

'Warm, funny and poignant' *Daily Mail*

Snowdrops
on
Rosemary
Lane



ELLEN BERRY

Ellen Berry

Christmas on Rosemary Lane

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SNOWDROPS ON ROSEMARY LANE

Ellen Berry

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Dedication

In memory of Margery Taylor

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Prologue

30 Years Ago

She scrambled over the high garden wall, scuffing her bare shins. She shouldn't have been there, but that was part of the thrill. Lucy Riddock and her friends were on a fruit-finding mission, and they knew there were redcurrant bushes here. They also knew the old woman whose house it was would go berserk if she saw them.

At least, she seemed old to Lucy, who had just turned ten; at that age, even forty seems ancient. The children certainly knew Kitty Cartwright was prone to outbursts of rage, and that only served to heighten their excitement. It wasn't the first time they had done this. Tellingly, it had never occurred to them to steal berries from anyone else.

Lucy had joined forces with a boy called Hally, which she assumed was a nickname but never thought to ask, as that's what everyone called him. Sometimes, there were others; namely Brenna, Toni and Peter Linton, a trio of siblings with vivid red hair and many guinea pigs. On this occasion, they all jumped down onto the overgrown lawn and darted behind the shed.

Unlike Lucy, who came from a nondescript suburb of Leeds, the others lived here in Burley Bridge. She was just visiting; these were the holiday friends she had met the previous summer, and there had been no contact since then. In those days that was normal. It would be a long time until everyone was easily contactable at all times. Three weeks were all they had together while Lucy stayed with her kind but rather staid and *definitely* ancient Uncle George and Aunt Babs (who were actually her great-aunt and uncle on her father's side).

As both of her parents worked full-time, it helped for Lucy, an only child, to spend time with her aunt and uncle. The Riddocks rarely took holidays beyond the occasional trip away in their caravan, and now Lucy had made friends here, she loved coming to Burley Bridge. Unlike at home, where Lucy's mother kept a tight rein on her, here she was allowed to roam freely.

Stifling laughter, the children crept out from behind the shed and ran to the enormous oak tree that spread its boughs over the entire lower portion of the garden. From here they peeped round, scanning the surroundings. 'The coast's clear,' murmured Hally. They favoured the language of the young adventurers they'd read about in books.

'Go!' Lucy commanded, and they charged as a pack towards the currant bushes around the side of the house. They grabbed at the berries and stuffed them into their pockets and mouths. In truth, the redcurrants were rather tart and not nearly as delicious as raspberries or even the less favoured blackberries that they often found in the wild. It was more about the thrill of the build-up than the actual prize. On a previous occasion, Hally had scoffed so many that he'd been gripped with cramping pains and had had to tell his scary dad that it was a stomach bug. At least, Lucy had gathered that he was scary. She hadn't actually met him. Hally had explained that he was a 'woodsman' and that they had an actual wood, close to their house a little way out of the village – which sounded straight out of a dark fairy tale.

Was chopping logs a real job, she wondered? Hally had mentioned that he sold Christmas trees, but what about the rest of the year? She also knew that Hally's mum had died when he was six, three years before she'd met him. Although the Linton kids had been to Hally's, Lucy understood that it wasn't the kind of home he could just invite his friends to whenever he wanted. Occasionally, on rainy days, they hung out at the Lintons' pink pebble-dashed bungalow in the village. But their most thrilling adventures happened outdoors.

As they grabbed at Kitty's redcurrants, a sharp rap on a side window of the cottage stopped them in their tracks. Moments later, they heard the front door opening. 'What are you lot doing there?' Kitty yelled.

‘Nothing!’ Hally shouted back.

There was a bang of the front door and they heard her running towards them. They saw her then – skinny and wiry, all furious eyes and flaming cheeks: ‘Clear off, the lot of you or I’ll phone the police!’ Thrilled by the drama, the children charged towards the wrought-iron gate and clattered through it, running as fast as they could until her cries faded away.

‘Mission accomplished!’ they yelled, once they were safely away down the street. Years later, Lucy would wonder if those childhood holidays would have been half as thrilling without Hally, the Lintons and Kitty’s fruit.

It wasn’t fair that Kitty lived there, she decided later that night. With its thatched roof and untamed garden filled with flowers, Rosemary Cottage seemed magical – if rather neglected. If Lucy had lived there she’d have given the house a fresh coat of white paint, and cut back the overgrown shrubs to give the roses and lupins room to breathe. She could picture exactly how it would look, under her care. She would paint the dull grey shed a bright sky blue, and the old wooden garage at the side of the house would become an art studio or a den. She would lavish the place with the love it deserved.

When Lucy was thirteen, Uncle George had a heart attack and died suddenly. Shortly afterwards, Babs moved into sheltered housing, where she only lived for a few months longer before passing away in her sleep. As Lucy’s family had no other ties with Burley Bridge, her visits there came to an end with no chance to say goodbye to her friends. If she’d had Hally’s address she might have written him a letter, but she didn’t even know his proper name. So Lucy lost touch with him and the Linton kids, and although she thought of them all occasionally, those memories gradually made way for the all-consuming matter of being a teenager. A few years after that she was going on cheap, rowdy package holidays to Greece and Spain with her college friends, and those summers spent building dens and scrambling over Kitty Cartwright’s garden wall seemed a lifetime away.

Gradually, the village that had once shone so brightly in Lucy’s mind began to fade like the image on an overwashed T-shirt. Apart from Rosemary Cottage, that is. It remained as vivid as it had ever been, and she never managed to shake off the fantasy that, one day, it would be hers.

Part One

Chapter One

Now

Whenever someone asked Lucy Scott, ‘So, what do you do?’ she could truthfully reply, ‘I work in lingerie.’ Responses varied from, ‘Ooh, is that allowed?’ to, ‘I don’t suppose they’re hiring?’ It was brilliant for getting laughs at parties.

Lucy would then explain that her employer, Claudine, was an online underwear retailer that sounded foxily French, but was actually based on an unlovely industrial estate in Manchester.

Not that Lucy minded. At forty years old, she loved her job as head buyer; it was creative and pretty hectic, and many of her colleagues were also her friends. Throughout the thirteen years she’d worked there – breaking only for two maternity leaves – she had never considered moving anywhere else.

However, recently there had been a sea change. Without warning, the company had been bought out. Her former boss, Ria, who had spearheaded Claudine’s image of seductive glamour, had now been booted and a new direction had been announced.

‘Hold on to your knickers, guys,’ Lucy’s right-hand man Andrew had muttered grimly. ‘It’s going to be a bumpy ride.’ And he was right. As the brand veered downmarket, Lucy was involved in numerous heated debates on the subjects of hoistage and underwired support.

‘It sounds more like engineering,’ her husband Ivan had joked, trying to ease her tension after a particularly trying day.

‘It *is* engineering,’ she remarked. ‘That’s exactly what it is – and it’s beautiful too. What I’m trying to tell Max is, it can be both. It’s next to woman’s skin, you know? It’s an intimate thing. It should feel lovely to wear—’

‘Hey, you don’t need to convince me,’ Ivan said with a smile. ‘I think it’s totally gorgeous stuff.’

Lucy sighed. ‘Well, unfortunately, our totally gorgeous stuff might not be quite so gorgeous in a few months’ time.’

She was right. After she had given an impassioned presentation to the new senior team, it looked as if the future was even bleaker than Lucy had imagined. ‘The Claudine customer doesn’t give a stuff about heritage,’ boomed Max, the flashy new CEO. ‘She wants value and fun.’

Lucy glanced at Andrew, who was sitting beside her in the meeting room. They had worked together so long, they could almost read each other’s thoughts. ‘She also wants beautifully made pieces that last,’ Lucy remarked.

‘We’re not after the granny market here,’ retorted Max.

‘The average age of our customer is thirty-seven!’ spluttered Lucy.

‘Hmm, whatever.’ The boss drummed his fingers impatiently. ‘No one wants to bankrupt themselves over a bra.’

‘They’re not expensive,’ Andrew muttered. ‘For the quality and workmanship, they’re competitively priced—’

‘Never mind that,’ Max said, waving a hand dismissively. ‘We know what women are looking for. They want *oomph*.’

Lucy inhaled deeply and glanced at the wall clock, wishing she could spirit herself out of here right now. She hated that word. It smacked of uncomfortable, scratchy push-up bras designed to please men – and never mind the poor woman trapped in the darned thing all day. Behind his back, Max was known in the company as MC – Max Cleavage.

The day after her presentation, his secretary phoned through to Lucy at her desk. ‘Could you pop in to see Max at three?’ she asked.

‘Sure,’ Lucy said, trying to remain calm. When the allotted time came, she reassured herself that he would simply reiterate his points from yesterday, and she would have to accept that that’s how things were going to be. She could handle that, she’d decided. Lucy and her husband Ivan had two young children and she wasn’t about to flounce out of her job.

She stepped into Max’s office, and he motioned for her to sit down. ‘That was quite a heated meeting yesterday.’ He flashed a brief smile.

‘It was, yes.’ Her heart quickened a little.

‘I thought we’d have a chat about the restructure, Luce?’

Luce? Only her friends here called her Luce. ‘Okay,’ she said warily. Max laced his fingers together and pursed his lips. He was one of those men who seemed to find it impossible to pass a reflective surface without checking out his appearance. Once, she had caught him fixing his hair via his reflection in the microwave door in the kitchen. For a moment now, she wondered if ‘restructure’ could refer to the controversial redesign of their classic ‘Sophia’ bra, which was hailed as a miracle in combining beauty and sublime comfort. But no. He was putting together a new senior team, he explained, that would ‘fully support our new vision, specifically the novelty undies line’.

‘Novelty undies?’ Lucy said with a frown. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘For men,’ he said plainly.

‘For *men*? But we don’t do men’s—’

‘We do now,’ he drawled, ‘and it’s jungle-themed ...’

Lucy realised she was gripping the sides of the chair. ‘Jungle-themed,’ she repeated.

‘Yep, starting with elephant pants with an integral trunk section,’ Max explained. ‘That’s for his—’

‘Yes, I get you,’ she cut in. Lucy wasn’t a prude – far from it – but the brand had always taken inspiration from beauties such as Sophia Loren and Lauren Bacall. She couldn’t help wondering what these icons would make of elephant pants and, more pressingly, how on earth she would fit in with Claudine’s startling new direction.

‘But how can a brand called Claudine produce elephant pants?’ she started. ‘It hardly suggests that kind of product—’

‘Ah, but there’ll be a separate men’s range. We’re calling it *Claude* ...’

She cleared her throat as she took this in. ‘So, um ... what does this mean for me? I mean, will I be expected to work across the men’s line too, or—’

‘I’ll cut to the chase,’ Max said firmly. ‘Obviously this is a very different kind of market for you. We want people on board who are with us a hundred per cent, who’ll *embrace* Claude.’

‘Pardon?’ she spluttered.

‘We can’t be po-faced about underwear, Luce.’

‘I’m not being po-faced,’ she insisted. ‘I’m just a little stunned, that’s all.’

Max nodded. ‘Yes, well, I expected that – and that’s why I called you in today.’ Her stomach clenched as he regarded her steadily across his vast, entirely bare desk. Lucy suddenly realised what was coming. Her heart rate quickened, and with a wave of despair she pictured their highly praised recent advertising campaign featuring models in oyster silk camisoles shot in the walnut-panelled cabins of an old-style ocean liner. Clearly, those days were gone.

‘We appreciate everything you’ve done here,’ Max continued, ‘but I think it’s best all round if we make you an offer. Take some time to consider it, of course.’

‘Elephant pants?’ scorned Nadeen over a drink after work. ‘I heard a whisper about those. I thought it was a joke.’

‘“The Dumbo collection”,’ Lucy said wryly, still reeling slightly from the admittedly generous payoff Max had just offered her.

‘Please don’t leave us,’ Andrew urged her. ‘We need someone around here to talk sense.’

‘MC will screw things up, and then he’ll be out on his ear,’ Nadeen murmured, and Lucy promised not to do anything rash. However, within a few days, it started to become clear what she should do next.

She had been feeling oddly queasy and flat-out exhausted, and had put it down to the stresses of work. But it turned out that it wasn’t that at all. At least, not just that.

Lucy was pregnant. It was unplanned, and quite a shocker at forty years old – when Marnie and Sam were well beyond the baby stage and her boss was trying to force her out. But both she and Ivan were delighted. And maybe, she reflected, this surprise pregnancy would shake up their lives in the loveliest way possible.

There was always the option to fight MC’s move to get rid of her. But did Lucy really want to work under him, with his frankly ridiculous ideas? Her maternity leave would be marred by the thought of returning to a company she barely recognised. Alternatively – and the very thought thrilled her – she could accept MC’s offer and use it to embark on a new, very different sort of life.

It was obvious now which choice she should make. An adventure lay ahead – Lucy was sure of it – and she couldn’t wait.

Chapter Two

If Lucy had known how events would unfold, she wouldn't have come up with her plan. Instead, she and Ivan would have headed straight to her parents' place to pick up their children, and all would have been fine. She might never have set foot in Burley Bridge again for the rest of her life. A few months on, she would wish over and over that she hadn't.

Such a selfish move, she would berate herself. Manipulative, too – and she'd thought she'd been so clever! But none of that had clouded her thoughts on that crisp, blue-skied late October morning when the world had seemed so full of promise.

Lucy and Ivan had spent their tenth wedding anniversary overnight in a country hotel. With two young children it was rare for them to have time alone together. The countryside in this part of West Yorkshire was all green, rolling hills, familiar to Lucy and every bit as lovely as she'd remembered from her holidays. Unbeknown to Ivan, she had planned to make a small detour. She was ready to make a change in their lives, and she was willing him to be positive about it – or, at least, to not think she had lost her mind.

'Where are we going?' he asked as she turned off the dual carriageway.

'Just thought we might have a stop-off,' she replied.

'Oh, whereabouts?' He glanced out of the passenger window.

'Burley Bridge. It's a village a couple of miles away, down in the valley. Remember I told you about my holidays there when I was a kid?'

'Uh-huh ...' He threw her a bemused glance. 'Feeling nostalgic?'

Lucy smiled. 'I guess so, yeah. I just thought we could have a quick look.'

'Hmm, okay ... what about your mum and dad, though?' They were both aware that Lucy's mother in particular would be eager to hand back Marnie and Sam at lunchtime as arranged. *No, no, we're fine*, Anna had said in a tight, high voice when Lucy had called last night. *They're quite a handful, but I'm okay – it's your father who's exhausted, you know what he's like, honestly ... anyway, don't worry about us. You just focus on enjoying your time together. You deserve it, love!*

At that moment, Lucy had almost wished her mother hadn't offered to have the kids, having almost forced her and Ivan to go away overnight. She always made them pay – not in money, of course, but in guilt. It was the currency she used: *Your dad's just a bit upset, that's all. Sam was playing with his models and snapped off a wing ...* For heaven's sake, couldn't her father have placed his Airfix aeroplanes out of reach on a high shelf? Hadn't he imagined that his five-year-old grandson might want to play with them? *It was his favourite Spitfire, that's all*, Anna added with a sigh.

'We'll still be there by lunchtime,' Lucy reassured her husband now, as the village came into view. 'Look – see that derelict cottage over there, by the river?' Ivan nodded, and she felt a twist of sadness at the sight of it. It was almost roofless now, the timbers rotted, the stone walls crumbling with weeds sprouting from their crevices. 'That's what's left of George and Babs's place,' she added.

'Wow,' Ivan murmured. 'Was it really habitable back then?'

'Just about. I thought it was wonderful – cosy and crammed with ornaments and artefacts. But according to Mum it was pretty damp and prone to flooding from the river. I don't think there were any more tenants after them.'

'What a waste,' Ivan remarked, adjusting his wire-rimmed spectacles, 'letting it fall into decay like that.' Lucy glanced at him. She could sense his interest waning already, but he perked up again as they drove through the main heart of the village on this perfect autumn morning.

How the place had changed since she was a little girl. There were numerous inviting shops now: a greengrocer with wicker baskets of produce stacked outside, a bijou art gallery, a couple of gift boutiques and a particularly alluring bookshop, which appeared to be wholly devoted to cookbooks. The fading facades Lucy remembered had been painted in cheery colours, and the shops' window

boxes and hanging baskets were filled with late-flowering geraniums and winter pansies. Happily, many of the more traditional shops were still there, and appeared to be virtually unchanged – like the general store, and the newsagent's where she had been allowed to spend her pocket money on comics, fishing nets, Sherbet Fountains and whatever else had caught her eye.

Simple pleasures, she reflected, enjoying a rush of nostalgia. 'It's so quaint,' Ivan remarked.

'Lovely, isn't it?'

'Yeah. We should have come here for lunch or something ...'

Lucy smirked. 'We were kind of busy in the hotel.'

Ivan chuckled. It *had* been wonderful, stealing a little time away from the kids. Life was so hectic with children, it was easy to let intimacy fall away. Her age aside, she couldn't help thinking it was a miracle that they had managed to conceive a third baby at all. These days, they only had to start kissing in bed for either Marnie or Sam to run into their room, desperately 'needing' something: a drink, a cuddle, reassurance after a nightmare. And soon, Lucy and Ivan would be propelled back to stage one all over again, with a newborn. A couple of her friends had recently had their third children. They seemed to have acquired a casualness about parenthood this time around that she hoped she would be able to emulate.

'No pristine babygrows this time,' a chronically sleep-deprived colleague had laughed. 'If there's food on his front, I just pop another T-shirt on over the top. Some days, by bath time, he's wearing six outfits.'

Lucy liked the idea of being more relaxed this time, and being able to fully enjoy their baby, rather than feeling as if they were merely staggering from one day to the next. She slowed down and turned left into a single-track lane.

Ivan looked at her. 'Where are we going now?'

'I just want to show you something,' she replied.

'But what's up here? It doesn't look like it leads anywhere ...'

'Wait and see,' she said, trying to suppress a smile. There was nothing at first – just trees on either side of the lane, their boughs joining to form a lacy green canopy overhead. There was an old red phone box, a stone trough at the roadside and a huddled cottage with a pale green front door. Someone trotted by on a pony. Surely, Ivan could see how idyllic it was, compared to their neighbourhood of nondescript terraced streets back in Manchester. Whilst perfectly functional, their house had only a tiny paved backyard and a bunch of party-loving students next door. They had been burgled twice, and last November someone had posted a firework through their letterbox. The joys of city life were beginning to wear thin.

'What *is* this?' Ivan asked. 'A mystery trip?'

'You'll see,' she replied, glimpsing the high garden wall now, weathered and patterned with lichen and moss. There was the cottage's whitewashed gable end, the thatched roof, and the wrought-iron garden gate that Lucy, Hally and the Linton kids had charged through in a pack. She could almost hear their plimsoled feet slapping onto the gravel path.

Lucy's heart was quickening now as she stopped the car. She could see the trees they'd climbed and the old wooden shed that they'd hidden behind, like kids in an adventure story. Her strongest childhood memories were here in this semi-wild garden.

And now there was something else too.

A 'For Sale' sign, garish red and white against the cloudless sky. Lucy turned to Ivan.

'What's this, honey?' he asked hesitantly.

'Just a cottage.' She was beaming now, unable to stop herself as they climbed out of the car.

They weren't here by chance. Ever since Max had taken over at Claudine, Lucy had been browsing estate agents' websites, fantasising about a cottage in the country. This usually happened late at night, after Ivan had gone to bed, and it had become quite a hobby of hers. She had searched this

whole area of West Yorkshire, then found herself homing in on Burley Bridge, just out of curiosity at first. When she had spotted that Rosemary Cottage was up for sale, she had almost fallen off her chair.

This was the reason she had suggested staying in a hotel fairly close by. She'd suspected that Ivan would have resisted coming to view the cottage; Burley Bridge was too remote for them to consider moving here while he was working in Manchester. But she hoped that, when he saw it for himself, he would at least consider taking a look inside.

Ivan met Lucy's gaze, clearly registering her shining green eyes and the flush to her cheeks. 'It's a beautiful house,' he conceded.

She pushed back her thick, long dark hair. 'D'you think we might be able to just – you know ... have a look around?'

His mouth twitched into a smile. 'What for?'

'Oh, I'm just curious, you know? I remember it really well. Me and a couple of local kids used to sneak into the garden and steal berries ...'

'You never told me you had a criminal past.' He grinned at her.

'Just a few handfuls,' she chuckled.

Ivan turned back to the cottage. 'Looks like it needs quite a bit of work, darling.'

She nodded. 'Yes, but imagine us all being here. Wouldn't it be lovely? You've been saying you've had enough of the crazy hours, the endless meetings, all the pressures—'

'Yes, but—'

'And wouldn't the kids love it? Look at the size of that garden! They could have a Wendy house and a den, and the house would be perfect for bed and breakfast ...' While she might have lured him here under false pretences, Ivan did know that Lucy had fantasised for years now about running a country B&B.

'Luce ...' He paused. 'Are you serious about doing bed and breakfast?'

She nodded. 'I know we'd be good at it, you and me together.'

Ivan shook his head and exhaled. 'But how on earth could we do that with the baby coming?'

'We'd manage,' she said firmly. 'We'd only be talking two or three rooms to let out to guests. How hard would that be?'

'Yes, but newborn babies are up all night and demand attention every second of the day. You remember how it was ...'

'Sam and Marnie were both sleeping through at eight months,' she reminded him.

'But what if this one isn't?'

She exhaled. 'I just thought we could have a look around.'

Ivan slid an arm around her waist. When they'd found out she was pregnant, he had agreed that perhaps now was the time to reduce his working hours in order to spend more time with their young family. With her redundancy payment, they could manage for a while, and he had agreed – tentatively – that it could be an opportunity to live their lives differently. Ivan worked full-pelt at Brookes, a Manchester-based branding agency. Although he loved his job, when deadlines loomed he was often plagued by insomnia and even the odd panic attack. Lucy worried about him. At times, he seemed so stressed and wrapped up in his work, he could barely interact with her or the children at all. 'It's just modern life,' he'd said flippantly, when she'd tried to address the issue. 'No, of course I don't need to see the doctor.'

'But she could sign you off with stress. You could have a break—'

'You know what'd happen then. I'd be edged out of the company, wouldn't I?'

'Like me, you mean,' she'd shot back, knowing he hadn't meant it that way.

He chose to ignore her remark. 'She'd only prescribe happy pills,' he'd muttered – which was Ivan all over: stubborn, dedicated, intent on providing for his young family. And who needed 'happy pills', as he called them – annoyingly – when he could knock back the best part of a bottle of merlot most nights?

Lucy was desperate to make a change. What was the point of Ivan slogging away if the children rarely saw him and the work was making him ill?

‘So,’ she said now, ‘d’you like it?’

He nodded and turned to the cottage again. ‘Of course I do, Luce. It’s beautiful.’

As she had half-expected a non-committal ‘it’s okay, I suppose’, this was a pleasant surprise. ‘I know it’s a long way from Manchester,’ she conceded, taking his hand in hers.

‘Yeah, of course it is.’ He nodded thoughtfully and they fell into silence for a few moments. ‘But maybe that’s not the be-all and end-all anymore,’ he added.

She bit her lip as her gaze skimmed the garden. ‘You mean—’

‘I’m not against it, darling,’ he said gently.

She nodded, barely able to believe he was being so positive. ‘If we did B&B, I know the baby’d put things on hold for a while ...’

‘Well, yes, obviously ... but shall we view it anyway?’

It was all Lucy could do not to yelp with delight. ‘I’d *love* to.’

‘Okay.’ His dark brown eyes met hers, and he rested his hand protectively on her stomach, even though she wasn’t showing yet. ‘Let’s phone the agent and just see, shall we? We could come back another time—’

‘Well, actually, I phoned already.’

‘What?’ he exclaimed.

She cleared her throat. ‘I told him we’d be in the area today, and he said if you liked the look of it we should give him a call. He’s only local. He said he’d pop round with the keys ...’

Ivan stared at her, feigning outrage. ‘You tricked me!’

‘I know.’ She winced. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Hmmm.’ He slid his gaze back towards the cottage, then turned and beamed at her. ‘I *suppose* not. Now you’ve forced me into this ...’

They were both laughing now, and Lucy felt as if she could burst with love as she wrapped her arms around his waist. ‘Okay, darling,’ she said. ‘I’ll give him a call right now.’

Chapter Three

Three months later, as the village sparkled with late January frost, Rosemary Cottage was theirs and ready to be transformed into the B&B of their dreams. Well, Lucy's dreams really; she was the one driving the project, looking into ways to manage bookings and marketing, as well as overseeing an upgrade of the house. Although it had been spruced up for sale, there was still a substantial amount of work to be done in order to create the kind of B&B she yearned for.

A team of tradesmen set to work upgrading fixtures and fittings. As the days turned milder – there had been no snow so far that winter – they took away the damp-riddled conservatory, and the area where it had stood was transformed into a decked seating space where Lucy planned to serve breakfasts on summer mornings. She was all for dismantling the ancient garden shed, and perhaps building a summerhouse for guests to enjoy – until Ivan and the children made a plea for keeping it. 'But it's falling to bits,' she reasoned. 'It must be as old as the house itself.'

'That's part of its charm,' Ivan reasoned, so she let it go and he set about making it a hobby shed for himself and the children. Although his spare time was still sparse, at least he seemed to be enjoying it now instead of huddling over his laptop, staring at reports, drinking wine. Sam and Marnie were thrilled to have more of his attention, and they were full of ideas for all kinds of construction projects they could get up to together.

'Can we make a birdhouse?' Sam asked.

'Sure!' Ivan replied.

'What about a bird bath and a bird table—' Marnie cut in.

'And bird hotel?' Sam asked, giggling.

'I'd never have guessed you were a shed man,' Lucy teased Ivan.

'I don't think I knew it myself,' he said with a grin. Meanwhile, the cottage's ancient kitchen was refitted in readiness for all the breakfasts – and possibly evening meals – they would be preparing for guests. Gradually, the place started to come together and feel altogether more welcoming.

Lucy had already gathered that the cookbook shop on the village high street had put Burley Bridge firmly on the day-trippers' map. In fact, Della, who had set it up and still ran it, had grown up in Rosemary Cottage alongside her brother and sister. It had been her mother, Kitty, who had shrieked at Lucy, Hally and the Linton children for sneaking into her garden and stealing her redcurrants.

'You were brave,' Della had laughed, when Lucy told her about her childhood antics. 'Mum was pretty scary – especially when she'd had a couple of gins. Even I wouldn't have taken berries without asking.' Lucy and Della soon became friends, and she made other connections through chatting to neighbours, shop owners and mums at the school gate. Unsurprisingly, Della had only a vague recollection of the Linton family in the pink bungalow, who had apparently moved away many years ago. The name Hally meant nothing to her, and Lucy hadn't really expected it to. Della was a decade older than she was, and would have already left home when Lucy and her companions were running wild through the village.

As Ivan had decided to hang on to his agency job for the time being, Lucy was grateful for these new friendships in the village. His 100-mile round trip was exhausting, but at least it wouldn't be for too long. The plan was for him to go freelance, and work from home once the major bills for the work on the house had been settled. Now and again, he'd call to say he was shattered and couldn't face the drive home, and would be staying over with a colleague in Manchester that night. While Lucy had no problem with that, she looked forward to the day when Ivan resigned from Brookes and was here at her side, being part of village life, being *with* them in every way.

Meanwhile, she took pride in the fact that they had managed the move and Marnie and Sam had settled happily into the village school. It was all going so well, Lucy thought. Too well, perhaps, as one grey March afternoon, she experienced intense cramping whilst out shopping in the village.

She made for the bookshop, trying to convince herself that she had just been overdoing things and needed to slow down.

‘You don’t look well,’ Della exclaimed. ‘You’re kind of clammy.’

‘I’m getting these pains,’ Lucy said. ‘Could I just sit down for a moment?’

‘Of course,’ Della said, her eyes filled with concern. She turned to her part-time assistant, Rikke, who was manning the till. ‘Rikke, I think Lucy should go to hospital—’

‘No, I’ll be fine,’ Lucy protested. ‘Maybe if I had a cup of tea ...’ But Della was insistent in her rather motherly way, and drove Lucy to Heathfield Hospital. Lucy tried over and over to contact Ivan, but he was in high-level meetings with clients all afternoon and couldn’t be disturbed. Finally, Lucy barked to the receptionist at Brookes that she was in a hospital waiting room and he had to take her call right now.

‘Damn his work,’ she muttered furiously to Della. But it wasn’t his fault – of course it wasn’t. Maybe she’d thrown herself into their project with too much gusto? After all, Marnie and Sam were only five and seven. Keeping on top of family life was challenging enough without trying to furnish the guest rooms and their en suites to an impeccable standard, get her head around health and safety rulings and – admittedly, this part was more fun – figure out what she could offer on her breakfast menu to set Rosemary Cottage apart from the rest.

The late miscarriage rocked them, and Lucy couldn’t help wondering: should they have stayed in Manchester, where life had just been jogging along? It was likely that the pregnancy had been unviable, a kind young doctor had told them. It was no one’s fault. But there was no way of knowing for sure; Lucy had had no tests other than the standard ultrasound, and everything had seemed fine.

At least Ivan had resigned from Brookes now, and was busying himself with putting the final touches to the house as well as starting to establish his own freelance work. Now and again, he’d make slightly disparaging remarks about village life, such as, ‘I’m sure they’re keeping a dossier on us, Luce. I went into the newsagent’s and a woman came over and said, “Oh, I see you’ve changed the colour of your gate!” They seem terribly interested in what we’re up to around here.’

‘Who’s “they”?’ Lucy asked, a tad defensively.

‘You know – just, people ...’

‘People who happen to be expressing a friendly interest, you mean?’

Ivan raked a hand through his wavy light brown hair and took off his wire-rimmed spectacles. What was it with middle-aged men and their intolerance of strangers, she wondered? It wasn’t just Ivan. Without exception, all of her female friends claimed that their husbands hadn’t made any new friends beyond thirty years old, and had no interest in doing so. ‘I won’t have room for any more mates until some of these old buggers die off,’ Ivan once joked. In contrast, Lucy relished making new connections and had actively enjoyed arriving in Burley Bridge, with that ‘clean slate’ feeling that came with starting afresh. It was the aspect of running a B&B that appealed to her most – the unpredictable nature of welcoming strangers into their home.

‘Last week, three people stopped me in the street and asked why we’d got rid of the conservatory,’ Ivan went on now, filling two mugs with tea from the pot. ‘Someone actually said it was a waste, and that Kitty had loved sitting out there on summer evenings.’ Exasperation flickered in his deep brown eyes.

‘They’re just curious,’ she remarked.

‘Yes, because there’s not enough important stuff for them to think about—’

‘That’s so patronising,’ she retorted, sensing a wave of fatigue now. The children had just gone to bed and she had a list of chores to rattle through before she could kick off her shoes and relax. ‘This is what it’s like, living in the country,’ she added. ‘People notice all the little things around them. I know that might seem weird and intrusive to you, but it also means they actually care. Look how Della looked after me, when we lost the baby.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ he said hotly. ‘I s’pose I’m just not used to being so ... noticed.’

‘What’ve you got to hide?’

‘Nothing!’ he exclaimed.

‘What’s this *dossier* you’re so afraid of then?’

His face broke into a reluctant smile, as if he had finally realised how curmudgeonly he was being. ‘Come on – country life’s new to you too,’ he added. ‘You can’t say where you grew up was rural.’

‘Well, no,’ she conceded.

‘So you must know what I mean.’

Of course she did. Naturally, they’d had friends in Manchester – but there had also been that relative anonymity that comes with living in a city. There’d been a pretty transient population in their street; it was the first house they’d bought together, before they’d had kids, and was in a more studenty area than they’d have chosen now. Whilst Ivan seemed to miss their life there, Lucy didn’t.

After the miscarriage her new friends in Burley Bridge had showed up with cards, flowers and pot-luck suppers. Women with whom she had only chatted sporadically at the school gate had stopped her in the village and asked if she was okay, suggested a coffee, and given her their numbers in case she ever needed anything. Touchingly, they had also made a point of inviting Marnie and Sam for extra playdates and even days out – as, of course, the children had been looking forward to the new baby coming too.

Burley Bridge was a special place, Lucy felt; even more so since they had lost the baby. Perhaps it had made her put down roots here more quickly than she would have otherwise.

She also knew her husband well enough to realise how stubborn he could be, and that there was no point in trying to *force* him into feeling entirely settled here. Ivan had agreed to move – and that had been nothing short of miraculous. However, Lucy was also convinced that he would come round, and eventually love the village as much as she did. It would just take a little more time.

Chapter Four

As the days had lengthened and Rosemary Cottage's garden had started to awaken, so Lucy began to feel stronger again – more like her old self.

'You're doing too much,' Ivan warned as she launched herself back into the business of readying their home for guests. 'Slow down, darling. We can open when we're ready – there's no rush.' But Lucy didn't want to slow down. She wanted to get things kick-started and found solace in designing a website and setting everything up for online bookings. It was crucial, she felt, to be up and running in good time for the summer season. Being busy certainly helped her to deal with her grief, and by early May they were open.

For those first few weeks, bookings were sparse. But as the mild spring eased into a glorious summer, the guest rooms were generally full at least on Friday and Saturday nights. As well as looking after their visitors, Lucy had thrown herself into decorating the house with flowers and foliage from the garden. She had always loved having fresh blooms around her at home; back in Manchester, she had grown what she could in tubs and window boxes, but been frustrated by the lack of space. Even as a child, she had loved to snip nasturtiums and cornflowers from her parents' neat suburban garden to plonk into jam jars and bring into her bedroom. Now, as something new seemed to burst into life every morning, her imagination began to run riot. This was the first time Lucy had ever had a proper garden of her own, and she adored it.

Her beautiful, cottagey floral arrangements started to be noticed by friends and guests. Through word of mouth she was asked to decorate the local church hall with flowers from her garden, which in turn led to her creating table centrepieces for a coffee morning at the village primary school. Several more occasions were in the diary. It was thrilling to her, how she was building this delightful side hustle, using little more than the natural resources around her.

Meanwhile, Rosemary Cottage was starting to become popular with hillwalkers, and her excellent breakfasts – prepared by Lucy while Ivan looked after the children – were proving quite a hit. As well as the traditional full English, she had introduced home-made creamy yoghurts and berry compotes, made from the currants that still grew in the garden, to be served with toasted brioche from the village bakery. There was also home-made granola, paper-thin crepes drizzled with molten dark chocolate, and fluffy vegan banana pancakes served with maple syrup and coconut cream.

It had all taken an enormous amount of thought and planning – but as the summer went on, Lucy was determined to offer something a little more special than the average B&B. She knew from reading numerous blogs that the days of the greasy fry-up served by a belligerent landlady-type were long gone. Guests were no longer thrown out into the rain straight after breakfast. It seemed that the most loved B&Bs combined the style and comfort of a boutique hotel with the personal welcome of a family home.

'And I thought we'd just be able to throw them some Sugar Puffs,' Ivan joked late one night, as Lucy prepared a batch of pancake mix for the morning.

From time to time, she still suspected her husband was missing his old life with all those client meetings and glittering ceremonies where Brookes had scooped numerous awards. While she chatted happily with guests, Ivan could be rather reserved and prone to hiding away in the tiny study upstairs. He had his freelance work to crack on with, she reminded herself, and perhaps he was still adjusting to rural life.

They grafted all through the summer, with the children spending much of their time playing happily in the garden with their new friends. Just as Lucy had as a child, Marnie and Sam viewed the garden as being full of hiding places, the setting for their imaginative games. 'I used to climb over that wall when I was a little girl,' she told them. 'The lady who lived here used to chase us out!'

‘We’re allowed to play here any time we like,’ Sam remarked with a trace of pride, his lightly freckled face browned from the sun.

‘Yeah – we’re the luckiest,’ Marnie agreed. Her long, flowing light brown hair had turned golden and, like her brother, she glowed from a summer of playing outdoors. Since school had broken up, Lucy couldn’t remember seeing them wearing anything other than T-shirts and shorts. They had inherited their father’s rangy physique, with slender limbs and skin that turned honey-brown at the merest whisper of sunshine; Lucy was paler and curvier. Both of her children had celebrated their birthdays here in the garden, with vast picnics set out on blankets, bunting strung from the trees and what had felt like the entire village descending for afternoons of games.

It had been a glorious summer so far, and Lucy had grabbed any opportunity to tend to the herbaceous borders and pots of herbs she grew for cooking. Meanwhile, Ivan regarded the lawn as ‘his’ job – much to the delight of Irene Bagshott, a widow in her sixties who lived further down the lane.

‘D’you ever loan him out, Lucy?’ she asked with a throaty laugh as she passed by one August afternoon.

‘I’m sure we could arrange something,’ Lucy chuckled, while Ivan raised a flustered smile. Since she’d met him, he had never seemed aware of his visual appeal, and dressed practically – forever in jeans, a T-shirt or sweater – rather than with any concession to style. In fact, since moving here he was proving himself to be quite the handyman. Whilst Lucy certainly fronted the B&B, Ivan wasn’t averse to fixing guttering, replacing a cracked window or sawing a precarious branch off a tree. Whenever he didn’t know how to tackle a job, he read up on it or studied YouTube tutorials, then got stuck in. It had felt crucial to Lucy for them to make a real go of their business this summer, and they had, very happily, certainly achieved that. Next summer, she felt, they could take things to another level and start offering evening meals too.

Lucy even allowed herself to believe that Ivan had settled fully into village life, and that he wasn’t missing his old workplace – or life in Manchester – at all. However, it soon became apparent that other plans were afoot, which he hadn’t shared with her.

Late one warm September night, they were setting the communal breakfast table for the next morning when he sighed and fiddled with fistfuls of cutlery before finally blurting out, ‘I have something to tell you, Luce. A job’s come up. A really good one.’

She stared at him and frowned. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘It’s with Si Morley. Remember him?’

‘From Brookes, yes, I think so. Didn’t you used to go for a drink sometimes?’

Ivan took off his glasses and nodded. ‘He has his own agency now – it’s small but they’re doing incredibly well. A few of the guys from Brookes have already moved over to work with him.’

She nodded, wondering what this was leading to. ‘Have you applied for a job with him?’ she asked hesitantly.

‘God, no, I haven’t *applied*,’ Ivan said quickly. ‘I wouldn’t do that without saying anything to you, would I? No, Si approached me.’ He repositioned the cups and saucers unnecessarily.

‘But why?’ Lucy asked. ‘Doesn’t he know we’re living here now, and that you’ve gone freelance?’

‘Yes, of course he does.’ Ivan started to polish the glassware with a tea towel even though it was sparkling already. ‘He just thought of me when it came up,’ he added. ‘Apparently I was kinda the obvious choice.’ He pushed back his wavy hair that he wore longer now, since he had left his job. He was more stubbly, too, and his more weathered, outdoorsy look suited him.

‘Right,’ Lucy said. ‘Well, you know how valued you were at Brookes.’

He nodded absently, as if the thought hadn’t occurred to him. Lucy crossed the room to one of the two squashy powder blue sofas. As she plumped up the cushions, she tried to ignore the ball of anxiety that seemed to be forming in her gut. Surely he wasn’t tempted by this so-called ‘approach’? Ivan had agreed that he, too, needed a fresh start, especially after they had lost the baby. He wanted to spend more time with the kids and less on jumping to attention when his clients demanded it. His

parents, who lived in the outer reaches of North London, had implied that Lucy had ‘forced’ him to give up his job – but it hadn’t been that way at all.

‘What is the job anyway?’ she asked lightly.

‘Oh, it’s a brand manager role. New client. A major repositioning so it’d be all hands on deck for a few months ...’ He repositioned the ketchups, the HP sauce and mustards on the table, as if engaged in a simplified game of chess, with condiments.

When he wandered through to the kitchen, Lucy followed him. ‘So, who’s the client?’

‘A pretty dire hotel chain – you wouldn’t know them. They’ve been hit with a torrent of bad reviews and some of them are pretty disgusting. There’s been food poisoning scandals, outbreaks of bedbugs—’

‘Nice,’ she exclaimed with a shudder. ‘Shall I book us in for a treat?’

Ivan smiled. ‘Sure. Anyway, they’ve been bought out with a ton of new investment, and the actual properties are sound, so they’re looking to completely refurbish and re-launch as a collection of boutique urban bolt-holes.’

“‘Boutique urban bolt-holes.’” Lucy gave him a bemused look.

‘Ha. Yeah, I know,’ Ivan chuckled, his dark eyes glinting. ‘Quite a challenge.’

Lucy unloaded the tumble dryer and started to fold Sam’s T-shirts. They were emblazoned with planets and robots; outer space and mechanics were his main interests right now. She picked up his polar bear sweatshirt, which he had recently shunned, considering it too babyish at the age of six (although he was still fiercely attached to his panda pillow and refused to sleep on anything else).

‘So, are you interested?’ Lucy ventured hesitantly, willing Ivan to say no, of course not, but it was flattering to be asked.

He shrugged. ‘I might just pop in for a chat. Nothing to lose, is there?’

She stared at him. ‘What d’you mean, there’s nothing to lose?’

‘I just think it might be a bit short-sighted to turn it down flat,’ he said quickly.

Lucy stood still, astounded. ‘I thought our life was here now? You agreed, Ivan. You said you’d had it with that kind of full-on work. It was doing your head in, you said—’

‘Lucy, I’m just saying—’

‘So how d’you think it’d work,’ she cut in, ‘if they did offer it to you? I mean, surely you wouldn’t go back to commuting? It was hard enough, those few weeks you did it.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Or would it be a home-based job? I suppose that might be okay. You’ve managed in the study so far, haven’t you, with your freelance work? I know it’s a bit cramped in there. Could we convert the shed, or build an office in the garden—’ Lucy broke off, cursing herself now for not having realised that something was going on. But these days, she felt as if she barely came up for air. It was all she could do to keep on top of day-to-day life here.

‘It’s not a home-based role,’ Ivan murmured. ‘They’re actually offering a flat with the job.’

‘A flat? Where – in Manchester?’

He nodded. ‘Yes, love. It’s a company flat – just a tiny studio – and it comes with the job. Si’s just bought it. They reckon they need *me* to make this work, this rebranding the hotel chain thing. So they’ve put together this great, um, package.’

Lucy blinked at her husband. At forty-two, his handsome, finely boned face was virtually unlined, his hair showing no sign of thinning. It had amused her, the way some of the women in the village had fussed over him when they had moved in, clearly delighting in the new, eye-pleasing family man who was seen out and about at weekends with his equally attractive children. He had just taught Sam how to ride a bike. He and the children had built a kite in the shed, which had attracted praise from the locals when they’d flown it up on the hill. Whether or not he was prepared to admit it, Ivan really was part of things here, and country life suited him. His wine consumption had reduced dramatically and he looked far healthier and more relaxed.

Lucy turned to him now, trying to remain calm and not over-react when she didn't fully understand what he was telling her. 'So, what are you saying exactly?' she asked. 'I don't quite see how ...'

'I don't want to upset you, Luce,' he said quickly. 'Honestly, it's the last thing I want.'

Lucy swallowed hard, understanding now what this meant. 'But we don't need a great package, do we? We've worked so hard to build this. What about school, the kids' new friends, their lives here —'

'No, you'd stay here with them.'

Her heart seemed to falter. 'And ... *you'd* move back to Manchester? You mean, on your own, without us?'

'Um ... yeah.' He nodded, and his gaze held hers. So this was it, she realised; finally, he was admitting that she *had* dragged him here, away from the cut and thrust of whizzy city life. It had been her dream – not his – to run a B&B in a picturesque village. He had only gone along with it to please her.

'Are you ... leaving me?' Her voice cracked.

Ivan looked aghast. 'No! Oh, God, Lucy – no. Of course I'm not. Jesus. Come here, darling.' He wound his arms around her and pulled her close. 'It's just ... I've really tried, sweetheart. You can't say I haven't.'

'We've only been here ten months, for God's sake. Can't you give it more time?'

'They need someone now,' he said gently. 'I'm so sorry, darling. I promise it's true that they approached me. I didn't go looking.'

'It doesn't matter,' she said sharply, turning away.

'Running a B&B just isn't me, Luce. I've realised that already. I mean, I love the village, and what we've done to this place. But I need more than this.'

'You need more than us?' she exclaimed.

'No, no – not you and the kids. I mean living here, being so cut off from the world, worrying about have we got enough sausages and do we need new pillows, and did we remember lime marmalade, one of the guests asked for it last week, and maybe it's time we started offering evening meals—'

'Sorry your life has become so limited,' she snapped as her tears spilled over.

'It's not limited. It's fantastic!'

'So fantastic that you're moving back to Manchester, away from us?' She was shouting now; she couldn't stop herself. Thank God their children slept soundly at night.

'Listen.' He grabbed at her hand. 'I'll only be away four nights out of seven. I'll set off on Monday mornings and be back on Fridays, and it'll make our weekends all the more special.'

So it was all decided then, she realised. This wasn't a discussion about whether or not he should accept the job. His mind was made up and, whatever her feelings, it looked as if she would be running the B&B virtually alone.

'We can get someone in to help here,' he added, as if reading her thoughts.

'We can't afford that,' Lucy said flatly. 'We're only just managing to stay afloat now.'

'Yes, but we'll have my salary again, won't we? It'll be less pressurised, love. Think what a relief it'll be, having that security again – that regular money coming in. I know it's looking good for the next few weeks, but what about winter? There's hardly anyone booked in past October—'

'I could go all out to get more floristry work,' she said quickly, hating the desperation that had crept into her voice.

'But there won't be any flowers then, will there?'

'I know, but I was thinking of doing Christmas arrangements and selling them locally – even over in Heathfield. There are plenty of shops that sell that kind of thing. Winter foliage, wreaths, there's tons of scope for seasonal decorations with holly, fir cones, berries ...' Lucy stopped, her

cheeks flushing. 'I know it won't make much money,' she added, 'but I have a feeling it could grow and become a bigger part of our lives.'

'I'm sure it could,' Ivan said distractedly. 'I think you're so talented, Luce. It's amazing that you're doing this too, on top of everything else you've got going on here. But it's not about that. It's more about ...' He paused. 'My future, I guess. *My working life.*'

She rubbed at her eyes and put down the bunch of teaspoons she'd been holding tightly. 'You really want this job, don't you?'

Ivan nodded.

'And it's definitely yours, if you decide to accept it?'

'It is, darling, yes, but please don't worry. I'll still be with you, in every way. You and me will always be a team.'

She inhaled slowly, letting his declaration settle in her mind, and looked around the country kitchen they had planned so carefully. In the past few weeks she had already scrambled hundreds of free-range eggs on that hob. She was immensely proud of what they had achieved, even at this early stage; the glowing online reviews, and a guestbook filling with positive comments. So she *would not* fall to pieces if Ivan had made up his mind to accept the job. She had wanted Rosemary Cottage far too much to let her dreams crumble now.

Lucy smoothed down her long dark hair, which fell in loose waves over her shoulders. 'Okay, then,' she said firmly. 'Go ahead and accept the job, if it feels like the right thing to do.'

Ivan cleared his throat and looked at her. 'I'm sorry, darling. I know I should have talked to you first, but ... I already have.'

Chapter Five

Two weeks later, Ivan launched into his new routine of heading off to work at six every Monday morning and being gone until Friday evening. Lucy could hardly believe this had been thrown at her, with virtually no warning – but then, that was the way his business worked. It was full on, all-hands-on-deck and, admittedly, Ivan was being well rewarded by his employer. However, it required a big adjustment on Lucy's side. Apart from the wrench of saying goodbye, there were practical aspects to consider; specifically, how could one person simultaneously serve up home-cured Yorkshire bacon to guests whilst chivvying two boisterous children into getting ready and ferrying them to school?

It was impossible, of course, and as Lucy felt uncomfortable relying on her still-new local friends, she decided to enlist some help. In stepped Rikke, the Danish woman in her late twenties who worked part-time at Della's bookshop as well as giving swimming lessons in Heathfield, and harp recitals locally. She quickly proved herself to be quite the godsend.

Marnie and Sam adapted fairly easily to their dad being away during the week. It's not that they didn't miss him; more that children tend to exist in the here and now, and often possess a talent for simply getting on with things. Whereas they used to cause havoc whilst getting ready in the mornings, 'losing' their shoes and suddenly finding themselves splattered with hot chocolate, they would now be eerily helpful and ready in good time for Rikke to pick them up. They would probably have been ready at five a.m. – with shoes polished – if required, so keen were they to impress her.

Within a few weeks, Lucy had managed to adjust too. 'It's amazing what you can get used to,' she told Della when she'd popped into the bookshop one bright and breezy late October afternoon. 'If someone had told me Ivan would be away during the week, I'd have said it'd be a disaster for us. But in some ways ...' She paused.

'It's made things better?' Della suggested.

Lucy winced. 'I feel terrible for saying it, and of course I miss him. But I must admit, he was getting pretty grumpy with the day-to-day stuff.'

'What kind of stuff?' Della asked with a wry smile.

'Oh, the change-overs, mostly. Cleaning rooms, scrubbing loos.' She paused and smirked. 'Ironing sheets ...'

'But guests can't have wrinkled sheets,' Della exclaimed in mock horror.

'They absolutely can't.' Lucy grinned. 'And as for the people aspect – well, you know Ivan's sociable enough, when he's in the mood. But with guests, you have to be more—'

'More "on"?' remarked Frank, Della's husband, as he wandered into the shop.

'Yes. That's exactly what Ivan called it.' Lucy laughed. "'I'm not like you," he kept telling me. "I can't be *on* all the time."'

'I guess running a B&B isn't everyone's cup of tea,' Frank added. 'Cutting the toast into perfect triangles—'

'Oh, I'm a stickler for that,' Lucy chuckled, 'with my ruler and set square.'

'You are a natural at it, though,' Della added, handing Lucy a coffee from the percolator. 'Frank, how many times have Lucy's guests told us how much they're loving their stay?'

'Tons,' he said. 'You're obviously doing something right.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' Lucy said, and she caught Della's eye and grinned. She knew her friend was delighted to see her childhood home lavished with care and attention after decades of neglect.

Having chosen a vintage French cookbook, Lucy strolled through the village to pick up Marnie and Sam from school. It was true that she missed Ivan, and by Friday afternoons she was desperate to hear his car pulling up outside the cottage. But they *were* still a team, just as he'd said when he'd dropped the bombshell about the job last month. Ivan wasn't a man to break a promise. Lucy had known that, instinctively, on the day they'd met, on that Euston-to-Manchester-Piccadilly train.

She wasn't normally one for chatting to strangers on journeys. Usually, she preferred to read or simply enjoy watching the landscape sliding by. But that day she'd fallen into conversation with the cute stranger in glasses sitting opposite. When a sudden heavy snowfall caused a two-hour delay, she had been a tiny bit pleased.

Actually, *extremely* pleased. The weekend at an old college friend's in London had been fun, but meeting Ivan on the journey home had been the icing on the cake. He had made her laugh, fetched them wine from the buffet carriage and they'd got tipsy together. They were at a standstill, not yet halfway home. While other passengers were moaning loudly to each other, and venting their frustrations to the train staff, Lucy had barely noticed time slipping by. *We're sorry about this continued delay*, came yet another announcement. *We're hoping to get moving again very soon ...*

'I hope we don't,' Ivan had said with a smile that caused her heart to flip. 'I'm enjoying this journey.'

'Me too,' Lucy had said. His eyes were lovely, she'd noticed; dark as espresso with long black lashes. She could hardly tear her gaze away from them.

'So, what d'you do for a living?' he'd asked.

Bingo! 'I work in lingerie,' she'd replied.

'Really?' His eyebrows had shot up. 'And I thought *my* workplace was relaxed.'

She'd smiled. 'It's a lingerie retailer, although sometimes I think it'd be better if we only sold knickers—'

'Then you could say, "I work in pants"?'

'Exactly.' That – or perhaps the wine they'd been sharing – set them off sniggering, and by the time they'd arrived at their home city they had swapped numbers and vowed to meet.

That had been over thirteen years ago. Three years later, she and Ivan were married, and a couple of years after that she was pregnant with Marnie, then Sam followed. Pre-Ivan, Lucy had never lived with a boyfriend or even had anything particularly serious. She'd had wild crushes and the odd, fairly short-lived relationship, but there'd been no one she'd remotely imagined a future with. *Thank God for freak snow*, she'd often thought. And now, as the softly weathered village primary school came into view, Lucy decided Ivan had been right in that their weekends would now feel more special. While there were often guests to look after, they were usually out during the day – and Lucy and Ivan seemed to appreciate each other like never before.

They were so lucky, she reflected as she spotted her new friends clustered by the school gate. She and Ivan had lost a baby, but they had Marnie and Sam and, of course, each other. Now, with Ivan working flat out during the week, it seemed as if they were conscious of making the most of every day they had together.

A few weeks later, when Lucy recalled thinking this, it chilled her to the bones.

Chapter Six

By the time winter took hold, bookings had started to thin out. Lucy had expected this to happen; after all, only the brave-hearted were inclined to hike into the hills with ominous clouds overhead. As the end of term approached, it had rained for what felt like weeks, and she was looking forward to Ivan taking a break over Christmas. Life had been hectic, especially since he had been working in Manchester, and they needed some family time together.

Although Lucy's mother had pushed for them to spend the festive season at theirs, Lucy had put her foot down this time. For years now, they had alternated between going to Ivan's parents', where it would be terribly restrained, with a foot-high tinsel tree sitting primly on a side table, and her own parents' place, which would be decked out in full, extravagant finery.

'But it's our turn this year,' her mother had argued.

'Yes, but we'd love to spend it here for the first time,' Lucy explained. 'Why don't you and Dad come to us?'

'Are you sure, darling? It seems like an awful lot of work ...'

Lucy smiled, knowing her mother was merely reluctant to relinquish control. 'It's a lot of work for you too, us lot all descending. And we'd love to do it. I don't think Rosemary Cottage will feel properly like our home until we've had Christmas here.'

Reluctantly, Anna had agreed (Lucy's father, Paddy, never had any say in such matters). Ivan's parents had been invited too, but they tended to view visiting Yorkshire as akin to traversing the Arctic tundra, and had politely declined.

And so Lucy propelled herself into preparing for Christmas, scribbling lists and bringing in holly and dark, glossy foliage, plus crispy seedpods and branches with which to create festive arrangements throughout the house.

Although she had enjoyed her run of looking after their guests, it was a relief to block out some time in order to ready the cottage for her parents' arrival on Christmas Eve. In amongst the foliage in the house, she dotted cream tapered candles, red velvet ribbons and silvery fairy lights. Although she had a vague memory that her childhood friend Hally's dad had sold Christmas trees, she gathered from asking around that the nearest source these days was a farm several miles out of the village. So she drove out there with the children and selected a seven-foot Scots Pine, which was delivered later to great excitement. As soon as it was set up in place, scenting the cottage and shimmering beneath an explosion of multi-coloured baubles, it felt as if the festive season had properly begun.

By now, the entire village was strewn with twinkling decorations. A huge tree glinted with jewel-coloured lights, and shop windows were filled with glowing nativity scenes and fuzzed with fake snow. Only an appearance of the genuine stuff could have made Burley Bridge look more festive. Lucy threw herself into every event going, from Della's festive drinks in the bookshop, to a heart-soaring carol concert in the village church. She had never felt such anticipation over Christmas Day itself since she had been a child.

Ivan, too, seemed to be full of festive spirit as the holidays grew closer. He had a buoyancy about him these days, Lucy was relieved to note, and he was certainly doing well in his new post at Si Morley's agency. Thirteen hotels in the once-beleaguered chain had been blitzed of their trouser presses, cheap melamine desks and industrial shower gel dispensers. 'Modern rustic with a hint of hippie' summed up the new look, according to Ivan: 'A little bit of Ibiza in Bradford,' he laughed. They offered green juices, massage and complimentary morning yoga.

Meanwhile, as Rikke had gone home to Copenhagen for the holidays, Lucy's mornings involved getting the children up and ready for school on time and cracking on with some last-minute orders for festive decorations. Happily, her floral displays around the village had led to several requests for handmade Christmas wreaths.

The annual Burley Bridge children's party was also drawing near. Lucy had gathered that the fancy dress element was the highlight, and Marnie and Sam had been talking about it for weeks. Unhelpfully, they had changed their minds about their costumes numerous times, and still hadn't decided when she'd dropped them off at school that morning.

'Can't you just throw something together?' Ivan asked, when he and Lucy caught up on the phone that lunchtime.

'Throw what together exactly?'

'I don't know,' he said distractedly. 'You're the one who's good at that stuff—'

'But it's *tonight*,' she reminded him. 'There isn't enough time. I can't believe we've left it so late.'

'Could you just nip out and buy something?'

Lucy laughed dryly. 'Where are you suggesting I nip out to?'

'Surely there's somewhere. What about that everything-shop on the high street?' The general-store-cum-post-office, he meant.

'Ivan,' Lucy said, shaking her head, 'how many times have you actually been in there?'

'Loads,' he protested, a trace of amusement in his voice.

Lucy smirked. 'What's her name, then? The lady who owns it, I mean?'

'Er ...'

'You don't know, do you? It's Irene.'

'Irene! Yes, of course.'

'You should remember,' she teased him. 'She has a crush on you.'

'Oh, stop it,' he exclaimed.

'How can you forget Irene? She was all overexcited watching you mowing the lawn.' Lucy was laughing now. 'D'you feel objectified, when that happens?'

'You're being ridiculous.'

'Okay – so who has the hair salon across the road from her?'

'What is this?' he cut in, chuckling now. 'A who's who in Burley Bridge quiz?'

'Yes, and you're doing terribly!'

'Anyway,' he said, quickly changing the subject, 'do they have to dress up? I mean, is it crucial?'

'Of course it is! It's not just the party. There's the parade through the village to the Christmas tree.'

'God, it is quite a number,' he conceded. 'Wish I was there to help.'

'Bet you do.' She laughed hollowly. 'Just hurry home tonight, will you? I can't wait to see you, and neither can the kids. They'll be desperate to show you their outfits – *if* we can cobble something together in time.'

After finishing the call, Lucy headed upstairs, pulled down the ladder from the hatch in the ceiling and climbed up to the attic. Although there was a lamp, it was still dark and shadowy – so dusty she could feel it in her throat – and the abundance of clutter set her on edge. They had shoved any surplus possessions up here when they'd moved in, and never got around to sorting it all out.

Ivan always launched himself into new hobbies and interests, almost to the point of obsession – which would involve buying all the equipment, materials and accessories. Lucy coughed as she picked her way through the evidence of Ivan's long-forgotten passions. There were tennis rackets and a defunct rowing machine. She gashed her shin against the sharp corner of a saxophone case.

'All this *stuff*,' she muttered irritably, relieved to find boxes of fabric remnants now. Once a keen crafter, often making her own clothes during her student days, these days she rarely had the time. She pulled out reams of fabric, hoping for inspiration to strike. Marnie could be an elf, Lucy decided, as she unearthed a length of bright green material. Further delving revealed an ancient light brown onesie, which had belonged to Marnie and could possibly be fashioned into a reindeer outfit for Sam. Lucy transported her finds to the box room where her sewing machine was set up.

By the time she set off to pick up the children from school, she had managed to knock up a basic elf's tunic *and* cut reindeer antlers from sturdy cardboard, which she had covered in felt and stitched to the onesie hood. Pretty impressive, she decided, considering it had all been thrown together at the last minute.

'How come dads never have to involve themselves with this kind of stuff?' Lucy asked with a wry smile at the school gate. There was murmured agreement amongst the mums that men seemed adept at swerving the issue.

'You mean, Ivan wasn't beavering away on the sewing machine last night?' teased Carys, to whom Lucy had grown especially close.

'He wasn't here,' Lucy reminded her. 'He'll just get to admire their costumes later – when it's all over.'

'Is this his last day at work?' Carys asked, and Lucy nodded. 'Bet you can't wait.'

'I'm counting the hours,' she admitted. 'It's been a pretty long haul without him ...' Lucy caught herself, and felt guilty for even admitting this. There were still five days to go before Christmas and Ivan had agreed to forget about work until after New Year. It meant almost three weeks together as a family. Carys was a single mum to Amber and Noah – Marnie and Sam's new best friends – and rarely got a break. Even when her husband had still been in the picture he had barely lifted a finger, apparently. It had been Glen who had nagged for a dog until Carys had crumbled. Of course, they all loved Bramble, their bouncy springer spaniel. But Glen had never once walked him – Bramble immediately became 'Carys's dog' – and all Glen had done was moan about the hair, the mud brought in on paws, the vet's bills.

More shockingly still, he had never once set foot in the children's school, figuring that 'We don't need two of us to go to a parents' meeting.' Thank God Ivan wasn't like that. When he was around, he wanted to *do* stuff with his children. Holed up in the shed, he and the kids had already constructed a rather wonky-looking wooden farm, an easel for Marnie and almost completed a birdhouse. The kids loved nothing more than time spent with their dad over spirit levels and pots of paint. Lucy hardly ever ventured into the shed. It was their domain, and she was happy to leave it that way.

The school doors opened and the children surged out. 'See you at the party,' Carys said as her own kids ran towards her. 'Hope they like their costumes!'

'They'll have no choice,' Lucy said with a laugh as Marnie and Sam appeared in the playground. As they set off for home, she described the outfits she'd made. Naturally, the children insisted on pulling them on the minute they were back.

'I love it, Mum!' Marnie enthused, posing for a picture as Lucy whipped out her phone.

'Can we go to the party now?' Sam demanded, clattering about the kitchen in the onesie.

'It doesn't start till half-six,' Lucy said. 'You need dinner first.'

'But I'm not hungry,' he retorted, 'and there'll be cakes and sweets at the party. Noah said—'

'You can't *just* have sweets and cakes, love.'

'Why not?'

'Cause all your teeth'll fall out,' Marnie retorted, slipping into the wise older sister role she so enjoyed.

'Don't care,' Sam huffed.

'Yeah, who needs teeth?' Lucy agreed with a smile. 'We could just *gum* our food—'

'Will Daddy see our costumes?' Sam wanted to know as she put on a pan of pasta.

'Yes, of course,' Lucy replied, 'when you come home. If he's back in time, he might even come out and join us on the parade.'

'Hurrah!' Sam yelled, antlers bobbing.

She looked at her children, aware that it wasn't just the party and parade they were delighted about. It was the fact that Ivan would soon be home. Never mind Lucy's costume-making skills. As far as Marnie and Sam were concerned, nothing could compete with seeing Daddy on a Friday night.

Pesto pasta was shovelled down hastily, and Lucy managed to unearth some queasily coloured lime green face paint to complete Marnie's incarnation as an elf. By the time they set off, the village was already milling with children dressed up and making their way to the party. There were Santas and snow queens and a plum pudding on legs, all hurrying along in the fine rain. As they entered the village hall, Lucy looked around in amazement at a sparkling scene of Christmas trees, model polar bears and stacks of presents. The entire building had been turned into a grotto. Festive music filled the hall as a strident woman wearing tartan trousers and a Christmas jumper – whom Lucy recognised as the school's deputy head – called the excitable children to heel. Clearly in charge of the games, she soon had some kind of dance competition on the go as Lucy found Carys at the trestle table.

'This is pretty impressive,' she said, helping herself to a mince pie. 'Is there always this much food?'

Carys nodded. The table was crammed with plates of cakes and cookies and dishes of foil-wrapped sweets. 'Some people around here have the whole home baking thing wrapped up. It's kind of competitive. No one says so, of course, but there's something shameful about being the one who brought the unwanted ginger cake and brandy snaps.'

Lucy laughed. 'I didn't bring anything. I didn't realise—'

'It'll have been noted,' Carys teased her, 'but you'll be excused, seeing as you're new.'

'Am I still new?'

Carys smiled. 'We're still new and we've been here for five years. What I mean is, the real villagers are the ones who were born here and you and me will never be one of those.'

Lucy knew what she meant. Ivan had made a similar point: that they would always be 'newcomers', and that villages tended to have their own traditions and rituals that were run by a select few. Well, fine, Lucy thought now, glimpsing Marnie and Sam grabbing cupcakes with their new friends in tow. Occasions like this brought the whole village together. As the party ended, and the children headed outside, she felt lucky to be a part of things here.

Despite the steady rain, the parade was a riotous affair as the children had been handed bells to ring as they made their way through the village. Carys had rushed home to fetch Bramble, who now led the procession in his festive red and white fur-trimmed coat. People waved from their windows above the shops. Several shops had opened late and set out tables laden with yet more mince pies and cups of mulled wine ready for the taking. Lucy took a paper cup of wine with thanks and looked around for Ivan. No sign of him yet – but she hadn't really expected him to come out and join them. He'd be waiting at home, she decided, as she sipped the warm, spicy drink. Hopefully he'd have brought back a decent bottle of red for them to share by the fireside once the children were in bed.

It was almost nine when they finally said their goodbyes and started to make their way home. Spirits were still high, despite the rain. Marnie and Sam clutched the bags of sweets they'd been given at the party as they ran ahead down the wet garden path.

Marnie was first to reach their front door. She rattled the handle impatiently. 'Mum, it's locked!'

'Is it?' Lucy frowned, quickening her pace. 'That's funny. I thought Dad'd be home by now.'

'Where is he?' Sam asked, pulling on a wilted antler.

'He's probably just delayed,' she replied as she let them into the house. 'Maybe something happened at work. Don't worry. He'll be back soon.'

'I want Dad,' Sam huffed, ill-tempered now as he stomped into the hallway. He unzipped the onesie, stepped out of it and kicked it aside on the floor.

'So do I,' muttered Marnie, pushing her damp honey-blond hair from her face. 'Why's he late?'

'I don't know, love. I'll try his phone.' The children plunged their hands into their bags of sweets as Lucy made the call. 'Not too many now, Sam,' she warned as her husband's voicemail message began: *Hey, it's Ivan. Sorry, can't take your call right now. Leave me a message and I'll get right back to you ...*

She glanced at Sam as he stuffed a handful of jelly snakes into his mouth. No point in trying to limit sweet consumption now, she decided. She wasn't up to a big debate on the matter, and it was a special occasion after all. Instead, she turned her attention to lighting the log fire in the living room in the hope that it would catch quickly, and cosy up the house. Surely Ivan wouldn't be too long now ... Pushing away a niggles of concern, she herded the children upstairs for their baths, with the promise of hot chocolate once they were tucked up in bed.

Normally, that would have done the trick. Sam adored his bedtime stories, and even at eight, Marnie still regarded them as a treat when she was in the mood for being read to.

'Mum, Marnie took some of my sweets,' Sam complained, swinging on his bedroom door handle.

'No, I didn't,' his sister retorted.

'Yeah, you did! You held my bag for me in the parade. You *stole* some.' He ran at her with a half-hearted kick.

'Ow!' Marnie screamed, unnecessarily.

'Sam, stop that,' Lucy exclaimed.

'I didn't do anything.' His dark eyes radiated annoyance.

'C'mon now, you two. You've just had far too many sweets tonight. *This* is why I try to get you to eat celery.'

'I hate celery!' Sam announced. Lucy's feeble attempt at a joke had clearly misfired.

'Stop shouting, Sam. I'm not going to try and force celery on you now.'

'I hate it more than anything!'

'Yes, we get the message,' Lucy muttered, rubbing at her temples, sensing the start of a headache.

Marnie sighed heavily. '*When* can we get a dog, Mummy?'

Lucy looked at her, figuring that the green face paint would take some shifting in the bath. 'We've been through this hundreds of times before, love—'

'You said we could have one when we moved to the country,' she added with a frown.

'I didn't say definitely. I said we'd consider it.'

'We're in the country now,' Sam announced, perking up instantly. 'Can we get one please, Mummy?'

'Life's a bit busy just now,' Lucy said firmly, although in truth, she would have welcomed a dog into their family. It was Ivan who kept insisting that they had enough on their plate.

'Bath's ready, Sam,' she said now, to swerve them off the subject. 'You're first in tonight.'

'He's always first,' Marnie bleated in the doorway. 'I don't want to go in cold water.'

'It won't be cold. We'll put more hot in—'

'He pees in it,' she moaned, and Lucy wondered yet again where Ivan had got to. She was more than ready for him to take over tonight. The children were much more compliant for him – willing, helpful, eager to please, the way they were with Rikke too; basically anyone who wasn't their mother. Mums always seemed to get the raw deal.

'I *don't* pee in the bath,' Sam muttered.

'You pooped in it once,' Marnie crowed from the landing, which was true – but he'd only been two, and there was no need to bring it up now.

'I didn't,' he growled.

'You did! You pooped!'

'Josh isn't allowed to say poo,' Sam added, referring to a boy in his class.

'What does he say, then?' Lucy asked as she folded towels in the bathroom.

'Chocolate sausage.'

'You're kidding,' she spluttered, at which Marnie guffawed in the doorway. 'Is that true?'

‘Yeah.’ Lucy handed him a towel as he clambered out of the bath. ‘He has to say, “I need a chocolate sausage, Mummy.” And he has to put up his hand, even at home!’

The children were giggling now, fuelled by copious quantities of refined sugar, and God knows what kinds of chemical compounds went into those neon-bright jelly snakes. While Lucy was grateful they weren’t bickering, she was now clearly visualising the glass of red she would be enjoying soon, whether or not Ivan brought a special bottle home with him. They always had a few in stock, and Friday nights certainly warranted a treat.

Knowing they would be eating later than normal – due to the party and parade – Lucy had planned a quick meal of fresh tuna steaks, seared with olives and peppers. Their weekend evenings were lovely, and she treasured them. They rarely went out, preferring instead to cosy up at home – sometimes sitting out in the garden on warm summer’s nights, and in the colder months cuddling up on the sofa by the fire. She checked the time again – it was nine-forty – and willed Ivan to hurry home.

Sam had sloped off to choose a story now, and Marnie was splashing idly in the bath. ‘Can you try and wash off that face paint please?’ Lucy said.

‘It *is* off,’ Marnie said, which was clearly untrue. There was some gentle wiping with a flannel – ‘Ow!’ she screamed, as if she were being attacked with nettles – and finally, bath time was over and the finishing post was in sight.

Lucy usually tried to make their bedtime stories exciting, with her children snuggled on either side of her, tucked up in Sam’s bed. However, she might as well have been reading the boiler instruction booklet for all the feeling she was putting into it.

It was her husband Lucy was thinking about on this cold, wet December night. She yearned for him to hurry home and be with her, and to know that everything was all right.

Chapter Seven

James Halsall was relieved to see the Christmas lights of Burley Bridge glinting in the distance. It had rained steadily the whole drive from Liverpool, and now he just wanted to pull up at his dad's and be reassured that everything was okay.

He had pleasant memories of long-ago summers in the village, spent stealing redcurrants from Rosemary Cottage's garden. However, a lot of James's childhood hadn't been fun, and he'd been relieved to leave the place for good the minute he'd found a means of escape. These days, he only came to visit his father who still lived here in a clapped-out farmhouse a mile out of the village. Despite the fact that they were hardly close, James had still seen him regularly – dutifully – over the years.

Until a few months ago there had been a sort of system in place. The unspoken agreement was that he and his older brother, Rod, would alternate visits, passing their father back and forth like a parcel that could potentially blow up in their faces at any moment. Then Rod had moved in with their dad – temporarily, he was keen to stress – and the last time James had visited, everything had seemed fine.

At least, fine-*ish*. Although hardly domesticated, Rod seemed to have things reasonably under control. But the phone call that morning had alerted James to the fact that everything was far from fine after all.

'Sorry to bother you,' Reena had said, 'but I'm really worried about your dad, James. Is Rod meant to be around at the moment?'

'Um, yes, as far as I know. Why, what's happened?' James had asked, immediately alarmed. Reena lived in the village but had a holiday cottage close to his father's place that she rented out. She had never called him before, and he didn't know her too well. James hadn't even known she had his number.

'I went up to the cottage this morning to say goodbye to my guests,' Reena explained, 'and they told me there'd been a bit of an altercation last night. Your dad had been at the door, trying to barge his way in—'

'Into your holiday house?' James exclaimed. 'But why? What did he want?'

'He ... he was convinced it was his place,' she said apologetically. 'That he lived there, and they shouldn't have been there at all. He was quite, um, insistent. He used some terrible language ...'

'I'm so sorry ...' James was aware of a sinking sensation in his chest.

'But finally,' she continued, 'they persuaded him that he'd made a mistake, and he wandered away. I wish they'd let me know last night. They just assumed it was some local eccentric, but by their description – the big beard, the gold earring – it was pretty obvious it was Kenny.'

'Did he seem drunk, do you know?'

'No – just confused, I think.'

'Okay, thanks, Reena,' James said, rubbing at his cropped dark hair. 'I really appreciate you calling.'

'I had to look you up online. You took some finding!'

'Yes, well, I'm glad you have my number now. Please don't worry. I'll try and get hold of Rod and find out what's going on.'

Perhaps it was just as well his father resembled a latter-day pirate, he'd thought bleakly as he called his brother's mobile; it made him distinctive. But Rod's number just rang out. Time after time, James tried it, but no joy.

At forty-four, Rod was three years older than James, and the golden boy as far as their father was concerned. When they were younger, James had wondered if it had simply been an age thing; Rod had done everything first, and had the gift of the gab and a knack of charming everyone. Whilst not wildly academic, he had talked his way into working in 'investments' – James had never quite

grasped what this entailed – and made a mint, apparently, which had clearly impressed their father. Weirdly, for someone who had possessed the same pair of slippers since about 1973, Kenny Halsall took a keen interest in money.

Meanwhile, James had been more of a practical type, good at fixing and making things. At seventeen he had gained a joinery apprenticeship in Liverpool through a family friend, and fled.

It wasn't that his childhood had been terrible. Whilst Kenny had hardly been the nurturing type, even as a child James had managed to grasp that raising two boys on his own wasn't easy, especially with his various one-man businesses to attend to. As it was, James and Rod had enjoyed virtually limitless freedom from the ages of six and nine. Even when their mother had still been there, she hadn't been one to establish too many rules.

It was rare to be so unsupervised, even back then in the 1980s. Not for James and Rod the tedious rituals of mealtimes and homework supervision. As Kenny was usually out working, dinner for the boys could mean tinned tomato soup and packets of Monster Munch or whatever else they could plunder from the under-stocked kitchen. James had vivid memories of Rod making some kind of 'pudding' out of jelly, doused liberally in contraband brandy and set alight. He'd been in awe of his big brother back then.

Although Kenny had various stints of working as a lorry driver, a gardener and a labourer, he always came back to being a woodsman. A couple of acres of forest adjoined their house, and Kenny was often to be found out there, sawing and chopping, then delivering logs all over Burley Bridge and beyond.

Throughout late November and December, Kenny would have virtually decamped permanently to the woods, as he had a seasonal business selling Christmas trees. James and Rod would be enlisted to help with the felling and the dragging of the trees into a makeshift hut, where the young boys were allowed – thrillingly – to use the netting machine. It felt good, the three of them working together when James and his father had little to do with each other the rest of the year. They were a team then. It's why James had a certain fondness for Christmas. It certainly wasn't down to any mince pie-making endeavours on Kenny's part.

Perhaps his father's attachment to wood – and to forests – had influenced James's own life choices, as once he'd left Burley Bridge and finished his apprenticeship, he had carved out a living as a furniture maker. From building tables and shelves, he graduated towards fitting out boats when his first commission had proven a success. James enjoyed being on the water and seeing a project through from his first visit, when he would start with basic dimensions and often go on to design the whole interior. It was creative, satisfying work. His love life was less successful; he and his ex-wife, Michaela, had split up two years ago, and now they shared the care of their nine-year-old son Spike. But on the whole, life was manageable.

It'll all be a panic over nothing, he tried to convince himself as he turned off the motorway towards Burley Bridge that night.

After Reena's call, James had tried to carry on fitting out the narrowboat he had been working on for the past week. But he'd been unable to concentrate. What the hell was going on with Rod? They weren't close, and never had been really. As for Rod's marriage to Phoebe, a terrifically capable sort, and a national champion swimmer in her youth, all James knew was it had ended messily with Rod somehow acquiring a black eye and his beloved racing bike being smashed up. After that, Rod had moved back in with their father and rarely seemed to see his three children.

Despite still being 'highly successful' in various businesses – which he never seemed keen to divulge any details about – his brother now seemed to have no income at all, as far as James could gather. Still, as Kenny had started to show signs of confusion, it had been a godsend really, to have someone living with him until a long-term solution could be figured out. 'Dad's just a bit ditsy,' was how Rod preferred to describe their father's current state. 'I'm sure it's nothing to worry about.'

As he neared Burley Bridge, James wondered if he had over-reacted wildly by rushing over on this bleak, wet night five days before Christmas. However, there had been no answer on his father's landline either, and there was no one local he felt he could ask to look in on his dad. James's childhood friends had scattered all over the country, and he knew Kenny wouldn't have taken kindly to anyone popping round anyway, checking on his welfare. It had seemed as if there had been no other option than to throw some clothes in a bag, apologise to his client for the delay to the job, and set off. Three and a half hours it took normally, but tonight James had managed it in under three.

As he approached the village, James tried to calm himself in readiness for whatever situation he might walk into tonight. He drove slowly through the quiet streets, noticing how sparkly and festive everything looked. It hadn't been quite as pretty as this when he was a kid. Now all the shop windows glowed with nativity scenes, and lights were strung from the Victorian lamp posts. James thought of Spike, who was currently at his mum's place. He was spending Christmas with her this year so James had planned to visit his father, though not quite this early. The thought of being apart from Spike was never easy at this time of year.

The pitted road rose sharply from the village, cutting between steeply sloping fields, then curving through the woodland that Kenny still owned, although it was only minimally tended these days. The shed his father had built, in which to store Christmas trees ready for purchase, was rotting badly and should probably come down at some point. It was almost impossible to believe how successful they had been, back in the day, when numerous garden centres offered not only a variety of firs but vast selections of Christmas gifts too. The fact was, quite simply, that Kenny Halsall's Christmas trees had been the best around.

As his father's house came into view, standing alone on a muddied stretch of lane, James noted that the living room light was on, which reassured him a little. Illogical, perhaps, but it suggested that Kenny was home, at least. He had always been pretty diligent about switching off all of the lights before he went out. While his heart was still beating he would never waste a single watt of electricity.

James climbed out of his car. He knocked briefly on the front door and pushed it open. 'Dad?' he called out.

'Who's that?' his father boomed from the living room.

'It's me – James.'

'What? *Who* is it?'

'It's me, Dad. Hi!' He stepped into the room where his father was sitting in an armchair with a newspaper spread out over his lap, gawping up at him.

'What are *you* doing here?'

I'm your son, not the bailiff, James wanted to say, but instead he feigned a bright smile and perched on the sofa. 'Just thought I'd come a bit earlier than planned for Christmas,' he said, wondering how best to broach things. He wasn't afraid of his father – not anymore – but he was keen to avoid conflict as far as possible so he could locate his brother and have some kind of discussion of what to do next.

'Why didn't you tell me?' Kenny asked.

'Dad, I've tried to call but you never pick up the landline. And I'm not sure what happened to that mobile Rod bought you.'

'Oh, I lost that,' he muttered.

'Right – okay. So, how are things?' James asked, taking care to maintain a cheery tone.

'Um, all right, I suppose,' Kenny replied.

'So, where's Rod at the moment? Any idea?'

'I'm ... not sure.' His gruffness had subsided a little.

'Erm, Dad,' James ventured, 'Reena called me today. You know, Reena who owns the yellow house?'

'Uh-huh?'

‘Well ... she sounded a bit worried. She said there’d been some kind of business at the cottage?’ Kenny frowned. ‘Oh, she’s a nuisance, that woman. Always sticking her bloody oar in.’

‘She’s always seemed perfectly pleasant to me,’ James said quickly. ‘She was just concerned that you’d been over to the house, and her guests said you’d, um ...’

‘Is that why you’re here? To check up on me?’

‘Of course not,’ James replied, his jaw tightening.

‘What would I be doing at her place?’

‘I’m just telling you what Reena said.’

‘Well, I don’t know what she’s on about,’ Kenny muttered.

How to proceed from here? They fell into silence, and Kenny scratched at his beard and flicked his gaze down to the newspaper. While he looked reasonably presentable in a navy cable-knit sweater and brown corduroys, the facial hair was always a worry. On previous occasions James had noted all manner of food residue clinging to it. Beards were like dogs, he often thought: if you were going to have one, you had to be responsible for it.

As it was, Kenny owned two obese cats, Horace and Winston, who were currently snoozing on the matted hearthrug. James cast his gaze around the low-ceilinged living room with the faded rose-patterned wallpaper and the dimly flickering open fire. The room reminded him of one of those pubs you’d only ever find yourself in by accident; the kind where there’d be no food on offer apart from some out-of-date pork scratchings, and the barman would look at you with mild disdain as you walked in, as if you had no business being there.

James had grown up in this house, and while his mum had still been there, until he was six, it had seemed forever sunny, filled with her giddy laughter as she tossed her mane of glossy dark hair and cooked up pots of her funny hippie food. When James thought of Evelyn – which he tried not to too often – he remembered glinting green eyes and the sweater dresses she made for herself on her bewildering knitting machine, and often wore with wellies (a look he imagined not many women could have pulled off). It was so long ago, he was sometimes surprised he could remember her at all. But although the images were disjointed – like a handful of random snapshots grabbed from a box – they were still vivid to him. Sometimes, he could almost smell her musky perfume that she kept on the dressing table.

As if he had forgotten that James was there, Kenny snatched the remote control from next to his slippers and turned on the TV. Rather than sitting there, trying to communicate, James went through to make two mugs of tea in the kitchen. A quick scan of the fridge revealed that, although the milk was drinkable – just – the only other items in it were two open tins, one partly filled with baked beans and another containing a residue of rice pudding. James had long suspected that Kenny pretty much existed on tins and frozen ready meals. It took him less than one second to weigh up whether to remind his father that opened cans weren’t supposed to be refrigerated, before deciding against it. Kenny didn’t respond well to household hints.

Hoping his dad wouldn’t notice, James binned the tins and made a mental note to do a grocery shop first thing in the morning. At least there was a reasonably fresh loaf on the counter.

Back in the living room, he handed his father a mug of tea. ‘So, how long are you thinking of staying?’ Kenny asked as he took it without thanks.

‘Just thought I’d play it by ear, Dad,’ James replied vaguely. ‘So, um, when did you last see Rod?’ Kenny shrugged. ‘Yesterday, I think it was. He went out.’

‘Where to? Did he say?’

‘To a meeting or something. That’s what he said.’

James frowned. At least they were now communicating civilly, for which he was grateful. But what kind of meeting went on for a whole night and late into the next evening? ‘D’you know *who* he was meeting?’ James ventured as he sank into the doughy sofa.

‘Probably someone important,’ Kenny said, adopting a lofty tone now and turning back to the TV, as if that had settled the matter. They drifted into one of those evenings when Kenny would channel-hop randomly, whilst James sat there in bleakness, wondering how long he would have to stay here and feeling tremendously guilty for having such thoughts.

By ten-thirty p.m., his father was showing no signs of wanting to turn off the TV, not when there were life-enhancing documentaries about people-trafficking and migrant workers kept in inhumane conditions in a leaking caravan. To escape the grimness, James went through to the kitchen again, with the intention of washing up the dirty crockery that lay in the chipped Belfast sink.

A mouse scuttled across the kitchen floor. Clearly, the cats were pretty ineffective at keeping them at bay. James checked his phone and tried Rod yet again; he still didn’t pick up. It occurred to him that he could call Phoebe, but since Rod’s ex had reputedly taken a hammer to his beloved childhood train set, battering the hell out of not only the locomotives but all the tiny buildings and delicate figurines as well, he thought it best not to trouble her with any mention of his brother’s name.

James looked around at the scuffed cupboards and reassured himself that it wasn’t too bad in here. Perhaps it would have been fine to pop over just for Christmas Day itself.

On numerous occasions he had made an impassioned plea for his father to sell up and move to Liverpool, so he’d be closer – not that James wanted him close especially, but it would have been easier then to keep an eye on him. He had even found the perfect flat, in a new block with a lovely courtyard garden, which his father could have easily afforded – but no, he wasn’t having that. ‘I’m not moving for nobody,’ he’d thundered.

Perhaps, James mused, his brother would come back tomorrow from wherever he’d been, and everything would be fine? Feeling more positive now, he washed up and looked around for a tea towel that didn’t look as if a badger had given birth on it. He checked various drawers and cupboards, and finally the tall closet in the hallway where miscellaneous items had always been stored: bicycle parts and broken umbrellas – all those bits and bobs that, apparently, it was against the law to throw out. Only now, such items were no longer visible as every one of the six shelves was entirely crammed with pre-packed supermarket sandwiches.

James stared and felt his stomach shifting. Through their clear plastic packaging it was obvious that many of them had been festering there for some time. His worry about open tins being stored in the fridge seemed suddenly rather pathetic. Clearly, Kenny wasn’t ‘just a bit ditsy’ these days. Of course, James would have to dispose of the stash – but how? Would he tell his father that they had simply ‘gone’, or that he’d been burgled?

‘What are you doing?’ Kenny called out from the living room.

‘Just looking for a tea towel,’ James replied brightly.

‘They’re not in there.’ Now Kenny had appeared in the hallway and was glaring at James, his small gold hoop earring glinting in the dim overhead light.

‘No – I can see that.’ James moved away from the open cupboard as if he’d been caught prying amongst his father’s personal possessions. ‘Um, Dad,’ he ventured, ‘I think you might’ve forgotten about these sandwiches. Look – there are way more than you need here ...’ *In fact, you actually need none of these, as they are in various stages of decay and would no doubt poison you.*

Kenny frowned. ‘They’re for the winter. You know I can get cut off up here.’

‘Yes, but there’s an awful lot, and I think some of them might have been hanging about for a quite a while, like, um, maybe longer than they should have, ideally ...’ James sensed himself growing clammy and wished any kind of confrontation with his dad didn’t reduce him to this nervous, sweating state. He was forty-one years old, for goodness’ sake, not four.

‘I don’t believe in all that use-by date stuff,’ Kenny retorted.

‘But these are sandwiches, Dad. They’re bread—’

‘I know what sandwiches are made of,’ he snapped.

‘And they’re all egg and cress,’ James added as Horace, the larger of the cats – Christ, what did his father feed them? – wandered into the hallway and mewed fretfully around Kenny’s ankles. The animal’s close proximity seemed to placate his father, and he scooped up the cat, holding him close to his chest. With a sharp kick, Kenny shut the cupboard door on the sandwiches and stalked back into the living room, muttering, ‘They’re not all egg and cress, are they, Horace? Some are *cheese*.’

Chapter Eight

Five bedtime stories, Lucy had read. At a quarter to eleven, she rubbed at her scratchy eyes and shut the last book firmly. ‘Okay, that’s it for tonight,’ she said wearily, kissing Sam and tucking him in, then coaxing Marnie through to her own room.

‘I wanted Dad to see my costume,’ she announced, radiating disappointment. Marnie wasn’t a moany girl usually; she was cheerful and sunny, if a little bossy at times, brimming with energy and ideas.

‘You can show him tomorrow,’ Lucy reasoned.

‘But it’s wet. It got rained on.’

‘Yes, sweetheart – but if I put it on the radiator it’ll be dry for the morning.’

‘I’m not tired yet, Mummy.’

‘Love, it’s so late. You really do need some sleep ...’

Where’s Dad?’ Sam yelled from his own room.

‘He’ll be on his way,’ Lucy called back, trying to keep her voice light despite underlying worry that had been niggling her since they’d come home. At least the bedtime routine had been useful in keeping her occupied: bath, pyjamas, drink and biscuit, teeth, stories ... the whole rigmarole she had been through zillions of times. But now there was nothing left to do but worry – and wait.

She had called Ivan yet again, but his phone still kept going to voicemail. Surely he hadn’t decided to go out with colleagues in Manchester tonight, without letting her know? No – that wasn’t Ivan at all. He loved his working life, the thrill of being in the midst of a huge project again, but he was also a caring husband and father, keeping in touch with daily calls while he was away. He’d never failed to show up as expected at the end of the week – and this was no ordinary Friday night either. It was the start of his holiday. Lucy was aware of a sharp pang of missing him as she tucked in Marnie and kissed her before padding quietly out to the landing and going to check on Sam.

‘I don’t want to go to sleep,’ Sam muttered from his bed.

‘Darling, it’s really late now. *I’m* going to bed soon—’

‘I feel sick, Mummy.’

‘Oh, Sam. It’ll be all those sweets. I did say don’t eat so many.’ She hurried towards him just in time to see him sit up abruptly and throw up all down his front. ‘Sam, honey!’ Lucy exclaimed. He started crying and scrambled out of bed. Splattered PJs were stripped off, and a naked Sam was ushered through to the bathroom where he was showered, then wrapped up in his favourite dressing gown – the cream one with teddy bear ears, which was far too babyish for him really, but which he needed to wear now, very much.

Back in his bedroom, Lucy bent to cuddle him as he slumped on his bean bag, then stripped his bed and made it up with fresh linen. ‘Marnie, please go back to bed,’ she muttered as, naturally, his sister had come through to observe the spectacle.

‘This room stinks.’

‘It’ll fade away in a minute,’ Lucy fibbed, aware of tiredness pressing down on her now. She was no longer conjuring up images of red wine, but of her own bed, freshly made up as was her custom on Friday nights, with candles ready to be lit on her bedside table. Not that there would be anything terribly thrilling going on in bed tonight, she thought irritably – not after Ivan had worried her so much.

Finally, the children were back in bed. There was a noise at the front door, and she hurried through from the kitchen towards it. But it wasn’t Ivan; in fact there was no one there. The wind had got up, and the door was rattling, that was all. Lucy freed her long hair from its ponytail as she strode back to the living room and checked her phone in case she had missed a call.

When she heard a knock, ten minutes later, she wondered if she might ignore it, as who could it be at this time of night? It was near midnight, and no one local would dream of calling. Something clenched inside her as she made her way through to the hallway to see who it was.

Lucy's breath caught in her throat as she opened the door. Two police officers – one man, one woman – were standing there, and that was the moment when Lucy's whole life changed.

Ivan never saw Marnie's elf costume, or Sam in his reindeer onesie. He never saw his wife or children again because, on his drive home from Manchester on that dark, wet night, Ivan had been killed in a head-on collision twelve miles from Burley Bridge. He hadn't been on the motorway but a winding B-road, which was unusual. It wasn't his normal route at all. The other car's driver survived, with serious spinal injuries; Ivan had seemingly skidded on the wet surface and ended up on the wrong side of the road.

It was no one's fault. That was the official conclusion that came out months after the event. It was the fact that water had pooled there on the road surface. But Lucy couldn't stop thinking that perhaps she was to blame for being so insistent about making a new life here in Burley Bridge.

You and me will always be a team, Ivan had said.

As the days and weeks somehow continued without him, Lucy would find herself playing his words over and over as if some terrible loop tape had wedged itself in her brain. And although she knew it was crazy, she couldn't help feeling furious that he had left her this way.

He hadn't kept his promise at all.

Chapter Nine

James had been at his dad's for two weeks now, trying to knock the place into shape and take care of the basics. Christmas had come and gone with Kenny showing little enthusiasm for the roast dinner James had made for the two of them, even though he had cooked his father's preferred beef. 'I don't want some dried-up old turkey,' Kenny had instructed. 'I've never seen the point of that bird.'

He hadn't seen the point of having a Christmas tree, either, but James had insisted on cutting one down from the woods and bringing it into the house. He had even unearthed the box of fragile hand-painted glass baubles his mum had collected, and which he remembered from childhood. Of course, his dad's Christmas tree business was long gone, but the sight of the small, squat pine strewn with tinsel at least cheered the place up. Crucially, James had also managed to dispose of the stash of supermarket sandwiches by flinging them into bin liners and sneaking outside with them while Kenny was watching a young man being apprehended by airport border security on TV.

The man's stash of advent calendars in his suitcase had turned out not to be filled with chocolates, but cocaine. 'How festive,' James had remarked as he came back inside, but his dad had merely cheered on the diligent customs officials (this was rich, considering Kenny had been fond of a gnarly-looking joint well into middle age). Fortunately, Kenny didn't seem to notice that his sandwiches had gone. Perhaps he'd forgotten he'd even bought them.

Meanwhile, James had kept trying to get hold of Rod. He had gone AWOL on several occasions before, during particularly rocky patches in his marriage – otherwise James might have considered reporting him missing to the police. Finally, after a fortnight of his phone just ringing out, Rod finally answered his brother's call. 'D'you realise I've been trying to get hold of you since before Christmas?' James exclaimed. 'Christ – I thought you were dead!'

'Sorry,' Rod said. 'Things have been ... a bit complicated.'

'You didn't even call Dad on Christmas Day. Even *he* was worried, and you know he's never particularly concerned about us—'

'Yeah. I've just been off-grid for a while.'

'Off-grid?' James spluttered. 'What d'you mean? Where *are* you?'

Rod paused, and James heard a female voice in the background. 'I'm, uh ... in Switzerland right now.'

'What?'

'I'm skiing,' Rod added curtly, as if it should be obvious. 'Well, not right now – right now I'm talking to you. But I came out for a bit of a break.'

James rubbed at his short dark hair, his breath forming white puffs as he exhaled. In order to conduct the conversation in private, he was pacing about on the scrubby ground behind his father's house. 'Fine,' he said, keeping his voice steady, 'but couldn't you have let me know? I mean, what about Dad?'

'Hmm, well, maybe you could have a go at trying to live with him for a while?' Rod remarked with more than a trace of bitterness.

James leaned against the dry stone wall, aware of his father's two cats eyeing him keenly from the living room window. 'I know Dad's not easy,' he conceded.

'You can say that again.'

'And of course I don't expect you to stay here indefinitely—'

'Well, thanks for that,' his brother snapped. 'That's hugely generous of you.'

James cleared his throat. 'Okay, I realise you're pissed off. I wish you'd said something, though. Who are you with, anyway?'

'Just a friend ...'

So, how long d'you plan to be "off-grid"? We really need to get together and talk.'

‘No idea,’ Rod murmured.

‘Right, okay.’ James paused. ‘But are we talking a few more days, or weeks, or what?’

‘It’s kind of open-ended at the moment,’ Rod replied, infuriatingly.

On that note, the woman – whoever she was – called out for Rod, and they finished the call. Keen to eke out a few more moments alone, James pulled himself up and sat on the wall, gazing out over the valley. It was one of those sharp winter days, blue skied with clear sunshine. Everything seemed incredibly sharp-focused. It was beautiful here, James reflected. Naturally, he’d never noticed quite how stunning it was when he’d been growing up; to him, the hills that swooped so gracefully were just *there*. He’d taken it for granted that there were rivers to wade in, his dad’s very own woodland in which to build dens, and those long, virtually endless days to fill with adventure.

Now James was a dad, and, naturally, he’d never want to be too far away from Spike in Liverpool. But he still had a fondness for this part of Yorkshire – which was just as well, as his father was adamant that he planned to stay here for the rest of his days.

Something had to be done, James decided later as he cleared up after dinner. Although he was no expert, he was aware that if Kenny was showing early signs of dementia, then things were only likely to get worse. James could stay here in the short term, making sure there was food in the house, that the place was reasonably orderly and Kenny didn’t harangue Reena’s houseguests again – but he couldn’t just relocate here permanently. He needed to be close to Spike, and then there was his work, specifically the narrowboat he had started to fit out, and whose owner was being incredibly patient. But he would have to get back to work at some point fairly soon. He had people waiting and a living to earn.

Once again, James looked up sheltered accommodation in the Liverpool area and tried to coax his father into coming around to the idea by showing him the alluring pictures on his laptop. But Kenny wasn’t having any of it. It was clear now that getting some kind of help – via his dad’s GP, the social work department, or even a private carer if it came to that – was paramount.

There was one thing for it, James decided. He would have to persuade his dad to go to the surgery for something fairly uncontroversial, in the hope that he could sit in on the appointment and somehow communicate telepathically with the GP (*‘Do you think my father might be showing the early stages of dementia?’*) while Kenny sat there, oblivious.

‘Yes, I think you might be onto something there,’ the doctor would transmit back. *‘But don’t worry, I shall arrange all the help he could possibly need.’*

A few days later, James broached the subject. ‘Dad,’ he started over breakfast, ‘I wondered if it might be a good idea for you to, um, have a few tests sometime?’

‘What kind of tests?’ Kenny asked with a mouthful of toast.

‘Just a few medical things. Blood pressure, cholesterol, the stuff everyone gets checked out from time to time ...’

‘Are you saying I’m falling to bits now?’ Kenny asked, frowning.

‘Of course not.’ James was struggling to keep his tone level.

‘Why not shove me over a cliff and be done with it?’

Tempting, James thought – but something must have sunk in as, later that day, his father grudgingly agreed to grace the surgery with his presence. The way things were right now, that seemed like something of a victory.

They went together the following week, finding themselves sitting side by side in the starkly decorated waiting room of the medical centre in Heathfield. There was no surgery in Burley Bridge, and for that, James was thankful; he wouldn’t have relished bumping into anyone his father knew.

Kenny’s name was called, and James sprang up from his chair as his father stood up. ‘What are you doing?’ Kenny asked.

‘I thought I’d come in with you, if that’s all right?’

‘What d’you want to do that for?’ His dark eyes narrowed. Across the waiting room, an elderly woman and a thin, pallid teenage boy – the only other people waiting – were clearly pretending not to be paying rapt attention.

‘I just thought it might be helpful,’ James said.

‘Kenny Halsall?’ the GP repeated from the doorway. He was wearing tiny round spectacles and had the wiry build of a jockey.

James looked at him, trying to transmit the message: *This is my father; he had fifty-seven egg sandwiches stuffed in his cupboard; could you please diagnose him with something and help?*

Kenny approached the doctor, and both men disappeared around the corner. James inhaled deeply, picked up a ragged copy of *Improve Your Coarse Fishing* magazine that he had no intention of reading, then dumped it back on the table and strode over to the receptionist. ‘Erm, my dad’s just gone through to the doctor’s,’ he started.

She nodded curtly as if he really shouldn’t be bothering her. ‘Yes?’

‘I was sort of hoping to go in with him,’ he continued, keeping his voice low, ‘but he wasn’t too keen on that. The thing is, I’d really like to talk to the doctor about my dad, about the concerns I have, about his memory and behaviour and things ...’

‘Are you registered with this practice?’ the woman asked. Her mouth was pursed, her lipstick worn off apart from a peachy line around the edges. ‘Because, if you are,’ she added, ‘the best thing to do is make an appointment with your own GP and discuss it with them.’

She turned back to her screen and seemed to be focusing on it intently. ‘I used to be registered,’ James offered, ‘so maybe I’m still on the system ...’ Even as he said it, he knew there was no point in her even checking; there hadn’t been a ‘system’ then, at least no computer as far as he could recall. He was from a pre-systems era when things were written in books and there were drawers of files on everybody. It was the same building, but the last time he was here was probably when he’d chicken pox in something like 1989.

‘Date of birth?’ the woman asked. As James answered, his father reappeared, looking unusually buoyant and pleased with himself. ‘Nothing wrong with me,’ he announced.

‘Oh, that’s good, Dad.’ James beamed and turned back to the woman.

‘What’s your name?’ she barked at him.

‘James Halsall—’

She shook her head. ‘You’re not on the system.’

‘Right. Okay. Well, could I possibly *get* on it?’

She eyed him with suspicion. ‘You’ll need to take these forms and bring them back.’

‘Great.’ He exhaled, aware of his father gazing at him.

‘What’re you doing?’ Kenny asked.

‘Nothing, Dad.’ He looked at the woman. ‘There’s no chance I could have a *quick* word with the doctor just now, just for a second—’

She widened her eyes and shook her head, as if he had expressed a desire to set up a burger stall right here in the reception. ‘No, sorry. He’s very busy today.’ He took the forms from her and stuffed them into his back pocket, aware of his father eyeing him curiously as they left the building and climbed into James’s car.

‘So, did the doctor give you any tests?’ James asked.

‘Oh yeah, he put that thing on my arm, the blood pressure thing,’ his father replied. James sensed him still studying him intently as he pulled out of the car park. ‘You think I’m going mad, don’t you?’ Kenny added.

‘Of course not, Dad,’ James said.

‘Why did you want to talk to my doctor, then?’

‘Just, you know, to see how things are.’

His dad regarded him steadily as they waited at a red light. 'You think I don't know you threw all that food away.'

'What food?'

'My sandwiches!'

James let out a gasp of exasperation. 'Oh, Dad. I was just trying to clear out the—'

'Well, don't *try* anything,' Kenny said firmly. 'You know I hate waste.'

As they fell into a rather surly silence on the drive back to Burley Bridge, James wondered what to do next. The thought of suggesting to his father that he might be suffering from anything more than perpetual ill humour filled him with horror. But then, James was an adult man of forty-one, and sometimes, being an adult required one to face up to bloody awful situations and figure out a way of dealing with them.

No matter how maddening he was, and how fervently he railed against the idea of any kind of 'help', James was determined that he would not let his father down.

Chapter Ten

Sometimes it was hard for Lucy to remember what she was like before the accident. But, somehow, the weeks had gone on and she was still here, alive. Christmas had happened, apparently, although naturally it had been a write-off. Lucy's parents had arrived at Rosemary Cottage, and Lucy had a vague recollection of a few presents and a cobbled-together dinner, and her mother cooking and cooking as the days went on – mostly pies, as it happened, as if copious quantities of pastry might save them all. But Lucy was still a mother herself, which required her to be stoic and strong – all those motherly things – so she did her best and tried not to fall to pieces in front of Marnie and Sam.

You were supposed to hold it together, just because you'd given birth. You had to comfort your children when they were inconsolable and stand there, clutching their hands because you'd decided it was best for them to go to Daddy's cremation, to say goodbye properly with the other people who loved him. As if you were capable of making any kind of rational decision. Should they have gone? Was it too traumatising for them, even though Lucy had somehow got it together to find a young, female celebrant who had followed her request to make the ceremony a celebration of Ivan's life?

It was beautiful – everyone had said so. Well, nearly everyone. Lucy became convinced that Ivan's mother, Penny, had glanced at her with fury – as if she thought she were somehow to blame for the accident. Perhaps she was being hypersensitive, and of course, his parents were devastated too. Ivan had been their only child, and although they were hardly demonstrative, she knew they adored him. Back in their North London semi, his childhood bedroom had remained just as he'd left it when he'd departed for university at eighteen years old.

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