do the right thing.'

Charlie's lips tightened, along with his jaw and Lucy was pretty sure he was gritting his teeth to stop himself saying anything. He folded his arms. Showdown in the car park, maybe this wasn't going to be such a minor accomplishment after all.

She would have quite liked to have told Jim to be quiet. 'Maybe if you leave us to chat?'

'Ah, yes.' He grinned and winked. 'Whatever you say, I'll leave you two youngsters to it then.'

The heat rushed to Lucy's face, and she was just about to launch into an explanation when the vet held up a hand.

'Look I am sorry, but before you start, the answer is no.' He glanced at his watch pointedly. 'I've got an emergency call to tend to.'

'We could walk and talk?' She was curious as much as anything, he'd recovered now but his reaction had been weird to say the least.

'I'm driving.' Obviously. He threw his bag into the back of the car and closed the door firmly. 'Nothing personal. Nice to meet you, I hope you enjoy it at the school, Miss er.'

'It's just that Jim, well the school, well I, well we just wanted you to spare an hour to talk to a group of kids?' He was opening the driver's door, any minute now he'd be driving off. 'Please,

could we at least have a chat about it?' She wasn't quite sure why it was so important to the school, or why it was such a problem to the vet, but she at least had to try. Failing at the first task she'd been given wasn't a good start. And he'd looked shocked, mildly horrified, at the thought of going into school, which seemed off when he appeared so level-headed and adrenaline-free. Bolting horses seemed to be a daily hazard, so why would a group of kids pose such a threat?

'This really is a matter of life and death.' His tone was firm, she could quite imagine him using it when a dog was misbehaving. Before she could say another word he'd started up the car engine, and was easing the door shut so that she had to skip out of the way, or get squashed. For a second his gaze met hers through the glass, and she sensed a genuine regret, then he put the car into gear and looked away.

Jim sidled up as the vet's car, and her opportunity to fulfil her first task, slipped away.

'Ah well, I told you he was a tricky one, slippery as an eel, but I'm sure you'll sort it.' He winked. 'A woman with your resources.'

'But he really doesn't seem to—'

'You'll talk him round.'

She wasn't sure she *wanted* to talk him round, his response had been so genuine it almost seemed wrong to ask. 'Isn't there anybody else? Another vet?' If the man didn't want to do it then surely there was somebody else who could do it?

'Only the one in the next village, and we won't be asking him now, will we?'

'We won't?' Oh God, even Jim was showing a steely side, another stubborn male.

'Over my dead body, and those of most of the other governor's.' He rubbed his hands together as though that settled the matter. 'We're relying on you my dear. Right, I better not keep you, got a fair drive haven't you?'

Lucy nodded. Hoping the journey home would be less eventful than the one here. At least she was heading back knowing she had a job, even if it was only for a few weeks.

'I'm sure you'll love it here, fit right in you will.' He smiled and just as she was putting her hand out to shake, he clapped both hands on her upper arms which she guessed was one step down from a hug.

She watched him stride off down the lane, then gazed back at the cottage that was going to be her temporary home.

It *would* be a long drive back. In fact her home seemed on a different planet to this little village.

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She deserved a celebratory glass of wine. Even if it was a temporary, very unsuitable, job. Lucy closed her front door, kicked her shoes off and headed straight for the kitchen and the chilled bottle of Pinot Grigio that was calling her name.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, she pulled her laptop from her bag.

It only took a couple of minutes to write an email to the agency, confirming that she had been offered the position, that it was for a half term only, and that she'd be looking for something more local (and ideally a permanent position) if possible when she completed the contract. The out-of-office reply, stating the hours the agency were open pinged straight back into her inbox.

Then she sent a text to Sarah telling her she'd got the job, that there were no phwoar farmers, just a very grumpy vet that was more Doc Martin than James Herriot (Sarah didn't need to know about the nearly-kiss or the mesmerising eyes), a headmaster who actually seemed to like children, and chickens.

Lucy headed upstairs. She'd have a nice shower first, then pour herself that drink. The job might not be her dream position, but it did mean that she had money to pay the mortgage. With the low rent that Annie was asking for, and the higher salary as it was a short-term contract, with luck she'd even be able to put some money aside in her savings account. And it might actually be quite pleasant spending a few weeks in the lovely little village – quite a change from the hustle and bustle she was used to in the much larger school.

The children had all seemed bright and inquisitive, and the classes were small so she wouldn't miss having a dedicated classroom assistant. It was going to be so much fun. A little shiver ran down her spine as the excitement she'd been fighting kicked in. She couldn't wait. Even the goose would be an interesting challenge, she just had a horrible feeling that her

immaculate clothes would need throwing away when she got back to civilisation. Cat hairs were notoriously difficult to remove, and she just knew the animal smell would linger on.

She switched off the shower and wrapped her hair up in a towel.

There was just one more thing she had to do though before she started to plan her move. And now she had at least got work lined up she could put a positive spin on this.

Wine glass in hand she picked up her mobile.

'Mum, I've got a new job.'

'Oh how lovely.' There was a pause. 'But I thought you loved the one you had, darling?'

'There's been a re-organisation, but this one's in a gorgeous village school.'

'Village?'

'It's sweet.'

'And it's not too far to drive each day? You work such long hours as it is, without a long journey on top of it.'

'Well no, I mean yes, it is too far to drive. I'm going to rent a place there for now. It's only for a while, and I've found a lovely cottage where the owner has pets she needs looking after so the rent is really reasonable.'

'So you've got your own house *and* a place to rent? Can you afford that dear?'

She could almost see her mum's worried frown. 'Yes Mum, it's just short term.'

‘But I thought you were too busy to have a pet, darling? And didn’t you say you liked keeping the house neat and tidy? When I came over with your Aunt Steph you made her tie Bono to a tree at the bottom of the garden.’

Lucy rolled her eyes as the memory of Bono, a very shaggy bearded collie who’d just been for an unscheduled dip in the canal, came to mind. ‘I had just bought a new cream carpet, Mum.’

‘That’s the trouble with these modern plain carpets, you need a pattern dear, hides a multitude of sins.’

Maybe that’s what her busy job had done, hidden the cracks in her life, but she didn’t want to ponder on that one. What was the point? ‘I like plain.’ Keep it simple. ‘Anyway, this job will be different, I don’t need to commute.’

‘And I hope you won’t need to be working those long hours any more. When I was your age…’

Lucy gritted her teeth, but some part of the retort she was biting back must have escaped and travelled over the airwaves. Her mum might not have worked long hours at her age, but she’d made up for it later on in life. Surely it was better to put all the effort in now? To be independent and secure.

‘Well yes I suppose times have changed.’ She could imagine her mother’s pursed lips. ‘But you work too hard, being a teacher used to be a nice job for a girl and now it’s all rushing round and paperwork. I always wanted an easier life for you, love.’

‘All jobs are like that, it’s about accountability.’ And Ofsted.

'Well that is nice anyway dear,' she could tell her mother was about to brush over that. 'It'll be nice for you to get out of the city for a bit. You did have fun when you were little in Stoneyvale, do you remember?'

'It was horrible. I hated it.' The words were out before she could stop them.

'Oh, Lucy.' Lucy felt a pang of guilt at the regret in her mother's voice. 'You didn't hate it. There were some good times, I used to love our time feeding the ducks, and picking you up from school. It was a pretty place, even if life wasn't quite as perfect as I'd hoped.' She sighed. 'You were such a happy toddler.'

'Yeah, and then I grew up.' And life had been turned upside down, and all her friends turned out to be nasty, small-minded people who only cared about themselves.

'It wasn't all bad, Lucy.'

'Mum, I didn't belong there, I didn't have any friends.'

'Oh you did, darling. It was just, after your party when your father got a bit cross I think some of their parents thought it better if they didn't come round to play. He just didn't like…'

'The mess, yeah I know.' She'd blocked that party out of her mind. Dad had been so cross to come home and find sticky finger marks on the table, and cake crumbs on the sofa. He hadn't shouted like some of the other dads did, he'd just laid the law down very softly. Even as a child she'd sensed the slight menace, the uncomfortable air as her mother had wiped her tears and shooed her up to her room. She hadn't thought about it before,

but that was probably when it had all started to go wrong. When children stopped coming round to play in their garden. When all the party invites started to dry up.

'He never really wanted me to have people round, did he?'

'Well no,' there was a crackle and silence, and she wasn't sure if it was a bad line. She hated silence, silence at home had always meant bad things, so she'd grown up wanting what some people would think of as chaos.

'Mum, are you still there?'

'I am. But you still had friends, didn't you dear?' There was a hopeful note to her mother's tone which she didn't want to kill. So she didn't say anything. 'You saw the others at school. There was lovely little Amy, and…'

'Exactly.' She sighed. 'Just lovely little Amy, and even that was an act.'

'Lucy, it wasn't you, your dad…'

'Forget it, Mum. I have. Langtry Meadows isn't Stoneyvale, and I'm only there for a few weeks, I like working in the city.' She did. It was less claustrophobic, more impersonal. Where people came and went, where nobody was an outsider.

'Anyway,' her mother's voice regained its normal no-nonsense brisk edge, the 'let's make the most of life' tone. 'A bit of country air will do you good, you've been looking a bit peaky lately. A change is as good as a rest, as they say.'

Lucy chatted to her mum for a bit longer then pressed the end call button and stared at her phone, suddenly wishing that she

hadn't told her mum to forget it.

She hadn't, she couldn't.

There were questions that had peeked their heads over the self-protective barrier she'd built around herself as she'd driven home. Questions about her dad she'd never dared ask. Questions that the absolute peace and quiet of Langtry Meadows had poked out of their slumber at the back of her mind. Questions about the almost obsessive tidiness that her father had insisted on.

It hadn't hit her until today just how different their new life had been. As though her mum had been determined to wipe every last trace of Stoneyvale out of her system.

But maybe it was time she tried to move on. To shift the ache that had settled in the centre of her chest once and for all.

Chapter 3

Charlie stared at the small white van. Whoever had parked, or should that be abandoned it, at such a crazy angle, couldn't have done a better job of blocking him out if they'd tried.

He was knackered. All he wanted was half an hour's peace with his feet up and a cup of coffee before his patients for the day started to arrive – and some delivery man had decided there was nothing wrong with blocking the entrance to his surgery.

His day had started at 5 a.m, a farm dog had been run over, and despite battling with every bit of experience and knowledge he had, they'd lost it. However long he did the job, he hated that bit.

Losing a battle to save a life that was ending far too early always left him feeling he'd failed. Owners that understood and thanked him destroyed him even more. They shouldn't have to be thanking somebody for losing the battle, and along with the sour taste in his mouth there was always the curdling doubt in the pit of his stomach. What if he'd missed something obvious? What if he'd acted quicker?

The farmer had offered sweet tea, and a bacon sandwich, apologising for calling him out at such an ungodly hour. He'd not wanted to churn out the same old words – for the best, not suffering now – but he had because he didn't know what else to say.

He clambered out of his car, feeling drained, and marched

towards the van. One of the benefits of living in a village was the lack of road rage, nobody was ever in that much of a hurry. The worst that could happen was that you had to follow a herd of cows down a lane as they ambled from field to farm, which he had found slightly frustrating the first week he'd been back here, then he'd realised he just had to go with the flow. In fact, he walked now whenever he could – but most farms visits meant taking the car.

'I can't get in my car park.' He rounded the open door, just as a girl backed out at speed, dragging a large cardboard box with her. Without thinking he grabbed her waist with one hand, and the van door with the other to stop them toppling.

She glanced up.

Oh shit, he'd been here before. In a tight clinch. Her soft lips were slightly parted, eyes wide staring straight into his own, his hands were only inches from her breasts. And he had an almost uncontrollable urge to kiss her.

Again.

It was the girl he'd nearly flattened by the village green. The teacher.

The one who'd asked him to go into school. The one who'd irrationally sprung to mind every time he walked past the village school – wondering when she'd be back.

Last time he'd had his hands on her he could have blamed the surge of adrenaline for the way his body had reacted, but he'd have been lying to himself because it was doing exactly the same

this time round.

The smell of her perfume, the brush of her soft skin against his cheek, and the gently quivering body pressed against his had turned him on something rotten. And she'd known. From what he remembered he'd solved the problem last time by practically throwing her back into the road. And now he was staring at her like a simpleton. Which he could, being logical, put down to lack of sleep, and emotional upset.

She blinked, and pulled herself together before he could. 'Oh hi, it's you. We must stop meeting like this.' She looked down pointedly and he realised he still had hold of her.

'Sorry, er I'm not in the habit of…' He let go, waved his hands in the air, glanced down to save the embarrassment of looking her straight in the eye. 'Good God, what are those?'

Bright pink wellingtons, which were more than just bright, they were positively glowing. They were ridiculous, but they suited her, in a cute kind of way. Oh God, what was he thinking? Cute? Where had that come from? He didn't even call day old kittens cute.

He glanced back up and she was grinning. She lifted a foot. 'These? Awesome aren't they? They're my secret weapon. If I don't wear them I'm in trouble. Serious GBH type of trouble.' She wrinkled her nose. How had he missed her slightly upturned nose last time they'd met?

He swallowed, trying to ignore the way the rest of her body had jiggled, and the dancing light in her eyes. It had obviously

been far too long since he'd had a soft female form pressed against his (apart from hers). Maybe his self-imposed ban was a mistake, it was turning him into a horny old man.

'They're Annie's actually.' For a moment he was confused, then focussed back on the wellingtons again. That figured, yep now she mentioned it he had seen Annie parading round the village in them. But on Annie they looked quite different. Unremarkable. 'Her goose Gertie is imprinted on them, and without these I'd be mincemeat. Imprinting, you know they were the first thing…'

'I do know what imprinting is.'

A flush tinged her cheekbones. Now what had made him shoot her down like that? He was being a patronising git now. Why couldn't he just be friendly? But it was just, he hadn't felt this drawn to somebody for a long, long time, not since he'd met Josie. Not since the most precious person in his life had appeared, not since he'd fallen madly, wildly, in love in a way he hadn't thought existed… and this was his way of making sure it didn't happen again. He blinked, and tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

'Ah yes, of course, you're a vet. Well at the moment these are a lifesaver, talking of which,' she avoided his eye, 'thanks for er, saving me the other week, when I came for my interview.'

'No problem. Look I don't want to be rude, but I really do need to get in, I've got work to do. If you could just straighten it up, move over a bit.'

'Oh, right, sure. Isn't it a bit early for work?' She looked at her watch. 'I'd never normally get up at this time, but I knew it would take me hours to move all my stuff into Annie's, and I didn't think I'd be in anybody's way. Or do you all get up at the crack of dawn round here?' Her eyes were twinkling, and he could have sworn she was teasing now.

'I prefer a lie in to be honest, but when there's an emergency.' He shrugged.

'Oh no. Was everything okay?' She'd stopped smiling.

'Not really.' He sighed. 'Look I need a coffee,' he'd been a git, surely he could at least have some manners and be a bit welcoming, 'fancy one?'

'You've no idea how good that sounds, I feel like I've done a day's work already. I'll pull the van up a bit so you can get in.'

'So,' Lucy wrapped her hands round the mug of coffee and stared at him, her head on one side. 'You're only here temporarily, like me?'

'I'm hoping so.'

Her eyes widened. 'The place is that bad?'

He grinned, he couldn't help it. 'No, it's not bad, but coming back here wasn't part of my life plan.'

She leant forward conspiratorially. 'Don't tell anybody, but it wasn't on mine either. So, where are you heading next?'

'Now that is the million dollar question.' He'd already been doing what he wanted, and when he lost that, for a while he felt like he'd lost everything. 'Well, when I sold my town centre

veterinary practice I had a vague idea of taking a few months off, before setting up somewhere else, faraway. Like Australia.'

'Oh.' She looked slightly shocked. 'Major deviation from the plan then. So, what made you come back here?'

'Family pressure.' He gave a wry smile. 'I hadn't made any firm plans, and my dad cornered me. He told me about Eric, I thought it would be pretty selfish to refuse. Dad and Eric were big buddies.'

'Ahh.'

'He said he was in a real mess, could be off work for months. As Dad pointed out I do know Langtry Meadows and the people, and about running a practice of my own. It was hard to say no.' But that had just been the beginning of the charm offensive. '*You'd just be able to walk in and get straight down to it*,' his father had said. '*This isn't charity, Charles. The man needs support, and he'd much rather hand the reins over to somebody he knows, than pull in some random Tom, Dick or Harriet vet from an agency. Go and see him. He's still in hospital*.' And even as he'd tried to object, he knew he hadn't really got any choice.

'I bet your dad was pleased, and it sounds like you're popular in the village.'

'He was, and so was my mother, she didn't like the idea of me at a loose end, or going to Australia.' He knew they cared. But he really hadn't planned on this, creeping back to the village with his tail between his legs, admitting he'd failed – had lost it all. 'I wasn't actually at a loose end,' they swapped an understanding

look, 'I was considering my options. But you know what mothers can be like.' He paused, took a gulp of his coffee. 'I think this is actually more of a trip down memory lane for Dad than me, he misses the place. Started to ramble on, asked me if I remembered the time when Ed Wright had chicken pox and was convinced he had foot and mouth. He said the little idiot was sure they were going to throw him in a pit and cover him with lime, he disappeared up the fields and hid. The whole village had to go out searching for him.'

Lucy giggled, which sent a shiver down his spine. 'And did you remember?'

'Did I hell!' He'd let his father reminisce, let the words flow over him, and wondered how on earth he'd ended up losing everything he'd worked for. One day he'd got his bright, shiny, efficient town centre practice handling referrals and money-no-object operations, and the next he had somehow agreed to bury himself back in Langtry Meadows in a tiny, old-fashioned veterinary practice.

'But you're happy you came back?'

'Well I haven't really thought about it,' he paused, 'but yes, yes it's a nice place and who needs time off work anyway when you can be dragged out of bed at 4 a.m. and stick your arm up a cow's rear?'

She was laughing again. He didn't know why, but he seemed to be trying to amuse her. And he seemed to be rambling on, it was far too easy to talk to her. Any second now and he'd be

spilling all his sordid secrets.

'True, and in Australia you'd miss the mud and frosty mornings.'

'Would I?' Langtry Meadows was perfect in many ways though, well one big way. It was miles from his old stomping ground and the practice he'd run with his ex-wife. Miles from any reminders that the cosy life he'd thought they'd built up had existed only in his imagination. Even miles from his suffocatingly concerned family who'd moved from the village to somewhere 'more convenient' when his father retired. 'What about you?' He needed to head the conversation in another direction. 'Are you looking forward to working here?'

'Oh yes, well I think so. I mean it wasn't what I'd planned on doing, but everybody seems lovely, and it's such a gorgeous place. To be honest, I didn't really have any option.' She hesitated. 'Look, sorry for pestering about the school visit thing last time we met.' She looked apologetic now, rather than demanding. 'I didn't mean to be pushy, I just had Jim prodding me in the back. It's the first thing they've asked me to do, and I don't like to fail.'

There was a question in her voice. 'Look, I'm sorry too if we got off on the wrong foot.' He couldn't help but glance down at the pink wellies again. 'But it's really not something I can help with.'

She was looking at him, like a spaniel deprived of its ball. Can't or won't, said the look – she was too kind to voice it. He was doing his best to avoid eye contact, but still felt a heel. He

couldn't though, just the thought of standing in front of those hopeful, innocent faces made him come over hot, then cold. He wasn't the only loser in this mess he'd made of his life, and that was the bit that made him feel totally useless. Helpless.

Her gaze hadn't wavered. 'It's just I've got my hands full with the surgery.' To her it was just a simple request. But it was asking him to expose his heart, to lay himself open to yet more hurt and he wasn't ready. He couldn't do it yet – and certainly not in front of the watching eyes of the whole village. Teenagers he could have coped with, the WI, the teachers. Just not a class full of primary school kids, expectant smiling faces. Kids that were at that age when they trusted adults, thought they could solve every problem in the world. He closed his eyes for a second, and the image that snuck its way into every dream, every nightmare, was there. A giggling little girl. Auburn curls soft as clouds around her angelic face. Large brown eyes gazing straight into his. Innocent, unknowing. Trusting.

He couldn't do it.

'They don't bite. Not like some of your patients.' Her lips curved into a seductive smile, but he was pretty sure she was just trying to lighten the mood, not drag him off to bed – that was wishful thinking on his side.

'No.' He swallowed down the clawing pain in his throat and hoped to God he looked more normal than he felt. 'It's just,' what was he supposed to say? 'This place can feel a bit claustrophobic.'

'Villages can.' Those two words had an unexpected depth to

them, she said that as though she knew.

'Everybody in each other's pockets and I would rather like to keep a professional distance.' And that was the truth, up to a point.

She nodded, looking thoughtful, then sighed. 'Yes, I can understand that.' And there was something in her eyes that convinced him she did. She was a bit of an outsider as well, and he had a feeling that despite all the smiles she wasn't entirely comfortable about being here. 'It's okay, don't worry I'll think of something.' She twisted her lips to one side as though she was thinking. 'But Jim swore blind that asking any other vet was out of bounds.'

'It is a bit of a no-no going to the other practice, you know what village politics can be like.' Now she was making it even more difficult. Understanding made him feel tetchy, and for some reason he couldn't quite fathom he felt almost like he was letting her down. Christ, he had enough problems with all the other people he felt he'd let down – and now he was doing it with a complete stranger. 'I'm sure you'll come up with something. I'm not here for long anyway, as soon as Eric is back on his feet I'll be off.' He couldn't do it, better to make that quite clear. 'I'm sorry, I really am.'

'No problem.' Her tone was light, but he still felt bad.

'It's just…' He hesitated, not quite wanting to leave it like that. But any discussions about how he should be involved in the village school were off the agenda. Some things he could do –

being surrounded by young children he couldn't. Not yet. The health of the village pets was his responsibility, the kids weren't.

She was looking at him quizzically, as though she was expecting him to say more. Offer an explanation, at least finish his bloody sentence, which was perfectly reasonable. But this was why he shouldn't have come back here. Why he should have buggered off to Australia. He wouldn't have these bloody problems then, he didn't need to feel irrational guilt on top of everything else. And he couldn't explain.

The silence lengthened between them and he felt awkward.

This was getting ridiculous. He was looking ridiculous.

He was just trying to come up with something to say when she smiled, stood up. 'I better get back to moving boxes. Thanks for the coffee and chat, lovely to meet you properly.'

'You too.' And he was surprised just how much he meant it.

As she left the surgery, his positive mood seemed to go with her. Talking about his return to Langtry Meadows reminded him just why he'd had to move on. Rolling his shoulders, he tried to ease the tension that had instantly grabbed hold of his body.

He wandered into the recovery room, determined to shake his mood. Being busy always helped. Stroking the little black cat that was stretched out on its side in one of the cages, he instantly felt his blood pressure drop as the faintest of purrs rumbled through its chest. Charlie smiled as it raised its head slightly, asking for more.

He loved these quiet times, with a patient that had turned

the corner. This was the good bit; this was what the job was all about. It didn't matter where in the world he was, animals were animals and moments like this made all the long hours and difficult decisions worthwhile.

'Ready to face the wrath of the Langtry Meadows women are you, Charlie?'

Charlie gave the cat one last rub behind the ear then glanced up at Sally, his receptionist, animal nurse and general answer to all his prayers.

Two months earlier he'd arrived at the Langtry Meadows Veterinary Centre expecting to be faced with the same officious, bossy receptionist he vaguely remembered from his childhood when he'd sneaked into the surgery to see the animals, borrow his dad's bag of tricks and pretend to be a vet – although that was pretty silly as she'd been considerably older than his father. He'd still been pleasantly surprised to meet the ever-friendly, and amazingly helpful Sally.

Her mid-length brown hair hung in straight, glossy sheets either side of her solemn face which lit up when she smiled, her large brown eyes as steady as a Labrador's and the frown lines on her forehead evident whenever she was concentrating. Within a few days Charlie had fallen in love with her, in a totally un-romantic way. She was efficient, kind and knew everybody in the village – which smoothed the path and allowed him to concentrate on the animals. Which was just how he liked it. Perfect.

Eric had played a masterstroke the day he had persuaded Sally to join the small veterinary practice, and Charlie hoped he realised it.

He rolled his eyes, and secured the catch of the cage. 'How many?'

'Only three so far.' Sally giggled. 'Don't worry, once you've been here a few months they'll lose interest, but we don't often get a hunky new man in the village.' She tipped her head on one side, 'and the fact that you've come back means the nosey old bags want to come and interrogate you as well.'

'I'd have thought they'd got more interesting things to think about.'

Sally laughed. 'You're the talk of the village shop, and the pub, and in the doctor's waiting room …'

'Shush.' He held a hand up to stop her. 'I don't think I want to know.' At least Lucy, the other newcomer in town, had the advantage that she had no history here, so there was no gossip to be had.

'Though if it's any consolation the magazines in the surgery are so old, and Dr Jones is so bloody slow, it's no wonder they've had to resort to talking about you. Last time I was in there the other hot topic of conversation was whether Jim Stafford was cheating at the last gooseberry show, apparently his were massive. Swollen out of all proportion.'

'Thanks, Sal, I feel much better now you've lowered my level of importance to an over-inflated soft fruit.' Jim had actually

seemed quite protective of the cover teacher. Maybe he wasn't the only one who was affected by her light floral perfume and softly curved body. He shook his head to dismiss the thought. She wasn't even his type. She was more what you'd call athletic than womanly, and she was blonde, and a bit well, well he couldn't put his finger on it, but not his type. Definitely not his type.

He'd never been a player, but maybe that was the antidote he needed. Except not with her. A teacher. The prickle of sweat that sprang up on his brow left him feeling clammy. He really had to get a grip.

'Talking of soft fruit, Holly rang to say she wants that colt of hers castrated.'

He switched his brain back to concentrating on work, his saviour. 'Why doesn't she go to the large animal practice in the next village? Most of the farm clients go there, and they've got a great horse vet.'

'It's you they love.' Sally winked. 'And you're getting quite a reputation as the man to go to for,' she made a snipping gesture and he winced, 'snipping off testicles.'

Balls were what he felt like he'd been lacking himself lately. Agreeing to come back here, and admit he was a failure professionally as well as in his private life wasn't doing him any good at all, not that any of them knew about the private bit. Yet. She'd looked at him like she knew though, Lucy. And he'd nearly said more than he'd intended.

'I remembered this place as a quiet backwater, full of farmers

with tight wallets who never visited a vet unless they had to.' If he was honest, he'd expected to be bored witless, and in need of a hobby.

'Ahh, you thought you could put your feet up, didn't you Charlie boy?' He hadn't actually wanted to put his feet up, keeping busy was what he needed now, but he'd never expected it to be this hectic. 'Thinking of taking up golf were you?' He shifted guiltily. 'Well in case you've missed it, most of your clients are females, and they don't tell their hubbies until the bill needs paying.'

'Well I wish they'd at least book appointments and not turn up at all times of day and night.' He'd got used to the way his town centre practice had run like clockwork, efficiency itself. Here, the waiting room was constantly busy, often between surgery hours when he was struggling to catch up on operations and paperwork. 'They seem to think I haven't got a life.'

Sally arched an eyebrow, obviously trying not to laugh.

'Okay, I haven't got a life. I admit it. But can't they at least take the farm animals up the road?'

'They're loyal to Langtry Meadows, Charlie. They want to support Eric, and anyway, there's been bad feeling between us and them, since they pulled that stunt at the county show.'

He held up a hand. 'I don't want to know.' He was going to keep a professional distance, not be dragged into village politics. 'But we had a trailer load of piglets the other day, and a very persistent man with a lamb in the back of his estate car.'

'They think it's quicker to come to you, than call you out. You have to admit they've got a point.'

'And since when did we have alpacas in the village? I'm sure it wasn't like this when Dad was here.'

When he thought about it though, his dad had been in and out on calls constantly, but he'd just taken it for granted. His mother had always been there for him, even if his father hadn't been. And he'd loved it when Dad had brought home a stray lamb, or a dog that needed careful monitoring and a warm spot by the Aga.

'I suppose I better make a start then.'

'Geriatric hamster, or the cat from hell first?'

He peered round the door, trying to see if he recognised anybody in the waiting room. 'It depends on who owns them.' Dealing with the animals was the easy bit, keeping some of the owners at arm's length was a different matter. 'Oh hell, Serena Stevens is in again,' he withdrew, and dropped his voice to a whisper, 'what is it this time?'

Sally giggled. 'She wants to discuss babies.'

The back of his neck went clammy, then common sense kicked in. He really should be able to handle any talk of babies and young children by now. 'Babies?' The word was raspy, and Sally gave him a strange look.

'Puppies! I don't think she'd risk seeing her own boobs droop. She rather thinks that Twinkle should experience motherhood before it's too late, she wants her to experience sexual thrill and maternal joy.' The sparkle of laughter was back in Sally's eyes.

'You should see your face! Anyway, don't worry, even if she is broody I don't think she's signed you up as sperm donor yet, and I've got your back, I won't let her get her wicked way with you.'

Some people lived their dreams vicariously through their children, Serena was intent on living it through her dog – a very sensitive long-haired Chihuahua who lived a life of luxury, mainly in one of Serena's large designer tote bags.

He was just wondering whether he could get away with referring her to another vet, on the grounds of his complete lack of understanding when it came to such delicate matters, when the buzzer on the door announced another customer.

Holding the door open, and peering in was a girl in jodhpurs. 'Soz to bother you, it's just that Jasper's caught himself. You couldn't whip a quick stitch in could you?'

Jasper was a horse. The same horse that was often seen bolting through Langtry Meadows, the animal that had been responsible for his very unconventional introduction to the new primary school teacher, the thought of which made him come over all hot and bothered again.

He took a deep breath and looked at Holly. She smiled back in a winning way. She was the capable, unflustered type, so he knew 'a quick stitch' could be shorthand for 'he's bleeding all over the car park and could drop dead if you don't hurry up'.

He was ashamed to realise though that even stitching up a hyper-horse was actually far preferable to discussing sex with the immaculately groomed Serena.

'Of course we can have a look, Holly. How are you?' Sally was already tapping away at her computer and Charlie saw a busy day ahead. 'What's he done now?'

'Overreach, the silly sod. If he concentrated on what he was doing instead of being so bloody nosey then he'd know where his feet were.'

Ahh, not so bad then, the downside being that he was going to be stitching an area well within kicking range.

'Typical male.' Sally smiled.

'Thank you for your continued efforts to keep my feet firmly on the ground.'

'You're welcome, Mr Davenport.' She looked back in Holly's direction. 'Are you still up for drinks tomorrow night?'

'Sure am. Eek, stop it Jasper.' She was yanked backward, the door clanging shut behind her and they heard a clatter of hooves on the tarmac. Two of the customers got up and tried to peer through the window.

'I'll put the kettle on shall I ladies? I'm sure you won't mind waiting a few minutes while Charlie sorts this urgent case out?' Sally scanned the waiting room with a professional eye. 'You can watch him in action of course.' Serena glanced at her watch and made reassuring cooing noises at Twinkle who was growling in indignation.

'Of course not, I do like to see a man in action.' The owner of the cantankerous cat, who'd also got a cantankerous husband always loved an excuse to stay out of the house as long as

possible.

Serena gazed admiringly. 'You've got such sensitive hands, you really shouldn't have to deal with such big, dangerous animals.'

Charlie stared blankly at the computer screen. Being cornered by a herd of rampaging bullocks was a safer bet than Serena and her Chihuahua.

'Oh no, no, not at all, do you want a hand with the coffee?' A slim woman in her thirties, who Charlie had never seen before, stroked a hand over her son's head and looked down at the box he was clutching. This had to be the geriatric hamster, and from the look of discomfort on the woman's face she was obviously expecting the worst – and was more than happy to put the moment of judgement off. The trouble with hamsters, Charlie knew, was that with a life span of rarely more than three years they had a habit of leaving grieving children in their wake. 'Do you want to sit here with Mario, Harry?' Harry nodded, and shooting Charlie a distrustful look clutched the box even tighter.

Another clatter of horseshoes on tarmac reminded Charlie that Jasper wasn't going to be an easy customer. With a sigh he went into the operating room and sneaked out through the back door to examine his patient.

As he bent closer to make a preliminary check of the wound, Charlie was suddenly excruciatingly aware of a pair of bright pink wellingtons, which he could see out of the corner of his eye as Lucy edged closer. He was used to being observed, but this

felt different, it was as though he was still back at college – trying to impress. He had to get a grip, this was ridiculous. What did it matter if she thought he was some uncooperative, incompetent idiot?

'Is that the horse that tried to flatten me when I came for interview?' She'd moved in so close he could smell her perfume again, which was far too disconcerting.

'Oh you're kidding?' Holly put a hand to her mouth. 'Oh God, was it you in that cute little car by the pond?'

'It was.' Lucy stepped back abruptly as Jasper attempted a pirouette, and joined the rest of his clients who, keen for entertainment, had drifted out from the waiting room and were now lined up at a safe distance.

'We'd just gone past those damned alpacas and one stuck its head through the fence and made faces at him, you don't like those weird things do you honey?' She kissed the end of Jasper's nose and he threw his head in the air.

'Let's face it Holly, he doesn't like much at all does he?' commented Sally, who was standing nearby with a tray of sterilised equipment.

'Is he okay with a hosepipe?' Charlie had to concentrate on the job.

'Oh yeah, sure, he's bombproof.'

The bombproof animal whizzed around her and Holly hung on to his bridle as Charlie very slowly unwound the hosepipe.

The audience were to be disappointed. After a good clean up

it was obvious that no stitching was required, and the amount of blood was due to the size of animal and location of wound rather than any serious problem.

'That looks fine, Holly. I'll just grab a twitch then we can tidy up that flap of skin.'

'Oh he'll be fine, I'll hold his nose. He's a gem, aren't you?' Holly kissed the 'gem' on the end of his nose and Charlie could see the whites of his eyes, as he shot him a warning look, followed up by a stamp on the ground in case the vet was in any doubt.

Charlie narrowed his eyes and studied the target, wondering just how quickly he could snip the skin off and dive to the side. At veterinary school he'd been told that commando style rolls could be seen as unprofessional, but he'd always thought that they had a place. Especially when the alternative was a horse's hoof up your backside. He sneaked a glance up at Lucy, who was watching intently, and wondered if he really wanted to strike another self-inflicted blow at his manhood.

'He hates a twitch, it makes him nervous.'

Snipping flaps of skin off un-anaesthetised equines made Charlie nervous.

Not giving himself time to think, he dived in and snipped decisively and was back on his feet before owner or animal had time to realise. There was a round of applause from his clients.

'Excellent.' Whatever you're doing, it pays to do it bloody quick, one of his tutors had told him, apart from surgery of course. 'I'll give him a shot of antibiotic, and if you can keep it

clean…'

'Oh cheers, that's super. I would have done it myself, but I was passing and thought I might as well pop in rather than ride him all the way home and then find out it was worse than I thought.' She patted the horse. 'Fab, give my love to Eric if you see him, and put it on Dad's account will you Sal?'

Charlie would have liked to insist on payment now, as the small sign on the counter requested. The business had a serious cash-flow problem, which was largely due to well-heeled customers who didn't feel the need to pay until absolutely necessary, and thrifty farmers who argued over every penny and asked for a discount. Charlie had been shocked at Eric's relaxed attitude towards money, with the price of drugs he was surprised they hadn't gone bankrupt. It was yet another thing he really had to look into if he had time.

Smiling at Holly, he glanced towards the surgery and was disappointed to see Lucy had gone. Along with her van.

He sighed, feeling strangely deflated, and rolled his sleeves up. It was time to tackle a sex-starved Chihuahua and a cat that he just knew was out to get him.

'You look like you're ready for battle.' Sally grinned. 'Oh, and Charlie there's a message from Mr Gibson about the cricket, and the vicar's wife has rung again to ask about judging the village fete.' She peered at him over the top of her notepad. 'You do realise there's no escape, she will hunt you down?'

Charlie knew that the 'Eric would do it' argument was on the

way, so he held up a hand to stop it. 'I know Eric probably—'

'Well actually he refuses.'

'Really?' That stumped him.

'You will never guess the amazing excuses he's come up with every year, he manages to come up with something so brilliantly believable that she lets him off the hook.'

'Brilliant? Like what?'

'Oh no, Charlie, you've got to come up with your own.' The light in her eyes danced as she waved a finger at him. 'A man like you shouldn't have any problem at all.'

'You're laughing at me.'

'Probably.' She grinned, unabashed. 'Claws or clitoris first?'

Charlie cringed and shook his head. 'Very witty. I think a geriatric hamster is the safest bet, don't you?'

'Probably, it'll give you time to work out how to fight Serena off, she thinks you're so manly now.' She leaned forward confidentially. 'I heard her telling little Twinkle that you really are everything a man should be. I'm sensing church bells ringing and the need for a posh hat.'

'You'll be sensing something if you don't get back behind your desk and stop causing trouble, woman.'

Chapter 4

After a very busy surgery, followed by an eye-crossingly intricate operation inserting pins into a tiny Yorkshire terrier's leg, all Charlie wanted was to head for a pint at the Taverner's Arms.

'You've not forgotten you said you'd pop in and see Miss Harrington, have you Charlie?'

He glanced up as he peeled off the green scrubs he'd been operating in. 'The thought of Miss Harrington is what's kept me going all day.'

Eric had a very chaotic style of management, and the clients could be challenging to say the least, but in amongst the villagers were some real gems – like the slightly eccentric character of Miss Harrington. She didn't seem to have a first name, and she insisted on calling him Charles rather than Charlie, but despite the old-fashioned formality he always left her house feeling better than when he'd arrived. To her he was probably still the little boy in short trousers that she'd chastised if he rode his bike on the pavement.

'I'm looking forward to a quiet cup of tea and a slice of cake as I check over Molly's new litter of puppies.'

'You only go for the homemade cake.' Sally was hugging her ever present clipboard to her chest.

'I do. That parkin last week was unbelievable, and I heard a

rumour she's got fresh cherry cake on offer.'

'You men are such simple creatures when it comes down to it, aren't you?'

He grinned and grabbed the few medical supplies he might need. 'See you in the morning?'

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