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Jill Mansell

maybe
this time



maybe
this
time

By Jill Mansell

Maybe This Time
This Could Change Everything
Meet Me At Beachcomber Bay
You And Me, Always
Three Amazing Things About You
The Unpredictable Consequences Of Love
Don't Want To Miss A Thing
A Walk In The Park
To The Moon And Back
Take A Chance On Me
Rumour Has It
An Offer You Can't Refuse
Thinking Of You
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Head Over Heels
Mixed Doubles
Perfect Timing
Fast Friends
Solo
Kiss
Sheer Mischief
Open House
Two's Company

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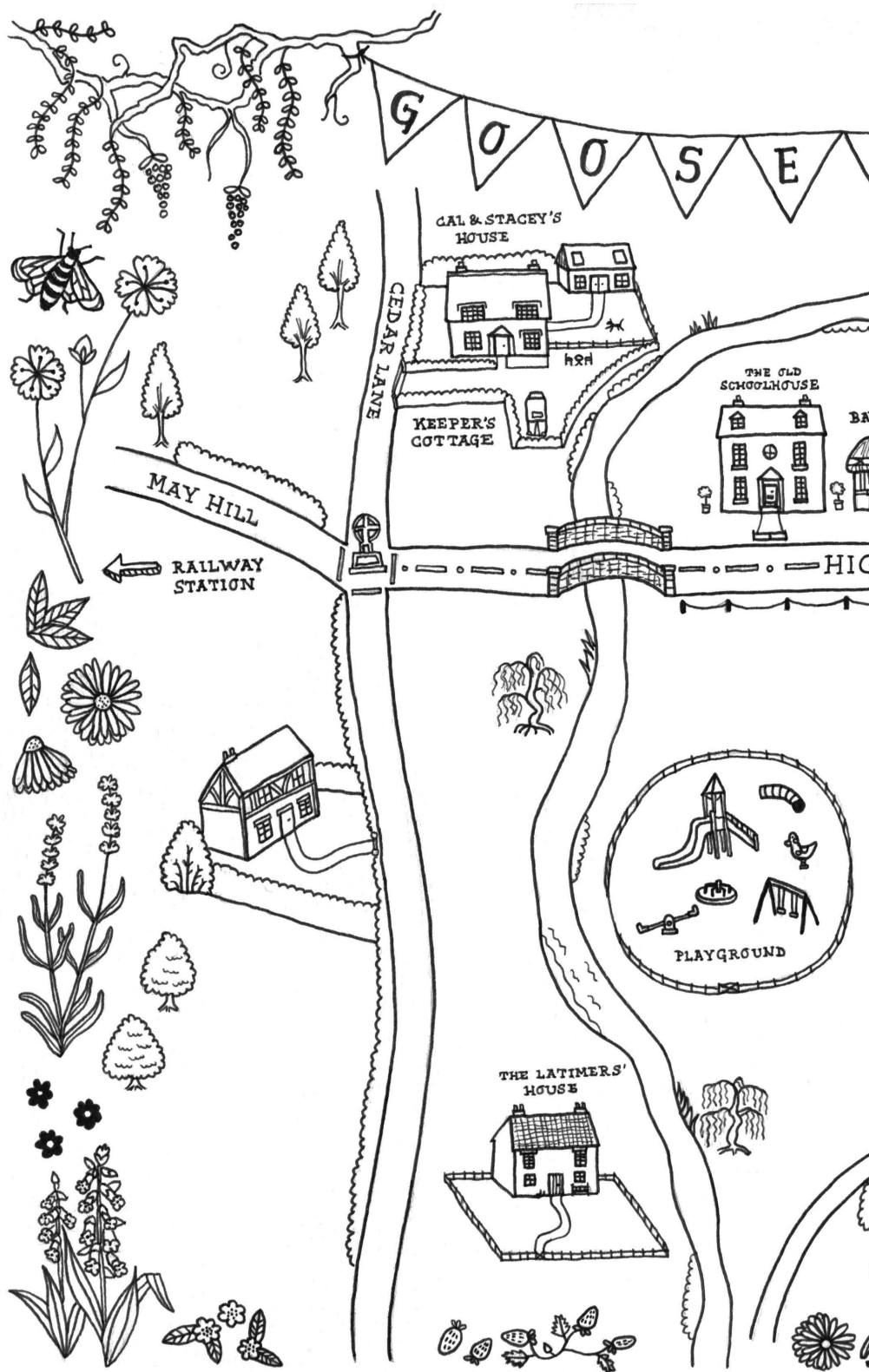


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For Judi and Paul
with my love.





Chapter 1

So this was it then, the countryside. Well, there had been a few previous rural encounters over the years, but to a lesser degree. Whereas this definitely ranked as up close and personal.

Feeling intrepid, Mimi stepped down from the train and breathed in the mingled green scents of spring grass, new leaves, damp earth and the smallest hint of cow poo, presumably drifting across from the field visible through the lattice of trees on the other side of the track. A couple of black and white cows lazily lifted their heads in order to observe the train as it departed, before swishing their tails and returning their attention to the serious business of tearing up clumps of grass.

It had to be the world's tiniest station, very cute indeed, comprising a single track dotted with wild flowers and weeds, and a small stone shelter. It would probably faint if it ever saw the gigantic edifice that was Paddington. Making her way towards the rickety metal gate, Mimi realised she'd made a fundamental error in having assumed there'd be a friendly local taxi driver waiting outside to be of service.

The only other passenger to have disembarked, a sixty-something woman in a brown tartan skirt and brutally sensible lace-up shoes, said, 'Excuse me,' in a pained way, probably because Mimi was hesitating in front of the gate.

'Oh, sorry! It's just . . . I thought there'd be a taxi rank.'

The woman's eyebrows lifted. 'Seriously?'

'I've just come down from London,' Mimi explained. 'I mean, I knew this station would be small, but I didn't realise it wouldn't have . . . anything here at all.'

'Well, it doesn't. You live and learn.'

Helpful. Mimi tried again. 'OK, could you point me in the direction of the bus stop?'

The woman was now looking at her as if she'd landed from Mars. 'There isn't a bus stop. Because there aren't any buses.'

What?

'But that's just crazy. How am I supposed to get to where I want to go?'

Mrs Tartan Kilt took out her car keys and said impatiently, 'Where are you headed?'

Oh thank goodness. Mimi beamed with relief. 'Goosebrook.'

'Well in that case you need to turn left at the end of the lane, then just keep on going. Follow the signposts.'

And now, unbelievably, she was turning away, marching over to a filthy dark blue Volvo rakishly parked half on and half off the dandelion-studded verge. Having climbed behind the wheel and buzzed down the windows, she performed a nifty five-point turn and gestured for Mimi to move out of the way so she could drive off.

In desperation, Mimi said, 'Look, I don't suppose you could give me a lift, could you? I'd be *so* grateful—'

‘Sorry, I’m going in the opposite direction.’ She didn’t sound sorry at all.

‘But how am I going to get to Goosebrook?’

The woman gave a pitying shake of the head. ‘You have legs, don’t you? A couple of fully functioning feet? I know it’s a radical idea, but I suggest you try using them.’

And she roared off down the narrow lane, just as the sun disappeared behind a cloud and the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

So much for friendly locals and the magic of the countryside.

An hour later, Mimi was making good, if sodden, progress. On the upside, at least she wasn’t wearing high heels. But her ballet flats, with their wafer-thin soles, weren’t the most comfortable either; she could feel every bump in the rough tarmac. And her overnight bag was making her shoulder ache; if only she’d brought along her red case with the wheels.

Oh well, she’d covered four miles and there was only one more to go. It had stopped raining, too. The sky was blue once more, birds were singing, the hedgerows were starred with primroses and there were sheep in the meadow to her right, some with newborn lambs gambolling in the sunshine—

Mimi stopped dead in her tracks, horrified by what she was seeing and realising at once what was going on. Just the other night she’d seen a report on TV about the recent spate of vicious attacks on horses in fields, and now it was happening right in front of her, but this time the victim of the attack was a sheep.

Shock and adrenalin surged through her body. She dropped her heavy bag, vaulted the low wall and charged down the slope towards the figure half hidden behind a clump of

bushes, but not half hidden enough to disguise the fact that he was wrestling furiously with a sheep on the ground.

‘Oh my God, *stop it* . . .’ She gathered speed as she ran through taller clumps of grass that whipped around her bare legs. ‘What are you doing? Get away from that sheep!’

The man was wearing jeans and a polo shirt; glancing up, he ignored her and carried on battling with the sheep, which was lying on its back, its little legs wagging furiously in the air as it struggled to escape.

‘Stop it, just *stop it!*’ Skidding to a halt a few metres away in case he was a lunatic with a knife, Mimi yelled, ‘You leave him alone right now or I’m calling the police!’

The man abruptly released his hold on the sheep and rose to his feet, prompting Mimi to take a few more steps backwards. OK, she hadn’t thought this through; what if he really was a lunatic?

‘Let me take a wild guess.’ As he spoke, he shook his wet hair out of his eyes and surveyed her, taking in the pink and white striped jacket, the short flippy white skirt and the silver ballet flats. ‘You don’t live around here.’

OK, the good news was that he wasn’t wielding a weapon. He also had a nice voice, kind of drawly and amused. Still panting from her unexpected exertions, Mimi said, ‘Just because I’m wearing silver shoes, you’re assuming I’m some kind of . . . townie.’

‘Partly true.’ He nodded, conceding that she’d been right. ‘Although one other clue was the way you called the sheep *him*.’

‘Now you’re just being pedantic. I was trying to stop you attacking it,’ Mimi pointed out. ‘There wasn’t time to get out my binoculars and have a look at its private parts.’

This was evidently hilarious; the man was now biting his lip, doing his best not to laugh. He said, 'With this breed of sheep, if it were a male it would have horns. And it would be a ram.'

'Well, you weren't treating it very gently.' Sensing that she was fighting a losing battle, Mimi jumped as the sheep let out a long, baleful *baaaaaaaaaa*. 'There's no need to be cruel to animals, you know.'

'OK, let me explain. She's pregnant.' He nodded patiently. 'By the look of her, with twins.'

Mimi was appalled. 'All the more reason to be kind!'

He smiled. 'Her fleece is sodden with rain. She has a huge belly. When she lay down, she rolled onto her back and now she's stuck there, can't get up again. If she's left like that, she'll die. So if you want to help, come over here and give me a hand getting her back on her feet.'

The grass was wet and slippery, and the pregnant ewe was bottom-heavy and wriggly, but after a couple of minutes of tussling, heaving and baa-ing, they finally managed to get her upright once more.

The man who wasn't a knife-wielding maniac held the animal's bulky body against his legs, giving her time to regain her bearings. Then he released her and they both watched as she trotted off without so much as a backward glance to rejoin the rest of the flock.

'Not even a thank you,' Mimi remarked.

'I know. She won't write, she won't phone.' As they began to make their way back up the sloping field, he said, 'Still, you did a good job there, helped to save her life. Not bad, for a townie.'

'Thanks. And I'm sorry I shouted at you.'

‘No problem. You meant well. Where are you visiting, anyway?’

‘Goosebrook.’ Wondering just how shiny her face was, but not wanting to get caught trying to make herself look better, Mimi surreptitiously gave her forehead a wipe with the sleeve of her jacket.

‘Well that’s where I live.’ They’d reached the gate that led out onto the road, and Mimi saw now that a dark brown terrier was waiting there for him. As he unhooked the lead, which had been looped over the gatepost, the man said, ‘This is Otto. I’m Cal.’

‘And is this your flock?’ She belatedly realised that he must be a farmer.

‘No, they aren’t mine.’ He grinned. ‘I just stopped to help out a young lady sheep in distress.’

Otto was up on his hind legs, nudging Mimi’s hand with his nose, eager for attention. Rubbing his lopsided ears, she said, ‘Hello, aren’t you gorgeous?’ then looked up at Cal. ‘I’m Mimi. Well, Emylia. But mainly Mimi.’ Now that she wasn’t distracted by the sheep, she noted that his hair was straight and shiny, streaked white blonde by the sun. His brows and lashes were dark, the whites of his brown eyes very white. He had olive skin, an outdoorsy tan and an athletic physique.

‘Mimi. Nice to meet you. So how long are you down here for?’

She couldn’t help perking up a bit; whilst she’d been checking him out, had he been doing the same to her? Damn, though, she definitely wasn’t looking her best. Aloud, Mimi said, ‘Just a couple of days.’

‘Staying in one of the holiday cottages?’

And now her heart was doing that uncomfortable speeding-up

thing it always did, even after so many years. She really should be used to it by now. She straightened her shoulders. 'No, I'm visiting my dad. He lives in Goosebrook.'

Cal looked surprised. 'He does? Who's your dad then?'

'Hang on a sec, I left my bag . . .' Turning before he could see the flush colouring her cheeks, Mimi ran back along the lane to where she'd flung her bag down in the dip where the grass verge met the dry-stone wall. She loved her dad to bits and she wasn't embarrassed by him, but there was always that tricky moment when other people discovered you were his daughter and you had to deal with whatever they might have to say about it.

The thing was, sometimes you weren't bothered about those people's reactions because they weren't important to you anyway. But at other times, when you met someone and instinctively liked them, it meant the pressure was on because you really didn't want them to come out with some response that was either rude or downright offensive.

Please don't let him do that.

Mentally preparing herself, Mimi hurried back to where Cal and Otto were waiting for her. She held up her bag – like an idiot – and said, 'Got it! Never a good idea to leave your overnight stuff in a ditch!'

Otto, eyeing her with bright-eyed interest, wagged his tail.

And Cal, also eyeing her with interest, said, 'Can I guess?'

'Um, if you like.' Did he really want to know what she'd brought down with her? OK, if he managed to tell her that her bag contained grey and white elephant-print pyjamas, a Fortnum and Mason fruit cake and half a dozen hardback thrillers, that would be seriously impressive and—

'Are you Dan Huish's daughter?'

Mimi stared at him. ‘Yes! How on earth did you know that?’ Because her father had told her only last night that no one in the village knew of her existence.

Cal shrugged and said simply, ‘You look like him.’

‘Oh. Really? I mean, I think I do a bit, but people don’t usually notice. I’m more like my mum.’

‘I’m observant.’ He smiled. ‘You have the same eyes. Green, deep-set. Similar face shape too. You have quite a bit more hair, though.’

‘I definitely win that competition.’ Mimi ruffled her mass of tortoiseshell hair, which always exploded out of control the moment it was exposed to rain.

‘We didn’t know he had a daughter. Is this your first time down here?’ Cal hesitated, looked wary. ‘Is he expecting to see you today?’

Touched by his concern, Mimi said, ‘Are you worried I might be about to get a massive surprise? It’s OK, don’t panic. I do know Dad’s gay.’

Chapter 2

Cal looked relieved. ‘Phew, for a moment you had me worried. I suddenly thought he might be leading a secret double life.’

He was nice, Mimi could tell; he wasn’t about to say anything bigoted or crass. ‘Mum and Dad got divorced seven years ago, when I was fifteen,’ she said. ‘It was a shock at first, of course it was, but we got through it. And Dad met Marcus four years ago.’

‘Marcus, that’s it.’ Cal nodded, clearly reassured there wasn’t about to be some dramatic *EastEnders*-style showdown.

‘And yes, they do know I’m coming down. Dad was going to meet me off the five o’clock train. But I left work at midday, caught the earlier one and thought it’d be fun to jump in a cab at the station so I could save him the trip.’

‘A . . . cab?’ Cal looked amused.

‘Well I know that now. I just wasn’t expecting it to be completely deserted. The countryside isn’t my specialist subject.’ Mimi shrugged. ‘Anyway, never mind. I’ve had an adventure instead. And we’re nearly there now. Oh wow, look at it . . . now that’s what I call a view.’

As she'd been speaking, they'd reached the brow of the hill and now Goosebrook was revealed, appearing before them in all its bucolic spring-infused glory. The honeyed Cotswold limestone of the buildings was offset by the abundance of greenery and the bright colours of the flowers in the gardens. The church spire rose into the sky, the roofs of the jumble of houses and cottages were mottled ochre yellow and grey, and children and parents were visible on the village green in front of the church. There were a few shops – not many, Mimi knew – as well as a popular local pub called the Black Swan. And there too, snaking through the village and gleaming silver in the sunlight, was the brook itself, with the old stone bridge arching across it.

'It's a pretty nice place to live,' said Cal, as Otto strained on his lead to reach a butterfly that was taunting him, dancing around just out of his reach.

'Beautiful. Bit different from London.' Just breathing in the sparkling, unpolluted air was an experience. Then again, the lack of handy takeaways would take some getting used to. Personally Mimi wasn't sure she could survive without a Burger King on her doorstep.

'And how are your dad and Marcus settling in?'

'They love the countryside. And living here in the Cotswolds. I'm sure everything's going to be fine,' said Mimi. 'It's just that getting-to-know-people stage, especially in their situation. They want people to like them, but some of the villagers haven't been . . . you know, as friendly as they'd hoped. Not you, I'm sure,' she added hastily. 'It's just a few of the older people have been a bit stand-offish.'

Cal nodded. 'I'm sure they have. But it's not because of the gay thing.'

It was all very well for Cal to say that, but how could he know for sure? ‘No? Dad and Marcus are so nice, though. What else could it be?’

‘Just good old-fashioned tribalism, suspicion of strangers.’ He shrugged. ‘It’s never changed. The general feeling is new people don’t count as villagers until they’ve lived here for a good while. Because what’s the point of bothering to get to know them if they’re just going to up and leave again? Not saying it’s right,’ he added. ‘Just that that’s the way it’s always been. And the older villagers especially resent the ones who buy second homes down here, then leave them standing empty for months on end. Which is what happened to Bay Cottage – your dad’s place – before he and Marcus bought it. That’s the reason they’re wary . . . they don’t want it happening again.’

‘Fair enough. Well, that’s good to know.’ They moved to the side of the road as a van passed them, the driver exchanging a cheery salute with Cal. ‘So how long before they count as proper villagers?’

‘Not too long, only about thirty years.’ He grinned at her. ‘Maybe fifty years for the really suspicious ones. Are you sure I can’t carry that for you?’

‘I’m fine.’ Mimi shook her head; the soles of her feet were burning and the weight of the overnight case was hurting her shoulder, but they were nearly there now. ‘And thanks for the heads-up. I’ll tell them what you said. They’ll be relieved it wasn’t the reason they thought.’

Mimi was relieved too; she felt like an anxious mum, reassured that her shy children would settle into their new school.

Cal said, ‘Things will get easier, I promise. And I hope

they do stay. Who knows, we might see the three of you later in the pub.'

'Dad's not really a drinker.' At a guess, the fact that they'd been keeping away from the Black Swan hadn't helped.

'Well, they do food too. It's a sociable place. If they walked in through the doors,' said Cal, 'it wouldn't instantly fall silent like the O.K. Corral.'

His dark brown eyes were glinting with amusement. Mimi said, 'I'll tell them that too.'

'The more they join in, the better things will be. I do understand, though. It must be tricky sometimes.'

'It has been.' Mimi nodded.

'Not easy for you either,' said Cal. 'Especially if you were fifteen and it came as a bolt from the blue for you and your mum . . . unless they'd broken up years before. No, don't answer that, none of my business. Sorry.' He shook his head. 'Sometimes I ask too many questions without stopping to wonder if they're appropriate.'

Mimi had had enough practice by now to know that some people were desperate to hear all the salacious details, whilst others were simply sympathetic to her situation. Cal, she could instinctively tell, fell into the second camp.

Not that the details were remotely salacious anyway.

'It's fine,' she reassured him. 'Mum and Dad did their best to make it easy for me. Obviously I was devastated when they broke up and Dad moved out, but I didn't know the real reason behind it. So that bit must have been harder for Mum, because she did know, and when he'd told her it had come as a massive shock. Then about six months later, they sat me down with them and told me. And that was . . . well, weird. Pretty traumatic in one way, but then it kind of made

sense, because I hadn't been able to understand why they couldn't stay together.' Mimi paused, still able to recall every moment of that rainy Saturday afternoon. 'I mean, I went through *all* the emotions. When you're that age, anything to do with the idea of your parents' sex lives is enough to make you want to throw up, so that aspect wasn't great. But on the other hand, he was still my dad and I loved him to bits.'

'It must have been hard to cope with,' said Cal.

'School was the worst. Some people were fantastic. And others were awful.' Mimi shuddered. 'Mainly the boys, who thought it was hilarious and couldn't stop making fun of me. Well, you can imagine the kind of crap I had to put up with.'

'Not ideal when you're that age,' said Cal.

'Teenagers can be brutal. You soon learn who your real friends are, I can tell you.' She pulled a face. 'It was definitely character-forming.'

'And I bet the worst culprits were the ones who were secretly battling with their own feelings.'

'Yes! Exactly that! The captain of the school football team was horrible to me for months, said some *really* mean things about Dad . . . and last Christmas I saw on Facebook that he was off to LA with his boyfriend. So I sent him a nice message saying I hoped they had a lovely time.'

'And did he apologise for everything he'd said at school?'

'Of course not. He might be gay now, but that doesn't magically stop him from being a massive prat.'

'Prats are boring.' Cal grinned. 'Tell me about you. Whereabouts do you live in London? Somewhere amazing?'

'Hmm, I wouldn't call it that.' Picturing the run-down building that had been all she could afford to share, Mimi

imagined plonking it down in the centre of the ultra-rural scene surrounding them. 'It's a Victorian hovel in Bermondsey, rented out by a shyster landlord who's crammed twelve of us into a place big enough for six. But that's what it's like in the city if you aren't loaded, you kind of get used to it. You have to ignore the downsides, the rats and the tenants you'd rather not be sharing with, and just make the most of having somewhere to live. My friend Kendra has the room next to mine and she's great, so we mainly stick together. And it's a friendly enough neighbourhood. Bit different to this, mind.' She indicated the rolling hills and the bobbing fields of wheat or corn or whatever that green stuff was over to the left of them.

'Well we're friendly here too, I promise.' Cal sounded entertained. 'And how about work? What do you do?'

'I'm in PR.' Mimi paused, wondering if he was familiar with the term, because some sheep wranglers might not be.

But he inclined his head and said, 'Public relations. It's OK, I know what it means. And have you always done that? Do you love it?'

'Oh I do. I mean, I've always loved working, anyway.' Mimi glanced over at Otto, who had paused to cock his leg against a clump of dandelions. 'And I started early too. I used to do three paper rounds when I was at school, then I got into babysitting in a big way. After A levels I took a job in a travel agency, which was great, but after a while it began to feel a bit too office-based and restricting. So then I saw an ad for a position in PR and decided to give it a shot. Well, it was a revelation, it was just . . . perfect!' She found herself gesturing expansively to convey just how perfect. 'Because you need to be really organised and efficient,

which I am, and you have to think on your feet, which I love doing, and when things go wrong it's up to you to sort everything out and make it right again . . . ooh, and when you come up with a fantastic plan that works like a dream, you get showered with praise and the clients are thrilled with you for being so clever. It's just the best feeling in the world!'

Mimi heard the enthusiasm in her own voice and knew she was getting carried away again, but she couldn't control it, because when you really loved your job as much as she did, it was hard to be laid-back and super-cool about it. 'OK, don't laugh,' she said, because Cal was clearly trying not to. 'I know I sound like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, but when I wake up in the morning I honestly can't wait to get to work. I'd do it for free if I could afford to.'

'Probably best not to let your bosses know about that,' said Cal with a smile.

'I know, but what can I say?' Her hands were waving again, all by themselves. 'I was lucky, I found my perfect job. The more effort you put in, the more people appreciate you, and I'm addicted to praise. I mean, right now I'm still one of the juniors in the company, but I know I can work my way up and I can't wait. Are you still laughing at me?'

'Wouldn't dream of it. I think it's brilliant that you're so enthusiastic.' Mimicking her movements, Cal waved his hands as he said the word. 'And ambitious.' More gesticulating. 'And motivated.' He sidestepped out of reach as she pretended to take a swipe at him, and said, 'No, really, it's great.'

'I've found my dream job, and I'm good at it.' Mimi hoped she didn't sound overconfident. Since starting at the agency she'd had to learn to be confident in order to promote the

people and products she was being paid to promote. Growing up in a household where everyone was self-deprecating, it had been quite the learning curve; in addition, she'd needed to learn not to be shy about promoting herself. In their business, as her bosses were so fond of announcing, shrinking violets need not apply.

'And what do you do when you aren't working?' asked Cal.

'I think about working,' Mimi said honestly. 'I spend time planning brilliant campaigns and coming up with fantastic new ways to boost our clients' products and profiles.'

'What about a social life? Or is that it?'

He'd said it jokingly, but she shrugged and nodded. 'Pretty much. Kendra and I go out occasionally, but we're both as bad as each other. Right now, our careers take top priority.'

'Good for you.' Cal nodded approvingly. 'So no boyfriends?'

There hadn't been a boyfriend for months, which was no bad thing, given her abysmal track record. Life was so much easier and less fraught when you were single. She shook her head. 'What can I tell you? I'm a hopeless case, a work-obsessed spinster. Once my career's properly up and running, maybe I'll find someone. Except I might be ancient by then and look like a wizened old tortoise, and no one will want me. Which will serve me right.'

Cal was grinning at her. 'Oh I'm sure you'll find someone. For every wizened female tortoise there's a male tortoise who thinks she's irresistible.' He glanced round and said, 'Move onto the verge . . .'

A car was coming up behind them; Mimi stepped aside and looked over her shoulder, exclaiming as she recognised the dusty, mud-splashed blue Volvo. 'Who's that, d'you know?'

The Volvo sailed past, its driver pointedly ignoring them. Cal said, 'It's Henrietta Mercer. She lives at Fox Court. Why?'

'She got off the train at the same time as me. When I found out there weren't any taxis, I asked her for a lift.'

'Brave. And what did she say to that?'

'Told me to walk.'

He burst out laughing. 'Sounds about right. Just because you own the biggest house in the village, it doesn't automatically make you a charming person. And it certainly hasn't in Henrietta's case. So don't worry,' he added, 'it isn't just you.'

Mimi grinned, glad now that the flinty-eyed older woman hadn't agreed to give her a lift; she'd much preferred meeting one of the friendlier inhabitants of Goosebrook. Not to mention his human owner.

'What's funny?' said Cal.

'Nothing. I just made a joke in my head.'

'Oh? And am I going to hear it?'

He really did have an incredible smile; not overly flirtatious, but the joyous, inclusive kind that made you feel better for being on the receiving end of it. Just when she'd been so convinced she didn't need male attention, too. 'Maybe one day,' said Mimi. 'The punchline still needs work. Speaking of work, I haven't asked what you do.'

'I design garden buildings, bespoke summer houses. Only a small company, but it's great, working with clients to create something they'll love for years to come. Here we are, then. This is Goosebrook.'

They'd reached the main street now; the stone war memorial stood directly ahead of them in the centre of the village, with cottages and shops lining the road beyond.

‘Beautiful.’ Mimi paused. It looked like a film set.

‘Well, we’re going in this direction,’ said Cal as Otto, tail wagging like a metronome, strained on his lead to head up the lane to their left. ‘It’s been good to meet you. Say bye, Otto.’

‘*Woof,*’ said Otto.

‘Oh my God, I love that!’ Bending down, Mimi ruffled his ears. ‘Clever boy!’

‘It’s his party trick. Actually, it’s mine too. Say it to me.’

‘Bye,’ said Mimi.

‘*Woof,*’ said Otto.

‘*Woof,*’ said Cal.

‘You’re both extremely talented.’ Mimi kept a straight face. ‘I’m impressed.’

He grinned. ‘Right, we’re off. Your dad’s place is down there, just past the old schoolhouse. And we might see you over at the pub later, yes? See what you can do. It’s pizza-and-quiz night tonight.’

He was nice. Sometimes you could meet a complete stranger and just know you really liked them. And he had an adorable dog too. Win-win. Experiencing that exciting zing of physical interest – all the more thrilling for being so completely unexpected, given recent events – Mimi said, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll make sure it happens. Leave it to me.’

‘You’re here!’ Marcus did a double-take when he pulled open the duck-egg-blue front door. ‘We were meant to be picking you up from the station at five thirty, weren’t we? Did Dan get it horribly wrong?’

‘No, he didn’t. Nothing went wrong.’ Mimi resisted the temptation to blurt out that everything had gone right.

Instead, she gave him a big hug and said, 'I caught the earlier train and walked.'

'You got caught in that downpour too! Oh dear, look at your hair . . . and your mascara's all over the shop . . .'

Oh bum, was it? And in her head she'd imagined herself looking rain-swept, but in an attractively dishevelled kind of way. Shaking her head like a spaniel, she said, 'I met someone from the village and we had a lovely time rescuing a sheep—'

'Darling, let go of that strange man and come here. My turn for a hug.' Having materialised beside Marcus, her father wrapped his arms around her. 'It's so good to see you. We can't wait to show you everything we've done to this place – you're going to be so impressed.'

They were justly proud of all their hard work. Thirty minutes later, Mimi had been given the full guided tour of Bay Cottage, the home they'd spent the last three months lovingly restoring and redecorating. Now, installed on a high wooden stool in the kitchen with an enormous gin and tonic, she said, 'Listen, that guy Cal told me it's pizza-and-quiz night over at the pub tonight, and he said we should give it a try, so I told him we'd see him there later.'

'No need.' Already shaking his head, her dad opened the fridge and took out a selection of wrapped packages. 'Dinner's right here, we're doing all your favourites – seared king scallops wrapped in bacon, then fillet steak with tomato salad and asparagus.'

'And dauphinoise potatoes,' Marcus chimed in triumphantly. 'Followed by lemon tart with raspberry sorbet. Everything you love best.'

Oh, their lit-up faces. She couldn't ask them to put the

food back into the fridge – they'd arranged it as a huge treat, specially for her.

'And I get to sit here like the Queen whilst you two do all the hard work?' The ice cubes clinked as she lifted her glass. 'Well that sounds just about perfect.'

Later, as they ate the delicious dinner, Mimi ventured, 'Maybe we could go to the pub tomorrow night.'

'Ah, but we've managed to book a table at Le Champignon Sauvage in Cheltenham.' Her dad looked triumphant. 'It has two Michelin stars! You'll love it there, it's amazing.'

She nodded. 'OK, but when I was talking to Cal, he said people would find it easier to get to know you if they saw more of you. Popping into the pub every now and again might help a bit . . . I mean, that'd be nice, wouldn't it?'

'I don't know . . .' Her dad was already looking doubtful, shaking his head. 'They're still not sure about us. We don't want any awkwardness.'

Was this how it felt to be a parent, having to cajole a shy child into making friends with the other kids at school? Mimi tried again. 'Cal said they're just wary because you're new to the village and you might end up only spending the occasional weekend down here. He told me they don't care that you're gay, that's no problem.'

'Hmm, it feels like it might be a problem for some of them.' Marcus sounded unenthusiastic. 'It's all very well this guy saying it isn't, but we don't even know who he is.'

Mimi frowned. 'He guessed who I was, so he's seen Dad around. He recognised me because we have the same eyes.'

'Well we haven't been introduced to anyone called Cal,' Marcus said with an air of finality.

'But maybe if you called into the pub, you'd be introduced

to lots of people! And I bet loads of them are really nice,' Mimi pleaded. 'You just have to give them a chance to get to know you.'

'Easier said than done,' Marcus said drily. 'Especially when you overhear people muttering behind your back in the shop.'

'Are you serious?' Mimi was outraged. 'Show me who they are and I'll have a word with them. What a bloody nerve—'

'Shh, don't get upset. And please don't say anything to anyone.' Her gentle father, who hated confrontation of any kind, reached for her hand. 'We're fine as we are for now. Just let us settle in gradually and deal with things in our own way. It'll all work out in the end, I'm sure, and there's no hurry as far as we're concerned. We've got each other.' He exchanged a contented smile with Marcus. 'And that's what really counts, isn't it? There's plenty of time for everything else to fall into place.'

Chapter 3

It was the week before Christmas and snowflakes were tumbling like fat feathers from a pale sky as the National Express coach from London made its scheduled stop in Cirencester.

Mimi, recalling her last visit to the Cotswolds, silently congratulated herself on being much better equipped this time. She was wrapped up in warm clothes *and* her case had wheels. Which was just as well really, seeing as it was a full-sized one crammed with Christmas presents.

Plus, this time she'd checked beforehand and discovered there was a taxi rank – an actual *rank!* – in Cirencester's central Market Place.

But first some shopping needed to be done. There were still a couple more gifts she wanted to pick up, and Cirencester was looking both festive and gorgeous, with Christmas lights strung everywhere around trees and across the narrow streets. The shop windows were lit up as well, many of them decorated with fake snow that was now being rapidly overtaken by the real thing.

Mimi tipped back her head and closed her eyes, listening

to the dulcet tones of Slade booming from a passing car and revelling in the sensation of the tiny ice-cold kisses of the snowflakes as they landed on her upturned face . . .

‘Oi, shift,’ ordered an irritable man behind her. ‘You’re blocking the pavement.’

And a very merry Christmas to you too.

An hour later, the suitcase was becoming a bit of a liability. The shops and narrow pavements were crowded, the snow was coming down faster than ever and Mimi’s empty stomach was rumbling like a cement mixer. Finding a pretty café on Black Jack Street, she ducked inside and grabbed the last tiny table by the window. Within minutes, with a cappuccino and a cheese and mushroom toasted sandwich in front of her, she heaved a happy sigh and took out her phone.

Kendra had sent her a text. *Are you there yet? Just saw the weather forecast on TV – looks like you’re going to get some snow!*

Amused, Mimi took a photo from inside the café, of Black Jack Street with the shops opposite almost obscured from view by the rapidly falling flakes. She tapped out: *Happening already xxx* and sent Kendra the photo.

Moments later, in the middle of taking a massive bite of toasted cheese sandwich, there was a loud double tap on the window. Her head jerked up in surprise and there was Cal, waving at her through the glass.

Looking quite handsome, too.

Mimi hastily chewed her mouthful of molten food. The next moment the bell above the door rang out as Cal pushed it open and came into the café, snowflakes melting on the shoulders of his brown leather jacket and in his tousled blonde hair.

‘Hello!’ There was that magical smile, the one that instantly

put you at your ease, even if you were still struggling to swallow your cheese and mushroom toastie. 'Sorry, did I make you jump? Are you here with your dad . . . or anyone else?'

Mimi shook her head and swallowed at last. 'Hi. No, I caught the coach down from London this time. I've been doing a bit of last-minute shopping, but as soon as I've finished this I'm going to get a taxi to Goosebrook.'

'Well I'm heading back soon. Do you want to come with me?'

'Not if it means walking,' said Mimi, and he laughed, pulling out the chair opposite her and sitting down.

'Don't worry, I brought my car into town earlier for a service. It'll be ready to pick up in thirty minutes. I can give you a lift if you don't mind waiting that long. It'll save you a taxi fare.' When she hesitated, he added, 'It's OK, you'll be safe, I'm a good driver. Passed my test and everything.'

Mimi had only paused in order to marvel at the fact that she'd bumped into him again. Was this fate? She felt her pulse quicken, because sometimes these things did seem to happen for a reason. Basically, Cal was attractive, he had a winning sense of humour, and since their last meeting she'd occasionally thought of him, wondered about him and imagined what he might look like naked.

Well, you were allowed to think those kinds of thoughts inside the safety of your own head, even if you weren't officially in the market for a boyfriend.

'A lift would be great.' She smiled. 'Thank you.'

'Good. And you're here for a few days?' Cal glanced at the suitcase propped up against the wall behind her. 'I thought you'd have come down more often, but we haven't seen you

again since that first time.' He tut-tutted. 'We were starting to take it personally.'

'I wanted to come down,' Mimi protested. 'But work's been crazy busy, and Dad and Marcus have been up to London a few times. Every time I rang and said I had a free weekend to come and see them, they told me they'd travel up instead. They still love being in the village,' she added, 'but they also like zipping back to London, getting to the theatre and catching up with their friends. Which is why I haven't been down. Still, I'm here now. How are things going for them? Are they settling in?'

'Like I said before, it's taking a bit of time. We do invite them to things but they're still wary.' Cal's brown eyes crinkled at the corners as he surveyed her across the table. 'Maybe now you're back we can make a concerted effort, get them to relax and join in.'

He really did care. Warmed by his attitude, Mimi said, 'I did try to get them into the pub last time, but they wriggled out of it. Look, if you're giving me a lift, the least I can do is buy you a coffee and something to eat. You can't just sit there with nothing.'

'I'm fine, don't worry.' He shook his head. 'They said the car would be ready by four. There's a couple of presents I still need to pick up before we leave, so . . .'

'Oh, sorry.' Mimi gestured apologetically. 'You go off and do whatever it is you have to do. We can meet up at the garage. Just tell me where it is and I'll find it.'

'Or you could come with me if you like. Help me choose what to buy. I'm only a man, after all.' Cal grinned as he sat back and watched her finish her coffee. 'All female expertise welcome.'

‘Let’s do it.’ Why sit here on her own when she could spend the time being useful? Standing up and sliding her arms into the sleeves of her red coat, Mimi said, ‘Who are the presents for? Your mum? Sisters?’

He shook his head. ‘My daughter.’

‘Oh!’ Well, she hadn’t been expecting that.

Already on his feet, he held the door open. Reaching to take the suitcase from her, he added easily, ‘And my wife.’

Twenty minutes later, Mimi watched from across the shop as he flashed that incredible smile of his at the sixty-something woman behind the till. Just moments ago the woman had been stressed and irate, but now she was laughing and relaxed.

Because that was evidently the effect Cal had; he was one of those people who lifted the spirits of everyone he encountered. He was one of nature’s mood-enhancers.

And he hadn’t been flirting with her at all, Mimi now realised, chastened. So much for thinking he might have been. He was just as friendly towards the old man who’d slipped over in the snow and whom he’d stopped to help back onto his feet.

Cal’s wife’s name, she’d learned, was Stacey, and his daughter was Cora. At six years old, Cora was currently in the grip of a zebra obsession – evidently because they were like horses but stripy and *better* – and was desperate for Father Christmas to bring her zebra-themed presents so she could run like a zebra and look like a zebra. ‘And sing like a zebra,’ Cal added drily. ‘But we’re not sure how that’s going to pan out.’

‘So she already has a stuffed zebra toy?’ Mimi double-checked.

‘Oh yes. He’s the one who started it all off. We bought him in the shop at Longleat.’

‘And he’s called . . .?’

‘Kevin.’

She nodded. ‘An excellent name for a zebra.’

‘You wait till you meet Cora,’ Cal replied with pride. ‘She’s one of a kind.’

After twenty minutes of diving in and out of shops, the task had been completed.

‘If I say so myself, we’ve done pretty well,’ said Mimi. On a stall in the craft market at the Corn Hall she’d found a soft cotton zebra-print scarf. In Accessorize, Cal had tracked down zebra-print fleece gloves. Finally, as they’d been passing a tiny shop that sold radios and electronic devices, Mimi had glanced inside and spotted a boxful of battery-operated microphones in an array of colours and patterns, amongst them zebra and leopard print.

‘We have,’ Cal agreed, ‘but I’m not sure how thrilled the rest of us are going to be with this microphone by Boxing Day.’

‘When I was eight, I was desperate for a drum kit,’ Mimi remembered. ‘Funnily enough, I never did get one – my parents told me the shops were all sold out. Right, where next?’

‘Just one last thing, then we’re done.’

They made their way back through the snowy streets towards the café where she’d first seen him through the now steamed-up window, then Cal led her down a narrow stone passageway to a craft studio. ‘Stacey and I came here back in October. She fell in love with these mirrors, so I want to get one for her.’

It was a glassworks studio, small but bright with reflected colour and light. The mirrors he was pointing to had frames made from stained dichroic glass in vivid jewel colours.

‘They’re stunning,’ Mimi marvelled.

‘Which one would Stacey like best, though?’

She shook her head. ‘You know her. I don’t.’

‘How about the red and yellow?’ Cal indicated the rectangular mirror to the left of them.

Oh dear, it wasn’t fair to choose something for a complete stranger, but Mimi said, ‘If I’m honest, I prefer the other one.’ The mirror she was pointing to was oval, framed in clusters of glass in shades of emerald, sapphire and violet, and had been finished with silver grouting rather than black.

‘Really?’

Hastily she said, ‘You don’t have to choose it because of me.’

‘No, I’m going to.’ His tone was playful as he took out his wallet. ‘Then if she really hates it, I can blame you.’

The mirror was bubble-wrapped and paid for, Mimi took control of her suitcase once more and Cal carried the heavy, unwieldy parcel as they headed towards the garage where he’d left his car.

Chapter 4

Once the bustling streets of Cirencester were behind them, the snow settled more thickly on the road that would eventually lead them to Goosebrook. Having now grown used to the idea that Cal was married, Mimi said, ‘Can I ask how old you are?’

‘You may ask.’ He turned down the music on the radio. ‘I’m twenty-eight. I know, I look marvellous for my age.’

‘And Cora’s six. So you were pretty young when you had her.’

‘I suppose so.’ Cal grinned. ‘So was Stacey. We were both twenty-one when we found out Cora was on the way . . . we called her our wonderful surprise. And now, whenever she’s playing us up or being particularly stroppy, we look at each other and say, “There she is, that’s our wonderful surprise.” Whoops, hold on tight . . .’

The car’s wheels had gone into a minor skid, causing Mimi to hang on to her seat belt as they slid sideways down an incline. Once he’d expertly steered them to safety, Cal continued, ‘I mean, I’m sure everyone else thought it was a disaster, that we’d messed up big-time, but we’d actually been

together for a year by then. We knew how much we liked each other. No, not liked, we were crazy about each other.' He slowed down once more as a van approached them. 'What can I tell you? It was love, and we decided to go for it. Make the best of a dodgy situation and see if we couldn't prove everyone wrong.'

'Wow.' Mimi was impressed. 'And that's what you've done.'

'Hasn't always been easy.' Cal paused, concentrating as he steered past the van and a flurry of snow briefly obscured the windscreen. 'We bought a tumbledown cottage and worked night and day to get it done up before Cora arrived. That was pretty chaotic, I can tell you. Then, once she was here, we discovered what chaos was really like. But we stuck it out.' He shrugged. 'Cora changed our world; we couldn't remember what life was like without her. And Stace and I did some pretty speedy growing up. We were skint and shattered, but we still couldn't imagine not being together forever.'

'That's brilliant.' She actually meant it; was there anything better than a good old-fashioned romantic story with a confound-the-experts happy ending? Kind of disappointing that Cal was off the market, of course, but then again, she was the diehard career girl, concentrating all her attention on work. It was still nice, though, hearing his words and having your faith in love restored.

'It really is.' He nodded in agreement. 'We make each other laugh. Life's never dull. And we've got ourselves the most amazing daughter, who's half girl, half zebra.'

'Who could ask for more?'

'How about you? Work still going well?'

'Going brilliantly, thanks. I've been promoted since I last

saw you. I'm no longer the most junior member of staff. I have my very own client list!

'Congratulations. Well deserved, I'm sure.' His brown eyes sparkled. 'And what's happening with the social life? Found yourself a tortoise yet?'

'My love life, you mean?' Mimi did a comedy shudder. 'Oh, I'm a walking disaster when it comes to boyfriends. Show me someone who'll end up treating me like dirt, listing all my faults in public and sleeping with other girls behind my back, and you can guarantee I'll think they're the one for me.'

'Really?' Cal looked genuinely intrigued. 'Why?'

'I have no idea. I promise I don't do it on purpose. My friend Kendra says I have unerring bad-boy radar.'

'And what happens when you meet someone who isn't a bad boy?'

'The kind who doesn't forget to turn up for dates, you mean? Who treats you nicely and actually remembers to buy you a card on your birthday? Honest answer?' Mimi waved a hand. 'I'd probably be really suspicious and wonder what he was playing at. Well, either that or assume there was something wrong with him.' She didn't tell him the real reason, was deliberately flippant. Flippant was good; it was the way she'd always dealt with her situation.

But Cal said, 'Your dad's a nice guy, isn't he? I mean, I don't know him but you told me he was.' He glanced sideways at her. 'Was he a kind and thoughtful husband when he was married to your mum?'

And *boom*, there it was, the answer to her dilemma that no one else had ever come up with. Deep down in her subconscious, she'd been afraid to allow herself to become

emotionally involved with anyone who was gentle, decent and thoughtful, with all the good qualities you could ever hope for in a boyfriend, because what if they turned out to be gay?

‘You’ve got it.’ She nodded at Cal. ‘Well spotted.’

He shrugged. ‘You’re still young. Give it time, you’ll get yourself sorted out.’

‘You won’t tell everyone in the village, will you? *Oh . . .*’ Mimi gripped her seat belt as the tyres lost traction on the snowy road leading down the hill into Goosebrook. When Cal had the car under control once more, he drove slowly over the stone bridge and along the high street before pulling up outside Bay Cottage.

‘Of course I won’t tell anyone. And I know you don’t know if you can trust me, but you can. I won’t say a word.’

‘Well, thanks. And for the lift too.’ Unbuckling her seat belt, Mimi prepared to climb out of the car.

‘I don’t think they’re home.’ Cal was leaning forward, peering past her. ‘There aren’t any lights on in the kitchen. And no sign of their car either. Do you have a key to let yourself in?’

‘No.’

‘Go and ring the doorbell.’

She skidded up to the front porch and rang the bell. No answer; he was right. Back at the car, she shook snowflakes out of her hair and said through the buzzed-down window, ‘They’re not in.’

‘Right.’ Cal nodded. ‘Well, the Parkers next door have got an old shed at the bottom of their garden. They probably wouldn’t mind if you waited in there.’

What? Mimi stared at him and belatedly realised he was joking.

‘Just for a second,’ she told him, ‘I believed you.’

He broke into a grin. ‘Come on, time to introduce you to our pet zebra.’

Keeper’s Cottage on Cedar Lane was decorated on the outside with multicoloured fairy lights along the eaves and around the porch. Inside, there were plenty more Christmas decorations, festive music was playing and the intermingled scents of simmering garlic, onions and tomatoes filled the air. There was also an overexcited six-year-old who took a flying leap off the back of the cobalt-blue sofa into Cal’s outstretched arms.

‘Dad, it’s snowing! Eurgh, your face is all wet.’ Having planted a kiss on his cheek, she dramatically wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

‘That’ll be the snow.’ Cal teasingly rubbed the side of his face against hers. ‘Have you built a snowman yet?’

‘You can do one with me tomorrow. Can we make a snow zebra?’

‘That might be tricky, sweetheart. Their legs are quite thin; he wouldn’t be able to stand up.’

‘But you can try,’ Cora insisted.

‘I bet Mummy could do it,’ Cal told her as his wife came into the living room.

‘Mummy said you could do it better.’

‘And Mummy’s always right.’ Stacey turned to Mimi with a grin. ‘Hello! You wouldn’t happen to be brilliant at snow zebras, would you?’

‘This is Mimi, Dan Huish’s daughter,’ Cal explained. ‘Remember the one who thought I was wrestling with a sheep at Easter?’

‘I do remember. And I loved that you tried to rescue it.’

Stacey's smile was friendly; she was one of those people you instantly warmed to. 'How lovely to meet you at last. Are you down here for Christmas?'

'Just the next three days, then I'm off to my mum's place in north Wales.'

'I bumped into Mimi in Cirencester, offered her a lift back. But Dan and Marcus aren't home yet, so . . .'

'No problem. We have a giant pot of bolognese on the go, so you won't starve. And we can stay inside in the warm while Cal takes Cora out into the garden.'

'Yay!' Cora wriggled to be put down. 'Why are you called Me-me? That's a funny name.'

'I know it is. I'm Emylia really, but when I was little I couldn't say that, so I became Mimi instead.'

'I could call you You-you,' said Cora.

'This is getting surreal.' Cal clapped his hands together. 'OK, go and fetch your coat. Wellies, hat, gloves. Let's build a snow-something before it gets dark.'

In the cosy yellow kitchen, Mimi perched on a stool at the counter and drank tea whilst Stacey made garlic bread and splashed red wine into the pasta sauce.

'So did Cal manage to buy any presents?'

'A few little things for Cora. Zebra-y things.'

'Oh thank goodness. It's mad, isn't it? Last year she was obsessed with parrots. Now they don't even get a look-in. Who knows what it'll be next Christmas?' Stacey reached across to throw a handful of torn basil leaves into the pan. 'We should start taking bets. Cal's been trying to get her into *Star Wars*, but she's not having it.'

They watched through the window as Cal and Cora, out in the back garden, worked together in the snow to construct

something that resembled a small pony lying down with a hangover.

‘Look at her, our gorgeous girl,’ Stacey marvelled. ‘Love her to bits. You can’t imagine the difference they make to your life. Ten years from now she won’t care about parrots or zebras. It’ll be all about boys and we’ll be the panicking parents, tearing our hair out, desperate to wrap her up in cotton wool and hide her upstairs.’

‘Ah, that’s ages away. You’ve got so much to enjoy before any of that happens. She’s adorable,’ said Mimi.

‘She’s a star.’ In the garden, Cora was now waving madly at them, keen to attract their attention so they could admire her magnificent handiwork.

‘Did Cal buy anything for me today?’ said Stacey when they’d dutifully gasped with amazement and applauded the snow zebra in the centre of the lawn.

‘It’s possible he did.’

‘Have you seen it?’

‘Might have,’ said Mimi.

Stacey’s blue eyes danced. ‘Is it a mirror with a stained-glass frame?’

‘You can’t ask me that question.’

‘Hooray, that means it is! I went into the shop last week to take another look at them. Aren’t they just gorgeous?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘OK, there was a red and yellow one and a bluey-pinky one. And I liked both of them but the bluey-pinky one was my absolute favourite.’ She peered intently into Mimi’s eyes. ‘So . . .?’

‘You’re terrible, you know that?’ But Mimi couldn’t keep a straight face. ‘You’ll love it.’

‘Thank you, thank you. And don’t worry, I won’t tell him. It’s just so brilliant to know I’m getting the one I really want. I thought Cal would probably go for the red and yellow.’

‘He did try.’

‘Well now I like you even more.’ Beaming, Stacey said, ‘Thank goodness you were there to put him right.’

Over dinner, Cal and Stacey made Mimi promise to do her best to get her father and Marcus along to the pub for tomorrow night’s pre-Christmas party. She assured them that this time she wouldn’t take no for an answer. Finally her phone rang. Her dad was home at last and had picked up the message she’d left on their landline.

‘Darling, come on in.’ He greeted Mimi with a hug before ushering her into the cottage. ‘Sorry, we thought we’d be back an hour ago, but the traffic in Cheltenham was grid-locked.’

‘If only there was some way you could have called to let me know you’d been held up,’ said Mimi, who had bought him a mobile phone for Christmas. ‘Anyway, doesn’t matter, I’ve had a fantastic time at Cal and Stacey’s. Their daughter is amazing, she’s obsessed with zebras. And they insisted I stay and have dinner with them.’

‘Ah, so that’s the little girl who wears zebra-print clothes. We’ve seen her around the village. And her mum’s the pretty one with the long dark hair.’ Marcus nodded, remembering.

They’d lived here in Goosebrook for almost a year; it was time they got to know people properly.

‘There’s a small party at the pub tomorrow night.’ Mimi braced herself. ‘Cal and Stacey are going, and I said we would too.’

‘Oh, now—’

‘Please, Dad. They really want to get to know you. Everyone does,’ she pressed on. ‘It’s your first Christmas down here, and now’s the perfect time to meet the rest of the village.’

‘But what if—’

‘I know you were worried about some of the older ones, but they’ve had long enough now to get used to the idea of you being a couple. They think you’re keeping your distance because you aren’t interested in getting to know them.’

Her dad looked at her and sighed. Mimi held his gaze. Marcus said, ‘She’s right, Dan. It’s time. We need to make the effort.’

‘I suppose we do.’

Relieved, Mimi broke into a smile. ‘We’ll go to the party tomorrow evening, OK? If you really hate it, you can leave after two hours.’

‘If anyone says anything offensive, I’m not staying,’ her dad warned. ‘We’ll be out of there.’

‘If anyone does, I’ll sort them out myself,’ Mimi promised. Hopefully, no one would.