



## *Chapter One*

Lipton was quiet underneath the stars. It was quiet as the snow fell through the night; as it settled on the roof of the Isitts' barn and the bell house of the school; as it came in through the cracked upper windows that needed mending at Lipton Hall; as it cast a hush across the cobbled main street of the village, muting the few cars that passed by. It lay on the roofs of the dentist's and the doctor's surgery; it fell on Manly's, the dated ladieswear boutique, and on the Red Lion, its outdoor tables buried under mounds, its mullioned windows piled high with the stuff.

It fell on the ancient church with the kissing gate, and the graveyard with its repeated local names: Lipton, Isitt, Carr, Cooper, Bell.

It fell on the sleeping sheep, camouflaging them completely (Rosie had made Stephen laugh once, asking

where the sheep slept when it got cold. He had looked at her strangely and said, ‘In the Wooldorf, of course, where else?’ and she had taken a moment or two before she kicked him crossly in the shins). It fell on birds cosy in their nests, their heads under their wings, and settled like a sigh, piled soft and deep in the gullies and crevasses of the great towering Derbyshire hills that fringed the little town.

Even now, after a year of living there, Rosie Hopkins couldn’t get over how quiet it was in the countryside. There were birds, of course, always, singing their hearts out in the morning. One could usually hear a cock crow, and every now and then from the deeper sections of the woods would come a distant gunshot, as someone headed out to hunt rabbits (you weren’t meant to, the woods belonged to the estate, so no one ever owned up, although if you passed Jake the farmhand’s little tied cottage on a Saturday night, the smell of a very rich stew might just greet your nostrils).

But tonight, as Rosie went to mount the little narrow stairs to bed, it felt quieter than ever. There was something different about it. Her foot creaked on the step.

‘Are you coming up or what?’ came the voice from overhead.

Even though she and Stephen had lived there together now for nearly a year, Rosie still wasn’t out of the habit of calling it Lilian’s cottage. Her great-aunt,

whom she'd come up to look after when Lilian had broken her hip, had moved into a lovely local home, but they still had her over most Sundays, so Rosie felt that, even though legally she had bought the cottage, she rather had to keep it exactly as Lilian liked it. Well, it was slightly that and slightly that Lilian would sniff and raise her eyebrows when they so much as tried to introduce a new picture, so it was easier all round just to keep it as it was. Anyway, Rosie liked it too. The polished wooden floor covered in warm rugs; the fireplace with its horse brasses; the chintzy sofa piled with cushions and floral throws; the old Aga and the old-fashioned butler's sink. It was dated, but in a very soft, worn-in, comfortable way, and as she lit the wood burner (she was terrible with fires; people from miles around would come to scoff and point at her efforts, as if growing up in a house with central heating was something to be ashamed of), she never failed to feel happy and cosy there.

Stephen had the use of Peak House, which was part of his family estate, a bankrupt and crumbling seat that gave Lipton its name. Peak House was a great big scary-looking thing up on the crags. It had a lot more space, but somehow they'd just found themselves more and more at Lilian's cottage. Also, as Rosie was just about eking a living from the sweetshop and Stephen was in teacher training, they were both completely skint and Lilian's cottage was substantially easier to heat.

Stephen may have scoffed a bit at the decor, but he seemed more than happy to lie on the sofa, his sore leg, damaged in a landmine accident in Africa, propped up on Rosie's lap as they watched box sets on Lilian's ancient television. Other nights, when the picture was just too grainy, Stephen would read to her and Rosie would knit, and Stephen would tease her for making the world's longest scarf, and she would tell him to hush, he would be pleased when it turned cold, and if he wasn't quiet she would knit him a pair of long johns and make him wear them, which shut him up pretty fast.

'In a minute!' shouted Rosie up the stairs, glancing round to make sure the door was shut on the wood burner – she was always nearly causing conflagrations. She was struck by the heaviness of the air. They hadn't moved in to Lilian's downstairs bedroom, all of them keeping up the pretence that one day Lilian might want to use it again, so they kept it pristine, the bed made up, her clothes still hanging in the wardrobe. Rosie kept a shrewd nurse's eye on her eighty-seven-year-old great-aunt. Lilian liked to complain about the home, but Rosie could see, in the rosiness of her cheeks (Lilian took great pride in her excellent complexion) and her slight weight gain (this, by contrast, made her utterly furious), that actually, living somewhere with help on hand all the time, and company, was just what Lilian needed. She had lasted a long time by herself in her own home, trying to pretend

to the world at large that everything was absolutely fine, when clearly it wasn't. She might complain, but it was clear that it was a weight off her shoulders.

So they continued to sleep in the little attic, adapted years before as a spare bedroom for Lilian's brothers. It was clean and bare, with views on one side of the great craggy Derbyshire fells, and on the other of Lilian's garden, the herb and vegetable patches tended with surprising care by Stephen, the rose bower trimmed from time to time by Mr Isitt, the local dairy farmer.

It was utterly freezing up in the unheated attic. Rosie saw with a smile that Stephen was already in bed, tucked in tightly under the sheets, blankets and thick eiderdown (Lilian thought duvets were a modern intrusion for lazy people; Rosie couldn't deny there was a certain comfort in being tucked in tight with hospital corners, plus it was much harder for your other half to steal the covers).

'Hurry up,' he said.

'Oh good,' said Rosie. 'You've warmed up one side. Now can you shift to the other side, please?'

The shape under the covers was unmoved.

'Not a chance,' it said. 'It's brass monkey bollocks up here.'

'Thank goodness I share my bed with a gentleman,' said Rosie. 'Move! And anyway, that's my side.'

'It is NOT your side. This is the window side, which

you insisted, when we were stifling up here in the summer, was making you too hot so you needed the other side.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Rosie, coming round the far end of the large sleigh bed. 'Now budge.'

'No!'

'Budge!'

'NO!'

Rosie began to wrestle with him, avoiding, as ever, his weaker left leg, until eventually Stephen suggested that if she really needed warming up, he had a plan, and she found that she liked that plan.

Afterwards, now cosy (as long as her feet didn't stray to the far regions of the mattress; if she didn't think it would turn Stephen off for ever, she would have worn bed socks), she felt herself drifting off to sleep, or she would have done if Stephen hadn't been lying so rigid next to her. He was pretending to be asleep, but she wasn't fooled for a second.

Still distracted by the heavy weather, she turned round to face him in the moonlight. Rosie liked to see the moon, and the countryside was so dark they rarely closed the curtains, a novelty she was so keen on it made Stephen laugh, as if it were a house feature. Stephen looked back at her. Rosie had curly black hair that she was always trying to wrestle into straight submission, but he loved it when it curled, as it did now, wild and cloudy around her face. Her eyes were direct

and green, her face freckled. Her skin glowed pale, her curvy body lit by the moonlight. He couldn't resist running his hand round her waist to her generous hips. He could never understand for a minute why Rosie worried about her weight, when her body was so voluptuous and lovely.

'Mm,' he said.

'What's up with you?' asked Rosie.

'I'm fine,' said Stephen. 'And don't look at me. That wasn't an "I'm fine" I'm fine. That was an "actually I am TOTALLY fine" I'm fine.'

'That one's even worse.'

'Ssh.'

Rosie glanced towards the window.

'It's weird out there.'

'That's what you said the night you heard the owl.'

'Come on, owls are really scary.'

'As opposed to drive-by shootings in London?'

'Shut it.' Rosie did her proper cockney voice that rarely failed to make him laugh, but she could see in the light, as her fingers traced his strong brow, his thick dark hair flopping on his forehead, his long eyelashes, that he wasn't even smiling.

'It's just kids.'

'I know.'

Stephen had been waiting for a job to come free at the local school for a while. He had only ever taught overseas, so had been considered underqualified and sent off

to do his time in various schools, including one in central Derby that had taught him a bit, but nonetheless he was still nervous about tomorrow.

‘So what are you worried about?’

‘Because I’m not just their new teacher, am I? They all know who I am.’

Stephen was from the local family of landed gentry. Even though he’d rejected everything they stood for, and broken from his parents – he had now made up with his mother, after his father had died of a heart attack – his every doing was subject to constant speculation in the village. Rosie also got her fair share of snotty gossip for going out with him, as several local worthies had had him in mind for their own daughters, but she kept this from him as much as possible.

‘Well that’s good,’ she argued. ‘All the young mums fancy you and all the kids think you’re Bruce Wayne.’

‘Or they all still think I’m a sulky pretentious teen,’ said Stephen sorrowfully.

‘Well that’s okay too,’ said Rosie. ‘You’ll get on well with the kids.’

She could tell he was still wearing the brooding expression.

‘We should definitely have had this conversation before we had sex,’ she said. ‘Then the relaxing bit could have come later.’

The moonlight caught a glint in his eye.

‘Well, maybe ...’



She grinned at him.

‘You know, for a wounded war dog, the Right Hon. Lipton, you still have some moves . . .’

Just as he moved towards her, however, she leapt up out of bed.

‘Snow!’ she shouted. ‘Look at the snow!’

Stephen turned his head and groaned.

‘Oh no,’ he said.

‘Look at it!’ said Rosie, heedless of the cold. ‘Just look at it!’

The previous winter in Lipton, after an early flurry, it had simply rained all winter; they had had hardly any snow at all. Now here it was, great big fat flakes falling softly all down the road, quickly covering it with a blanket of white.

‘It’s settling!’ shouted Rosie.

‘Of course it’s settling,’ said Stephen. ‘This is the Peak District, not Dubai.’

Nonetheless, with a sigh of resignation, he got up and pulled the eiderdown off the bed and padded across the cold wooden floor to Rosie, wrapping them both up in it. The snow flurried and danced in the air, the stars peeking out between the flakes, the mountains great dark looming silhouettes in the distance.

‘I’ve never seen snow like this,’ said Rosie. ‘Well, not that’s lasted.’

‘It’s bad,’ said Stephen soberly. ‘It’s very early. Lambing was late this year; they’ll need looking out for.

And no one can get around. It's treacherous for the old folks; they don't clear the roads up here, you know. People get trapped for weeks. We're barely stocked up, and we're in town.'

Rosie blinked. She'd never thought of snow as a serious matter before. In Hackney it was five minutes of prettiness that bunged up all the trains then degenerated quickly into mucky, splashy roads, dog poo smeared into sleet and big grey slushy puddles. This silent remaking of the world filled her with awe.

'If it blocks the pass road . . . well, that's when we all have to resort to cannibalism,' said Stephen, baring his teeth in the moonlight.

'Well I love it,' she whispered. 'Jake's going to drop us off some wood, he said.'

'Ahem,' said Stephen, coughing.

'What?'

'Well,' said Stephen, 'he'll probably be nicking it from somewhere that belongs to my family in the first place.'

'It's just ridiculous that a family owns a whole wood,' said Rosie.

'Ridiculous or not, I can get Laird to deliver it for nothing,' said Stephen. 'Seeing as it's, you know. Ours.'

'Yeah yeah yeah. Because your great-grandad times a jillion shagged a princess by accident,' said Rosie, whose interest in Stephen's ancestry was hazy. 'Whatever.'

‘Whatever,’ said Stephen, kissing her soft scented shoulder, ‘means a warm, cosy house. Unlike this icebox. Come come, my love. Back to bed.’



## Chapter Two

Five miles away, Lilian slept in a single bed in a neat little room filled with her pictures and knick-knacks, snoring gently under a duvet she professed to despise. She dreamed, as she often did, of the past: of a boy with nut-brown eyes and curly hair, and a ready smile and a farmer's tan, who made her laugh when she was happy and comforted her when she was sad, and all the while the silent snow fell and wrapped itself around the house like a blanket, like soft cotton wool covering the well-heated building.

*She was walking down the road at the end of a day in the sweetshop, a busy Friday when the men got paid and the ration books were out. The Red Lion would be packed tonight. The harvest sun was hanging heavy in the sky, bathing everything in soft gold, and she was going to post a letter to Neddy, not yet dead. In the distance, his curly hair springing up, his face wiped*

*clean after a day in the fields with the sheep, she could see Henry, waving to her excitedly, and all she could feel was the joy bubbling up in her as she prepared to skip down to meet him, to let him walk her home, even though 'home' was the cottage next to the sweetshop. They liked to take a circuitous route. The older folk of the village used to smile to see the two of them, their heads together. That was what they would do, just as soon as . . .*

Lilian had this dream often. It was real, she knew; Henry did used to meet her from work, trying his best to wash in the stream so he wasn't too filthy. And they had had happy times, before she'd lost Ned, her brother. She treasured them all, because in their short time together there hadn't been enough of them. She remembered how at school he used to pull her pigtails and she had thought he was being annoying. How he used to hang around the sweetshop, buying caramels for her because they were her favourites. How the back of his neck turned brown in the sun, and how much she wanted to caress it; the warm, sweet hay smell of him when he was near her; his long fingers. The way he held her close when her brother died and made her feel that everything would be all right; the plans they had made. And then he had been caught out: a girl he had slept with before, her erstwhile best friend Ida Delia, had turned up pregnant, and that was the end of everything. And then his call-up papers . . . and the following year, the dreaded telegram. That Lilian had had to hear about second-hand.

She didn't like to focus on that. She liked to keep her

memories deeply hidden, like pearls, taking them out to polish them. His easy, gangling stride; the way he used to put her on the front of his bike and cycle down to the fields to feed the lambs, her dark hair whipping in the wind. The taste of a shared bottle of brown ale, and some butter humbugs, eaten in the sunny churchyard.

But her dreams were never like that. In her dream – the same one, repeated so often – she could never reach him; never make herself walk forward to take his hand. He would be waving and she could not get to him, and she would wake up frustrated, and alone.



Ninety miles away, a man called Edward Boyd ensured that all the lights were off in the house, double-locked the door and made a final check on the spare room – he liked to be careful about everything, he couldn't sleep otherwise, plus the old man was always wandering off. Upstairs, his wife, Doreen, was already fast asleep and snoring; the whole house, in fact, was asleep. Well, young Ian wasn't home yet, but he did keep these funny hours. It was odd, Edward had spent so long comforting Doreen when Ian had left home – and the girls, of course, but it was Ian whom Doreen had mourned the most – and now here he was, couldn't find a job in Manchester, so he was back living at home.

Edward didn't begrudge it – and Dor was delighted – but he found it odd. In his day he'd left as soon as he

could and never gone back. He'd been so proud to buy the big house – as manager of the local building society, he'd explained to Dor, he should live smartly in the community, and the Grange was as smart as it got (it wasn't called the Grange then; it was plain old 39 Cormlett Drive, but Edward liked a name on a house, so the Grange it became). Of course he hadn't foreseen (though Doreen clearly had) that with its high ceilings and its granny flat it would be a perfect place for the children to come back to, and his elderly father to move into, so now he felt rather like the manager of a hotel, but that was the problem with being responsible – everyone just assumed you would do it. He checked the heavy bolt of the back door again. Yup, sorted. The house was still. He could risk going to bed.

Edward was not a man who liked risk.



‘Good morning!’

Rosie had made poached eggs. She didn't find it easy. Poached eggs, as far as she was concerned, meant love. As far as Stephen was concerned they meant a shocking waste of an egg. He looked at them in perturbation.

‘Ugh, these eggs have skin.’

‘You're not at boarding school now,’ warned Rosie. ‘They're lovely! Eat them. You need a good breakfast.’

Stephen grumbled, still cross at the weather. But Rosie had woken with the lark, lying on her back in the

big attic room, wondering at the lovely pattern of white light that danced frostily across the ceiling. She felt excited, like it was Christmas, even though it had never once snowed at Christmas during her childhood. She had always felt cheated by those adverts that insisted that it would; that a Christmas without snow was somehow lacking.

But now here it was: November, and snow was here already! She wondered if it was too early to go and get a Christmas tree. Probably. She wondered if Stephen would get one from his land, like last year. What a lovely thing that had been. They had gone mad and got it far too big for the little cottage, so they had had to leave the staircase to the attic door down all the time, which meant they had to slide past the stairs to get to the kitchen and basically climb a tree to get to bed at night. The intense scent of the wild pine invaded everything, until Rosie had felt that she was sleeping in a forest. It had been wonderful.

She had already stoked the fire – they didn't really have enough money for it to be on all day, but Rosie figured they could make an exception for the first day of snow – and had peeked her head out into the garden.

'Close the door!' barked Stephen, trying to fill up on toast and wondering if he could slip the eggs into his pyjama pockets and dispose of them later.

'Just a sec,' said Rosie. She couldn't resist it; she slipped into her special wellington boots with the little



sweets printed on the lining – a peace offering from Stephen’s mother – and leapt out into the virgin snow, hopping about like a child.

Stephen watched her through the window. Even though Rosie had told him a million times that she’d had a happy childhood – that she and Angie (her mother, very young when she’d had her) and her younger brother Pip (who now lived in Australia; Angie had joined him and was looking after Pip’s three children, who according to Rosie were wholly terrifying) had had a good time, growing up in a council flat without a garden, eating fish fingers in front of the television, catching the bus to a school that had one high-fenced concrete play area and not a blade of grass; even though she, on balance, had probably had a better childhood than he himself had had, isolated, and butting heads with his father, his mother always busy with her dogs and the crumbling, creaking house, and money troubles at every turn – Stephen still enjoyed seeing her take pleasure in her new life.

He knew Rosie had grown up poor, but she had never seemed to feel it; she had related to him without embarrassment how one year Angie had had absolutely no money and had resorted to wrapping everything in the house in cheap paper – toothbrushes, combs, ashtrays, forks, individual Quality Street – and leaving it all under the tree, which had led to much joy and jubilation as Pip and Rosie had exuberantly torn off all the packaging, breathless at the sheer mound of gifts and display of

plenty, and caring nothing for what lay within. Perhaps it was because no one she knew had much, whereas the schools he had had to go to had made him always aware of the gulf.

Anyway, he relished the sheer joy she got from things he had always taken for granted – a garden, for one. He liked working in there too, growing things, providing the odd stunted lettuce or minuscule carrot.

However happy Rosie's childhood, though, she was certainly adding to her enjoyment of life now, as she played hopscotch in her pyjamas, the daft wellingtons flying. Stephen finished the last of his coffee with a gulp, then took advantage of Rosie's absence to hurl the poached eggs in the bin before the cold drove her inside again. Although, he reflected on seeing her delighted face, obviously she was now just going to think he adored poached eggs and make them three times a week.



‘Do you want me to make you a packed lunch?’ said Rosie as she prepared to open up early – catching the passing school traffic was always lucrative.

Stephen made a face.

‘I’m not GOING to school, I am a teacher,’ he said grumpily. Rosie knew better than to try and talk him out of a mood like this. His handsome face looked a little taut and nervous. For a man who had walked into war zones unprotected; who had worked in some of the most

dangerous regions on earth, it was quite amazing that he was so anxious about a clutch of eight-year-olds. But wisely she said nothing, instead kissing him lightly on the nose.

Stephen opened the front door – which opened directly on to the cobbled main street, still thick with snow but showing a couple of Land Rover tracks and some hoofprints – and sniffed. The snow was still falling.

‘Half the kids won’t be in,’ he said. ‘They’ll be needed on the farm, or their parents won’t send them in case it doesn’t let up and they can’t get them home.’

‘Excellent,’ said Rosie. ‘Well, you inspire the hell out of the ones who do make it.’

Stephen smiled, shrugged on his heavy waxed jacket and stepped out into the snow.

‘AHEM,’ said Rosie, until he came back inside and kissed her firmly on her plump pink mouth.

‘That’s better,’ she said. ‘I always fancied my teachers anyway.’

‘Your PRIMARY teachers?’ said Stephen, horrified.

‘Oh God, no,’ said Rosie.

‘Well that’s a relief,’ said Stephen. ‘One CRB check was quite enough, thank you.’

Suddenly he grabbed her face and gave her another kiss.

‘I love it when you make me breakfast,’ he said. Rosie smiled up at him.

‘Well don’t expect poached eggs every day.’

‘A solitary piece of toast,’ said Stephen, pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear, ‘is like a feast to me. Sorry I’m a bit cranky and nervous.’

‘I like you cranky and nervous,’ said Rosie, kissing him again. ‘Anything else would make me suspicious.’

Stephen laughed, extricated himself from the kiss before it threatened to turn more serious, tightened up his heavy boots, then tramped off down the road, which was slowly beginning to fill up with people. The bakery down by the war memorial was already open and doing a brisk business; Malik’s Spar, of course, would have been getting the daily papers in since 6 a.m.

Rosie looked at the falling flakes and the pale blue early light. She would need to get moving herself. She watched Stephen’s tall figure limping only slightly down the cobbled street, then lifted the tea towel she was still holding and waved it at him.



At 8.30, she unlocked the door of Hopkins’ Sweetshop and Confectionery, the sign to which had been over the door now for nearly ninety years, give or take something of an interregnum when Lilian hadn’t been able to manage on her own.

Rosie, sent up from London to close the place down and arrange care for Lilian, had instead completely fallen in love with it, and had ended up restoring it to its former glory. She still used the old pre-decimal till (with a card

reader on the side), and had kept the great glass apothecary jars, filled to the brim with favourites old and new: flying saucers, barley sugar, lemon sherbets, lime sherbets, melon sherbets, chocolate peanuts (all the peanut candies Rosie now kept on a side shelf, like dynamite, to avoid the possibility of them mixing with another sweet and affecting an allergic child, something Lilian thought was modern nonsense simply, Rosie knew as a nurse, because she hadn't ever seen it happen).

The old wooden shelves with the library ladder that swung along them held the less popular and out-of-fashion items: travel sweets, humbugs, jujubes, jawbreakers, rhubarb and custards, rosy apples and fairy satins; further down were the sharp, sour flavours, the branded jellies and the soft flumpish marshmallow varieties popular with their younger clientele.

There were tightly packed rows of mints and gums, and of course a traditional selection of chocolate bars, excepting Topics, which Lilian had taken against in a fit the previous summer; despite Rosie insisting that they were the most innocuous of chocolate bars, she had never been able to stock them again.

The old advertisements – cleaned up and polished, if they were tin – still lined the walls; for Cadbury's Cocoa, and Dairy Milk, all with healthy apple-cheeked children wearing purple, or skipping, with large blue eyes and extravagant hats.

The bell above the door, taken apart, degunked and

cleaned, now made a healthy ting when rung, which it did now. Rosie, distracted with counting change from the till, hardly glanced up until she saw who it was.

‘Good morning, Edison!’

Edison was the son of Hester and Arthur Felling-Jackson. His mother was terribly up on all the latest fads in childcare, which meant she had been utterly horrified when he had befriended Rosie, with her refined sugary ways (although not too horrified to let Rosie take care of him whenever she was out at yoga classes). This morning he was wearing a coat, with an ethnic scarf wrapped tightly around the bottom half of his face, nearly coming up to his glasses, and the kind of ridiculous hat people bought when experimenting with substances at music festivals. Rosie wished Hester would just let him wear clothes like the other kids, it might help him make a friend. Plus, it made him a little difficult to understand.

‘How’s your mum doing?’

Edison’s mother was pregnant again. She had announced this by sending a round-robin email declaring that she was ‘with Mother Gaia’, so no one had known what she meant until she started appearing with a noticeable bump. It was difficult to tell how pregnant she was, however, as she had started pushing out her stomach and huffing and groaning from about two months on, so it seemed to Rosie she had now been pregnant for about two and a half years.

Edison sighed. He was a very literal child.

‘I don’t want to watch.’

‘You don’t want to watch what?’

‘I don’t want to watch the baby coming out.’

Rosie raised an eyebrow.

‘Well that’s okay,’ she said, her hand going out instinctively to the strawberry bootlaces she knew he loved. ‘I’m sure Hester won’t make you if you don’t want to.’

Edison looked at the floor.

‘She says I need to understand Patacky.’

‘Patacky?’

‘Why men are naughty to women ALL THE TIME.’

Rosie thought for a bit. It was still early. She sipped the coffee she’d brought in in her special Scrabble mug.

‘Do you mean “patriarchy”?’

‘Yes!’ said Edison. ‘That’s what I said.’

‘So she’s going to make you watch . . . hmm.’

Rosie decided under the circumstances just to get back to organising her new line of chocolate animals.

‘Did you know babies come out of baginas?’ said Edison.

‘I did know that,’ said Rosie, although she also knew that her elder niece Kelly referred to it as a foofoo. She supposed Hester’s way made more sense.

Edison sighed sadly.

‘Are you going to have a baby?’ he asked. ‘Out of your bagina?’

Rosie nearly dropped some of the chocolate animals.

‘Well if I ever do,’ she said, ‘I promise you don’t have to watch.’

‘Good,’ said Edison. He glanced at the chocolate animals.

‘No,’ said Rosie. ‘It’s too early. Edison, can I ask you a favour?’

Edison frowned.

‘Do I have to go on a march?’

‘No.’

‘Okay.’

Rosie bent down. He was getting taller, she noticed, and needed a haircut. His glasses were smeared. She didn’t quite understand why cleaning Edison’s glasses was against Hester’s principles, but she took them off him and set about with a wipe.

‘Now, do you know what’s happening at school today?’

Edison shrugged.

‘Some kids will be mean to me because of my superior intlechew?’

‘Uhm, possibly,’ said Rosie. ‘Learn to clean your own glasses, please.’

She handed them back to him and he blinked, looking surprised at how clear the world seemed.

‘No,’ said Rosie. ‘You have a new teacher starting.’

‘Oh yes!’ said Edison. ‘Mr Lakeman. He hops. Does he hit people with his stick?’

‘Is that what you think?’ said Rosie, appalled. ‘No. He has to use the stick to walk sometimes.’



‘It’s not a hitting stick?’

‘Edison, you have never been hit in your life. You have to stop worrying about things.’

Edison’s brow furrowed.

‘It’s a very big stick.’

‘Can we forget about the stick, please? All I was going to say is, it’s his first day. Do you remember your first day at school?’

‘Every day is like my first day,’ said Edison, sadly.

‘Okay,’ said Rosie. ‘Well, it’s Ste . . . Mr Lakeman’s first day. So can you be very nice and kind to him, please?’

‘I’m always nice to teachers,’ said Edison in surprise. ‘Even when they say, “PLEASE put your hand down, Edison, I think we’ve all heard enough now.”’ He did a surprisingly accurate imitation of Mrs Archer, Stephen’s predecessor. Rosie smiled.

‘Okay, good,’ she said. ‘He’s lucky to have you in his class.’

There were only two classes at the little village school, under and over sevens, with around fifteen children in each. The local council talked from time to time about bussing them out to Carningford, the nearest town, but the village was dead set against it. The school house, next to the church, dated back to Victorian times and had high windows and a pitched roof with a bell, and two entrances with ‘Boys’ and ‘Girls’ carved in stone. There was a hopscotch outline painted on the playground concrete and a Portakabin for music and art, i.e. making

gigantic amounts of noise and mess. Playtime could be heard all the way up the main street.

Rosie compared it, sometimes wistfully, to the school she had gone to in London, which had had a locking door and a tiny playground and hundreds of huge kids everywhere kicking out at other kids. Here, the great hills cast shadows in the winter sunlight and the children tore out at the end of the day in their blue sweatshirts, satchels flying, charging home to run about with the friends they'd known all their lives, on farms or big meadows. Rosie wished Edison realised what a lovely place it was to grow up.



The phone rang in the shop. They had kept the original, with the heavy old rotary dial. Lilian didn't want to get rid of it, which meant that whenever Rosie wanted to call someone, she always did it on her mobile phone for the speaker, and that was annoying because Lipton's signal was erratic to say the least. In fact, she thought, that was probably Lilian now. She'd got her a mobile phone with enormous buttons that didn't do anything except make phone calls. The shop was speed dial 1, and the price plan she was on allowed free local calls. This meant in practice that quite often Lilian would just call and leave her phone on speaker, occasionally chipping in with her remarks on the business of the shop. Newcomers to the village found the disembodied voice rather alarming,

particularly when it was recommending them which liquorice to buy or telling Rosie off for over-ordering watermelon-flavoured candy that nobody liked. But everyone else was used to it; it was just Lilian, and most people had a friendly word for her as they came in and out.

‘Hey,’ said Rosie, casually. There was static on the line, and somebody yelling. Somebody yelling down the phone was not at all uncommon; it meant that her mother, Angie, was phoning from Australia. As far as Rosie could ascertain, her brother Pip’s three unruly children used any instance of Angie being distracted to attempt to slaughter each other with kitchen knives.

‘G’day,’ said Angie, who had adopted an unaccountable Australian accent despite only having lived there for two years.

‘Hi, Mum,’ said Rosie, glancing at her watch. ‘Isn’t it, like, ten p.m. there?’

‘Yup.’

‘Why are the children still up? You never let me and Pip stay up.’

‘Oh, you know . . .’

‘Have they been locking you in the linen cupboard again? Mum, you HAVE to get tough with them.’

‘It’s three against one,’ said her mother. ‘And Desleigh thinks they’re fine.’

Rosie didn’t know her sister-in-law very well, just that she worked long hours and when she wasn’t working she

liked a lot of what she called ‘me time’, which seemed to involve Angie being left with the children at weekends whilst Desleigh had spa treatments.

‘So,’ said her mother, ‘I was thinking. About Christmas?’

‘We can’t, Mum,’ said Rosie sadly. She would have loved to go to Sydney to see her family, but they were limited to Stephen’s holidays, and the shop couldn’t run itself and they couldn’t really afford the tickets and . . .

‘We’re coming!’

Rosie swallowed hard.

‘You’re what?’

‘We’re coming. We’re all coming to have Christmas in Lipton. And to see you and Lilian!’

‘ALL of you?’

‘Yis!’

Rosie paused for merely a millisecond as the huge and complex implications of doing this suddenly raced across her brain. Not a single sensible response presented itself, but all the myriad problems were completely overshadowed by her desperate desire to see her family.

‘That is a BRILLIANT idea,’ she said.



Rosie spent the rest of the morning serving customers in a daze, and got the red and black kola cubes mixed up twice. She was desperate to see her mother; she had felt so abandoned when Angie had left the country. On the

other hand, what were they going to do with Shane, Kelly and Meridian in Lipton? They were used to swimming pools and beach parties and amazing fish caught fresh from the sea ... It was entirely possible that it would rain here for three weeks solid like it had last Christmas, and unless you liked wet-weather hiking, or going to see the new Waitrose in Derby, there really wasn't a massive amount going on. By which, she realised, she meant nothing going on. This was the country, it was quiet; her mother was always going on about all the amazing things Sydney had to offer, and the fabulous weather and ...

Rosie was just working herself up into a bit of a state when the door tinged and Lady Lipton walked in. She and Rosie had always had something of a tricky relationship, although Henrietta was a dear friend of Lilian's, and of course she was Stephen's mother, so Rosie always felt she should make more of an effort. Before Stephen had gone off to work in Africa, he had had a terrible row with his father and his mother had taken his father's side. While Stephen was in the military hospital in Africa, his father had had a heart attack and died. Stephen's relationship with his mother had been very up and down ever since.

Today, Lady Lipton was looking even more imperious than normal.

'Cough drops?' said Rosie promptly, even though she knew that Lady Lipton fed them to her dogs, which she

shouldn't really do. A flash of panic grabbed at her: what if Lady Lipton didn't like Angie? Angie had absolutely no problem telling people exactly what she thought of them, and if she believed this woman wasn't being nice to her daughter, there was no telling what she would do. And, thought Rosie with a sinking heart, how would Stephen behave? She loved him with every fibre of her being, but he wasn't like her ex, Gerard, who liked to please and get along with everyone. Stephen's family had been always been a bit wobbly, and joining in communal games and meals would not be the kind of thing he would want to do at all . . . Oh Lord.

'What's the matter with you?' said Lady Lipton. 'You look like someone's just thrown up on your slippers. Are you pregnant?'

Sometimes, thought Rosie, living in a small village where everybody knew everybody else's business was not at all what it was cracked up to be, especially when that knowledge was wrong.

'No,' she said.

'Oh, good,' said Lady Lipton, without indicating whether this was because she didn't approve of Rosie being with her boy. 'Now listen. Wonderful news! Bran's had a litter!'

'I thought he was a boy dog.'

Lady Lipton looked at her scornfully.

'He's SIRED a litter.'

'So, more cough drops then?'

‘And,’ went on Lady Lipton, ‘I’m giving one to you and Stephen. As a Christmas present.’

‘I thought you couldn’t give dogs as Christmas presents,’ said Rosie, shocked.

‘Yes, it’s political correctness gone mad,’ said Lady Lipton, which was her stock response to literally anything on earth that wasn’t exactly how it had been when she was eleven years old. ‘Anyway, would you prefer a dog or a bitch?’

‘But we don’t have space for a dog!’ said Rosie. ‘Or time to look after it, or . . .’

Lady Lipton looked at her as if completely incapable of understanding how a person could not want a dog – which was, indeed, exactly her state of mind. Her face clouded over. Rosie felt she’d said something akin to ‘I eat babies.’

‘Well, perhaps I’ll mention it to Stephen,’ said Lady Lipton stiffly.

Rosie had run out of steam.

‘Of course,’ she said meekly, bagging up the cough drops.

It wasn’t, she thought, as the door banged heavily behind her, that she didn’t like dogs; of course she did. But she’d grown up without any pets at all, not even a goldfish, as they didn’t really have anywhere to keep it, and the dogs she was familiar with were one or two really dangerous-looking Staffies on the estate, dogs whose owners swaggered up and down with them, letting them

shit in the middle of the street, then eyeing passers-by as if daring them to suggest they clean it up. And the idea of having their little house filled with a big dog – Bran was undeniably a big dog – who would make Lilian’s nice things dirty and put muddy pawprints everywhere and need endless walks and those cans of stinky food and ... Rosie sighed. Oh, as well as three strange Australian children in the house. She had suddenly stopped looking forward to Christmas quite so much.



She was slightly cheered by her friend and colleague Tina arriving with six boxes of candy canes.

‘I thought we could hang them all round the door frame,’ said Tina. ‘Start to make the place look Christmassy.’

‘Yes,’ said Rosie. Then she frowned. ‘Wouldn’t that be basically inciting children to nick ’em?’

‘It’s Christmas,’ said Tina. ‘I think we can probably lose a few to sticky fingers. Oh, and let’s get the super-duper expensive chocs, the really crazy Belgian ones. In boxes.’

‘Why? Do people like those in for Christmas?’

‘It’s not a question of like,’ said Tina. ‘The nearest supermarket is an hour away and shuts early on Christmas Eve. If we stay open right up to the very last minute, we’ll be able to sell every single piece of stock in the shop, no matter what we charge, to lazy people, or



farmers who don't get the chance to leave their farms before then. You see it every year. It's what keeps the boutique afloat too.'

'You're an evil business genius,' said Rosie, leafing through the catalogue. 'I don't know why you stay with me instead of going on *The Apprentice*.'

Tina smiled shyly and blushed a little bit.

'Are you staying here for Christmas?' asked Rosie. Actually, it was a bit of a daft question round here; of course they were. It was different in London, everyone from their own places, going home to their extended families. London emptied out at Christmas time, leaving the few stray locals born and bred, plus lots of people who didn't celebrate it anyway. When Rosie told people here that shops and cafés in London were open on Christmas Day, they looked at her like she was a heathen Martian.

'Yes,' said Tina. 'Jake's coming over.'

Jake was the handsome local farmhand Tina had fallen for last year. He was something of a well-known rake about town, who'd always liked the girls – and they'd liked him back – and no one was more surprised than Jake himself how hard he'd fallen for her, a single mother of twins, in return.

'So it'll be us and my mum, you know, and Kent and Emily, and Jake's mum and dad. It'll be lovely and we'll have a big lunch down at my mum and dad's – my mum does everything, she loves cooking for Christmas. All I

have to do is watch the kids open their presents, get drunk and watch telly.’

‘That sounds BRILLIANT,’ said Rosie enviously. Then she explained her own plans. ‘It is wonderful they’re coming,’ she said. ‘I’m just a bit worried about what we’ll all do, where we’ll fit . . . ’

‘No, it’ll be great!’ said Tina, who lived two streets away from her mother and wished they were closer.

‘I don’t know what Stephen will think, though,’ added Rosie. ‘Plus, we’ll have to see his mother, and—’

‘It’ll be fantastic!’ said Tina. ‘It’s nice to have children at Christmas. Can’t you have it up at the big house?’

‘Hmm,’ said Rosie. ‘I don’t think so. Shane and Meridian will have broken the lot by first kick.’

‘Don’t worry so much,’ said Tina. ‘It’ll be fine.’

‘You think?’



Rosie meant to tell Stephen straight away that night, but he looked so happy and full of his own news that she made him tea in front of the fire instead.

‘How was it?’

‘Amazing!’ he said. ‘They were great. So keen and nice and of course I know half of them. They all wanted to know what happened to my leg.’

‘Did you tell them?’

‘Of course I told them, what did you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Rosie. ‘I might have been tempted

to tell them I hurt it in an intergalactic space raid to impress them.'

Stephen lifted his cup of tea.

'That didn't occur to me. Anyway, I told them, so they won't worry about it. And also, I wanted them to see the lengths some kids in this world have to go to to get an education. How lucky they are.'

'No kid ever thinks they're lucky,' mused Rosie.

'Some adults do,' said Stephen, looking at her for a second, until she smiled, her worries forgotten. She'd tell him later, she thought.

'Oh, and I almost forgot!' said Stephen, his face lighting up. 'Mother says we can have one of Bran's pups when they come!'

'I know,' said Rosie. 'She told me.'

Stephen looked at her expression.

'This is amazing!' he said. 'They're worth a fortune, Bran's pups. He's a wonderful working dog.'

'Where are we going to put a gigantic dog?' said Rosie, glancing round the cosy little room, the logs crackling in the fireplace, the light dancing in the old brasses.

Stephen shrugged. 'Well, it'll just go where we go, won't it. And it's not like we'll be here for ever.'

Rosie looked up in surprise.

'Why, do you have a plan?'

'No,' he said. 'But, you know, it's not ideal, is it?'

'It's lovely, and five seconds from our jobs,' said Rosie. 'Seems pretty ideal to me.'

‘Yes, but that’s because you grew up in a box.’

‘You are SUCH a disgusting snob,’ said Rosie.

‘I know,’ said Stephen. ‘That’s why you love me and the dog so much.’