

Caroline Roberts



Christmas
at Rachel's
**PUDDING
PANTRY**

* 'A real treat!' Debbie Johnson *

Caroline Roberts

Christmas at Rachel's Pudding Pantry

«HarperCollins»

Roberts C.

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Doors open at Rachel's Pudding Pantry again for Christmas! Cosy up with the new novel in the Pudding Pantry series, full of love, laughter, kisses under the mistletoe, and plenty of delicious pudding! The first snow is falling over Primrose Farm, the mince pies are warming, and Rachel can't wait to share a kiss under the mistletoe with her gorgeous new flame, Tom. If only it was all comfort and joy... The arrival of Tom's ex brings an unwelcome chill to the farm. And despite Master Baker Mum Jill's valiant efforts, the new pudding pantry business is feeling the pinch. With a spoonful of festive spirit, a cupful of goodwill with friends, and her messy, wonderful family by her side, can Rachel make this a Christmas to remember? Why readers love cosying up with Caroline Roberts' gorgeous novels: 'Family, friendships, farming and fabulous food. The Pudding Pantry is perfect!' Sunday Times bestseller Heidi Swain 'Cosy and uplifting – a real treat!' Debbie Johnson 'A delightful, life affirming story' Ali McNamara 'Such a wonderful book, heart-wrenching and uplifting and joyful! Cressida McLaughlin 'A top-rated romance which I devoured quicker than a slice of Victoria Sponge. Beautifully written, warm, funny, cosy, romantic and sweeter than a tray full of cookie dough' Bookaholic Confessions 'A warm and cosy read for a cold winter's day... will have you longing to be served in the tearoom' Rachel's Random Reads

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CHRISTMAS AT RACHEL'S PUDDING PANTRY
Caroline Roberts



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Dedication

For Mum and Dad

Epigraph

*Winter is the time for comfort,
For good food and warmth,
For the touch of a friendly hand
And for a talk beside the fire:
It is the time for home.*

Edith Sitwell

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The First Bake of Christmas

Memories and Mince Pies – Dad's All-Time Festive Favourite

As a child, Rachel could walk into the farmhouse kitchen at almost any point during November and December, and if Dad was there on a break from his farm work, he was sure to have a mug of strong tea and a mince pie to hand.

Rachel smiled as she read Granny Ruth's neat handwriting on the page that had long ago been slipped into the 'Baking Bible' book ...

Buttery Mince Pies:

8oz/225g Butter

12oz/350g Plain flour

3.5oz/100g Golden caster sugar

Pinch of salt

10oz/280g Good quality mincemeat

Splash of sherry

1 small egg

Icing sugar to dust

Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas/fan 180°C.

To make the pastry, rub 8oz cold, diced butter into 12oz plain flour, then mix in 3½ oz golden caster sugar and a pinch of salt.

Combine the pastry into two balls, warming and moulding with your hands – don't add any liquid – and knead them briefly. The dough will be fairly firm, like shortbread dough.

Roll out and cut 12 rounds with an 8.5cm (3½ inch) cutter and 12 rounds with a 6.5cm (2½ inch) cutter. Using a 16-hole non-stick tartlet tin, use the larger rounds to line each hole.

Spoon a heaped teaspoon of the mincemeat, mixed with a splash of sherry, into the pies.

Top the pies with their lids, pressing the edges gently together to seal.

Beat 1 small egg and brush over the tops of the pies. Bake for 20 mins until golden. Leave to cool in the tin for 5 mins, then remove to a wire rack.

Dust with icing sugar before serving.

These will keep for 3 to 4 days in an airtight container.

'These little pies herald the start of Christmas in our household,' Granny had written below the recipe. 'Robert loves to lift up the pastry lid and add a blob of thick cream on top of the warm mincemeat. It melts in so you have to eat it quickly. Delicious! I've even seen him eat five in one go. It's a good job he's a growing lad!'

Oh yes, Granny's mince pies were the best; that crumbly buttery first bite and then the lingering taste of festive-spiced mincemeat. It made you feel like Christmas was on its way ...

1

Rachel was teetering up a ladder with a strand of fairy lights in her hand.

'Just a touch more to the left, love, that'll even up the loops.' Jill, her mother, was poised at the base of the ladder, keeping it steady and giving directions.

'Okay ...'

'Careful, now.'

'I'm all right.' Rachel leaned from her perch to give them a tweak. She was used to doing far riskier things out on the farm, not that she would have enlightened her mum about *that*.

Rachel was fixing the twinkly white lights to the guttering of the old barn, ready to give the Pudding Pantry – their new business venture – a festive facelift and a touch of winter magic. From her vantage point, Rachel could see down across the yard and into the farmhouse kitchen window, glimpsing the large pine table and chairs that had been there for as long as she could remember. Memories of Christmases past suddenly came flooding back.

Sitting there on her father's knee, aged about six, the scrumptious turkey dinner now eaten, festive crackers snapped, corny jokes read out and Robert, still wearing his bright red paper hat – now a little skewwhiff – bouncing her up and down boisterously, while singing 'Jingle Bells' loudly. Granny Ruth and Grandad Ken, as well as Grandma Isabel, were sitting there at the table, looking on merrily, with Mum busy at the Aga preparing pudding, scolding him with a smile on her face, telling him that all that bouncing about would make Rachel feel sick after her big meal.

Jill was busy steaming her Christmas pudding ready for dessert, and Rachel, who as a little girl wasn't that keen on the rich fruity pud, was looking forward to a slice of the treat made especially for her and, ready on the side, a Chocolate Yule Log, with thick cocoa frosting covering a rolled chocolate sponge. Rachel loved the little robin that was brought out annually to pop on the top as decoration along with some sugar paste holly leaves.

Smiles and laughter, festive fun and full tummies. Gifts had been given, nothing too lavish but always much wanted – hmm, that might have been the year when she'd got her Jessie doll; the feisty, smart cowgirl from the Toy Story films. That was the only doll she'd ever asked for, preferring model tractors and farm toys in the main, and soon after, the real things. Jessie was still there upstairs in her room somewhere.

Oh yes, Christmas at the farmhouse, she remembered the warmth of the Aga, and the warmth of their hearts: the family together.

'Rachel ... are you all right up there?' Mum's voice broke her reverie.

'Ah ... yes, fine.'

Life had changed so very much, and Christmas had felt empty these past two years, as though they were just going through the motions. Her father's death had cast a dark shadow over them all, but it was time to recapture some of that festive magic for her daughter Maisy's sake – in fact, for all their sakes.

Life had shifted in ways they could never have imagined, and just this summer they had transformed the derelict stone barn into a gorgeous little tearoom where puddings were very much their 'thing'. Stepping inside the Pudding Pantry, you'd find a counter filled with a mouthwatering selection of Sticky Toffee, Chocolate, Ginger and steamed Syrup Puddings, crumbles galore, lusciously moist Carrot Cake, an Autumn Berry Pavlova, gluten-free banana cake and a selection of home-baked scones, not to mention crisp, buttery shortbreads and frosted cupcakes. Everything was made here at the farm. The Aga in the farmhouse kitchen was always on the go, with delightful baking aromas drifting over the farmyard – guaranteed to make your tummy rumble. They'd had a good start over the summer season, but business in the Pantry had started to slow worryingly during October.

It was time to get themselves ready for the build-up to Christmas, and to try and boost trade. The fairy lights were a festive nod in the right direction.

Once again up the ladder, at the far end of the barn now, with the lights all in place, Rachel looked across the hawthorn-hedged fields where their sheep and small herd of cattle grazed happily. The leaves on the trees in the nearby copse were drifting down on the breeze, leaving jumbled heaps of golds and copper beneath them, ready for Maisy to tumble through in her wellingtons with a giggle. Further into the distance, the high moorland hills of the Cheviots rose majestically, bracken bronzed with short grassy banks, rising to purple peaks. This view, this place, held so much of her heart.

Job complete, Rachel climbed back down the ladder. She and Jill looked up, admiring their handiwork, the lights strung in loops along the old stone wall, just under the eaves.

'Well, that's added a bit of festive cheer, hasn't it? It looks really pretty,' commented her mum.

'Yes, just a soft twinkle. I love it. It'll look great as the dusk comes in.'

'It'll not be that long either, the way the evenings are pulling in these days.'

Rachel glanced at her watch. It was nearly three o'clock. 'Blimey, is that the time already? I need to go and fetch Maisy from the school bus.'

Within minutes, Rachel had jogged down the farm track and was standing at the farm entrance, waiting for the minibus to arrive.

She wasn't the only one who was in a rush; Eve came dashing down the lane from her cottage, her dark hair tumbling from its ponytail, in a half-jog. 'Blimey, I got so caught up in making wooden stars and hearts for Christmas decorations, I hadn't realised the time. I was trying to come up with festive phrases to paint on them ...' She was panting between words, 'All I've managed so far is "Ho Ho Ho!" and "Merry Christmas" – very original, not.'

Eve was Rachel's closest friend and craftsperson extraordinaire. She made the most gorgeous soft-toy felt animals and children's knits, as well as turning her hand to woodwork, greetings cards, and much more. Crafting was her passion, and in addition to her online Etsy store, she kept a selection of gifts for sale at the Pantry, which had proven popular with their customers. With Christmas on the horizon, it was all go for her with the festive crafting.

'Well, that'll be keeping you busy. Hmm, the wooden hearts and stars sound pretty and they'd be ideal for the Pantry. Do you think you can make enough so we can have some to sell, too? I want to start making the tearooms really festive now. I've just been putting up the outside lights, and some Christmas crafts in there would look great, don't you think? It is October, after all.'

'Ooh yes, I can just picture the barn, with that gorgeous old dresser filled with Christmas gifts. I'm planning on making some pretty tealight holders and hand painting glass baubles as well. Oh, and, I'll soon be making my Christmas knits and toys. So yes, of course, I'll make some extra ones for your display.'

'Gosh, Eve, I don't know how you fit it all in. Superwoman! But that sounds brilliant.'

With that, there came the low rumbling, more like grumbling, sound of an engine pulling up the hill, announcing the imminent arrival of the school minibus. And minutes later, after it pulled to a halt, out spilled Maisy closely followed by Amelia, Eve's daughter and Maisy's best friend. Maisy's attire was typically half-mast, one sock up, one down, with her school coat trailing from her arm.

'Hi, Mummy.' She ran to Rachel, planting an affectionate kiss on her cheek and rounding off with a hug.

'Hey, petal. Good day?'

'Yes, we've been painting leaves and doing prints with them, *and* we've been learning all about squirrels and we're helping to save the red ones.'

'Oh, that sounds good. Did you know that where we live, here in Northumberland, is one of the few counties in England that still has red squirrels?'

'Yes, Mrs Brown told us all about that – and they have *four* fingers and five toes, and their babies are called kittens.'

'Well, I didn't know that,' said Eve.

'And they have no teeth and no hair when they get borned,' added Amelia.

'Hah, they'll look funny little things,' said Maisy.

'Hmm, yes I bet, all bald. Well, you two *have* learnt a lot today,' said Rachel. 'That's great.' It was nice that her daughter was happy and had settled in well in her first year at the local school. 'Time for home then, Maisy?'

'Yep. Has Grandma been baking?' asked the little girl hopefully.

'Oh yes, there's bound to be a little something waiting at home for you.' The smells wafting from the farmhouse kitchen had been delicious as she'd left, so there had definitely been plenty of goodies baking away in that Aga.

Rachel had been covering in the Pantry this afternoon before taking a break to fix up the fairy lights; worryingly, the only custom had been an elderly lady and a couple who'd been out hiking in the hills.

'Yippee!'

They said their goodbyes to Eve and Amelia and set off up the farm track, walking past the field where their small herd of black, Aberdeen Angus cattle were out to pasture, making the most of the late-growing grass. Macduff, the sturdy bull, gave them a stare and one of his ladies moored. The autumn had been mild so far, but who knew when that might change. Winter could be hard in the Cheviot Hills, as Rachel well knew. Soon enough they'd have to come into the shelter of the cattle shed.

'Can we go and see Petie, Mummy?'

Petie was Maisy's favourite pet lamb from this spring. He'd joined the other sheep out in the fields several months ago, but was still the friendliest of the bunch by far. Maisy (plus Rachel, she had to confess) had a soft spot for him, so much so that when the other male lambs went off to market recently, they couldn't bear to send him. So, he was still here on the farm, even though he was nearly fully grown, full of bounce and cheeky affection. Rachel swore he thought he was a dog at times, chasing about after the quad and their Land Rover, and he loved playing with Moss, the farm's border collie.

'Yes, I don't see why not. We could go and have a check of the sheep before it gets dark.' There had been that bother with the ewes stuck in the fence yesterday, so it'd be good to check the others were all all right and that the fence repair she'd made had stayed sound. 'We could jump in the Land Rover and go before tea. It'll be muddy, mind, so you'd better get changed out of your school uniform and get your wellies on.'

'Yay!'

They popped in to say hello to Grandma Jill, who was now keeping an eye on the Pudding Pantry which was disappointingly devoid of customers. With it being nearly four o'clock, it seemed unlikely there'd be any more. Jill was still baking like a trojan, but the customers weren't there in the numbers they had been over the summer. Rachel might have to have a word. She didn't want to dim her mum's baking enthusiasm, but they really couldn't afford to waste all those ingredients.

Jill was already starting to pack up. 'I'll be across to the farmhouse soon, love. I'll just get tidied here and pop back and check on the crumbles I have in the Aga. Then, we can have a quick cup of tea before I start organising supper.'

No wonder it had smelt so good – Mum's crumbles were divine.

'That sounds great. But first, Maisy and I are going out to quickly check on the sheep.'

'We're going to see Petie, Grandma.'

'Ah, how nice. Well, give him a pat from me.'

'I will.'

'We won't be long.'

'That's fine. See you later, then. Oh, here, take a couple of these oat flapjacks with you. You might fancy a little treat whilst you're out and about.'

Rachel rolled her eyes – Jill was unstoppable when it came to feeding them up with her delicious wares – but couldn't resist a smile as her mum popped the syrupy flapjacks into a paper bag.

'Thank you, Grandma.' Maisy broke into a gappy grin, having recently lost her two lower front teeth.

'Cheers, Mum.'

'See you soon, my loves.'

Maisy bounded into the passenger side of their slightly battered Land Rover as Rachel took up the driver's seat. Moss, the collie dog, was in the back, more than happy to join them, and little Maisy was soon chattering on about school and squirrels once more. After a bumpy ride over the fields that made Maisy giggle, they were soon up at the Top Field, where Petie and the hogs, as the lambs selected for breeding were called, were grazing. Rachel had taken a couple of cobnuts from the lambing shed store to give their fleecy friend a treat. There was no need to call out to him, as he was already galloping across the field to meet the vehicle as they slowed to a halt on the rise.

'Hello, Petie boy!' Maisy was out of the Land Rover in a dash, rubbing his nose and ears affectionately, and feeding him the cobnuts.

The little (well, rather stocky now) lamb was so familiar and friendly. He nibbled happily at the treats. It was lovely to see the bond he had with Maisy, but it had meant a difficult decision a couple of months ago, when Rachel should have been pragmatic and sent him to market along with the others. She just hadn't had the heart to do it, nor to have to explain his fate to Maisy. They'd had enough sorrow in their lives. On this rare occasion, Rachel had let her heart rule her head, even considering the farm's very limited finances.

On a quick drive around, they checked the other sheep, who thankfully seemed to be fine and were keeping away from the fences and out of trouble – for the moment, anyway.

'Can we have Grandma's flapjack now?' a rather hungry Maisy asked.

'Good idea.'

Rachel slowed the Land Rover and pulled up near a rocky outcrop at the top of the hill. They got out and walked up the last of the rise, with Moss at their heels. As they reached the top, Rachel popped Maisy onto a large, flat mossy stone that made the perfect seat, and clambered up beside her. They sat perched together with the sheepdog at their feet.

'Here you go, petal.' Rachel took out the golden-baked flapjacks.

Rachel's first bite was a toffee-crunchy delight that melted in the mouth – scrumptious.

'Yummy!' Maisy announced her approval. 'Ooh, look Mummy, the farm's gone all fuzzy.' Maisy was pointing down to their valley where, sure enough, you could only just make out the dim golden lights of their farmhouse. And there, further in the distance, was the soft glow from the buildings of Tom's farm next door. It matched a soft tender glow within Rachel too.

Since they'd left the house, an autumn mist had swirled in across the lower fields and the stream that ran through the valley, and the view looked as though it was in soft focus. That gentle glowing scene of Primrose Farm made Rachel's heart lift. It had suddenly got chillier so the two of them sat side by side, keeping closely snuggled for warmth, eating their flapjacks. Moss was keeping alert beneath them, on the lookout for the odd tasty crumb that might drop his way.

Dew was beginning to form on the rocks and the grass as dusk crept upon them, the sky deepening to a purply-grey. Rachel was looking forward to heading back down to a warming supper, eaten sitting around the old pine table in the farmhouse kitchen. Mum would be there now, having closed up the Pantry for the night. Rachel could picture the golden-topped crumble puddings sitting there tantalisingly, cooling on the side.

She tightened her arm around her daughter as they gazed down at their farm. And though Rachel's heart had been shredded these past couple of years – with losing her dad so devastatingly

– this legacy of Primrose Farm, though not always easy, warmed her soul. Keeping it going for the three of them, and especially for Maisy and her future, *this* gave her purpose. *This* was home.

2

The next morning, there was the telltale 'fut-fut' of Frank's old Fiat coming up the farm track. Frank was in his mid-seventies, and a real gent. He lived in the nearby small town of Kirkton and he had become one of their Pudding Pantry regulars. Most days he'd appear for his morning coffee by ten thirty and he was always delighted to sample something sweet with it. Jill liked to try out her latest puddings and 'specials' on him, and he was generally most happy to oblige. He enjoyed the cake, chat and company, having lost his beloved wife a few years ago.

'Morning, Frank,' Jill said, smiling as he walked into the Pantry.

'Morning,' Rachel added from behind the counter, where she was stringing a further strand of fairy lights to hang along the till front.

'Hello there, ladies.' Frank doffed his flat cap. 'Now then, what are you pair up to? Christmas lights time is it, already?'

'It is indeed,' Rachel answered. 'We want to make the most of the festive spirit and give the place a bit of sparkle.'

'There's plenty of sparkle here already, what with you two lovely ladies here to greet me.' Frank gave a cheeky grin.

Jill's smile widened. 'Come on in. Now, what can I get you with your coffee today, Frank? Oh, hang on, I've been baking something new this morning, a Gingerbread Pudding. Thought it'd take the chill off these damp autumn days. Fancy giving it a try?'

'Oh, that'll go down a treat, I'm sure.'

'Any cream or vanilla custard with that?'

'Custard sounds delightful.'

'Excellent choice!'

Frank was soon settled at one of the white-painted wooden tables, happily tucking in to his sponge and custard, with the local newspaper set out beside him.

'What's the verdict, Frank?' Jill asked a minute or two later, a trace of anxiety in her tone.

'Well ... I'd say it's a ten out of ten. Got all those lovely warming festive flavours through it, somehow. In fact, it brings to mind a pudding my mam used to make, back in the day. Though I have to admit,' Frank pulled a wry smile, 'her puddings always turned out a bit on the heavy side, bless her soul. Still, it went down a treat when I was a young lad.'

'Hah, I bet it did.'

'Yes, she used to blame it on the post-war rations, but me and Da knew better. She didn't have the best of teachers, mind. Now then ...' Frank was off in full storytelling mode. '*Her* mam, Nanna Wallace, lived across on the Scottish side of the border, so she did. Now, she used to make something called a "Cloutie Dumpling". "Clarty Dumpling" me and Da secretly called it. It was a dark-coloured pudding with raisins, currants, and all sorts in. I seem to remember having it around Old Year's Night. It was meant to be a special treat. Well, that thing was like a cannon ball. Don't suppose it was meant to turn out that way. Hah yes, I even spooned some off one day and shaped it into balls for my catapult. That stuff made great pellets.'

Jill couldn't help but laugh.

'Well, we'd better not make anything like that here, Frank!' Rachel pitched in.

'Aye, lass, we'd have to have lashings of custard with it, to manage to get it down. My, it was hard work that pudding.'

'Well, I'm lucky I had the best teacher in my mum, Isabel,' Jill said. 'And, well, I'd be lost without the fabulous Baking Bible.'

The 'Baking Bible' was the family recipe book that had been handed down over generations. It took pride of place on the shelf in their farmhouse kitchen and provided inspiration, recipes and tips, even now.

'That's where the Gingerbread pudding came from, it was one of my old Aunt Elsie's recipes.'

'Well, you're onto a winner there, lass. My taste buds are waltzing.'

'Thank you, Frank.'

Jill then focussed on getting organised for the day ahead, and began making a batch of fresh cherry and sultana scones in the little oven they had there in the Pantry. Rachel stood wrapping up sets of knives and forks in red gingham checked napkins. They were both humming away to Radio Two, and when one of Jill's favourite oldies, Abba's 'Dancing Queen', came on, they ended up doing a bit of bum-wiggling in time behind the counter, with a dusting of flour spinning around them from Jill's wooden spoon which had suddenly morphed into a microphone, much to Frank's delight.

Rachel then headed out to the customer area to make sure the tables were all set out prettily. She'd bought a spray of red carnations from the flower shop in the village, which she split into posies and placed in the mini milk bottles they had on each table. The red was a blast of colour against the cream stone walls and rustic white furniture. She stood tapping her feet in time to the music – her cheerful wiggle belying the worry curdling in her stomach as she looked out on a near-empty Pantry.

And so began another day at Primrose Farm.

At eleven o'clock sharp, the sound of Tom's quad pulling up came from outside. Rachel couldn't help but grin as he strolled in, his dark eyes smiling warmly beneath chestnut-brown hair that was cut fairly short but still managed to be unruly. He was dressed in his farmyard-stained jeans, green wellies and a weathered Barbour coat.

'Hah, we'll be able to set the clock by you soon. I've already started the bacon off on the griddle for you,' said Rachel.

'You know me too well. And yes, a bacon roll and coffee it is. Though, I may surprise you one day and order something else. I might live dangerously and have a cheese scone or something.' He grinned mischievously.

Rachel had to admit that eleven o'clock was fast becoming one of her favourite times of the day, seeing Tom stroll in, hungry and handsome in a windswept kind of way after having worked several hours on his neighbouring farm. And, the amazing thing was, that after years of them growing up as children close by – albeit with a bit of an age gap – they were now actually an *item*. A rather wonderful, sexy and caring kind of item. Rachel could still hardly believe it.

She passed him a mug of steaming coffee – strong with a touch of milk and no sugar, just how he liked it – across the counter.

'Cheers, Rachel. Morning, Frank,' Tom greeted the old chap who was still sitting there, browsing his newspaper, with a top-up of coffee to hand.

'Hello, Tom. Busy morning?'

'Yep, I've just put the tups out in the fields with the ewes. And, with this wet weather we've had lately, the fields are getting damned muddy. I've had to pull out a couple of stuck sheep.'

'All fun and games, I'm sure,' replied Frank.

'Tell me about it,' added Rachel. 'There were two stuck in the mud here yesterday morning. They'd got themselves in a right state.' She dished out the crispy bacon onto soft white bread.

Tom took the sandwich and was soon tucking in. 'Delicious, Rach. As always. I'll settle up. Can't stay long, unfortunately. Gotta get back as there's a delivery of bulk feed due in at any time.' He handed his plate and mug back across the counter. 'That was great, thanks.'

'Ah, okay.' Well, that was short and sweet. Rachel couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed.

'Can I see you, later on?' Tom's smile was hopeful and his dark eyes had a rather sexy look about them. Or maybe that was just Rachel's interpretation.

'Yes, I'll try. When Mum's back over in a while, I'll check if she has any plans for this evening herself. She's just nipped over to the farmhouse.' It was unlikely that Jill would be out, but she didn't want to take her mum's babysitting duties for granted. This new relationship with Tom was still very much finding its feet and Rachel felt she was juggling her responsibilities as a mother with it. Tom seemed pretty laid back about the situation, knowing the set up at Primrose Farm, but sometimes what they both *really* wanted was a couple of hours just for the two of them.

Tom leaned across to give Rachel a kiss on the cheek. Rachel caught a whiff of eau-de-sheep and aftershave, which surprisingly wasn't too off-putting.

'Try hard,' he whispered sensually at her ear.

She smiled broadly, feeling a flip in her belly. 'I will ... but I do need to check.'

She watched him leave, amazed at how this new relationship had even happened, how they'd bridged that gap from neighbours and friends to becoming lovers. Seeing Tom always made her heart soar, and they were getting on so well. But they were at that crucial early stage – where it felt exciting, but also a little bit scary ...

The Second Bake of Christmas

Jill's Toffee Apple Crumble – 1997 and Present Day

In autumn, Rachel used to pick the apples with Dad from the big old gnarled tree in their garden. He'd lift her up in his strong arms so she could reach the fruit, and they'd fill a wicker basket with the large Bramley cooking apples. Mum would keep some to use straight away for her crumbles and apple sauce, the rest they'd lay out on the big kitchen table, the very same table they had now, and wrap them in old newspaper ready to store in boxes under the bottom shelf in the walk-in larder.

Toffee Apple Crumble:

450g/1lb cooking apples

75g/3oz soft brown sugar

60g butter

½tsp cinnamon

For the crumble:

175g/6oz flour

75g/3oz butter, cubed

25g/1oz caster sugar and 75g/1oz demerara sugar

Dice the apples into large chunks and place in a pan with the butter, sugar and cinnamon. Cook gently until the apples just start to soften but are still mostly whole. Remove apples from the pan with slotted spoon and place into baking dish. Pop the pan back on the heat and reduce liquid by half, stirring with a wooden spoon, and pour over the apples.

To make the crumble, sift flour into a bowl, rub the butter into flour until it resembles breadcrumbs. Stir in sugar keeping a heaped tablespoon of demerara to sprinkle over the top. Sprinkle crumble thickly and evenly over the fruit and press down lightly with the palm of your hand to smooth.

Bake at 180°C Mark 4 for 30–40 minutes until the fruit is bubbling and the crumble golden.

Serve with cream, custard or ice cream!

3

'So, do you think you can make it over?' Tom's toffee-warm voice came through on Rachel's mobile, as she parked the Land Rover outside the farmhouse, making her stomach flutter.

'Hey, Tom, hi. Well, we're still to have supper here. But yes, once Maisy's all tucked up in bed ... then I'll scoot across.' In fact, Rachel had yet to check with Jill, but her mum hadn't mentioned that she was going out.

'Great, can't wait,' Tom said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. 'So, how's the rest of your day been?' he continued.

'Yeah, not bad. The usual on the farm, and steady away at the Pantry ... Look, we're just heading in for supper and I've got Maisy with me, so we'll catch up later, yeah?' She was aware of Maisy listening in beside her and Jill was no doubt waiting inside with their meal prepared, having slaved away at the Aga again.

'Ah, okay.'

She could hear the tinge of disappointment in his voice. She wished they could speak for longer too, but it wasn't easy balancing Maisy and her mum's needs with her own.

While remaining cool on the outside, Rachel's heart was already giving little leaps at the thought of spending the evening with Tom – and whatever that might bring. Their budding relationship was still so new and still so exciting that it felt very fragile, like butterfly wings. And, even though they were getting on really, really well, Rachel was afraid they might yet break at any point. She pushed that thought aside – just because things had gone wrong with her relationships in the past, it didn't automatically mean they would now. Not all men were unreliable and selfish like Jake, her crazy first love and Maisy's absent and irresponsible dad, she told herself.

This, with Tom? This was built on friendship, on a steady base of caring and support. They'd known each other for years as neighbours, as farmers – since they were kids, in fact. But it had all changed very recently into something so much more than friends, and that, at times, was hard to comprehend.

'Great, so I'll see you later, then,' Tom added, taking her out of her reverie.

'Yes, that'll be lovely. I'll send a text when I'm about to leave, but it'll probably be around seven thirty, once Maisy's settled.'

'No problem. See you then.'

'Bye, Tom.'

'Bye.'

Maisy was already out of the vehicle and pulling off her wellington boots at the farmhouse porch.

'Was that Tom, Mummy?' she asked, with a serious face.

'Yes, petal, I'm going across to see him tonight.' She may as well be honest.

'Oh.' Maisy paused for a second before adding, 'Can I come?' Maisy got on well with Tom and he seemed to have a soft spot for her too.

'Sorry, not tonight, sweetheart. It's a school night and you need your sleep. By the time we've had supper with Grandma, it'll be bath and bedtime for you.'

'Hah – not fair.' She crossed her arms indignantly.

'Look, we can pop across on the weekend and you can say "hello" to Tom then, if you like,' Rachel appeased.

'Yes!'

'Okay.'

It was sweet that they got on so well, but yet another reason for Rachel to feel anxious. If this new relationship didn't last between her and Tom, how would that be for Maisy? She couldn't risk

Maisy getting hurt, couldn't risk another man her daughter had grown fond of suddenly exiting her life. It was bad enough with Jake living hundreds of miles away and flitting in and out when it pleased him – mostly *out*. A small sigh escaped Rachel's lips. Why were relationships always complicated?

She opened the truck's back door and Moss leapt out, following them into the house, hopeful of a warm place by the Aga before having to go out to his kennel in the yard for the night. Rachel leaned down and gave his back a rub, his black and white coat soft and reassuring under her palm, before taking off her boots.

Nothing says home like the smell of baking and a gorgeous aroma drifted under the kitchen door. It smelt sugary-sweet, of apples and mmm, caramel.

'Oh Moss, you're gonna have to stay out here just now, fella.' The dog was banned from the kitchen during Pudding Pantry cooking hours. Everything had to be done by the book for health and hygiene reasons – they couldn't possibly risk getting in trouble with the environmental health agency, and being shut down. She gave the dog one last pat, then hung up her old Barbour jacket on a coat hook in the porch. 'Sorry, mate.'

Maisy was already charging about the kitchen, loudly announcing, 'Mummy's going out. To see Tom. What's for tea?'

Jill looked up. She was busy at the work surface, rubbing butter into flour in a mixing bowl. Next to her was a bag of demerara sugar, no doubt ready to add to the mix and then top her second batch of crumbles.

'If that's okay?' added Rachel politely. 'Sorry, I meant to ask earlier. It'll be later on, after I've settled Maisy to bed.'

'That's fine, love. Well, there's a cottage pie in the oven, and we'll try out one of these for dessert, shall we? There's one batch already made – Toffee Apple Crumbles.'

'I can't wait, it sounds delicious, Mum,' said Rachel with a smile.

'Yum,' grinned Maisy.

Yes, that sticky toffee apple smell filled the kitchen. It transported Rachel back to Bonfire Nights on the farm years ago, back when she was a little girl herself. Dad used to keep old firewood and debris stacked up through the year and then they'd have a huge bonfire out in the yard. There'd be hot dogs with golden fried onions and ketchup. And, earlier in the day, Mum would have dipped apples that were picked from their tree into hot toffee and then let them set on baking parchment. Rachel would have a friend or two over, and they'd watch Dad set off some low-noise fireworks with a 'woosh' of falling stars and colours, dramatic and sparkly as they lit the night sky but without the alarming bangs that would upset the farm animals. Then they'd eat the candied apples on sticks as they stood by the orange, crackling glow of the fire, with the sugary toffee sticking to their teeth and dripping messily onto fingers.

Memories were catching up with Rachel again. It happened all too often these days, the rawness of losing her dad still a haunting feeling within her. Even though it was over two years since it happened, there were still times when she thought of Dad and it suddenly became harder to breathe. There were just so many things here on the farm to remind her. She missed him so much.

They needed to look forwards as well as back, however. Maybe she and Jill could put on a small fireworks event this year, give Maisy a taste of that November magic? Perhaps they could invite Eve and her family along too, and Tom. They might not have much money to spare, but if the two families went halves on some pretty fireworks, then she and her mum could easily cook up some tasty food for everyone – that was their forte, after all.

'You all right, love?' Jill asked.

'Yes, just remembering those fireworks nights we had with Dad,' Rachel shared. 'That toffee apple smell brings it all back.'

'Ah yes ...' Jill smiled sadly, silently acknowledging their joint grief.

It felt as though the big man himself might just walk back in to the room and take up his old seat by the Aga, holding his 'John Deere' mug of tea.

Sometimes Dad seemed a world away, and sometimes he didn't seem that far away at all.

With Maisy tucked up in bed, and a tummy full of delicious toffee apple crumble, Rachel headed to her room to swap her old jumper for a pretty pink-and-grey checked blouse, teaming it with her best dark-blue jeans. She flicked on some mascara and a swipe of lip gloss – she wasn't the type to worry about wearing much makeup, and her cheeks were certainly rosy enough from working outdoors without needing blusher.

She skipped down the stairs, finding Jill in the kitchen. 'Right, I'm off now, Mum. I'll just be a couple of hours.'

'There's no hurry, love, I'm fine here. I've got an episode of *Emmerdale* to catch up on, and Jan brought me in some magazines the other day, so I can look over those. Might even glance through the old Baking Bible and get some ideas for some warming winter pud's to put on in the Pantry as specials in the coming months.'

'Mmm, that sounds good. That crumble was delicious tonight, by the way. Just the thing after being out in the cold.'

'Thanks, love. Hopefully they'll go down well in the Pantry this week. We need to pull a few more customers back in. It's been very quiet lately, hasn't it?'

Ah, Rachel thought, so Mum was more than aware of that too. 'Yes, I've noticed. It's getting a bit worrying,' Rachel admitted. 'I suppose with it being October and out of season ...' The lack of customers, tourists, and *income*, these past few weeks was a real concern for Rachel, but she hadn't wanted to worry her mum too much, or put a damper on her enthusiasm for the new business. The Pudding Pantry was meant to be *lifting* the farm's struggling finances, but there was no sign of that lately. They were just about keeping their heads above water for now, but they needed a boost over the Christmas period or they'd soon be sinking once more. The very last of their savings from the summer trade had gone into installing a log-burning stove to keep the barn cosy and the customers warm over the winter months. It had felt like a wise investment, but that was it; there were no backup funds at all. And it was still a long while until the basic payment monies would be coming in for the farm.

'Well, it's bound to be quieter just now, I suppose. The summer tourists have all gone. And, remember, we're still getting established.' Jill was trying to look on the bright side. Rachel loved that about her mum – ever the optimist.

'Yes, you're right,' Rachel agreed, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

'Well then, love, don't let me keep you. Get yourself away. Oh, and why don't you take one of those crumbles for Tom? I'm sure he'd like that.'

Rachel stifled a giggle. Ever since a raucous conversation in the pub one night between Rachel and her girlfriends – before she and Tom had become an item – there'd been a standing joke about Tom being 'comforting' like an apple crumble. Her mum was blissfully unaware.

'Will do!' she replied, a wide grin spreading across her face.

4

Rachel drove the two miles between their farms in the dark, along the familiar, twisting hawthorn-hedged country lanes. She felt a touch nervous, her tummy in a bit of a knot, as she neared his farm entrance gate. They didn't get an awful lot of time alone, and though she was desperate to see him, all this togetherness was still strangely new. She *so* didn't want to mess things up. She pulled to a halt, and soon found herself knocking at Tom's farmhouse door, a fizz of anticipation building as she let herself in.

'Hi, I'm here,' Rachel announced.

Tom turned to greet her. He was standing at the kitchen island unit, opening a bottle of red wine. His hair was still slightly damp, as though he'd just got out of the shower. Hmm, just the thought of that sent a little shiver through her.

The house was a large, traditional honeyed-stone building similar to their own. Inside however, the kitchen had been modernised with light-coloured wood units and chrome fittings – a modernisation Tom's ex-wife had insisted on, complaining that the original kitchen was archaic. It wasn't the only thing she'd complained about, so Rachel had heard, with the relationship falling apart after four years. Caitlin had moved back to Newcastle, leaving Tom with a wrecked heart and a large bank loan to buy her out with, so he could keep the family farm intact.

'Hey.' He gave her a broad smile, that reached right through to his deep brown eyes.

'Hi.' Rachel handed him the pudding gift from her mother. 'Crumble,' she said with a suggestive grin.

'Oh, perfect. Can't wait to tuck in ...' His smile widened cheekily.

Mabel, Tom's Jack Russell Terrier, then dashed to greet Rachel, leaving the warmth of her rug by the stove. She was soon skipping around her visitor's feet, with her tail wagging merrily.

'Hi Mabel, how are you?' Rachel leaned to pat the little dog's smooth white-and-brown patched head.

As she stood back up, Tom took a step forward, taking Rachel into his arms. 'I've missed you.' His lips met hers with a kiss that was tender and oh so promising. The knot in her stomach began to unravel.

'Hah, it's only been a matter of hours.' She made light of it, but she had been thinking about him too. A snatched 'hello' at the Pantry was nothing like spending an evening together. She had a feeling Tom would have liked to meet up more, but life was busy enough and Rachel hadn't wanted to crowd him or appear needy in these early days of their changing relationship. She was still getting used to it herself.

'I know. But still ...' Tom added, his eyes intense. 'Glass of red?'

'Yes, please.'

They took their wine glasses through to the lounge, where a log fire was roaring away in the stone hearth. It was welcoming and cosy there, with a well-worn plum-coloured sofa set next to a low wooden coffee table. They were soon settled there together, chatting about their respective days. This was just what she needed after being up since six thirty out on the farm, hauling big circular hay bales about, preparing their store of winter supplies in the shed ready for the cattle and sheep, then on her feet all morning and afternoon at the Pudding Pantry. Tonight was a chance to chill out in some rather gorgeous company. She began to feel herself unwind.

Tom was sitting so very close ... Then the urge to kiss him again hit her. She placed her glass down purposefully and leaned towards him. He didn't need any encouragement. His lips were warm and welcoming, their tongues soon entwined. It was becoming familiar, the way his kiss felt, so tender and passionate. Soon, Rachel's whole body was on high alert, every nerve ending tingling.

Still on the sofa, with their upper bodies pressed so very close, Rachel pushed him down so that he lay back across the cushions. Tom was a tall guy, and as he tried to position himself so she could move across him, his lower legs and feet hung awkwardly over the sofa arm. Rachel looked at his gangly arrangement and giggled.

'Shall we move this fireside?' he suggested with a cheeky, and rather sexy, arch of his eyebrow.

'I think that sounds like a very good idea. We might well end up in A & E otherwise.' Rachel laughed.

They shifted to the rug and lay down by the glowing heat of a crackling log fire. Tom, who was now propped on one elbow, gently pushed a strand of her dark wavy hair away from her face and gazed at her intensely.

'You're beautiful.'

'Oh ...' Rachel never quite knew how to take a compliment, but she managed a smile.

They kissed again, with warm, wine-tasting lips, and Rachel lay him down, teasing off his shirt, button by button, guiding her fingertips underneath the cotton of his top, and tracing the taut muscles of his chest. She gave a little grin. 'You're not so bad yourself, Tom Watson.'

She loved the maleness of him, his strength, those toned muscles. As a working farmer, he was fit and healthy and she had to admit he looked damned good for his thirty-three years. And, it wasn't all about the exterior, either; Tom's personality was kind and caring too, and in contrast to all that strength, he still had the capacity to be gentle. He'd been a great support to all of them since her father's death. In fact, Rachel mused, as she stroked his chest, trailing her fingertips down over his stomach where the muscles quivered involuntary, the whole of him was a very special combination, and making love with this wonderful man was a joy. She couldn't wait to experience that all over again.

Tom shifted to sit up, his top now off and discarded across the floor, revealing a very attractive chest above his jeans. He began to slowly remove Rachel's clothing, kissing her bared skin as he went. Down to her underwear now, he traced his hand along the curve of her waist, her hip, her thigh as she lay on her side. Soon they were both naked in the firelight glow.

The emotions within Rachel were powerful ... yearning, loving, learning ...

As they made love, she lost herself to him. And though she hadn't voiced those words 'I love you' lately, she felt it within every bone in her body.

As they lay naked in the afterglow, Tom propped himself up on one elbow beside her.

'Are you warm enough?' he asked.

'Yes, the fire's lovely.'

'And you're okay?' He sounded so caring, checking she was happy, that all of this was right for her.

'Very.' She smiled tenderly. This was so beautiful, getting to know every inch of his body, getting to know the real Tom, inside and out.

He moved closer, snuggling up behind her, his arm slipping around her waist, moving on until he found her hand, where he laced his fingertips through hers. Then Mabel trotted in from her kitchen bed and paused, giving them a haughty look.

'Hah, I think she's put out,' Tom commented, though there was a smile through his voice. 'The rug by the fire is usually her spot of an evening.'

Rachel patted the mat beside her. 'Ah, sorry Mabel; will you share?'

The little dog put her nose in the air as though thinking about it, then took up the spot on the rug in front of Rachel and curled up, letting Rachel stroke the short silky fur of her head. Her short tail thumped contentedly in answer.

There were a few quiet moments, where they lay listening to the crackle of the fire. It felt peaceful there, just being together. A world of two ... and a terrier. Rachel hadn't imagined it could ever be this magical, this close. Her longest relationship having been with Jake, Maisy's father, at aged seventeen into eighteen. They had been so young, naïve, experiencing snatched moments of sex

in the back of Jake's car or at his parents' house. It now seemed childish, experimental, as if they hadn't known each other at all.

This was so much more ... heartfelt, body and soul.

Maybe it was because it was so wonderful, so special, that Rachel's vulnerabilities hit home. She suddenly pictured Tom there with his ex. Had they ever made love here by the fire – they'd lived in this very house for several years, after all? Had he felt all this before? He must have really loved Caitlin once to have married her. Rachel felt a strange twinge of envy for Tom's ex-wife, for what the two of them had shared before, even though it had been over for years now.

'Tom ... what happened with Caitlin? How did it all go wrong?'

'Ah, let's not talk about that now, Rachel. This is so nice, let's not think about anything else ...' He brushed the question off, seeming a little ruffled.

'Oh.' Well, she sure knew how to kill the atmosphere.

'Look, we weren't right for each other. It was never going to last,' he added, matter-of-factly.

That made Rachel suddenly feel sad, lying there with Tom's arm around her. Could they go wrong too? Is that the way things went? But no; she reminded herself of her parent's long marriage, they had been happy ... up until that last fateful day. She turned her thoughts to Eve and Ben and their secure little family unit. It didn't always have to go wrong.

'And Rachel,' Tom spoke gently, 'it wasn't like *this*.'

She rolled over to face him and they shared a tender kiss. As she finally pulled away, Rachel gave a fragile smile. Oh my, how would it feel not to have him beside her?

The evening passed all too soon; drinking red wine, naked by the fire, with this gorgeous man she had fallen in love with.

Still wearing only her watch, Rachel glanced at her wrist to see that it was already past ten thirty.

Reluctantly, she sat up and began gathering her clothes. 'Tom, I'm going to have to go. I'm sorry, but I don't want to take advantage of Mum's goodwill and babysitting services. And I like to be there in the morning for Maisy, getting her up and ready for school.' There wasn't only herself to think of in all this.

'It's okay, I understand.' He brushed Rachel's cheek fondly with his fingertips. 'You're like the three musketeers,' he said smiling. 'I take on one, I take you all on.' His voice had assumed a daft French twang.

'Exactly,' she beamed. 'Thank you,' she added softly, before kissing him affectionately on the nose.

'Though, I'm sure we could just snatch five more minutes ...' He gave a sexy grin, before adding, 'I can achieve a hell of a lot in five minutes.'

'I'm sure you can.' She laughed. 'Hmm, well, in that case ...'

And they were soon back together fireside, in a tumble of arms, legs, lips and hot kisses.

Rachel drove back to Primrose Farm through the indigo dark of the winding lane, her heart still full from their sensual night, her skin still warm from Tom's touch.

The lights were on downstairs and, as she opened the farmhouse door, there was the sound of the radio on in the kitchen. Jill was at the kitchen work surface with a pinafore over her dressing gown.

'Hello, love, did you have a nice time?'

'Yes, thanks.' Rachel still, rather embarrassingly, felt like she was basking in the afterglow. 'Are you still baking, Mum?' Rachel added, surprised to see the late-night activity in the kitchen.

'Oh, I've just about finished, love. And don't worry, I haven't been here all night. I sat and watched my programme after supper, had a bath, and then I was flicking through the old Baking Bible and found this recipe of my Great-Auntie Edna's. I was looking for some warming winter puds for the chillier months, and this seemed perfect. Look, she's even done a little drawing, though I must say those sultanas in the pudding look very like rabbit droppings.'

They both giggled.

The finished article, stood on the side, did indeed look and smell wonderful; a baked sponge in a rectangular dish, with a rich caramel sauce over it. 'Mmm, that looks great. What is it?'

'Sultana and butterscotch pudding.'

'Ooh, delightful.'

The Baking Bible was laid open on the side next to the mixer. There were at least four generations of puddings and bakes recorded there, with the earliest being penned by Jill's own grandmother, Alice. A legacy of bakes and cakes that Jill had brought with her, and since added to, when she had married Dad back in the mid-Eighties and moved into the farmhouse.

'I think I'll put it on as a special tomorrow.'

'Ideal! I can't wait to taste it.'

'Well then, maybe we can spoon out a little portion from the edge to try?'

'Oh yes, go on then. We need to maintain quality control, after all,' Rachel grinned.

Jill scooped some out into a small bowl, spooning over a little of the syrupy caramel-coloured sauce.

Lifting her spoon to her mouth, Rachel's taste buds exploded happily. 'Oh my, that's going to be a hit. The sponge is so light and the sauce is naughty but very nice.'

'Aw, thanks, love.' Her mum beamed proudly.

Rachel loved seeing her mum in good spirits, and farmhouse-kitchen baking was most definitely Jill's happy place. The downside was that Jill was still making nearly as much food as in the busier summer months, 'just in case', and they were starting to waste some now. Rachel knew she should really ask her mum to ease off on the baking, warn her that they couldn't afford to throw things away now that it was quieter. But looking at her mother, happy there in the kitchen, knowing that baking helped to fill a loneliness that Rachel still shared ... well, she bit her tongue, though she knew she'd have to say something if things didn't turn around soon. In the meanwhile, their friends, family and the postman were benefitting from some rather scrumptious giveaways for now.

Rachel resolved that she would have to put her mind to drumming up some more business, somehow. Fingers crossed, things would turn around for Primrose Farm soon.

She smiled at her mum over the steam of the delicious pudding, and nudged closer at the kitchen side to give her hand a squeeze. 'They're a winner every time, Mum.'

The Third Bake of Christmas

Chocolate Cupcakes with the Cutest of Faces – Maisy's Festive Favourite

Jill's Chocolate Reindeer Cupcakes:

100g plain flour

20g cocoa powder

140g caster sugar

1 ½ tsp baking powder

¼ tsp vanilla extract

Pinch of salt

40g butter

120ml whole milk

1 egg

To decorate: Chocolate buttercream, large milk chocolate buttons, large white chocolate buttons, red and brown Smarties (or similar), cake decorating eyes or mini chocolate chips

Heat oven to 180°C/Gas 4. Mix flour, cocoa, baking powder, pinch of salt, and butter in electric mixer or with handheld electric whisk. Beat until everything combined.

Whisk the milk, egg and vanilla extract together in a jug, then slowly pour about half into the flour mixture. Beat to combine, then turn mixer to high speed and pour in the remaining liquid and beat until smooth.

Spoon into paper cases to 2/3rds full. Bake 20-25 mins.

Leave to cool before decorating with chocolate buttercream, half a large milk chocolate button for each of the ears, a white chocolate button with a Smartie stuck on for the nose, and the sugar paste eyes (or choc chips).

Extremely cute and very tasty!

5

There was a promising flurry of customers at the Pantry the next morning. By ten thirty, Anne and Irene, two senior citizens from the village, were chatting away, enjoying coffee and shortbread.

'Oh, by the way, Jill,' Irene called across from their table, 'that apple and blackberry crumble I took home last week went down a real treat. I passed it off as my own,' she confessed. 'Well, I didn't exactly lie; I just didn't tell my Ronald that I hadn't made it myself. Anyway, he liked it that much he said I'd have to make it again soon, so I'd better take another one home today.' She grinned mischievously.

'Of course, but this week's crumble is an apple and pear.'

'Ah, not to worry, that'll do nicely. I'll just make out I've been experimenting. He'll be impressed and I'm sure it'll go down as well.' Irene started chuckling.

'Well, that's the way to do your home baking,' added Anne, 'sitting here having coffee and biscuits with a friend, and getting a takeaway bake as you leave.'

'Hah, absolutely, that's what the Pudding Pantry's all about my lovelies.' Jill smiled.

'Oh yes, that's the way to do it, ladies,' Rachel joined in, enjoying the camaraderie.

Two more regulars, Denise and Christine, who Jill knew from the local Women's Institute, called in soon afterwards for tea and cake. Trevor, the postman, stopped by for a takeaway coffee and a flapjack, and then gorgeous Tom for his elevenses. Just picturing last night's fireside activities made Rachel blush bright pink at the counter – she hoped her mum hadn't spotted that and busied herself with the coffee machine.

Tom was in a bit of a dash to get back as he needed to catch up with his farmhand, Jack. 'I'll maybe catch you later, Rach. It was a great evening last night, by the way.' His eyes held hers with a sexy intensity.

'Yes,' was all she could answer, in a pitch higher than normal, remembering all too well.

After a promising morning, the Pantry was disappointingly bare by the time lunchtime swung around.

The slowing of trade nagged at Rachel. 'It's gone so quiet here these past few weeks, Mum, hasn't it?' She stifled a sigh. It had cost so much in money, time and energy to get the Pudding Pantry up and running; they really couldn't afford for it to belly-flop so soon. There was no magic pot of savings to bail them out, no stash of money in the bank. This was it – every last penny was invested in this project. Their livelihoods and future, in fact the whole farm, depended on it.

'I know, love. It is a concern. I don't suppose the takings have been much to speak of, either.'

'No, I doubt we've even covered our costs these past few weeks, to be honest.'

'Now then ...' Jill placed a reassuring hand on Rachel's shoulder, 'let's not get too despondent, love. Like I said the other day, it's a quiet time of the year for most businesses around here. The tourists are fewer just now. We'll just have to be patient. I'm sure things will pick up again before Christmas.'

Mother and daughter looked about them; there wasn't a soul in the tearooms. It was hard not to feel downcast about it.

'But yes,' Jill continued pragmatically, 'maybe, we do need to get our thinking caps on just now and drum up a bit of interest.'

'No time like the present, then,' Rachel rallied, determined to lift their mood and take some action. 'I'll make us a pot of tea and grab a pad and a pen. Let's smash out some ideas, Mum.'

Sitting down at one of the white wooden tables just a few minutes later, Jill kick-started the brainstorm, 'Well, the Kirkton Country Show, where we had the stall back in the summer, that went off really well ... so what about finding out about any other shows, or local Christmas Fayres and such like, that might be coming up soon?'

'Good thinking. I'll do some research. Eve might know of any craft events coming up in the area. And, of course, we absolutely need to make the most of the build-up to Christmas here at the Pantry.' Rachel doodled a holly leaf, and a Christmas tree on her pad as she wrote 'Christmas Fayres' down. 'Yes, we can feature a feast of festive flavours, Christmas puddings, mince pies ...'

'That Gingerbread Pudding went down well with Frank the other day, and oh, what did I used to make for you when you were small? Yes, those little meringue snowmen. They might go down well with the children.'

'They sound good. You used to make reindeer cupcakes too. I remember the noses were chocolate buttons,' said Rachel.

'Hah, yes so I did. Chocolate sponge ones.'

'I used to love those.' Mum's Christmas bakes were legendary. They were a tradition that came out annually along with the decorations. 'Oh, and we can have a festive facelift with our displays on the dressers, with Eve's Christmas decorations and toys for sale. She's already mentioned that she's busy making lots of new things.'

'Great. And I agree, we can really up the ante with our Christmas goodies too; I can make Christmas cakes and puddings for people to take away. I'm sure Brenda at the deli would take some to sell too. I could make up packs of shortbread and those reindeer cupcakes – in fact, there could be all sorts of festive foodie gifts and treats to take away. Folk are busy enough as it is over Christmas, without having all that extra baking to do.'

'Yes, that'd be brilliant. Some great ideas there, Mum. But ... hmm ... it's still not much good if we can't get the people here to start with.' Rachel was looking around the empty barn once more. 'We need to step up our promotion and advertising, remind people that we're here. It's like the initial buzz has gone. Though that'll cost, of course.' Rachel took a sip of tea. 'I could design some new flyers. And, maybe we could get a bit of free editorial in the *Gazette*, if I make it newsworthy enough and ask Amanda there nicely.'

'Perhaps we could drop by the newspaper office with a sticky toffee pudding or two, or even better a Christmas Pudding to try?' Jill suggested.

'Hah, that sounds like bribery to me, but it's definitely worth a try.' Rachel smiled at her mother's wily ways.

'Well, at least we have a few ideas to be going on with,' added Jill.

'It's all good, but I just feel like we need something else, something a little different, to make us stand out from the crowd ... something unique that only *we* can do.'

'But what, love?'

'Hah, I wish I knew! I'll have a think on it whilst I'm sorting out the cattle shed this afternoon. Can you handle the rush in here?' Rachel added ironically, the reality of the pretty but empty space bringing it all gloomily home once more. Empty chairs and empty tables ...

'I'm sure I'll manage,' Jill answered drily.

'Right, well, I'll be back in time to collect Maisy from the school bus.'

'Okay, pet.'

Rachel finished off her cup of tea and stood up to leave.

'Rachel?' Jill stopped her in her tracks. 'Chin up, love. We'll find a way.'

Oh how her mum's encouragement brought a lump to her throat. Over the past couple of years, it had been Rachel who'd stood strong, Rachel the one to rally Jill, especially through the dark days they'd had, but lately Rachel's own fears were beginning to get to her. There was so much at stake. The future of the farm and their lives here were tied up with the Pudding Pantry. The pressure was really on for it to do well.

'Thanks, Mum.' Rachel nodded, appreciating that prop of support and finding a grain of hope.

No stupendous brainwave hit in the cattle shed, unfortunately. The only thing that came like a bolt from the blue was a large male pheasant who'd decided to take up residence in there, roosting in

the rafters and bursting out with a piercing squawk that frightened Rachel half to death. After taking a breather and waiting for her heart to stop hammering – every day brought a new surprise on the farm – Rachel set about splitting open and spreading huge circular bales of straw, ready to bed down the cattle. The time would soon come for them to come in from the fields.

Something unique – something special for the Pudding Pantry. This manifesto kept rolling along in Rachel's mind like the ruddy bales. There didn't seem to be any magic answer, but hey, was there ever?

When Rachel looked at the farm's accounts later that evening, it was obvious that they were still sliding down that slippery slope of debt. Her mood felt black and a headache hung over her right eye. *What was it all for?* All that hard work, the never-ending routine of getting up at dawn, working with the sheep, the cattle, feeding, tending, mucking out, filling in mountains of paperwork – and that was before all the things she needed to do at the Pantry, as well as looking after Maisy. Life was more than a juggle right now; it was a big struggle.

She sighed and took a sip of her coffee. The Pudding Pantry was meant to be the thing that turned it all around and saved them. What if it ended up being the thing that pulled them under?

'Is everything all right, love, you seem a bit quiet tonight?' Jill asked kindly once they'd finished having dinner later that evening.

'Ah, I'm just tired, that's all.'

'Of course.' Jill paused, giving Rachel the chance to talk more if she wanted.

'Oh, Mum, sometimes I just feel like I'm on a hamster wheel, working so damned hard and juggling it all, on the farm, the Pantry, and getting nowhere.'

'It's been a hard couple of years, love. And you've got so much to carry on your shoulders just with the farm. It's no wonder you feel the pressure of it sometimes. We've all been thrown in at the deep end.'

Yes, farm life could be hard, but like most farmers, a bit of hard work had never bothered the Swinton family. It was losing Dad in such a devastatingly tragic way that had left a gaping hole in all their hearts. Much as she'd wanted to, Rachel couldn't just curl up in a ball of grief after it happened, she'd had to keep going for Mum and Maisy, for the farm. And the aftershocks kept rolling with them, like waves.

They had all got up one early spring morning, had breakfast together around the kitchen table, expecting life on the farm to drift along in much the same way as it always had. But that day life was smashed like a raw egg, and their world had been shattered. They were still struggling to find their way.

Rachel gazed absently into the flickering flames of the cosy fire in the living room, her mind elsewhere for a while, taking her back to her childhood days here on the farm, memories of working with her dad, learning the ways of the farm and of the animals. Her voice when she finally spoke was soft, yet filled with emotion. 'It's not just a job though, is it? When I go and stand on the hill above the farm – *our* hill, *our* farm – and I look around at the valley and see our animals ... Well, this is it, this is everything. It's where my heart is.'

'I know. Mine too.' Jill's voice was tinged with sorrow as well as love.

'Well, then, we battle on, until we've given it every last shot,' Rachel resolved. 'I know I've just got to do my best with the farm work. But we'll try not to be blinkered about it; and if it all gets too much and we're about to go under financially, then ...' She sighed deeply and looked down at her hands in her lap. 'We'll have to be realistic and look to sell up. But until then, we give it everything we've got, yeah?'

'Yes, absolutely. And it's understandable that you're tired, pet, it's been hectic and you haven't stopped for months. Heaven knows, the farm work's enough on its own. And, even now with the Pantry being slower, you're still on the go, looking for ways to boost business. You need to look after yourself too.'

'I suppose.'

'I *know*.' Jill gave her a stern look.

'Hah, "Your mother is always right",' Rachel quipped.

'Too true.' Jill quirked an eyebrow. 'And Rachel,' her mum's tone became serious, 'don't keep it all in, will you? If it feels like things are getting too much, talk to me, love, tell me. We'll face things together.' They both knew what Jill was referring to; the dreadful circumstances surrounding her father's death. 'It's good that we're talking tonight, but don't feel you've got to carry the load on your own. Don't *ever* be afraid to ask for help.'

'Of course, Mum, and I promise.'

'So, we won't be giving up cowpats, boiler suits and baking aprons any time soon then,' Jill said, resolutely.

'Of course not – and oh, the glamour, hey?'

They both raised a smile, as they gazed into the flickering fire.

6

The weekend rolled around and it was one of those picture-perfect autumn days with golden and russet trees glowing against the fresh, blue backdrop of sky, which was streaked with soft wisps of cloud.

Maisy was helping out around the Pantry. She had her own little pink apron on, with white polka dots, that matched her grandma's, and she seemed happy enough wrapping up knives and forks in napkins. Rachel did worry that her little girl spent far too much time with them working at the Pantry or on the farm. Yet, they didn't have a lot of choice. Yes, Eve would have her sometimes or Granny Ruth might stop by, but otherwise, where else was she going to go?

As elevenses time swung around, Tom stopped by for his Saturday morning coffee break.

'Good morning, ladies. It's a beauty out there, isn't it?' His sunny smile lit the room, as well as Rachel's heart.

'Too right. Morning, Tom.'

'Hi, Tom.'

'Hi, Maisy. I see you're doing a grand job there. I bet you're a star helper.'

'She is indeed,' agreed Grandma Jill.

'Hey, Maisy,' Tom grinned, 'what do you say to a cow if it's in your way?'

'Ah ... Don't know?'

'You tell it to Moooooove!' He gave her a wink.

Maisy started giggling, then repeated the phrase exaggeratedly, 'MOOOOVE – that's funny, Tom. I'm going to tell that to Granny Ruth *and* my friend Amelia.'

'So, what's on today then, folks?'

'Well, it's just another day here at the Pantry for us,' answered Rachel, 'and we'll just have to see how many people we get in.'

'Ah, well, I have a couple of hours to spare and I wondered if I might whisk you off somewhere, actually.'

'Oh, I'm not sure ...' Rachel glanced across at her mum.

Jill was quick to respond. 'Go on, get yourself away. Look how quiet it's been; I'll manage just fine.'

True, there was only one couple in, sitting having a shared pudding platter with a pot of tea.

'But, what about Maisy?'

'Well, Maisy can come along too. The more the merrier. Hey, Maisy what do you think?' asked Tom.

'Yay! Where are we going?' She was skipping across the room towards Tom already.

'Well, why don't you choose? I was thinking maybe a walk and then a lunch out, somewhere not too far away. So, what about the woods and a pub lunch, or there's always the beach. What do you fancy, young lady?'

'Can we take Moss?'

'Yeah, why not, and Mabel can come too.'

'Good. Well, we were doing the squirrels at school. We *could* go and see their houses in the woods.'

'Sounds good to me. Rachel?'

Tom turned to face her, his dark brown eyes catching hers with a warmth that made her insides melt. She answered with a broad grin. A little break would be bliss, and with all her recent worries, it might be just what she needed. She felt a tad guilty leaving Mum to manage on her own with the tearoom, but Jill seemed happy to help, and Rachel could always offer to help her mum out another day to give her some time out too.

'Thanks, Mum. I'll make sure we're not out too long.'

'It's no problem, now go off and enjoy yourselves.'

Half an hour later, they were strolling through the woods at Kirkton Burn. They meandered along a slightly muddy path beside a stream which was lined by beech, oak and ash trees. Leaves had been tossed down by the autumn breeze and swept into heaps of gold, copper and bronze. Burnished bracken tumbled in crisp feathery strands alongside.

'Wheee!' Maisy was off, kicking up the crisp piles of leaves with her wellington boots, revealing the soggy heaps that lay beneath. Musky, earthy smells filled the air. And the leaves fell once more around the three of them like autumn-gold confetti.

'Hah, bet I can kick up more than you,' said Tom, challenging Maisy with a grin.

And the three of them started a welly-boot-lifting leaf fight and even Moss and Mabel joined in, dashing around them in daft circles, barking, with Moss trying to catch the odd one in his mouth. Maisy was giggling, and Tom and Rachel leaned against each other, slightly out of breath, at the end of it. Rachel couldn't ignore the burst of happiness spreading in her chest.

They began to walk once more, Maisy moving in close beside Tom and taking his hand. Rachel had to smile, watching them; they were so easy and natural together. Maisy looked up at the trees and asked Tom what a squirrel's nest would look like.

'Well, I know it's called a drey,' Tom answered, 'and it's made out of lots of twigs with moss and such like, and they'll be up high in the branches. I think they're about the size of a football.'

'What about that one?' Maisy was pointing up towards a fork in the branches.

Sure enough, there was indeed a nest in the tree above them. The three of them paused to look up.

'Good spot, Maisy. It might well be, yes. But I'm no expert. It could be a squirrel's nest, or perhaps a bird's.'

'Well, I think it's a squirrel's,' proclaimed Maisy, with a smile. 'I wonder if there are any babies in there.'

'I doubt if there would be at this time of year. It'll be getting a bit cold for them to have little ones. Most likely in the spring.'

'Ah, okay.' Her little girl was taking it all in.

Unlike her real and mostly absent father, Jake, having Maisy about didn't seem to be a chore for Tom. It lifted Rachel's spirits seeing the pair of them happy together. Tom would make a great dad. An image of her and Tom and Maisy as a family filtered unexpectedly into her mind. Dare she hope that could ever work out one day? But it was all too soon. A little daydream. She'd just enjoy the moment and see where life took them for now.

They enjoyed their pub lunch out at the Black Bull Inn in the little town of Kirkton on their way back. Rachel and Tom tucked into a meal of steak pie with vegetables, while Maisy had a tasty-looking homemade fish finger sandwich. By a cosy log fire, with a glass of red wine to hand and good company, Rachel hadn't felt so content in a long while.

She felt so comfortable with Tom, and seeing Maisy so happy with him warmed her soul. But all too soon it was time to get back – she'd need to help Mum out at the Pantry before going to do the dusk checks on the animals and the farm. Tom had mentioned he had some chores to do too.

Back at Primrose Farm, they unbuckled their seat belts, ready to get out. Rachel really didn't want the magic of the afternoon to end, but life and work had a way of taking over again. Maisy had already skipped down out of the jeep, and was heading into the barn to tell Jill all about her leaf walk in the woods – she'd brought home a few special ones in her coat pocket to show her grandma – and their lunch out, including her chocolate ice cream for pudding.

Tom leaned across the cab of the truck towards Rachel. His kiss was warm and tender and loving, and she *so* wished she could carry this on somewhere else, somewhere very private indeed. But that wasn't to be. Not tonight.

Reluctantly, she drew away, her lips missing his already. 'Thank you so much, Tom. It's been a wonderful afternoon, and I know Maisy loved it too.'

'You are very welcome. She's a good kid.'

'Thanks. I think so too.' She gave a happy sigh. 'Sorry, but I'd really better go on in now and help Mum.'

'Yeah, I ought to get away too.'

Rachel hovered – this moment felt too precious to leave. Just one more brief kiss on the lips, a few more seconds together ... Rachel moved back towards the scent of his aftershave, feeling the slight scratch of his beard where it was growing in, and meeting the soft fullness of his lips. She lingered there for a few more glorious seconds. Right, she really *had* better go now, or Maisy and Jill would be at the Pantry door wondering what was holding them up.

'Bye,' said Rachel, as she reluctantly pulled away, her voice a little husky.

'See you soon.'

'Yeah. See you.'

She stood and waved, watching his pickup drive off down the track. He gave a chirpy toot on the horn. She'd never felt like this before about a man and it was so good – but she couldn't deny that frightened her too. She knew just how vulnerable life and relationships could be. Yes, she knew that very well.

7

Sunday had been yet another quiet day at the Pantry. Rachel was still at a loss as to how to get more customers over the threshold. Frosty mornings and November chills would soon be on their doorstep, and though December should bring some welcome pre-Christmas trade, it was likely that the next few weeks would remain slow. And, with that, the farm's bank balance was on a very slippery slope.

The next day at four thirty on the dot, Rachel was standing outside the Kirkton First School gates, her breath misting in the chill air. With a burst of heavy wooden doors, and a blast of chatter, out came the little ones in a rush across the playground, still wearing their gym gear with their coats mostly half-mast over the top.

Suddenly, there was Maisy, with a bounce of blonde curls, dashing forward and waving. 'Aw, that was so good, Mummy. I love Gym Club. We did tumbles with music today.'

'It was fun,' added Amelia, who was close on Maisy's heels, with a sunny grin. Rachel was collecting the two of them today.

This was their second week attending, and they were so happy with their new after-school club activity. The idea of going to a club seemed different than classroom work somehow. It was sociable, and fun, yet they were still learning.

A club ... Something about that was starting to oil the cogs in Rachel's mind. What was it that was nagging at her?

'Wowser, I've got it!' she blurted out.

'What have you got, Mummy?' Maisy looked at her quizzically.

'A club. We need a Pudding Club!' Oh yes, something to draw people out to the Pantry on those dull autumn and winter nights. Cosy puddings, in a cosy barn ... They'd just invested the last of the summer earnings on installing that log-burning stove; it would be perfect in there on a chilly winter's evening.

'But we don't make puddings at school, Mummy.' Maisy had her hands on her hips and was frowning.

'Not at school, petal. At our farm ... in the Pudding Pantry.'

'Oh, a club for making puddings? But doesn't Grandma Jill do the making bit?' Maisy looked nonplussed.

'Yes, but other people could come along and eat puddings, and maybe learn how to make puddings, have a chat, make new friends, share recipes over a cup of tea.' The ideas were flowing already.

'Could they have cupcakes?' Maisy grinned, catching on to the idea.

'Yes, sometimes, why not? We could have Cupcake Week, Crumble Week, all sorts.' Rachel's mind was firing now.

'Ooh, that sounds nice,' said Amelia.

'Can I come?' Maisy was starting to warm to the suggestion.

'Oh, well, I think it'll most likely be in the evening, petal.' Rachel imagined an evening might work better as the club would need to be something different from their usual tearoom opening hours. 'So, it would be past your bedtime. But maybe you could come along to the first one, and then we'll see.'

'Okay.'

'Could *my* mummy come?' Amelia asked.

'Yes, of course, if she wanted to. I'll need to speak with Grandma Jill and see what she thinks about the club thing first, but yes I'll let your mummy know all about it if we decide to go ahead.'

They were back at the Land Rover now, the girls clambering in to the passenger side, ready to be belted up. Moss nudged a damp black nose over from the back to welcome them.

Maisy patted his soft furry head. 'Hi, Mossy.'

Driving along the country roads, the girls chatted between themselves as Rachel's mind whirred with this new Pudding Club idea. She couldn't wait to discuss it with Jill. They were soon pulling up outside Amelia's pretty stone cottage, just up the lane from Primrose Farm.

Eve came out to thank her friend for collecting the girls, just as Rachel was helping Amelia down from the Jeep.

'Hey, sweetie pie.'

'Hi, Mummy.'

Eve took Amelia by the hand, as her little girl announced, 'Mummy, Rachel's making a Pudding Club.'

'Ooh, that sounds fun.' Eve looked at Rachel, her brow quirked with interest.

'You can go too, if you want,' Amelia continued.

'Still in the planning stage,' Rachel explained. 'Need to broach it with Mum, yet. So, I'll tell you all about it soon. It was the girls here who gave me a brainwave.'

'Good, good. Well, maybe we can catch up over a cup of coffee sometime. Seems ages since we've done that.'

'That sounds good. And yeah, I've been a bit snowed under lately. The farm, the pressures with the Pudding Pantry ...'

'No worries, hun, I know life's fraught at the moment. Same here, we can't catch our breath, can we? But how's the delicious Tom anyway?' Eve asked with a cheeky twinkle in her eye. Eve had had a little crush on Tom for some time now, which she didn't try to hide. It was just a source of light-hearted banter, and she was happily married to Ben after all, so Rachel was happy to go along with the joke.

'He's fine, thank you. Very good in fact.'

'Not *too* good, I hope,' Eve added with a cheeky grin.

'Hah, I'm saying no more.'

'Well, thanks for fetching Amelia. My turn next week. And let me know when you can drop by, I'll make sure there's some fresh brownies made.'

'Perfect. Oh, and keep the night of Fifth November free. Me and Mum are planning a small fireworks party at the farm. Just something low-key.'

'Sounds good. We don't have any plans for Bonfire Night, so that'd be great. Thanks, hun. Catch you later, then.'

'Cheers, Eve. Bye!'

'Bye, Eve. Bye, Melia,' chanted Maisy, happily waving from her seat in the Land Rover.

Back at the farmhouse kitchen they were greeted by the warming smells of minced beef and onions. Jill was standing at the Aga, cooking supper.

'Hi Mum, we're home. How was this afternoon?' Rachel asked. She'd been out and about on the farm for several hours, checking fences once more along with their farmhand, Simon, so hadn't had chance to look in on Jill before leaving to fetch the girls. 'Did it get any busier?'

'Not a great deal. There was a family and then a couple in. The family were staying in a holiday cottage up the valley, they were nice and chatty. The others were on a day trip from Alnwick for a change of scenery, had some tea and shared a scone between them. Oh, and Brenda from the Deli called, they've sold six puddings this week, so I need to top up the Sticky Toffee supplies there, so that was a bit of good news.'

A bit of positive news, yes, Rachel mused, and a step in the right direction, but it wasn't exactly going to cover the mounting bills.

'Grandma, Grandma! Mummy wants to make a Pudding Club,' Maisy blurted out. News certainly travelled fast when five-year-olds got to know it! And though Rachel was excited about the idea, she had intended to broach the matter a little later on when she and Jill were on their own and would have the chance to chat it over properly.

'Well, that's the cat out of the bag. Thanks, Maisy.' Never tell a child anything you didn't want shared! 'Well, it's just a thought I've had, we can talk about it over supper, maybe.'

'A Pudding Club? Hmm, sounds like it might be quite fun. Something like a cooking class, do you mean?' Rachel was pleased that she'd got Jill's attention.

'Maybe, but nothing as formal as that. We could have puddings to taste, share baking tips, a chance to chat and relax with a cuppa ... maybe themed nights, even.'

'Okay, but it might be a lot of work. We'll have to think on it, won't we?' Jill didn't sound totally sold on the idea yet.

Oh dear, did it feel to Jill like Rachel was loading more work on to her? She hadn't thought of that.

'Look, I know it's a big ask, and we can chat some more about it in a while. I still need to pop out and do my last checks around the farm.'

'Okay, pet.' Jill lifted a large casserole pot out of the Aga, resting it on the top as she popped in eight round balls of herby dumplings. 'Supper will be ready in about twenty minutes.'

'That's great.' After baking and looking after the Pantry all day, here was Jill still cooking and caring for her family. Rachel didn't take her for granted, but maybe she needed to show her gratitude a little more often. 'And thanks, Mum. You look after us all so well.'

'Isn't that what mums are for, love?'

'Well, some are better at it than others, I'm sure ... and you're up there with the best.'

Jill beamed.

'Maisy, do you want to come on out with me?' Rachel asked.

It was already getting dark outside, and the kitchen was a cosy haven. Maisy had her school coat and shoes off and was stroking Moss, who'd sneaked up and joined her on the chair beside the Aga. 'I'll stay with Grandma.'

'Okay, I won't be long.'

Rachel couldn't wait to get the last farm chores done and get back in herself, but she could never rest easy if she hadn't seen for herself that the farm animals were all fine and settled for the night.

Up at the Top Field Rachel's mobile buzzed into life. She stopped the quad.

'Hi, Rach.' It was Tom.

'Oh hi, you okay?'

'Yep. Look, when do I get to see you again? It was great in the woods at the weekend with Maisy, but I'd love some time just for us too. Can you make tonight? The other evening was pretty special.'

'Yes, it was really lovely.' Her mind wandered back to that sensual night by the fireside at Tom's house. But she'd already promised to go back tonight and chat further with Mum about the Pudding Club idea; they couldn't afford to rest on their laurels with the Pudding Pantry. It had needed energy and a huge commitment to get this business off the ground, and would need even more to make it a success.

'Oh, Tom, much as I'd love to, I can't see you tonight, sorry.'

'Tomorrow?' He wasn't one to give up easily.

The following night was set aside for the mammoth pile of farming paperwork she hadn't managed to get around to today.

'Umm, look, I'll see you at your elevenses.'

'*Is that it?* I can't make love to you over a bacon sandwich in the middle of the Pudding Pantry.'

Rachel couldn't help but laugh. 'Oh, why on earth not?' She was trying to keep her tone deadpan.

'For a start, Frank's false teeth might fall out with the shock, *and* I don't think your mother would approve.'

'Hah, maybe not.'

'I'm serious though, Rach.' His voice softened, sounding so earnest. 'I'd love to see you again soon.'

God, she wanted to see him, to be with him, too, not be stuck under a pile of paperwork, but that wasn't going to keep the farm afloat. Her life seemed to be a never-ending To Do list right now. It was no wonder it was hard to find time to be together. She wasn't young, free and single, like other girls her age might be. Well, she might still be young – twenty-four was hardly ancient – but she was a mother, and tied to a farm and a business. Would Tom prefer a no-strings-attached kind of girl, where every night could be date night? That thought made her feel uneasy.

'Just give me a day or two to get things straight, okay, and then I'll try and free up an evening. I'll see if Mum's all right to look after Maisy, or maybe Eve will step in. We could go out for a drink or something. Or just stay in?'

'All right, I suppose I'll just have to wait. And don't forget our rendezvous at elevenses,' he added more chirpily.

'How could I?'

'See you then.'

'Bye.' She turned off the mobile, and found herself smiling. Amid all the To Dos, the chores, paperwork and bills, Tom Watson was a warm beacon of light. She just prayed he'd manage to stay aglow for her.

'So, come on, tell me more about this Pudding Club idea, then?' Jill asked, as the three of them were sat around the kitchen table with plates loaded with mince, dumplings, carrots and cabbage, fresh from their vegetable patch.

'Okay, so I'm thinking that the Pudding Pantry is already a lovely cosy place to meet up. So, the Pudding *Club* will have to be a bit different. A chance to come in, make new friends, *and* learn something. It'll be about all things pudding and baking, with ideas and recipes, and tastings ... Ooh yes, we'll have to have a little taster of something delicious from the Pantry to try.'

'We can taste cupcakes!' came Maisy's suggestion with a big grin.

'Hmm, it does sound interesting. So, do we charge for customers to come in? How would it work? We'd have to cover our costs and make a little bit extra ourselves, to make it worthwhile.'

'Of course, we'll have to think about the price. And we'd need to decide on a theme for each week or fortnight, or however often we decide to hold it.'

'Weekly might prove a bit hard to come up with enough rolling ideas, but twice a month might work well,' Jill pondered.

'So, fortnightly then,' Rachel continued, 'with a pudding to taste – something that fits with that session's theme. It'd be great to have a festive one in the lead-up to Christmas, and maybe a recipe to hand out and chat about.'

'Oh well, we can't be giving away all the Baking Bible secrets, you know.' Jill looked rather affronted.

'I know, but just one example, or a twist on one of your classics. Look, say it was Crumble Night or something, then the group could chat about favourite crumble recipes and flavours. We'd have one or two to taste, and of course,' Rachel gave a little wink, 'some more ready to buy to take away at the counter.' Rachel's business mind was firing up now.

'Yes ... I can see how that might work.'

'Well, I think we should have an ice-cream night,' Maisy added her thoughts on the matter, beaming.

'Oh, now then,' Rachel smiled across at her little girl, 'that might work well. Hmm, "which ice-cream flavours go best with our puddings"? That's a great idea, Maisy.'

'Well done, Maisy. A pudding pairing session.' Jill was smiling too, evidently warming to the idea.

'We could invite someone from the local dairy along for that, and later on we could have other guest speakers.' Rachel was thinking out loud. 'Doing that will give us lots more ideas for the future and pair us with other local businesses too. I like it.'

Maisy beamed proudly, then took up a forkful of tasty carrots.

'Though I do think the ice-cream evening might be something to keep up our sleeve for next spring or summer, when the weather's a bit warmer,' added Jill. 'But, it's a really great idea, Maisy.'

'Hey, what a team!' Rachel made a high-five in the air, and Maisy leaned across to clap it with her palm. 'Well then, we'll think a bit more on it yet, and I'll make sure to cost it out, but I think the Pudding Club has legs, don't you?'

'It's certainly food for thought, love.'

'Yeah ... well, let's sleep on it and we'll chat more about it at the Pantry tomorrow.'

'Yes, that sounds good. So, young lady, how was your day at school today?' asked Jill, moving things on. 'All you've talked about was gym club since you got back. What else have you been up to then?'

'Umm, we made pictures from leaves. Crunchy ones like we found in the woods, Mummy, and we painted them, then pressed them on to paper so the colour came off.'

'Like a leaf print,' said Rachel.

'Yes. They looked really pretty. We're going to put them up on the class wall.'

'That sounds good,' added Jill.

'Oh! And,' Maisy started pulling an oh-my-gosh face, 'Matthew Timpson wasn't feeling very well. And guess what, Grandma? He was sick in the playground.'

'Oh dear.'

'All over Sarah Scott's shoes! It was yucky and lumpy and yellow and Sarah screamed so loud.'

'Ah, okay, Maisy. Not really suitable dinner table conversation,' Rachel warned, though secretly she was chuckling to herself, imagining the chaotic scene in the playground.

'Poor Matthew,' said Jill.

'Hah, well I'd be really cross if he was sick on my shoes,' Maisy said huffily.

'Yes, but he couldn't have helped it,' added Rachel.

'Well, he could have been sick somewhere else!' That was Maisy's final proclamation on the matter.

Rachel and Jill couldn't help but smile.

Rachel listened to the dinner table chatter with warmth and appreciation for her little family. And with the new Pudding Club plans came a new sense of hope and purpose between them. Though times were still tough at Primrose Farm, the Swinton girls were a team and they were trying to plough forward – they were all in it together.

The Fourth Bake of Christmas

Blackberry and Apple Jam Sponge Pudding – Grandma Isabel's Recipe, circa 1946

This handwritten poem had always been tucked into the Baking Bible as a loose leaf next to a recipe of Rachel's grandmother's:

Autumn days, the sky a blue haze.
Blackberry picking,
Hedgerows thick with brambles,
Watch out for the prickles.
Purple-stained fingers and mouths,
Ripe dark berries sweet with juice,
Baskets laden.
Ready for home, pass on to Mum,
With crumbles, jams and puddings to come!

Recipe:

100g/4oz self-raising flour

Pinch of salt

100g/4oz caster sugar

100g/4oz butter

2 eggs, beaten

2tbsp whole milk

45ml/3tbsp homemade or good quality Blackberry and Apple Jam (or other flavour if you prefer)

Sift flour and salt into a bowl. Cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs a little at a time with a spoonful of flour, beating well until eggs are mixed in. Fold in remaining flour alternately with the milk.

Grease and base-line a pudding basin, add the jam to the bottom. Spoon over the pudding mix up to $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Cover with buttered greaseproof paper, and secure with string. Using extra string to make a handle for ease of removal.

Steam for 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 hours in a covered pan of boiling water, keeping water topped up to half way up the pudding bowl sides, until a wooden skewer comes out clean at centre. Allow to stand for 3 minutes before turning out.

Delicious with custard or cream.

8

'Morning, ladies.'

'Hello, Tom,' answered Jill from behind the Pantry's wooden counter.

'Hi ...' Rachel answered with a slight blush, remembering yesterday's conversation. He was right on time for his elevenses.

'Coffee and a bacon roll, is it?' Jill anticipated.

'Yes,' replied Tom with a grin. 'Though I may well have a little extra something on the side this morning.' He gave Rachel a very cheeky glance.

'And what might that be?' Rachel asked leadingly.

'Hmm, now then, maybe a ... flapjack.'

'Coming right up,' Jill replied.

Rachel and Tom then burst into a fit of the giggles, leaving Jill bemused. Shaking her head at the giddy pair, she headed to the fridge for some bacon rashers, saying, 'What on earth has got into you two?'

They were still grinning like loons, with the odd splutter from Rachel as she tried to focus on making Tom's coffee, barista-style.

'Ah, young love,' Jill muttered at the griddle pan.

Tom leaned across the counter to whisper in Rachel's ear, 'I might even have a little crumble waiting for you later on, if I can tempt you away from your chores.'

'Oh, but my paperwork mountain awaits,' replied Rachel matter-of-factly, vowing to keep her promise to herself to get the farm's piling admin sorted, though her body was telling her to ditch it – feeling tinglingly aroused.

'Crikey, my charm must be failing fast – I've never been rejected for a pile of paperwork before.'

'Sorry ... *soon*, okay,' she whispered. 'Hang in there.'

'I'll try.' He pulled a hang-dog face.

With that, Frank's tut-tutting car could be heard coming up the lane, and the old gentleman was shortly making his way through the barn door.

'Morning, Frank,' greeted Tom first, as the two ladies then chorused, 'Hello, Frank.'

'How are you doing, pet?' asked Jill.

'Not too bad at all, thank you. All the better for seeing your smiling faces.'

That made the women's smiles even wider.

'And morning, young Tom. Farming going well?'

'Yes thanks, Frank. Bit quieter at this time of year, now the harvest's all in, and the cattle haven't yet been brought in for the winter. Can't complain.'

'More time to see this lovely young lady, then,' added Frank with a wink. The news had been out for a while around the village that they were formally an item.

'So you'd think,' answered Tom with a wry smile, followed by a meaningful glance at Rachel. 'She's one busy lady.'

Jill handed Tom his warm bacon roll. He opened the bap, and added a dollop of Brown Sauce on top of the bacon, then tucked in hungrily. 'It's been a long while since breakfast.'

'What can we get for you today, Frank? Coffee, as per usual?' asked Jill. 'Oh, and I've just made a blackberry and cream roulade this morning, you might want to try a slice of that.'

'That sounds just grand, and coffee it is. I'll just settle myself at my usual table.' He liked the one beside the arch-shaped window that looked out across the valley.

'Yes do, and we'll bring it all across in two ticks for you,' added Rachel.

Frank liked to read the weekly local paper – of which Rachel kept a copy for the Pantry guests – and he often brought in his own copy of *The Times* to peruse over his hot drink and cake.

'Right, I'd better be on my way,' announced Tom, soon afterwards. 'We've got some cattle tags to put back in today; they keep losing them out in the fields, so I need to get the cattle herded down to the yard to meet up with my farmhand, Jack.'

'Well, have a good day,' said Rachel.

'Will do.' His tone was ironic. 'It won't be nearly as exciting as your paperwork mountain.'

'Nearly, but not quite.' Rachel pulled a wry face.

'Hah, I might even have to have a look at my own paperwork tonight. Seeing as there's nothing else happening ...'

'Well, you know what they say, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.'

He shook his head, yet still managing a small smile. 'Thanks, Jill. See you soon, folks. Take care, Frank.'

Rachel came out from behind the counter to give Tom a peck on the cheek. 'Sorry,' was all she could say, sensing his frustration behind the smile.

'No worries. See you soon, Rach.'

She'd far rather have a carefree flirty evening with Tom than working away yet again, but there were reports to make, records to complete, government checks to fulfil – and no one else was able to do it for her. Why did life have to be so bloody exasperating?

After their lunchtime customers – all six of them – had left, Rachel mooted, 'So, Mum, how do you think we can best go forward with the Pudding Club idea?' She was impatient to move things on quickly, if Jill was in support.

'Well, I do think we should at least give it a try. I have to say, it's been whirring around in my head since you mentioned it – a sign of a good idea in my book. It'll not cost us much to set up, just more of our time. I imagine it'll be something we'll need to hold off an evening?'

Yet another night that Rachel would be tied up and would have to think of childcare. But if it had to be done, so be it. 'Yes, I think that'd work best.'

'So, what do you think we'd need to charge for this Pudding Club?'

'I don't think we should make it too expensive; let's keep it attractive and inclusive, but of course we'll need to make a little bit of money out of doing it, or else there's no point. I'm thinking there are young mums who might want a night out, older people wanting some company, and anyone interested in baking, really. What do you think, say £5 per session? That'd cover a tea or coffee, the puds to taste, and we should come away with a bit of profit for the business too.'

'Yes, that sounds reasonable. Do we hold a club night fortnightly up until Christmas and see how it goes?' suggested Jill.

'So, you're definitely in?' Rachel couldn't help but grin.

'Of course, I'm in. Sounds a lovely idea.'

'Really? I thought you seemed a little cool on it at first.'

'No, I just wanted us both to think it through properly.'

'Aw, thanks, Mum. You're the best, you know that? It will mean another evening of work for us, though.'

'Yes, I realise that, but it does sound quite sociable. I think we might enjoy it too!'

'We might have to take turns with who hosts it, or ask Granny Ruth across to help with little Maisy.'

'Yes, we can organise that, and I'm sure Ruth would enjoy getting involved. In fact, I've asked her across for supper later, so we can mention it to her then.'

'That's great. Mind you, I have promised Maisy she can come to the first night if the Pudding Club went ahead,' added Rachel.

'So, what date shall we start, and what's the first pudding theme to be?' Jill was sounding quite animated now.

'Sooner rather than later. We may as well get going quickly, to hopefully pick up some new customers. So, what's coming up soon and what puddings can we tie that in with?' Rachel paused and suddenly thought of Bonfire Night and Jill's scrumptious crumble. *Ooh, yes*, something around November Fifth would be ideal. 'This might work – Guy Fawkes, fireworks, and your ...'

'Toffee Apple Crumble,' Jill finished the sentence for her, with a smile.

'Hah! We could make our first Pudding Club go off with a real bang!' Rachel announced with a huge grin.

Later that day, another autumn beauty with soft sunshine and just a gentle nip of cold, Rachel reached the small row of honeyed-stone cottages where her Granny Ruth had lived since leaving the farmhouse at Primrose Farm herself, when Rachel and her family had moved in, following the long-standing family tradition that the eldest son would eventually take over. She pulled up outside, and walked up the neat front garden path, ready to collect Granny to take her back to the farm for supper with them. The last blooms of a pale-pink rose that climbed the wall beside the cottage door were holding on in the autumn chill. There was a pot of bold deep-purple and yellow winter pansies on the front step to greet any guests. Granny loved her gardening, even though she struggled with arthritis that was particularly bad in her knees.

Rachel knocked on the door and then went on in, knowing that the house would be unlocked and that she was always welcome. 'Only me, Granny,' she called.

There was an intense smell of warm sugary fruits as Rachel entered the kitchen. There was Granny, standing stirring the contents of a large steel pan with a wooden spoon. 'Oh, sorry pet – is that the time? I'm not quite ready for you.'

'No worries. What delights are you concocting here?' Rachel leaned over to take a look at the glossy mixture.

'Jam – blackberry and apple. I'm using those apples you gave me from your tree last week. Thought it might go nice on a fruit scone with some butter.'

'Well, it certainly smells delicious.'

'I've finished one batch of blackberry and raspberry, already. Thought that'd go nicely in the next Jam Roly-Poly I make.'

Rachel was impressed. Despite being in her eighties, her grandmother still loved to cook and nurture. Baking was such a strong influence from both sides of Rachel's family – no wonder she had got the bug.

'Oh, yes.'

'Well, next week, I'll make one of those for you all, too. I know it's one of *Maisy's* favourites.'

'That'd be lovely, Granny. Just perfect with lashings of creamy custard.'

'Right, well, this just needs to cool a little and then we can pour it into the jars here.'

A row of squeaky-clean jam jars was waiting on the kitchen side. Beside them were squares of red gingham muslin and thin elastic bands ready to cover the lids.

'I'll just nip upstairs and get my things together. I'll not be long; I've already packed an overnight bag.'

'I'll help fill these if you like, while you finish getting ready.'

'Thank you, pet, that'd be grand.'

The old lady came back down just as her granddaughter was placing the material squares over each metal lid.

'Take some back with you, lass, and you can use them in the Pantry.'

'Will do, thanks Granny. I'm sure they'll go down a treat.'

'So, how are you, pet? And how are things going with that nice young man of yours?' Ruth was gathering her coat and shoes.

'Good, thanks ...' Rachel's voice trailed a little.

'Rightio – but you sound a little disheartened, lass.' Granny Ruth could pick up on Rachel's mood like no one else.

'Oh, Granny! It's just life getting in the way. I'm so busy right now, and me and Tom, well, we get on so well, and it's been lovely, but we don't get an awful lot of time to see each other really. Well, not on our own. I can't keep upping and leaving Maisy and Mum and the farm.'

Granny was nodding, listening.

'I'm worried he might be getting a bit fed up with it all ...'

'Ah, and have you spoken with him about it?' asked Ruth in a gentle tone.

'Well, not properly, no. It should be pretty obvious how busy I am, though.'

'Hmm, well in any relationship, you need to start by being honest with each other. You've got to be a team. Me and your granda didn't always see eye to eye, but we learnt to talk things through, to come to understand each other. And life's *always* going to be busy for you with the farm and everything else, Rachel, but if this relationship with Tom is worth it, maybe you need to make some time, don't you think?'

'Maybe ...' Rachel breathed out with a small sigh. 'Thanks, Granny.'

'He seems a good man, Tom. I like him, and it's obvious that he cares for you. Nothing like that waste-of-space Jake you paired up with.'

Rachel grimaced; it was no secret that the intuitive Granny Ruth was far from Jake's biggest fan – not that she'd say anything in front of Maisy.

'And don't be afraid to ask for help, pet. Me and your mum are always happy to help out with Maisy, and where we can on the farm. Don't pile too much on yourself, you're not Wonder Woman.'

'Hah,' Rachel smiled. 'I rather hoped I might be. It'd mean I could get things done a bit quicker. And she does wear one hell of an outfit,' Rachel quipped.

'Well, I'm ready when you are, lass. Shall we head over to the farm?'

'Of course. Mum'll be wondering where we've got to otherwise.'

'Right then, I'll just pop my shoes on. I'll need a seat for that. Here we go, just give me a second.' She sat down stiffly on one of her kitchen chairs. Her body might be struggling, but her mind was still sharp as a tack. She was one of the few people who said it how it was. Rachel admired her for it, even if, at times, the truth was a bit too close for comfort.

Rachel was towel-drying Maisy after her bath that evening when her mobile rang. She glanced at the caller ID: Jake. She gave an inward groan. How did he always manage to pick a bad time? She was trying to settle Maisy, ready for bedtime on a school night. But of course, Maisy's dad would hardly be aware of her routine. Living so far away, he was never really there for her, was he? But, she supposed, at least he was phoning and his promised 'weekly' call could be hit and miss at the best of times.

Rachel wrapped the towel tightly around her daughter to keep her warm, then answered with a gritting of her teeth. 'Hi, Jake.'

'Hey, there. Where's my gorgeous girl? Is Maisy about?'

'Ah, yes, but can you just give us five minutes and I'll call you back? She's just out of the bath and I need to dry her and pop her pyjamas on.'

'Yeah, no worries – although ah, I'm going out in ten, but yeah, if you're quick.'

Hah, ever the doting father.

'Daddy?' Maisy asked, looking excited, bless her. Bloody hell, he did so little, yet Maisy couldn't help that buzz of excitement at hearing from him. His last visit had been back in July, three months ago now, and there was a promised visit for August that had never materialised, much to Maisy's disappointment. Just thinking about the consequences of that day still made Rachel mad.

'Okay, I'll call back straight away,' answered Rachel tersely and she put down the phone. 'Come on then, petal, let's get those PJs on,' her voice softened.

In Maisy's room a few minutes later, with her little girl now dressed in her nightclothes and sat expectantly on the bed, Rachel called Jake back. After saying a brief hello, she passed the phone over to her daughter. Having put the phone on loudspeaker, she sat quietly beside her, monitoring the conversation. Maisy was happily telling him all about school, and her gym club, and about Amelia coming for fireworks night next week with her mummy and daddy for hot dogs. Jake, in turn, said how busy he'd been at work, helping to build people's houses.

Rachel then heard him say that he was missing her. But hey, it was all too easy to say that from two hundred miles away, and then not bother to come and see her. And all too soon Jake said his goodbyes, with an excuse that he was about to go out.

She watched her little girl's sunny face begin to fall as the conversation rolled to a close. It was painful to watch.

'Daddy's got to go now,' Maisy explained to Rachel. Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. She passed the phone back across.

'Okay, sweetheart.' Rachel placed the mobile to her own ear. 'Hi, it's me.' Her tone was cool.

'Yeah, got to dash. Meeting a mate.'

'Right ... and don't forget to call Maisy again next week. And, a little earlier might help, not right at bedtime; it can be unsettling for her.'

'Okay. Slapped hands again.' He still managed to sound like a stroppy teenager.

Rachel didn't even bother to respond to that comment.

'See you then, Rach.'

'Yeah. Bye, Jake.' Rachel sighed as she switched off her mobile. Then she turned with an encouraging smile to her little girl. She couldn't let her exasperation show in front of her. 'Let's get you all tucked up in bed then, petal. Shall we have a story?'

'O-kay.' Maisy sounded reluctant, and a frown had formed across her brow. And, just as Rachel had thought, here was her little girl unsettled and upset for bedtime.

'Mummy, when's Daddy coming to see me again?' Maisy was hugging her soft toy sheep that Grandma Jill had given her several years ago – it was still a favourite.

Rachel knew she could only be honest; false promises and lies would only hurt more in the long-run. 'I don't know, petal.'

It broke Rachel's heart to see the look of disappointment that fell across Maisy's face. She gave her daughter a hug and a kiss, before going to the pine bookcase to find her *Floss* book, hoping the sheepdog's story might help cheer her little girl up.

This unpredictable relationship with her dad was so hard for Maisy, and for Rachel. How she wished she could protect her daughter, wrap her fragile heart up in cotton wool, and keep her safe from disappointment. But sometimes, even the love of a mother couldn't do that.

9

It was mid-afternoon, the Northumberland sky softening to a watery blue-grey above the rolling hills. Rachel had just set Hamish, her stocky Scottish Texel ram, out in the field with the Texel ewes. He looked very pleased with himself, given this new freedom. With hormones running high within the flocks, the three Primrose Farm tups had been kept in the sheep shed for the past week to keep them out of mischief. Hamish was now more than happy to find himself in this large grassy area with his very own flock, and he was soon nestling up beside one of his ladies.

The farmhand, Simon, had just set off on the quad to check how Edward and Chevy, the two Cheviot rams, were getting on higher up the valley in the other field, where they had been released earlier that morning. The two flocks had been purposely set well apart to avoid any interbreeding accidents.

Rachel was just having a quick breather, gazing out across the beautiful valley, when her mobile vibrated in her pocket. 'Hello?'

'Rach, hey, you haven't phoned me! It's been days since you dropped Amelia off.' It was Eve, and by the sounds of it, yet someone else irked by her absence. 'So, I've made some cookies, anyhow. You must call in and have some while they're fresh. You are at risk of becoming a farmyard recluse, hun. So, is it coffee-break time, yet?'

'Ah ... Well, I've just finished putting the tups out so I suppose it can be. It'll have to be a quick one, mind, I still have lots to do.'

'No problem, that's great. I'll see you soon then. And afterwards we can walk down and collect the girls from the school bus together.'

Crikey, was it that time already? The days seemed to just fly by. 'Okay, thanks, I'll see you shortly.'

It would be lovely to see Eve, Rachel realised, even if it was only for a snatched coffee break. It was weeks since the friends had met up properly. It wasn't just Tom she hadn't had much time to see lately.

Fifteen minutes later, after a quick catch up with Simon who confirmed all was well with the sheep and rams, Rachel headed across to her friend's cottage.

'Come on in, I'm in the kitchen,' Eve sang out. 'It's the only place with a seat not covered in wool or craft materials just now. It's driving Ben nuts.' Her friend carried on chatting loudly, as Rachel made her way down the narrow hallway. 'I'm on a pre-Christmas craft-making bonanza.'

'That sounds great – hard work though.' Rachel popped her head around the kitchen door, to find her friend dressed in denim dungarees, with a bright flower-patterned long-sleeved tee, her auburn curly hair piled high in a ponytail. Eve was pouring water from the kettle into a cafetière. The aroma of fresh coffee filling the air. Rachel also caught a whiff of the cookies that were smelling divinely chocolatey and looked delightful, stacked on a plate on the side.

'Oh, wow, they look good. And, can I have a peek at what you're making craft-wise? Then I can get some ideas of what we can display for you at The Pudding Pantry for the run up to Christmas. The dressers need restocking and some new and festive things would be fabulous.'

Eve led her through to the dining room while the coffee was brewing. There were piles of grey-painted wooden hearts and stars, and the prettiest dainty wooden angels, strung ready to hang on a Christmas tree. Cute soft-toy animals sat in rows – the hedgehog was particularly adorable – with little Santa hats on and festive bow ties. There were mini Christmas jumpers for babies and toddlers; chunky knits adorned with red-breasted robins, red-nosed reindeers, charming snowmen and sparkly snowflakes.

'Eve, this is brilliant. You're so talented. These must take ages to make,' Rachel enthused, holding up a felt fox dressed in a fabulous waistcoat with holly patterns on.

'Ah, not that long, really. It's just the volumes I need to do to keep up with my online orders that takes the time, *and* I still need to make a load more for a couple of craft fairs I've got coming up.'

'Well, the Christmas soft toys would look gorgeous on the shelves of the dressers in the Pantry, and those tree decorations would be great. I just love the angels. I was thinking of getting a Christmas tree up in the barn fairly soon actually, we're nearly into November after all. Set the scene for the run up to Christmas. What do you think?'

'Oh yes, that'd be lovely. I can just picture it there, with fairy lights twinkling away.'

'So, can you make some extra crafts for us too? Sorry, it sounds like you're super-busy as it is, but I'm sure we'll get some sales for you.'

'Of course, and I've still got more festive goodies yet to make. There'll be wooden coasters with Christmas messages on and pretty tealight holders too. I was even thinking of making some fir wreaths with red tartan gingham ribbons nearer to Christmas.'

'Ooh, they sound lovely. Put us down for one of those. I can just picture it hanging so pretty there on the barn door.'

'Aw, thanks. Right then, coffee time. I've had enough of all this craft stuff for today. My fingers are aching, and my brain's gone to mush concentrating on all the small detail.'

The two friends were soon sitting on stools at the breakfast bar in Eve's galley kitchen with a cafetière between them, two glass mugs ready to fill, and the plate of warm cookies.

'So, where have you been hiding, Rach? You've disappeared, except for the school run, and even then, you always seem to be dashing off.'

Rachel looked down at her hands and shifted uncomfortably on the stool. 'Life's just pretty hectic right now.'

'Yeah, it must be pretty tough, what with the farm and everything to keep going. You have such a full-on life, Rachel, even more so than mine. But, if there's anything you ever want to chat about, I'm here. You can always talk to me, that's what friends are for.'

'Ah,' Rachel sighed, feeling slightly uncomfortable. Should she share how the Pantry was running into difficulties? She didn't want the local community knowing how slow things were. Sometimes that just encouraged the downward spiral. But this was Eve, and Eve was no gossip. Eve had shared her hopes, fears and dreams from as far back as primary school.

'Well, the Pantry is struggling a bit just now, which is a real worry after all the investment we've put in.'

'Oh, that's tough. I had noticed it's been a bit quieter of late when I've called in. But, you know, maybe it's just that time of year. My crafts business slowed right down after the summer, but now I'm on the up again with my Christmas pre-orders. I'm sure you'll pick up soon with the Christmas trade.'

'Maybe. And I know it's early days and we're still getting established ...' Rachel paused.

'Well, if there's anything me and Ben can do to help?'

'Thanks.'

'And I'll be sure to make you some festive crafts for the Pantry as soon as I can.'

'You're a star.'

'Well, we can't have these cookies going to waste.' Eve passed the plate across. 'I've made some dark chocolate with white choc chunks today.'

The first bite was amazing. They were crisp on the outside and melted in the middle where the white chocolate chunks delighted the taste buds.

'These are divine.'

'Cheers, hun.'

'I might need this recipe for the Pantry. This is taking cookie making to the next level. *Cookies* ...' she said slowly, in a daft voice, like the cookie monster from Sesame Street.

It took them back to both being little girls, when their friendship had first blossomed and life was always a laugh and carefree.

'Ha ha ha, brilliant, and yes, no problem. I'll jot it down for you.'

'Oh, by the way,' Rachel said, 'we are going to go ahead with the Pudding Club idea that Amelia mentioned the other day. I'm hoping it might help turn things around a bit for us.'

'Oh, fab, tell me more.'

'Well, it'll be a nice thing to do socially, and with it being so quiet lately, we're thinking it might drum up some more interest for the Pantry. Hang on, I've got a flyer here in my pocket. I was trying out some designs on the laptop this morning. What do you think?' Rachel stood up, unfolding the sheet of paper that she'd put in her jeans back pocket earlier, ready to show to Jill.

Eve looked over the leaflet. 'Crumble night, hey.' She had a daft grin on her face. 'Now are you sure that's for the Pudding Club, or is that a night you're planning with Tom?' The old joke about 'comforting' apple-crumble Tom was still rumbling on.

'Stop it, you!' Rachel shook her head.

'Hah, what a way to start.' Eve couldn't stop chuckling.

Rachel felt herself blush, then couldn't help but join in. It felt good to be laughing with an old friend.

'It sounds like it'll be a great night, this club. I'll check with Ben,' Eve continued, once she managed to stop giggling, 'I'd love to come along. I'll give Charlotte a ring, see if she can make it too, and we'll rally some other friends. It sounds like it'll be fun. That's going in the diary, Thursday the 7 November, Pudding Club night. Oh, and are you still going ahead with your Bonfire Night at the farm next week? Can I make anything to help out with that?'

'Well, the food's all in hand. Me and Mum have a few ideas up our sleeves – just keeping it casual. So, if you can bring some small fireworks and a couple of packs of sparklers along, that'd be great. No noisy rockets or screeches, mind, don't want the animals stressed out, just some garden-type ones.'

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