THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Cathy Bramley

Appleby Farm

There's simply no place like home...



'Warm, endearing and engaging'
Veronica Henry

Your favourite authors can't resist Cathy Bramley's charming, feel-good stories:

'A real treat. No one does friendship better than Cathy'
Karen Swan

'Delightfully warm with plenty of twists and turns'
Trisha Ashley

'Filled with warmth and laugher'
Carole Matthews

'A perfect blend'
Fern Britton

'An emotional journey, written with love'
Jo Thomas

'A ray of sunshine'
Phillipa Ashley

'The perfect romantic tale'
Ali McNamara

'Magical, heart-felt and uplifting'
Carmel Harrington

'Warm, cosy and deliciously romantic'
Holly Martin

www.penguin.co.uk

Copyrighted Material

Also by Cathy Bramley

The Sunrise Sisterhood
Merrily Ever After
The Summer That Changed Us
The Merry Christmas Project
My Kind of Happy
A Patchwork Family
A Vintage Summer
A Match Made in Devon
Hetty's Farmhouse Bakery
The Lemon Tree Café
White Lies and Wishes
Comfort and Joy
The Plumberry School of Comfort Food
Wickham Hall
Conditional Love
Ivy Lane

Copyrighted Material

Cathy Bramley

Appleby Farm





PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain as four separate ebooks
in 2015 by Transworld Digital
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
First published as one edition in 2015 by Corgi Books
an imprint of Transworld Publishers.
Corgi edition reissued 2024

Copyright © Cathy Bramley 2015

Cathy Bramley has asserted her right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions
with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted.
We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to
make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

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

ISBN
9780552171595

Typeset in 11.5/13pt Garamond by Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For my nanna, Mary –
three hand squeezes

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

A Blessing in Disguise



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Chapter 1

The door opened with a ding of the bell, letting in a welcome blast of fresh air as a group of teenage girls left the café.

'Adios, amigos!' I called. 'Ciao, bellas!'

It was the Thursday before the Easter weekend, children were off school and the spring sunshine had brought us a steady stream of customers all day long. Now, at four o'clock, we were having a quiet spell, which was just as well, because the service side of the counter, where I stood, looked like a scene out of *Titanic*.

I had spent the last hour training Amy, our new recruit, in the art of making espressos, cappuccinos and lattes. The work area was awash with her efforts; we were marooned in a sea of brown liquid, puddles of spilt milk and numerous abandoned mugs, spoons and jugs. The pair of us were looking a bit worse for the experience, too: my red hair had turned to frizz after repeated exposure to random gusts of steam and Amy had a streak of coffee across her forehead like a third eyebrow.

On the plus side, despite the steamy atmosphere, there was a heavenly aroma of fresh coffee and I'd felt enormous satisfaction from seeing Amy get the hang of the equipment

Copyrighted Material

– eventually. I watched over her shoulder, a bit close, actually, seeing as her short ponytail was tickling my nose, as she poured steamed milk from a stainless-steel jug into a tall glass.

'Yay! Perfect,' I cheered. 'That's it; nice and slow so you don't spoil the foamy bit on top.' Phew! I thought she was never going to get there.

Amy placed the jug on the counter with a shaky hand and exhaled. We both examined her first latte.

'What do you think?' She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and wrinkled her smeared brow.

'I think you've cracked it,' I said, and grinned.

Just in time, because I was hanging up my apron any second, leaving early and then she would be on her own behind the counter. I flung an arm around her shoulders and gave the sixteen-year-old a squeeze. 'But now you've got to pass the boss's taste test.'

I nodded towards the far corner of the café. Shirley, head down over a pile of invoices, sat at a small table with one foot raised on the chair beside her. Her ankle was completely better now; it was simply a habit she'd fallen into after being told to keep it raised when she broke it last autumn.

That foot was the reason I was here. Shirley's daughter, Anna, is a friend of mine and when Shirley had her accident, Anna begged me to come and help out in the café for a few months until her mum was back on her feet. At the time I was working in promotions, handing out free samples and money-off coupons in supermarkets around Manchester – a job that had lost its sparkle early on. So I moved to Kingsfield, a small town on the outskirts of Derbyshire, and into Anna's spare room, and I'd been working at the café ever since.

Copyrighted Material

I watched Amy creep towards Shirley, the tall glass rattling in its saucer as she placed one foot cautiously in front of the other. I held my breath; it was like witnessing a tight-rope walker crossing Niagara Falls.

'Delicious. Well done, both of you,' Shirley declared, lifting the latte in approval. 'Amy, you're now officially allowed to use the coffee machine and, FYI, I like three sugars in mine.'

'Go Amy, go Amy,' I hollered, waving my fist in the air as my student smiled bashfully, dipped her head and twisted one foot behind her other leg, looking far younger than sixteen all of a sudden.

I also dropped into a curtsey, holding out an imaginary skirt with my fingertips. 'And my work here is done.'

Shirley chuckled, shook her head and went back to her paperwork.

Is it?

As soon as the words were out of my mouth a fluttering sensation worked its way from my head to my heart. *Was* my work here actually done? Was it time to move on? Again? Eek! I stared at the top of Shirley's bowed head until it dawned on me that Amy was looking at me rather oddly.

I gave myself a shake, pointed Amy in the direction of the floor mop and, leaving her to soak up the spillages, went to clear the table vacated by the teenagers.

Yikes. My face felt scarlet now after that unbidden thought, which, seeing as I almost qualified for official albino status in the pale skin department, was pretty hard to hide.

Freya Moorcroft, you are up to your old tricks. Can't you stick at a job for more than five minutes? And anyway, what about you-know-who? Aren't you in L.O.V.E.?

Copyrighted Material

I puffed out my cheeks and began to stack plates loudly to crowd out my snarky inner thoughts.

Shirley's café was booming. And without being big-headed about it, the boom had something to do with me. When I arrived six months ago the coffee had been instant, the menu consisted almost entirely of jacket potatoes and barely any customers bothered coming to the café after two o'clock.

Now we had a fancy chrome coffee machine hissing like a contemptuous goose on the counter, a panini grill permanently making posh toasties and we did a roaring trade in afternoon tea. The free WiFi, which I'd suggested we install, had also proved a hit, especially with teenagers. The café was heaving with youthful hormones for an hour after school, earning us the reputation of being *the* place to hang out and doubling our sales of hot chocolate and smoothies. A win-win, as far as I was concerned.

It had been a whirlwind few months, which was exactly how I liked my life to be. The whirlier the better, in fact. Shirley had pretty much let me have free rein once I'd convinced her to pimp the place up a bit and I'd had a ball. And, outside of work, my life was good too. I loved living with Anna, I'd made loads of new friends and, most importantly, I'd met Charlie, my boyfriend of four months.

Charlie.

You know those ads for yogurt where the actors go all dreamy when the spoon goes into their mouths? Well, that's what happens to me just thinking about him. Tall, fit, amazing blue eyes, the cheekiest smile in the universe and, to top it all, he's a fireman. I mean, hello?

So yep, my life in Kingsfield's pretty good.

But now . . . I paused from swiping cake crumbs into my hand and glanced out of the window at the row of

Copyrighted Material

shops, the pub on the corner, the parked cars, the total lack of greenery. It was the same view I'd been looking at since October. I could do the job standing on my head. Blindfolded. One hand tied behind my back.

Unlike Amy, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, who was making hard work of clearing up the kitchen.

I took the dirty crockery over to the counter and handed it to her. 'So how has your first day been?' I asked. 'Can you see yourself as a waitress? Or have I scared you off with caffeine-options overload?'

'It's OK,' she replied, nodding earnestly. 'As a part-time job. Till I go to uni.'

'Great.' I suppressed a smile but I must have raised my eyebrows higher than I'd intended because Amy blushed. There's nothing like being told by a teenager that your career choice is merely their stepping stone to greater things.

'Sorry,' she muttered, plunging her arms into the sink. 'That came out wrong. Not that there's anything wrong . . . Oh God.' She bent low over the sink so I couldn't see her face.

'Hey, no worries,' I laughed. 'Good on you for knowing what you want to do with your life. I got the grades at A level to go to uni, but I had no idea what to study.' I shrugged. 'So I opted for a gap year instead.'

Ten gap years, as it turned out . . .

Auntie Sue referred to my decision to go travelling after sixth form as studying at the university of life. My mother called it a waste of a private education.

Amy glanced over her shoulder at Shirley and then looked back at me. 'I can only work here until I leave sixth form. I'm going to study architecture and it takes seven years to qualify, and then I want to move to London, so I really need to save up.'

Copyrighted Material

'Right. Well, good luck!' I swallowed, smiled and shuffled off.

Flippin' heck. Sixteen and she'd got a ten-year plan. I thought I was being organized when I had a ten-*day* plan.

A career butterfly, that was me. I couldn't seem to help it. I'd start a job full of enthusiasm, throw myself into it, loving the whole 'new challenge' thing. Then, as soon as I'd mastered it and put my own spin on the role, for some reason I sprouted wings and an urge to fly off somewhere new.

Uncle Arthur reckoned that one day I'd find my niche and my career would take off. My father, on the other hand, put my transient tendencies down to lack of ambition and commitment. I hoped Uncle Arthur was right because I couldn't bear it if Dad was.

The edited highlights of my career included: apple picker in New Zealand, stablehand in Dubai, chalet girl in Austria, barmaid in Cornwall (eighteen months – a personal record for me, largely down to a lifeguard called Ivan), a short-lived stint as a tour guide at a pencil museum and now here, waitress in the Shenton Road Café in Kingsfield.

I was sure all the random experience I'd gained was preparing me for something; I just wished I knew what that something was. I dropped down into the empty chair opposite my boss and pondered whether to tell her that it might be time for me to move on. Or should I, for once, keep my ponderings to myself?

'You're wasted here; you know that, don't you?' Shirley said without looking up. Which was just as well because my face was now as red as my hair.

I shifted in my seat. Shirley Maxwell should never, ever, be underestimated. She had an uncanny knack for reading

Copyrighted Material

minds. Not that I'd been thinking that I was wasted, just a bit . . . unchallenged.

'Meaning?' I asked, playing for time. I pulled the sugar bowl towards me and started mashing the crystals against the side of the bowl.

Shirley dropped her pen on the table, looked at me and exhaled in a 'what are we going to do with you?' sort of way. She moved the sugar bowl out of my reach and I folded my arms.

'Bright girl like you. You could be running your own business like my Anna. Or managing your own branch of Starbucks or . . .'

'Trying to get rid of me, are you?' I said, giving her my fake haughty eyebrow raise.

'Oh, Freya.' She swiped a hand at me. 'You've revamped the menu, you've organized the dreaded paperwork and now you're even training new staff. I'm so grateful for all your hard work at my café.'

She pronounced it caff, which always made me smile. She leaned forward and mouthed with exaggerated facial expressions, 'But I can't pay you what you're worth and that upsets me.' She pressed a hand to her bosom. 'You might want to buy a house, settle down—'

'I'm not money-orientated, Shirley,' I said. 'I know people who are. People who put pursuit of wealth before happiness and, believe me, I have no desire to go down that route.' I shuddered. My parents, for instance. 'No, as the saying goes, "all you need is love", as far as I'm concerned.' I grinned at her as she rolled her eyes.

'And as the other saying goes, "every little helps",' she retorted and we both laughed.

'You're a case, Freya Moorcroft, you really are.' Shirley sighed.

Copyrighted Material

I reached out and squeezed her hand, the one that wasn't nestled on her cleavage. 'Thank you. It's nice to be appreciated.'

'Be honest with yourself, Freya. Waitressing isn't your future.'

The doorbell dinged and we both turned to see who it was. A familiar pink velour-clad bottom backed into the café, pulling a complicated-looking pushchair.

Saved by the bell before I talked myself out of a job.

'Gemma!' I cried, breathing an inward sigh of relief. I jumped up to help my friend and one of our regulars negotiate the door and the step.

'Nightmare dot com,' grunted Gemma, as she attempted a three-point turn with the pushchair. 'You need a blooming HGV licence to drive this thing.'

'Oh dear. Let me make you something healthy, herbal and foul-smelling in a mug.' I heard Shirley huff at my alternative approach to hospitality as I kissed Gemma's cheek. I stood back to let her manoeuvre herself and the baby past me and peered in at him. Parker was wide awake (hurray, I could have a cuddle!) and aiming a determined swipe at the toys suspended across his pushchair.

'Actually, sorry to take liberties,' said Gemma, making a beeline for the loos, 'but I only came in to use the facilities. His Lordship's nappy is beyond bearable and I say that as a mother with a very high threshold to bad smells.'

'TMI, love, thank you very much,' said Shirley with a wince. By comparison, Shirley had a low threshold to many things: smells, pain, loud music, most yellow foods . . . I once saw her nearly faint at the sight of mashed banana. Even a jacket potato gave her the shivers if it dared to err on the yellowy side.

'Not even a quick herbal brew?' I offered. I was due to

Copyrighted Material

meet Charlie at his allotment in half an hour and then I had the whole of the Easter weekend off, but I hadn't seen Gemma since the baby's christening and I wanted to hear her news. And get my mitts on Parker, obviously.

Gemma paused and then flapped a beautifully manicured hand, which made me tuck my own scruffy nails into my jeans pockets. 'Go on then. Camomile if you've got it, please.'

Five minutes later I was sitting down with a freshly changed baby boy on my knee, watching Gemma squashing and swirling her tea bag round in her white mug.

I couldn't abide those mugs.

Shirley and I had only clashed on a couple of things since I'd been here. I was Team vintage china, she was Team cheap-practical-and-dishwasher-proof. I'd suggested pretty mismatched cups and saucers, stacked on shelves in pastel shades of pink, yellow and blue. But Shirley had gone pale at the thought of crockery not matching and had put her foot down.

Parker was concentrating on scrunching up a fabric toy between his fingers, which made a rustling noise when it moved. Gemma and I exchanged smiles as he babbled away quietly to himself.

'There's one scone left, do you fancy sharing it?' I said.

I made the café's scones using my Auntie Sue's recipe. The secret is in the mixing; over mix and you've got yourself a batch of primitive weapons. Mine, though I say so myself, are sultana-stuffed clouds of deliciousness.

Gemma shook her blonde curls and patted her stomach, which, given that Parker was only about four months old, was in pretty good shape. 'I shouldn't really . . . unless . . . does it come with clotted cream?'

I shook my head. 'Whipped cream,' I said, adding more

Copyrighted Material

loudly, 'See, Shirley, someone else thinks it should be clotted cream.'

This, believe it or not, was the other thing we had disagreed on.

'No. Not having clotted cream in my café. That yellow crusty bit . . . urgh.' Shirley shuddered.

'I'll leave it then, thanks. Probably for the best,' Gemma said, wrinkling her nose. 'Anyway, what are you up to for Easter?'

The café would be closed on Good Friday, plus it was my weekend off, double-plus I'd tagged on an extra couple of days next week – my first proper break since working here.

'Nothing much.' I shrugged, wishing I'd bothered to organize an adventure or two. 'Just chilling out with Charlie, hopefully.'

'Bliss.' Gemma sighed, her blue eyes going all dreamy for a second. 'What I'd give to chill out. But with a fifteen-year-old daughter hell bent on making us suffer because *she's* got exams and a husband who's decided to dismantle a lawnmower in our back garden, I doubt very much that I'll be doing much of that this weekend.'

I tightened my grip around Parker's tummy with one hand and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear with the other. 'Just give me a shout if you want a babysitter for a few hours.'

Her face softened as she leaned forward to hand Parker back the toy he had just dropped.

'Aww, thanks, Freya. Are you getting broody, by any chance?'

I thought about it for a moment.

'Yes and no,' I replied honestly. 'I'm not ready to do the whole settling-down thing yet. But at some point, yes. I can see myself with a couple of munchkins, cottage in

Copyrighted Material

the country, a horse and a dog . . . But at the moment, I'm happy to borrow Parker every now and then.'

No idea why I'd suddenly blurted all that out. I felt my face redden. I'd never been conscious of this plan before. I did want to be a mother at some point, though. And at the risk of sounding a bit 1950s, I wanted to be the sort of mother who was there when my children got in from school, with a kiss and a cake straight out of the oven. Like my Auntie Sue. I'd have to work on the cakes bit; my repertoire consisted of one thing – scones.

'Does Charlie know how you feel?' Gemma asked, gazing at me wide-eyed.

The only problem with Kingsfield is that everyone else has been here for donkey's years. I might only have met Charlie a few months ago, but Gemma's known him for ages from Ivy Lane allotments. Unlikely as it seemed looking at those nails, Gemma had her own allotment plot until Parker came along.

'Whoa! Steady on, Gem, we've only been together five minutes!' I bent to brush my lips against Parker's head to hide my hot cheeks. 'I'm sure we'll broach the subject when the time comes.'

'It's just that . . . oh, nothing,' mumbled Gemma. She lifted the mug to her lips and sipped at her tea.

My stomach lurched. Just that what? But before I had chance to ask, Gemma squealed and reached into her bag.

'I nearly forgot to show you this!' She handed me a postcard with a picture of a tortoise on a deserted beach on it. 'Came this morning, from Tilly and Aidan. Sounds like they're having an amazing time in the Galloping-wotsit Islands. Aww,' she sighed, lifting Parker from me and arranging him back in his pushchair, 'they are such a perfect match, those two.'

Copyrighted Material

My friend, the lovely Tilly Parker, the baby's namesake, was another of the Ivy Lane allotment posse. She was the girl I credited with getting me and Charlie together and she met *her* fella, Aidan, when he came to Kingsfield last year as part of a film crew making a documentary about the allotment. He was filming something else now, in the Galápagos Islands, and Tilly had joined him for a holiday.

A perfect match. The words ran rhythmically through my head while I read Tilly's postcard and Gemma prepared to depart.

I waved her and Parker off with a smile. I didn't feel overly smiley on the inside; I felt a bit churned up. Gemma hadn't uttered the exact words and I might have been putting two and two together and making a fuss about nothing, but it felt as though she thought that in some way Charlie and I *weren't* a perfect match. And as Shirley had pointed out only a few minutes ago, Shenton Road Café wasn't my future.

My stomach flipped queasily. When I woke up this morning my life had seemed quite straightforward, but now . . . well, I wasn't sure of anything.

Copyrighted Material

Chapter 2

By the time I'd finished up at the café, scurried along Shenton Road, into All Saints Road, down Ivy Lane and made it as far as the allotment gate I was back to my normal happy-go-lucky self and smiling at my own daft thoughts. What had all that self-doubt malarkey been about?

I pushed open the heavy gate and closed it behind me.

It wasn't like me to over-analyse things; life's far too short to agonize over my career choice or to worry about the state of my relationship. Or anything else, for that matter. Far better just to go with the flow. I loved my life and anyway, no one really has the perfect job and the perfect partner. Charlie and I were fine. No, better than fine – we were great, we made each other happy and we had a laugh together. And that was what made us so well-suited.

I half-walked, half-ran along the road towards Charlie's plot and waved to Peter, the allotment committee chairman, as he appeared at the pavilion door, fastening the buttons of his anorak.

'Afternoon, Freya. It's a cool breeze, isn't it? I think we might be in for a light frost tonight.' He pulled a tweed flat cap out of his pocket and settled it on his balding head.

Copyrighted Material

'Hi, Pete. Yes, it is a bit chilly.' I smiled and supressed a giggle. I'd yet to meet one member of the allotment community who wasn't totally obsessed with the weather.

'Changed your mind about joining the waiting list for your own plot yet?' he called.

I laughed and shook my head. 'No time, these days. I'm too busy being Charlie's assistant gardener.'

Peter gave me a disappointed smile and touched his cap in a cute old-fashioned gesture, and I carried on my way.

He asked me the same question every time I saw him, hoping to change my mind. I'd toyed with the idea of having my own plot last year and he had shown me round. But I was glad I didn't go for it in the end; helping Charlie on his plot was a much better solution. I got to spend time outdoors, which I loved; I got to spend time with Charlie-boy, which I also loved; and I only had to do the nice bits (planting seeds and picking stuff) and not the grotty bits (spreading muck and digging up weeds).

My stomach flipped as I spotted my gorgeous man further ahead in his greenhouse and I jogged the last few metres to join him. He was lifting huge bags of something or other onto shelves and didn't spot me at first.

The air in the greenhouse was warm and tinged with the fragrance of tomato plants. I leaned on the open door frame and watched him for a couple of seconds while he arranged growbags in rows with his back to me. He was wearing his old gardening jumper with holes in the sleeves, a woolly hat, jeans and an old pair of boots.

'Hey.'

Charlie turned around and grinned. 'Hello, beautiful!'

I squealed as he scooped me up and spun me round, knocking over a watering can and several plant pots in the process.

Copyrighted Material

'Put me down this instant and kiss me,' I giggled breathlessly.

'I love it when you're bossy,' he murmured, his blue eyes crinkling with humour as he did as he was told and lowered me to the ground.

He unzipped my jacket and threaded his arms around my waist, pulling me close. I lifted my face to meet his and felt my body sigh as we kissed. His face was rough with stubble but his lips were full and soft. He smelled of earth and wood smoke and something sweeter . . . vanilla, maybe? Whatever it was, I approved. His kiss deepened and I stopped wondering about anything and reached up on my tiptoes to wrap my arms around his neck. When it was just us, him and me, close like this, it felt as if nothing could ever come between us, like we were the only two people in the universe who mattered.

'What's on the job list today, then?' I asked, pulling back and smiling up at him. I snuggled my head against his chest and wriggled my fingers into the back pockets of his jeans while he rested his chin on my head.

'Tomatoes,' he said, easing us apart and dropping a kiss on my nose. 'I thought you'd never come and help me plant them. I've got about twenty good ones to get in this afternoon. If you do a good job I'll buy you a pint at The Feathers after.'

'Payment in cider?' I laughed, striking a pose and resting my hands on my hips. 'What sort of girl do you think I am?'

Charlie winked at me. 'The best sort. Come on, Green Eyes, here's a trowel.'

He showed me the trays of seedlings and demonstrated how to lift them without damaging the soft stems and how to transplant them into the waiting growbags.

Copyrighted Material

'Is it me, or are there two different types here?' I asked, looking from one tray to the other.

'Clever girl,' said Charlie, placing a soft kiss on the side of my neck, which gave me a warm feeling in the pit of my stomach. 'These are Sungold, they're sweet little cherry tomatoes. I'm hoping to get Ollie to try them. He reckons he doesn't like tomatoes, but I might convert him with one of these.'

The warm feeling grew a bit bigger. Yet another reason to adore him. 'The world's greatest dad, you,' I said, nudging him playfully. 'What are these other bigger ones?'

Charlie cleared his throat. 'Um, they're Outdoor Girl. I saw the packet and thought of you.'

'Me?' I gasped. I threw my arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

He shrugged and turned his face away but I could tell he'd gone a bit pink.

OK, so growing a variety of outdoor tomatoes in someone's honour might not be everyone's idea of a romantic gesture, but I knew how Charlie's mind worked and my heart bounced all over the place. He worshipped his six-year-old son Ollie, who was quite literally at the centre of Charlie's universe. So if he'd been thinking about both of us when he'd made his tomato choices, that must mean that I was special too, mustn't it?

More than that, I loved the fact that he knew me so well. My favourite jobs have been those where I could spend time outside. My idea of absolute hell is being desk-bound like my housemate, Anna, who is a web designer and barely moves more than five metres in an entire day.

'Can I plant them outside, then?' I said, dragging my eyes back to the seedlings. 'I quite fancy a bit of fresh air.'

Charlie rolled his eyes and chuckled. 'I don't know why

Copyrighted Material

you work in a café when you're so mad keen on the great outdoors. You should be a park ranger or a policewoman or something. But no, sorry, they're not hardened off yet. Here, stick these in instead.'

'Peas! Oh, I love these!' I said as he handed me a tray of sturdy pea plants. A picture of me hiding in Auntie Sue's veggie patch floated into my head, sitting in the sunshine, popping fat peapods with my thumbs and eating the contents like sweets.

Charlie chuckled indulgently. He dispatched me towards a wigwam of bamboo canes and we both settled into our tasks. I knelt down in a patch of low sun and began to dig a small hole. I sprinkled a bit of fairy dust into it and then placed a tiny pea plant into its new home. I knew it wasn't fairy dust. Obviously. It was just far nicer to think of that than what it actually was, which might have been very nutritious for plants but absolutely stank.

Policewoman. I started to laugh.

'It's the handcuffs, isn't it?' I shouted over my shoulder.

'What is?'

'That's why you imagined me as a policewoman. So that you can play with the handcuffs. I know your game, mister.'

'Er, excuse me, Miss Moorcroft,' Charlie laughed indignantly, 'it wasn't my idea to stay in bed all last Sunday and look at pictures of you naked. That was entirely your doing.'

The patch of sunlight that had been warming my back suddenly disappeared and I heard a discreet cough. A prickle of embarrassment ran along my spine as I turned around to see Christine, the allotment secretary and coincidentally Gemma's mum, standing at the end of Charlie's plot. My eyes made their way from her wellingtons to her quilted jacket and up to her bobble hat. I scanned her face, holding

Copyrighted Material

my breath in case there was a sliver of hope that she hadn't overheard.

'Lovely looking beetroot, so it is,' said Christine in her broad Irish accent, smirking away to herself.

'Oh, yes,' I said, unsure whether Charlie grew beetroot or whether it was simply a blunt observation about the state of my face. 'It was my baby album,' I spluttered. 'That's why I was naked. And not in all of them, obviously . . .' I trailed off as Christine's shoulders began to shake with laughter.

'Ah, you youngsters. It's a long time since my husband Roy and I spent the day doing that.'

I gulped and laughed nervously. TMI, as Shirley would say.

'Hello, Christine,' said Charlie, joining us both, totally oblivious to my discomfort. 'Everything OK?'

'Grand, so it is.' She nodded. 'Just came by to remind you about Sunday. The Easter egg hunt. Great fun for the kiddies. Gemma will be here. Come if you can, won't you? Ollie would love it.'

Charlie and I made the right noises and Christine bustled off in the direction of the pavilion.

'You've got the weekend off, haven't you?' I said, a picture forming in my head of him and me under a huge blue sky with no buildings or people for miles.

'I have.' He nodded, his expression knotted in concentration as he took a piece of string from his pocket and gently tied my newly bedded pea plant to its cane. 'Four days off. Can't wait.'

'Remember that deal we made, when I came cycling with you even though I didn't want to and in return you promised to come horse riding with me?'

'Ye-s,' Charlie replied, not meeting my eye as he straightened up. I abandoned my planting, hooked my fingers

Copyrighted Material

through the belt loops of his jeans and stepped towards him, closing the gap between us until I could feel his warm breath on my cheek.

'Well, we could do that, this weekend. I found some stables just outside Kingsfield that said I could go and ride their horses. What do you think?'

I stared up at him and held my breath. I knew what he thought. He thought horses were all teeth and nostrils, but a deal was a deal and there was nothing – nothing – I'd rather do over the Easter weekend than canter through fields with the wind in my hair and Charlie by my side.

He pressed his lips to my forehead and shook his head. 'No can do, I'm afraid. I'm having Ollie over for a few days. In fact, I might bring him here to the Easter egg hunt. What do you reckon?'

My happy bubble burst and I felt my shoulders sag.

But you had him last weekend.

Eek! I very nearly said that out loud! Luckily my one diplomatic brain cell jumped in first and stopped me from making a huge mistake. Charlie would always choose Ollie over me. Quite rightly. I wished my own dad had shown even a tenth of the enthusiasm Charlie had for spending time with his son. So I wasn't complaining – well, maybe a bit.

'He'd love it.' I nodded. 'Perhaps we could all . . . ?' I swallowed and waited for Charlie to pick up on my thoughts and dive in with a suggestion that the three of us spend Easter Sunday together.

Charlie was a fab dad. I'd have loved a dad like him. Reading between the lines, I don't think he'd always been such a good father, but he certainly was now. And Ollie was a delight. He had big blue eyes just like his dad, was cute, well-mannered and had an inquisitive streak that

Copyrighted Material

made me laugh and kept Charlie constantly on his toes.

I have met Ollie twice. Both times when Charlie brought him into the café for something to eat.

I wasn't introduced. Well, strictly speaking, I suppose I was. Although 'Say thank you to the nice lady, Ollie' wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind when I'd envisaged meeting my potential stepson for the first time.

Charlie blinked at me, pulled off his woolly hat and scratched his head, dislodging my hands from his waist as he did so.

'Why don't you go horse riding on your own?' he asked gently. 'I'll come another time, I promise. But I think Ollie and me will just have a quiet one this weekend. It's too soon . . .' His voice petered out and he shrugged awkwardly.

That was a no, then.

I struggled to get my feelings under control, but there were no two ways about it. Charlie didn't want to tell Ollie about me and that stung. Was I an embarrassment or something?

Bright smile, Freya.

'Honey, you and I have been together four months. Haven't I earned my girlfriend badge yet?'

'Oh, come here.' He wrapped me in his arms and I burrowed my face into his jumper. 'I know it's tough. Believe me, I'd love to spend time with the three of us all together. But I want to be the best dad I can be. I've only been in Ollie's life properly myself for a few months and it's still early days for you and me. I don't want to confuse him by bringing a girlfriend into the equation.'

Four months was longer than some of my relationships, but I didn't think that admitting that would be particularly helpful to my cause.

I bit my lip. 'Yeah, but Tilly and Aidan have only been

Copyrighted Material

together a couple of weeks longer than us and they're already halfway across the world together.'

And they're a perfect match.

Charlie puffed out his cheeks and a frown wrinkled his brow. 'That's different.'

I flushed, wishing I hadn't said that.

Tilly's first husband had died in a car crash a couple of years ago. I could totally see why she was ready to get serious with Aidan so quickly; she had settled down once and she wanted to do it again. On the other hand, Charlie had had his fingers badly burned by his wife and I could understand why he was treading cautiously; apart from having a crush on Tilly last year, I was the first woman that Charlie had let into his life since splitting up with his ex. I just wondered how long I'd have to wait until he let me into Ollie's life too.

I let out a long sigh. Charlie tilted my chin up to meet his gaze and I managed a weak smile.

'Hey, cheer up! We have fun, don't we?' he said, breaking into a cheeky grin.

A wave of disappointment washed away my smile. 'Is that what I am to you, Charlie? A bit of fun?'

My heart was pounding all of a sudden. How had the conversation got so heavy? Only two minutes ago we were talking handcuffs and nude photos.

We stared at each other as a weird sort of tension crackled between us. His expression faltered and I scanned his face, willing him to say that I was more than that. I could see him battling to find the right words but before a suitable reply occurred to him my mobile phone rang.

I loved the lyrics to Pharrell Williams's song 'Happy'. Hence choosing it as my ring tone. Normally I indulge in a full thirty seconds of clapping along as per Pharrell's instructions before accepting the call.

Copyrighted Material

This time I fumbled in my jacket pocket and stabbed at the green button sharpish.

'Hello?'

'Freya, is that you?' The voice was higher than usual and a bit tremulous, but I recognized Auntie Sue instantly. My heart, already beating at top speed after the uncomfortable conversation with Charlie, thudded louder.

'Yes, it is. Is everything all right?'

'No, lass. It's Uncle Arthur, he's had an accident.'

'Oh no,' I gasped, turning to Charlie. He frowned with concern and reached a hand out to my arm. 'Is he OK?'

'He's out of hospital but he's a bit worse for wear and he's mithering something chronic. I hate to bother you and I know it's short notice, but do you think you could come up and help out for a few days?'

Charlie was still looking at me anxiously but I didn't make eye contact. I had a few days off and as Ollie was around it looked like I wouldn't be 'having fun' with Charlie. I glanced at my watch. Five o'clock. The train journey would take a couple of hours at least, plus I'd need to pack a bag . . .

'I'll be on the next train,' I promised, crossing my fingers that there would be a train at some point tonight.

I ended the call, telling her that I'd let her know what time the train would be in as soon as I was on board.

Finally, I looked Charlie in the eye. 'I've got to go home.'

'To Paris?'

My parents lived in Paris. Before that they'd lived in Brussels. Before that Johannesburg, Singapore, Sydney, Kuala Lumpur and Washington, DC . . . From memory they'd moved house seventeen times. But I'd only ever called one place my home.

I shook my head. 'Appleby Farm.'

Copyrighted Material

Chapter 3

The train hissed to a standstill at Oxenholme station shortly after ten o'clock. Only a handful of passengers disembarked and by the time I'd faffed about stuffing my belongings into my rucksack and left the carriage, the platform at the little station was eerily deserted. I searched up and down for a familiar face – or any face, come to that – but couldn't see another soul. There was, however, a long metal sign displaying the message 'Welcome to The Lakes', and despite the circumstances of my impromptu visit, my heart skipped with happiness as I inhaled my first lungful of the fresh night air.

I was in the Lake District. My favourite place on earth.

I walked towards the exit with an eager bounce in my step, out of the station and towards the tiny taxi rank where, hopefully, the lift that Auntie Sue had arranged for me would be waiting. The journey to the farm took about half an hour and I couldn't wait to see her and Uncle Arthur. I had a quick scan around but the car park and taxi rank were completely devoid of cars so I plonked my rucksack on the floor against a stone wall and sat on it while I waited.

The last few hours had whizzed by. After Auntie Sue's call for help, Charlie and I had hugged each other for the

Copyrighted Material

longest time and then I'd dashed back to Anna's house to pack while she booked me a ticket online. Anna, being the ace friend that she was, made me a cheese and pickle sandwich, reminded me to pack my wellies and drove me to the station. I didn't breathe a word to her about the whole 'bit of fun' convo with Charlie because . . . well, because she'd probably think I was making a fuss about nothing and also because, after me, Anna was Charlie's number-one fan and she may well have sided with him.

The way things had been left between Charlie and me bothered me a lot. But during the train journey, I'd tucked my worries aside and decided to concentrate on what had been going on at Appleby Farm. I'd called Auntie Sue from the train. Apparently, Uncle Arthur had had an accident in his tractor this morning. The tractor had overturned and he'd broken his wrist, split his head open and bruised several ribs. He was OK now, a bit shaken-up, but nothing too serious. Poor old sausage.

There was still no sign of my lift and I strained to listen for an approaching car. Nothing. I was just contemplating calling for a taxi when my mobile rang. My heart fluttered when I saw Charlie's name flash up on the screen. Thank goodness.

I slid the phone under my hair to my ear and smiled as I answered his call. 'Hey.'

'Are you there yet?'

'I'm off the train. Just waiting for a taxi.'

'On your own? In the dark? You be careful.'

My smile grew bigger at the concern in his voice. He did care about me, of course he did.

'This is Oxenholme village, Charlie,' I giggled. 'The most dangerous thing I'm likely to encounter is a lost sheep.'

'Even so . . . Freya?'

Copyrighted Material

There was something about the tone of his voice – softer, lower – that made my insides quiver. I gripped the phone tighter and swallowed. 'Yes?'

There was a pause down the line and I heard the creaking of leather, which probably meant he was on the sofa in his flat. 'I just wanted you to know that you make me very happy.'

'Ditto,' I said, smiling down the line at my big softie of a boyfriend.

'And you are a lot more to me than a bit of fun.'

His words flooded through me like warm honey. I leaned back against the cold stone wall and cradled the phone to my cheek. 'Well, that's all right, then,' I said softly. 'You mean a lot to me, too.'

A car with a rasping engine and rattling exhaust pipe came into view and flashed its headlights at me.

'Maybe when you're home . . .'

Home. My heart thumped at that. After six months, Kingsfield still didn't feel like home.

'. . . we can all go out for the day: me, you and Ollie?'

'I'd love that!' I jumped to my feet and performed a five-second tap dance.

The car, which I could see now was actually a tatty red van, came to a halt in front of me with a ratchety yank on the handbrake.

'My lift's here, Charlie. I've got to go.'

I blew him a kiss down the phone, said goodnight and slipped the phone back in my pocket, grinning like a loon. I felt so much better after talking to him. Shame he wasn't here with me now; I'd have loved to show him off to my family. Maybe next time.

The driver's door of the van opened with a creak and out stepped Eddy Hopkins, my uncle's right-hand man – quite

Copyrighted Material

literally at the moment, given his injuries – and the man who taught me to milk a cow when I was eight.

'Eddy! Gosh, what a lovely surprise!'

I sprang over to him, threw my arms around his neck and kissed his surprisingly smooth cheek.

'You're here, then.' He stepped back, holding me at arm's length, and squinted at me. I'd forgotten he wasn't one for physical contact. He had a piece of rolled-up tissue protruding from one nostril and his aftershave was eye-wateringly strong.

'Looking well, Eddy.' I beamed at him and waited for some sort of reciprocal compliment.

'You've filled out a bit,' he said, a shadow of a smile lifting one side of his face.

'Cheers.' I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help grinning. Ever the charmer, our Eddy.

He strode to the rear of the van and opened one of the doors.

'Thanks for fetching me,' I said, swallowing a chuckle at the worn-out elbows of his tweed jacket and the elastic bands around the soles of his boots, presumably to stop them flapping. Eddy was in his late fifties, he'd never been married, had a minimalist approach to anything vaguely domestic and was what you might call frugal when it came to clothing.

'I swear you were wearing those boots last time I came,' I said, shaking my head.

'Nowt wrong with these.' He inspected his footwear and shrugged. 'And I've put new elastic bands on 'em specially for you.'

He hefted my heavy rucksack onto his shoulder effortlessly and slid the bag inside.

'Get yourself in't van. Your aunt and uncle will be waiting

Copyrighted Material

up for you,' he said, nodding towards the passenger side. He pulled the tissue out of his nostril, inspected it with a grunt and shoved it in his pocket.

I yanked the handle several times before the door swung open. 'What happened to your nose?'

'Cut myself shaving, trying to rush so I wouldn't be late picking you up.'

I pressed my lips together to smother a giggle. I remembered now. He was always stubbly by noon because he shaved before going to bed instead of in the morning to save himself time when he got up.

'Well, I appreciate it. Thank you.'

The passenger seat was missing most of its upholstery and was currently occupied by a small, wiry black terrier, who turned excitedly on the spot several times with its tongue hanging out.

'Out the road, Buddy,' growled Eddy, hooking his finger through the dog's collar and pulling him out of my way.

I sat down, shut the door and did up my seatbelt. Buddy sat down too, on my lap, his face inches from mine. Eddy started up the engine – foregoing his seatbelt, I noticed – and seconds later we were on our way.

We trundled along dark country lanes towards Lovedale village and Appleby Farm for several minutes before Eddy spoke.

'Glad you're here.'

I turned to face him and tried not to inhale Buddy's hot meaty breath. There were no street lamps on this stretch of the road and only a faint glow from the dashboard to light Eddy's features, but I could see his furrowed brow.

'Uncle Arthur's OK, isn't he? I mean, apart from a few cuts and bruises, and the broken wrist?'

Copyrighted Material

Eddy sucked in air through his teeth and shook his head. 'I'm probably speaking out of turn but I dunno.' He shrugged. 'Hitting a ditch and overturning the tractor? It's not like Arthur. He knows them fields like I know me own face.'

The face you sliced into earlier with a razor? I snorted softly to myself.

'Better, probably,' he said, shooting me a flinty look.

'Do you think there's more to this accident than meets the eye, Eddy?'

The van rounded a sharp bend, Buddy dug his claws into my jeans to keep his balance and I gasped in pain. Eddy, seemingly oblivious to his passenger's anguish, sighed. 'I hope not, lass. For his sake, and your auntie's. Farming's a tough business. Arthur's got me to help him, but even so, there's a lot to do.'

I nodded. My memories of holidays spent at the farm when I was growing up were happy ones. In fact, I'd spent the happiest days of my life there, but my aunt and uncle were on the go all day long. The farm spanned 150 acres of land, mostly given over to sloping grassland where the cows grazed, with some crops grown on the flatter bits to keep the cattle going during winter when the grass didn't grow. Eddy was their only employee and for the first time since leaving Kingsfield it dawned on me that I was going to have to roll up my sleeves and muck in.

The farming calendar was pretty full on, day in, day out, seven days a week. Time off was scarce, money was in short supply and every day brought new challenges, from bad weather to sick animals. And yet Auntie Sue and Uncle Arthur were the most content people I knew and devoted to each other, even after goodness knows how many years of marriage.

Copyrighted Material

'How can I help?' I asked, as much to myself as to Eddy. It had been years since I'd milked a cow and even then I had only been playing at it. I could probably drive a tractor at a push, but I didn't fancy doing anything complicated like spraying crops. My heart sank as reality hit home: I wasn't much use to them at all, really.

Eddy chuckled. 'Oh, Sue will keep you busy. She's got a dodgy knee now, so she'll probably get you to look after the hens.'

'Right. I can do that.' One of my jobs growing up had been to collect the eggs. That would be a piece of cake.

'Veg patch probably needs looking at, too.'

'OK.' At least my experience on Charlie's allotment would come in handy.

'And the office is a bit of a state.'

I shuddered. 'Not my forte, offices, but I'll do my best.'

The next section of road was lined with street lamps as we entered the tiny village of Lovedale. Eddy indicated right just after the White Lion pub and thankfully slowed down as we turned on to a bumpy track.

The farm gate was pushed back as far as it would go against the hedge and I could just make out the Appleby Farm sign attached to the top bar.

Ahead, at the top of the track behind the cowsheds, stood the stables, and to the side of the barns sat the farmhouse. It was a moonless sky and the building itself was barely visible amongst the shadows of the night, but lights twinkled in every one of the nine windows in its front façade. I don't think I'd ever seen a building look so inviting and welcoming in my entire life.

'I'd forgotten how lovely it is,' I gasped, clutching a surprised Buddy to my chest as tears pricked at my eyes.

Eddy stopped the van in the yard. I jumped out and

Copyrighted Material

dragged my rucksack out of the back before he even had a chance to get out.

The noise of the van had woken up the cows. One or two began to moo and I could hear the swishing of straw and snorting and sniffing coming from the cowsheds as the animals protested at having their evening disturbed.

Eddy opened his window instead and I reached in and hugged him tight before he could lean away.

'Thanks for the lift, Eddy. Goodnight. See you tomorrow, I expect.'

'Damn,' he grumbled, ferreting in his pocket until he found another piece of tissue, or possibly the same piece as before. 'You've set the bleeding off again.'

I waved him off and opened the wrought-iron gate in front of the farmhouse, my fingers fumbling with the latch in my haste. A wide shaft of light suddenly illuminated the path and Auntie Sue emerged, her face beaming as she wiped her hands on her apron.

'Welcome home, lass.'

She opened her arms and I raced into them.

Copyrighted Material

Chapter 4

Auntie Sue's hug sent me straight back to my childhood. She pressed me to her bosom and I breathed her in – fresh bread and Nivea face cream – exactly as I remembered. I sighed contentedly.

'I've missed you so much, Auntie Sue,' I said, feeling ridiculously emotional all of a sudden.

She leaned back against my arms and peered at me. Two fat tears escaped from the corners of her eyes. 'Well. This *is* a blessing in disguise. I think you've grown even more beautiful in the three years since you were last here.'

'Three?' I gasped. 'It can't be, surely.'

My aunt nodded sagely. She was in her seventies, had a cloud of fine white hair, the figure of a woman who enjoyed both baking and eating, and the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen.

A pang of guilt stabbed at me as I did a mental calculation. The last time I was here must have been the summer before my parents moved to Paris. I'd come back for a few days before starting a new job. I racked my brains to remember which job it had been . . . the pub in Cornwall, that was it. The following Christmas I'd spent two days at my parents' elegant Parisian apartment and ever since then,

Copyrighted Material

I'd worked over the Christmas period – which gave me an excuse not to join them again. And my summer holidays were usually spent somewhere hot, with friends.

I'd neglected the two members of my family whom I loved the most and the fact that it had taken Uncle Arthur to be mangled underneath a tractor to get me to visit them made me feel awful.

'I'm a terrible niece,' I muttered.

'Pshh. Rubbish,' she replied briskly, dabbing at her face with the hem of her apron. Auntie Sue had shrunk, I realized. We used to be the same height, but now she had to look up at me.

'You're here now and I can't tell you how grateful we are. It'll do your uncle the world of good seeing you about the place. He's so stressed with his accident and everything. I hope we haven't put you out?'

I shook my head. 'There's nowhere I'd rather be and as luck would have it I've got the whole of the Easter weekend off anyway.'

'Is that young Freya?' Uncle Arthur's gruff voice travelled through the open door and we both laughed.

'Sure is!' I replied, breaking our hug. I planted a kiss on my aunt's soft cheek and carried my rucksack inside.

The front door led straight into the farmhouse kitchen. The room was warm and cosy, and smelled of wood smoke and baking. On one side of the room, a gleaming black Aga was tucked into an inglenook fireplace next to which two cats were curled up in a basket, soaking up the range's warmth. A huge scrubbed-pine table with benches running along its sides and a chair at each end dominated the centre of the room, and at the far side an assortment of comfy armchairs were arranged around a blazing log fire.

Wisps of dark grey hair were just visible over the back

Copyrighted Material

of the middle chair. Uncle Arthur was in prime position in front of the fire, his feet propped up on a footrest and Madge, the black and tan mongrel dog who had to be at least fifteen by now, was stretched out under his legs. I dropped a kiss on his cheek and squeezed my bottom on to his footrest so that I could see him properly. Madge nudged my leg with her nose and I scratched the top of her head.

'Blimey, look at you! Looks like you've done ten rounds in a boxing ring,' I exclaimed.

His hair had been jet black when he was younger, but it was still thick and he had bushy eyebrows to match, although one was now covered with a bandage. His left arm was in plaster and his chin was cut and bruised, but his dark eyes were still twinkly behind his glasses.

'Looks worse than it is.' He grinned. 'I'll be fine in a couple of days.'

'Are you in much pain?'

'Nooo,' he said, rather too quickly for my liking. 'I'm drugged up to the eyeballs for starters. Don't tell her indoors, though,' he chuckled and then winced, laying his plastered arm across his ribs, 'I quite like being waited on hand and foot.'

Auntie Sue tutted affectionately, bustled over to the Aga and slid the kettle on to the hotplate.

'Tea, love?' she called.

'Um . . .' I was ready for a drink, but I was shattered, too. And I knew that the pair of them would usually be in bed by now. Uncle Arthur was already in his dressing gown and pyjamas.

'Or hot milk?' she asked, selecting two mugs from an overloaded pine dresser.

'Oh, yes, please.' My eyes roamed the shelves of the dresser, stacked with crockery: pretty milk jugs hung from

Copyrighted Material

a row of hooks, Auntie Sue's 'everyday' mugs filled one shelf, cups and saucers another, and the top was lined with her collection of teapots of every shape, colour and size, from novelty cats to vintage china. I'd spent hours playing with them when I was a little girl.

'Sweet dreams special?'

'Oh, Auntie Sue, that would be perfect,' I sighed.

I looked across to see her smiling to herself. My favourite bedtime supper ever, which she used to say would guarantee me a good night's sleep, consisted of real butter on toasted homemade bread and hot milk with a sprinkling of nutmeg and a bit of sugar.

The cats stirred from their slumber and wrapped themselves around my aunt's legs as she retrieved a jug of milk from the fridge.

'All right, Benny and Björn, just a drop.'

I shook my head and chuckled, catching Uncle Arthur's eye; Auntie Sue had always had a soft spot for ABBA. 'Which is which?'

'Björn has two white socks,' said Auntie Sue. 'And Benny has three.'

'And plays piano,' Uncle Arthur hissed. We both laughed and Auntie Sue tutted.

He squeezed my hand gently and I held it up to my cheek. I caught the faint scent of cows on his skin – not as unpleasant as you might think – sweet and grassy and precisely as he had always smelled.

'Thanks for coming,' he whispered. 'It's not that we can't manage, but she needs a bit of female company. You'll cheer her up no end.'

'I hope so,' I said, biting my lip.

It looked as if they were both keen to have me for the other person's sake. I couldn't escape the feeling that

Copyrighted Material

there was more going on here than just a few cuts and bruises. OK, so Uncle Arthur wouldn't be driving a tractor any time soon, but surely Eddy could handle that side of things, or they could hire in some extra labour for a few weeks?

I opened my mouth to voice my thoughts but Uncle Arthur cut me off with a gigantic yawn. Poor thing, he looked exhausted after his traumatic day.

Auntie Sue was quick to act. 'Right then, Artie. Bedtime for you after all the excitement you've had today,' she said, brandishing a butter knife in his direction from her position at the kitchen table.

'I was only allowed to stay up until you arrived,' he said, with a wink. 'Ouch.' His hand flew to his bandaged brow. 'Must remember not to keep doing that.'

He swung his feet off the stool and I helped him to his feet. 'I haven't even heard any of your news,' he moaned and lifted up my left hand to inspect. 'But no ring yet, I see.'

'We'll catch up in the morning. Promise.' I kissed his cheek, taking care not to touch his ribs. 'Anything special you need me to do tomorrow?'

'Plenty of time for all that,' he said, batting my offer of help away with his hand. 'See you in the morning.'

I watched him go out into the hallway and towards the stairs before I dived into a plate of thickly buttered toast at the table.

'Ooh, thank you,' I breathed, taking a piping-hot mug of fragrant milk from my aunt.

'Now, then,' Auntie Sue's eyes sparkled as she tipped a generous measure of brandy into our mugs of milk and sat down at the table beside me, 'tell your Auntie Sue everything, and I mean everything.'

Copyrighted Material

*

Maybe it was the brandy or the heavy woollen blankets (Auntie Sue didn't do duvets) or perhaps it was simply that the air here was stuffed with extra oxygen. Whatever it was I slept like a log and it was nine o'clock when I climbed out of my single bed the next morning and pulled the curtain aside.

I'd like to say that a soft blue sky gave me a perfect view all the way down the valley to Lake Windermere from my bedroom window. Sadly, that was not the case. The rain had begun hammering it down by the time Auntie Sue and I had gone to bed after our catch-up, and although it had stopped now, the sky was bulging with fat low clouds that seemed to hover over the landscape, barely skimming the tops of trees and distant scattered rooftops.

Ten minutes later, I'd showered, dressed, scooped my hair up into a ponytail and was helping myself to tea from a blue-glazed teapot I'd found sitting on the Aga. There was no one about, so I slipped into my coat and wellies and took my mug outside.

I meandered down the mossy path at the front of the farmhouse, through the little cottage garden blooming with spring flowers and out through the gate.

Phwoar! I grinned to myself. What a pong! How had that unmistakeable farmyard aroma sneaked past me last night? I sipped at my tea, crossed the cobbled yard pitted with puddles and took a good, long look around me to remind myself of the farm's layout. Most of the buildings faced on to the yard: the old three-storey farmhouse, a stout sort of building made from weathered dove-grey stone, was at the heart of the farm. A couple of barns stood on one side of the house and Auntie Sue's veggie patch and orchard on the other. The cowsheds, the milking parlour and the old dairy

Copyrighted Material

opposite were built of the same stone as the farmhouse and I walked slowly past them, noticing the holes in the slate roofs. Yet despite the farm buildings' slightly tumbledown appearance, there was an irresistible charm to the old place and it warmed my heart to be back.

I paused next to the old dog kennel that had been in the yard for as long as I could remember and peered into the small field beyond, which was fenced off for the chickens. Thirty or so plump brown hens wandered around, pecking purposefully at the grass. A scruffy wooden mobile hen-house complete with windows, a ramp and pitched roof stood in the centre and behind it, a pair of wellington-clad feet were just visible between its wheels.

'Hello, Auntie Sue! How's Uncle Arthur today?'

'Morning, love!' Auntie Sue's head popped out from behind the nesting boxes. 'He's sulking in his office because I wouldn't let him come outside.'

'Oh dear.' I pulled a face. The ground floor of the farmhouse had a dining room that no one ever used and a small office where Uncle Arthur liked to spend as little time as possible. But then he didn't like being inside much, full stop.

My aunt held out a wicker basket. 'Guess what's for breakfast?'

'Fresh eggs! Yum. Would you like me to cook? I can boil them, but my poaching needs work.'

And then some. I was actually a terrible cook. My scones regularly lulled people into thinking I was a whizz in the kitchen. The truth was sadly quite different. But what I lacked in skill, I made up for in enthusiasm, which had to count for something.

'Not today,' Auntie Sue replied diplomatically. 'Anyway, we had ours hours ago.'

Copyrighted Material

So much for me coming to help; I was more like a lazy guest. That would have to change.

'You should have woken me,' I said, feeling rather sheepish. 'Never mind, I'll get straight on with some chores.'

She flapped a hand at me and looked down at her watch. 'Has that dog turned up yet?'

I turned to see Madge ambling slowly towards me.

'She's here now,' I replied.

'Watch this,' Auntie Sue chuckled.

The old dog flopped down in front of the kennel and, as if she'd rehearsed it, an escaped hen waddled past Madge and into the kennel, clucked noisily and reappeared almost straight away. The dog, with sudden stealth, sprang to her paws, stuck her head in the kennel and retrieved an egg, which she gobbled down in two seconds flat. She wagged her tail at me triumphantly and sauntered back off to the farmhouse.

Now that was what you called a fresh egg.

'Wow. Does that happen often?' I asked, shaking my head.

'Every day. Nine thirty sharp,' said Auntie Sue. 'You can set your clock by those two. Right, I'll make you some breakfast while you go on round to the stables, there's someone I think you'd like to meet.'

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued, but Auntie Sue just jerked her head in the direction of the stables and strode off, limping slightly. *Dodgy knee*, I suddenly remembered Eddy telling me last night, as I walked down towards the stables.

I used to have my own pony called Bailey years ago but I outgrew her and my uncle sold her. I'd cried myself to sleep for a week. But once I'd left school I'd only been back to the farm for a few days at a time and it hadn't

Copyrighted Material

been worth getting another. I know it was a childish sort of ambition to hold, but one day I'd have my own horse. Fact.

The stable block was further along the yard, set at a right angle to the cowsheds. I rounded the corner and came to an abrupt stop. A girl roughly my age was leading a skewbald horse out of the end stall by its head collar.

I made a whinnying noise of unbridled joy, not unhorse-like itself, and the girl looked around and beamed.

'I think I'm in love,' I squealed, virtually galloping over.

The girl scratched the horse's neck and laughed. 'Hurray, you can muck out then. This one's a right messy mare.'

She tied the horse to a wooden post and picked up a fork. Even in her waterproof jacket and scruffy jogging bottoms I could see she was gorgeous. She had one of those to-die-for complexions that looked as if she was wearing make-up even though she wasn't: olive skin that probably tanned even on a grey day in Cumbria, and naturally peach-tinted cheeks.

Jealousy is not an attractive trait, I told myself, trying to forget that I'd once spent an entire summer in Greece and had still looked like a peeled prawn at the end of it. And her hair: long, shiny and straight except for a top section that she'd gathered up in a quiff. It was probably really silky too, whereas mine . . . I reached a hand up to stroke the horse's mane. Yup, my hair was as wiry as that.

I surreptitiously tucked the end of my ponytail into the back of my jacket and hoped I'd remembered to pack my Frizz Ease. 'I would love to help, seriously – mucking out, grooming, anything. I'm Freya, by the way.'

I could barely keep my cheeks under control, my smile was so massive. A person my age *and* a horse. At Appleby Farm! I was so glad to be here. Although, of course, Uncle

Copyrighted Material