

## A DORSET CHRISTMAS

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**December 22, 1959**

Shaking the rain from my sou'wester, I scurried through the back door into the kitchen. The smells of baking pastry wafted across the room, and the welcome warmth from the oven seeped into my chilled skin.

'Is the kettle on, Mrs Scadden?' I turned from hanging my raincoat to look for our cook-housekeeper. 'Oh!' I clapped my hand to my mouth at the sight of the man seated at the kitchen table, doorstep sandwiches and a pot of tea in front of him. 'Gareth, I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you arrive.' Yanking off my wellingtons, I pattered across the tiles in my socks to kiss his cheek. 'I was checking on a pregnant cow I'm concerned about.'

Gareth pulled me into his lap for a more serious kiss. 'I can't argue with that.'

I rested my hands on his shoulders, basking in the smile that crinkled the corners of his green eyes. 'Why aren't you in the sitting room? Most of the others are home.'

'There was so much decorating bustle, I decided to keep out of the way in the kitchen and make sure there was a pot of fresh tea ready for you. They said you'd been up twice in the night.'

'I couldn't sleep for thinking about the cow. Stupid, really. We farmers know that nature usually takes care of things, but I can't help worrying. Especially since it's Tinkerbelle.'

'The orphan that Valerie hand-reared?'

‘In this very kitchen.’ I laughed. ‘Almost over Mrs Scadden’s dead body at the time. But now that dratted cow comes wandering up to the back door any time she can escape, and Mrs Scadden feeds her.’

‘I understand the cow’s point of view.’ He glanced at his sandwiches, thick slices of white crusty bread glistening with butter, fat chunks of ham spilling over the crusts.

‘Here you go, Dr Easton. I found that piccalilli.’ Mrs Scadden bustled out of the hall leading from the pantry. I slid off Gareth’s lap onto a chair.

‘How’s that cow, Miss Ros?’ she asked.

‘Healthy enough, but I’m not sure the calf is positioned where it should be, given she’s due soon. But calves often turn at the last minute, even in birth.’

She nodded. ‘Like babies.’

The back door swung open and my little sister Valerie rushed across the kitchen to hug Gareth. ‘I saw your car in the driveway. Now only Teddy and Rajat need to come, and we’re all here for Christmas. Three more days!’

‘Take your riding boots off, Val,’ I said.

She plonked down on a kitchen chair and stuck out a foot for me to tug off her muddy boot. ‘You’re eleven,’ I grumbled, but obliged.

‘Let me.’ Gareth pulled off the other one. ‘What are you hoping for this Christmas, Valerie?’

‘There’s no room under the tree for another pony,’ I said quickly.

Valerie pouted. ‘But maybe a new riding hat?’

‘A complete grammar to help you cram for the eleven plus exam,’ I grinned.

‘As a professor, I declare that a rotten Christmas present,’ said Gareth. ‘Don’t listen to your mean sister.’

Mrs Scadden set two more teacups and a plate of mince pies on the table. Gareth poured out what was left, and she whisked the teapot away. Valerie stood and grabbed her cup and a mince pie. ‘I’m going to see if cousin Aidan has unpacked those photographs he took of me and Brandybuck.’

Mrs Scadden brought back a fresh pot of tea. Gareth opened his sandwich and heaped piccalilli on the meat. ‘Why don’t you sit down with us, Mrs Scadden?’

‘I’ll put me feet up with *Mrs Dale’s Diary* in a bit.’ She nodded at the receiver radio on the dresser.

Gareth caught me eyeing the sandwich. ‘Go on.’

‘I skipped afternoon tea,’ I explained, and grabbed one half. We chewed in companionable silence, legs entwined under the table, while Mrs Scadden rolled out yet more pastry on the counter.

‘So,’ said Gareth between mouthfuls, ‘Teddy will be here soon?’

‘This evening.’

‘And Rajat is coming with him?’

‘They’re motoring down from London.’ I lowered my voice. ‘That was good matchmaking on your part. Rajat is so much better for him than the gorgeous, poisonous Julian.’

He shrugged, though a smile played on his lips. ‘I merely introduced them at Cambridge.’

We finished the sandwich and mince pies between us, then I took the plate and cups to the sink.

Mrs Scadden looked over her shoulder. 'Leave them there, Miss Ros. I've got more tea things to gather and wash up.'

'Make sure you leave early,' I said. 'There's a worse storm coming behind this rain. Shall Gareth and I give you a lift?'

'Kind of you, but Master James offered to drive me home.'

Gareth and I wandered hand-in-hand into the square entrance hall, dominated now by the huge fir tree, whose branches bowed under Valerie's liberal application of lead tinsel. As we climbed the wide, dark staircase, I leaned over and straightened the fairy atop the tree. Gareth's guest room was discreetly opposite mine in the east wing.

We stepped inside for a longer reunion. Gareth buried his face in my hair, planting kisses over my scalp. 'Mmm, you are so sexy when you smell of the farmyard, Ros Stephenson.'

'Says the person whose career is digging up dead things,' I murmured against his collar.

He caressed my fingers, lingering on my empty ring finger. I tensed, but wasn't going to start a quarrel at Christmas. It had been over six years since we'd met while Gareth was doing his National Service in Dorset. Now he had recently finished his PhD in Archaeology, and was a young professor at Cambridge. I had graduated from Wye Agricultural College a few years back and returned to the family estate where I was gradually forging the role of manager, helping my father and brother Jamie future-proof our inheritance. But I'd evaded hints at a proposal of marriage, afraid of the sacrifices it would mean to take that final leap.

‘What if I was able to have a base closer to here?’ he asked.

I slid my hands up his back. ‘You’ve barely started your new fellowship at Jesus College. Don’t give up your life and career for me so quickly.’

‘It’s not giving up, Ros. It’s finding a solution.’

I silenced him with a kiss. ‘I like having you as my lover.’

‘That’s because the estate is your husband.’ He glanced out of the window with a rueful smile.

‘It isn’t just the estate. You know I couldn’t leave Grandfather in his final years.’ My voice hitched, the pain of my grandfather’s passing this spring still raw.

Gareth stroked my face. ‘Of course not. I wouldn’t have expected less of you. But he lived a good life, right to the end. And he always looked to the future.’

I softened. ‘Soon, Gareth. It has to be when I can give you everything. Talking of which, what did you get for Valerie? You’ve been very mysterious.’

He shook his head at my obvious change of subject. ‘A new set of the Narnia books, signed by Professor Lewis, with a letter for her.’

I gasped. ‘That’s so kind of him! She’s a huge fan.’

‘He’s very patient with all his admirers.’

Patient. Like Gareth. I laid my hand on his cheek, feeling the faint stubble. ‘Wait a little longer, please.’

‘Until the last battle,’ he smiled.

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That evening, after the casserole and apple pie Mrs Scadden had left for us, we cleared up and settled in the living room, barely large enough to hold our gathered clan: a dozen of us, plus three dogs. Dickens, Daddy's ancient black Labrador, hugged the hearth before the coal fire, our young chocolate Labrador, Wilkie, rolling against him, chewing his ear. Dickens put up with the pup's antics patiently, only snapping gently if Wilkie hit a sore spot in his old bones.

Gareth, Teddy, Rajat and I played bridge at a card table. The two had arrived shortly before dinner. I'd met Rajat, a young law professor, many times, and liked him immensely. Ostensibly Teddy's flatmate in London, the fact that they both worked in law made a convenient screen for their relationship. Only Gareth, myself and Teddy's mother, Livvy knew the truth, though I assumed several other family members guessed but kept quiet.

Wilfrid, my brother Harry's springer spaniel, stuck fast to his master, home from the army for Christmas. Harry and Jamie were arguing good-naturedly about politics. Teddy's younger brother, Aidan, sat next to Valerie, patiently helping her make yet more paper chains. Our parents were gathered around the radio sipping coffee, half listening to a light entertainment programme, half chatting.

Daddy, head of the family now, sat in his father's armchair, as Grandfather would have wanted. My mother perched at the end of the sofa near Daddy, hemming a nightdress-like confection for an angel in the church nativity play. Her cousin, Livvy, was winding gold thread around the cord for the shepherds' headdresses.

Mummy snipped her thread. 'I said we'd drop the costumes off tomorrow afternoon in time for the final rehearsal.'

‘I suppose Ginny’s baby is going to be Jesus,’ said Livvy. ‘He was a miracle, after all.’ No one had been more surprised than Mrs Vaughn, the vicar’s wife, when she finally had a baby this year at forty.

Daddy rose, strolled to the window and stared out. ‘It’s going to be a big storm.’

‘Another wet winter,’ remarked Simon, Livvy’s husband.

‘Ros, your turn,’ Gareth chided. I snatched my gaze back from the window. ‘Sorry.’ I screwed up my face. What suit had Gareth played last?

‘That is not a card-playing face,’ said Teddy.

My hand hovered over my cards. Thunder cracked overhead. The radio went crackly. Wilfred whined and crept behind the sofa. Wilkie snuggled against Dickens, who was thankfully getting too deaf to be upset by storms.

I put down the cards. ‘I think I’ll check on Tinkerbelle before the rain gets heavy.’ I glanced at Daddy, who nodded. ‘Val or Aidan, would you take my place?’

‘Good, we might have a chance of victory,’ Gareth teased. ‘You’ve had your mind more on that cow than on bridge.’

Rajat grinned. ‘And you make fun of us Indians for calling cows sacred.’

Valerie came over, sidling past Gareth, an obvious ploy to glance at his cards, which we all ignored. She leaned against my shoulder, picked up my hand of cards. ‘Will Tinkerbelle be all right, Ros?’

I slipped an arm around her. ‘Mother Nature is the best midwife, and Tinkerbelle is healthy. But it’s her first, so I don’t know how she calves.’ Best not to worry my little sister more.

Jamie rose. 'I'll come and hold the lamp for you, so you have two free hands.'

'Thanks. Let Aidan help you play, Val.'

Out in the cowshed, Tinkerbelle paced back and forth in her stall, restless. Drops of milk trickled from her teats. While Jamie held the lamp, I felt around her belly, murmuring words of comfort. She twisted her head to nose her side.

'Do you think it's righted itself?' Jamie asked.

I grimaced. 'I don't think so. She's about ready, though. The calf has moved down into birthing position. There's not much we can do until she goes into labour. Come on, let's get back.'

Tinkerbelle followed us towards the door, lowing.

'No girl.' I laughed softly. 'Honestly, I think that cow expects us to take her to a nursing home to give birth in comfort.' I rubbed her nose. 'Your family's here. Come back to your stall.' I heaped another pile of hay into her feeder to entice her back. She snatched a couple of mouthfuls as if starved, then stopped abruptly. Another sign labour was close.

Jamie pushed open the door. It immediately slammed back on him. 'Come on, Ros, the storm is getting worse.'

We jogged back to the house under fat raindrops. The hills above lit up in a flash of lightning that silhouetted the scrubby trees against the sky. Ahead of us, Daddy stood framed in the kitchen door. He grabbed our wet things as we pulled them off, and I updated him.

'Maybe she'll hold back calving in the bad weather,' he said. 'It's not a good night for man nor beast. There's mulled wine on the stove to warm you up.'

We helped him take the saucepan of wine back to the living room. Everyone crowded together as we doled out drinks, even a small cup for Valerie, since it was Christmas. The wine warmed my stomach, a small comfort against my nagging worry.

‘How about charades?’ suggested Livvy. ‘Rajat, do you know how to play?’

He inclined his head. ‘I have played it many times. It seems a popular house party game.’

‘Livvy and Mum can’t be on the same team,’ said Harry. ‘They always wipe the floor with us.’

We split into three teams, and Livvy leaped up to start. She held up one finger. ‘I’ll go easy on you for the first one,’ she smiled. ‘Now...’

An ear splitting crash of thunder enveloped the house, plunging us into almost total darkness. Shrieks and splashes of liquid told me more than one person had spilled their mulled wine. I glanced towards the only light, the small coal fire, which eerily reflected our pale faces.

‘Well,’ said Livvy, ‘That’s appropriate. I was going to mime *Frankenstein*.’

Simon laughed. ‘You jinxed us, darling.’

Daddy fumbled along the mantelpiece for the candlestick, sending Christmas cards rustling to the floor. He lit the candle from the coals, and went around the room, lighting the few other candles we set about the place.

‘Let’s get more candles, and some water for whoever and whatever needs mopping,’ said Mummy. ‘Red wine will stain everything. Who remembers if they have a candlestick in their bedroom?’

‘I’ve got a battery lamp,’ said Harry.

‘I’ll check the fuse box,’ offered Simon. He took a candlestick from Daddy, and the two of them, plus my mother, left the room. The rest of us sat and waited. The darkness seemed to amplify every raindrop that hit the windows like lead shot. Thunder rattled the panes. Valerie pressed close to me.

I hugged her. ‘It’s all right, Val. Only bad weather.’

‘Don’t let anyone tell ghost stories,’ she whispered.

‘I promise,’ I whispered back.

In less than half an hour, we were variously mopped down and equipped with the stock of ancient candlesticks Mummy had pulled from the back of a cupboard. The fuse boxes were fine, Simon reported.

‘Well, that’s good news for us,’ said Daddy. ‘If it’s a problem with the power line and not only our house, they’ll have it fixed sooner.’

I pressed my nose against the glass. ‘There’s no let up.’ The apple trees in the orchard, bare of their leaves, whipped their branches in circles like a wild dryad’s dance.

‘Let’s get to bed,’ said Mummy. ‘Hopefully we’ll have power in the morning.’

‘How about we tell...’ began Harry.

‘No!’ I snapped.

‘Can I sleep with someone?’ asked Valerie in a small voice.

Daddy stroked her hair. ‘I’ll put a camp bed in our room.’

We processed out of the living room, upstairs and through the long gallery to the east wing. Candlelight flickered across the faces of our ancestors in the portraits that loomed over us. Perhaps they approved of our eschewing modern electric lights.

We murmured our good nights and drifted into various rooms. Gareth gave my hand a quick squeeze. I saw Teddy's palm touch the small of Rajat's back as they disappeared into his room. Ironic that they could share a room without an eyebrow raised, but six years on, and Gareth and I had to sneak into each other's bedroom. Not that we had slept together until I was twenty-one. Gareth had been firm that I should be an adult, and have finished my studies before committing myself in that way.

When the bustle to and from the bathroom settled down, I slipped into Gareth's room. He looked up from his book, perched his reading glasses atop his head. 'Why have you brought your clothes, Ros? Oh, that cow.'

I laid my working clothes over the back of a chair. 'I'll need to check on her later. I can stay in my own room if you want an undisturbed night's sleep.'

Another thunderclap echoed in the distance, followed by another, nearer. Gareth shrugged. 'I doubt anyone will sleep soundly tonight.' His lips quirked. 'I dare say we can pass the time somehow.'

I snuggled in beside him and rubbed my chilled feet against his pyjama legs.

'Your feet would be less cold if we were married,' he teased.

I reached up to take off his glasses, caressing his hair. 'You're busy turning your thesis into a book. We're reorganising the farm and village as a cooperative. There's precious little time for a wedding. Besides, you told me all those years ago to follow my heart in life.'

Gareth rubbed a hand along my thigh. 'That was because I didn't know how far below the cows I'd be in the pecking order.'

I straddled him and pressed a hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat against my palm, then lifted his hand and lay it over my own heart. 'Our hearts beat together. That's what matters.'

'Darling.' He drew me in and planted a kiss on my forehead, trailing down my nose to my lips...

'Shall I leave the candle burning?' he asked afterwards.

I leaned across his bare chest. 'Better not.' I slipped out of bed, clutching my dressing gown to myself as I took a last look out of the window. 'The wind's whipping up again. That's a big storm front.' Shivering, I jumped back under the covers. 'I hope Tinkerbelle waits it out.'

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I woke with a start sometime in the middle of the night. My first thought was that it was time to return back to my own room, but a glance at the bedside clock told me otherwise. Had a clap of thunder disturbed me, or a dream? The rain was certainly still pouring down. Groggy, I sat up, recognising that prod of intuition.

Gareth stirred against me. I slipped out of bed and groped for my clothes. Gareth opened an eye.

'I'm going to check on Tinkerbelle,' I said in a low voice. 'Farmer's instinct. Go back to sleep.'

As I shut the door behind me, my parents' door opened. I stepped away from Gareth's room as Daddy emerged, also in his farm clothes.

‘You too?’ I said.

He rubbed a hand sleepily through his mop of grey curls. ‘Well, either we’re both right or both fools.’

Mummy poked her head out from behind him. ‘I’ll ask Livvy to come and sleep with Valerie, then get some water boiling, just in case.’

Down in the kitchen, Daddy and I pulled on our wet weather gear and he picked up the large electric torch from the shelf above the coat hooks. The thunderstorm had passed, but the rain beat down mercilessly as we headed out towards the cowshed. What sounded like a roof tile crunched under my foot, but I couldn’t tell if it was from the house or one of the sheds.

We slipped inside the cowshed, shaking and stamping the water from our clothes. Daddy flicked the electric switch. Nothing. ‘It was worth trying,’ he said.

Across from us, all the cows were restless. Tinkerbelle lowed. I raised the torch and immediately saw the distress in her eyes. Her water bag protruded, but the feet of her calf were not showing. She made a noise somewhere between a groan and a grunt.

‘Could you give me some more light over here?’ Daddy pulled one of the ancient horn lamps from the shelf, the only illumination the dairy and animal sheds had back in Grandfather’s youth. He lit the candle inside, but the light barely penetrated the thin horn panels. He cursed. ‘I’d forgotten how useless these things are. There’s an oil lamp here somewhere.’ He fumbled in the semi-darkness and eventually unhooked another lamp from the wall.

I pointed my torch in Tinkerbelle's direction. She was panting now, her water bag broken. Daddy felt swiftly around her abdomen. 'That calf's still breech. You'll have to turn it, Ros.'

I swallowed. 'But you have more strength and experience than me.'

'Your arms are slimmer, and it's her first. You've done it once before.'

'But the vet was here. And the calf died later. Can't we call him?' My voice wavered.

Daddy shook his head. 'I tried to earlier. The telephone lines are out, as well.' He laid a hand briefly on my shoulder. 'We can do this, Ros. We've coped with worse.' He left the cowshed, and I heard the noise of a bucket being filled from the tap. Trembling with fear and cold, I slipped off my raincoat and jumper and rolled up my sleeves.

'Here.' Daddy handed me a bar of carbolic soap, then turned to scratch Tinkerbelle on the head. 'It's all right, girl.' His tone was fatherly, as if talking to me or Valerie when we were little. She quieted for a moment.

I plunged my arms into the cold water and rubbed the soap vigorously over my goose bumps. Daddy looped a halter over Tinkerbelle's head. 'Get the rope, just in case,' he said.

I gulped as I grasped the calving rope hanging on the wall. Could I do it? Could I save her?

Daddy's face was one of stern encouragement as I leaned against Tinkerbelle's flank and slid my arm inside her. I closed my eyes, willing all other thoughts away, relying on touch to tell me what was happening. 'You're right, it's a regular breech. The back legs are folded towards its nose.' I glanced at my father. 'Should I try to rotate it or birth it?'

'What do you think?'

*Think?* Anger and fright surged up. Why was he playing with me when Tinkerbelle was in trouble? We had to get that calf out, and quickly. Stuck in a breech position, it could drown inside the mother. But when I looked at Daddy's face, I saw this was no game. It was a challenge – and a lesson.

*A potentially deadly one.*

I felt Tinkerbelle's contraction against my arm. Yes, *think*. How big did the calf seem? How roomy was the birth canal?

I took a breath. 'She's too far gone in labour to attempt to turn it. We'll have to deliver.' I leaned forward, pushing the calf as far back into the birth canal as possible. My muscles strained with effort. 'Okay, I have a leg.' Bracing my shoulder against Tinkerbelle's flank, I carefully eased the leg inwards.

'Left or right?' Daddy asked.

'Left.'

'Move it to the right. Don't forget to cup the hoof. Breathe, Ros.'

I gasped, letting out the breath I'd not realised I was holding. Grasping the hoof to protect Tinkerbelle's womb, I pulled at the hairy, slippery leg. It slid towards me, and suddenly a little hoof appeared through the birth canal.

'Wait a second, Ros. I'll tie it.' Daddy expertly fastened the calving rope around the ankle. 'I'll hold the rope, you reach for the other leg.'

'I don't know if I can,' I panted. Tears pricked my eyes. My arm was screaming. 'You need to take over.'

Daddy clapped me on the back with his free hand. ‘Yes, you can. You know the calf. You’re already ahead of me.’

I slipped my hand back inside Tinkerbelle and along the extended leg until found the other. ‘Right leg. Move to the left.’ I whispered. Every nerve fibre in my shoulder was shot with pain. The shaking moved down my arm and along my side. I pulled the second leg towards me, and with a cry to match Tinkerbelle’s labour grunts, felt it unfold, then saw it appear. Suddenly, freed, Tinkerbelle gave a great push, and before we could tie the second leg, both the back legs were out, up to the calf’s backside. Daddy grabbed the second leg quickly, before any of the calf could go back in.

‘Good girl,’ I cried. ‘Push!’ I massaged her opening as she groaned and the hindquarters eased out.

‘The umbilical cord is broken,’ I said. ‘The rest needs to come quickly. Pull. Daddy, why aren’t you pulling?’

‘It’s all right, Ros.’ His face was grim, but calm. ‘I’ll go with her next push unless there’s trouble.’

The next minute or so seemed like hours. The back end of the calf hung limp, legs twitching. Tinkerbelle turned her head to see her baby.

‘It’s nearly there, girl,’ I said. ‘Okay, Daddy, I see a contraction coming.’

‘And... now.’ He pulled with gentle strength on the rope and in a few seconds, a wet, slippery body gushed through my arms and down into the deep bed of straw. Laughing and crying, I quickly unhooked the calving rope and began rubbing the calf with straw as Daddy unhooked Tinkerbelle’s halter for her to bend and lick the struggling baby.

We stood back to let her get on with mothering. I glanced up at Daddy. Tears glistened in his eyes in the dim lamplight. He threw an arm round me, heedless of the mess I was in, and kissed me soundly on the cheek.

‘Well done, Ros. I knew you could do it. Your grandfather would be proud of you.’

‘Listen.’ I cocked my head. Outside, the rain had died away, now just a steady pattering. Exhausted, I leaned against Daddy. He held me steady as we waited in happy silence until all seemed obviously well. Tinkerbelle’s calf was pushing against her udders as she continued to lick its flanks.

‘A girl,’ I said.

Daddy grinned. ‘The best.’

Back in the kitchen, Mummy had feeding bottles lined up on the counter. ‘No need,’ Daddy beamed. ‘All’s well, thanks to Ros.’

‘Good job I had the tin bath out ready,’ said Mummy. ‘Wash in the scullery, Ros. I fetched you some fresh pyjamas, just in case.’

*Thank goodness Gareth wasn’t in my room. I bit my lip. But did I turn the covers down?*

‘The kettle’s on, I hope?’ said Daddy.

‘Of course.’

Soon I was in pyjamas, a blanket around my shoulders, nodding over a steaming cup of tea.

‘Get off to bed, Ros,’ said Daddy. ‘There’s nothing more to do.’

I glanced at the kitchen clock. 'It's not long till dawn. I should help you see what damage has been done out there once it's light.'

'Jamie can do that. You'll be more help if you've rested.'

Too tired to argue, I shuffled out of the kitchen, trailing the blanket behind me. I knew I should go straight to my own room, but I was bursting to share the news with Gareth. A few minutes wouldn't hurt. I'd be back in my bed before my parents came upstairs.

Gareth lay in the bed, hair tousled around his forehead, one arm stretched across my pillow. The faint light of the setting stars outlined the body I knew so intimately. A blend of love and desire stirred my own tired body. I dropped the blanket from my shoulders and snuggled into the crook of his arm.

He drew me into the contours of his body. 'All well?' he asked sleepily.

'A beautiful heifer,' I murmured, and tumbled into blissful oblivion.

I woke to full light and an empty space in the bed. I might have the instinct to wake up for an animal in distress far across the farm, but apparently Gareth could slip out to breakfast without disturbing me.

My eyes shot wide open. *Gareth's bed*. I sat up and winced at the pain that throbbed through my shoulder. I hopped out of bed and gingerly wrapped the blanket over me like a shroud, then cracked open the door. All was clear. I scurried to my room, slamming the door at a click from another bedroom latch. Damn, the blanket was caught. I wrenched it inside, heart pounding, then let out a sigh of relief as the footsteps went down the corridor towards the bathroom.

After dressing, I found Gareth in the hall downstairs, tapping the telephone hook.

'Still not working?' I asked.

‘No. I’d given this number to someone I expected to hear from today.’ He shrugged. ‘Well, they’ll figure it out. We left some breakfast for you. Mrs Scadden hasn’t arrived yet, so Harry cooked. I must say, the army has done him a world of good.’

‘Is Darby here?’ Our butler always made it in, whatever the weather.

‘No, so there must have been damage down in the village. Your father says the farm’s not too bad. Some slates off various roofs, the manure piles are a bit of a mess. He’s not sure about the winter wheat as yet. And yes, Tinkerbelle’s calf is fine.’

‘Thank goodness it wasn’t summer.’ I shuddered at the thought of how much money we would have lost if this was harvest time.

He set down the receiver and gave me a kiss. ‘I hear you were the heroine of the night. How are you?’

‘Sore. And Daddy forced me to be heroic. He was in charge the whole time.’

Gareth smiled. ‘I bet you’re being modest. We’re keeping warm in the living room. Join us there.’

I stood on tiptoes to put my mouth to his ear. ‘Why didn’t you wake me?’ I whispered. ‘Someone might have seen.’

He laughed low. ‘Ros, I tried three times then gave up. Go on, get your breakfast. I’ll bring fresh tea.’

As he reached the passageway to the kitchen, he turned his head with a grin. ‘Anyway, if someone saw, we’d just have to do the honourable thing.’

I hurried into the dim, unlit dining room. Those stomach pangs were hunger, not anticipation, I told myself. My breakfast lay in a dish warmer, a tea light beneath, and a plate

ready on a tray. I served myself every last scrap and wandered into the living room. Rajat lingered near the fire in his coat, reading a book. Livvy and Simon sat at the card table, making lists. After brief 'good mornings' all round, I settled into an armchair, all of a sudden ravenous.

'Where is everyone?' I asked, spearing fried egg and black pudding onto my fork.

'Teddy is helping your father with roof repairs,' said Livvy. 'Your mother has set out towards the village with Harry and Aiden. If Darby and Mrs Scadden haven't turned up, there must be trouble down there.'

'Maybe just a blocked road,' said Simon.

'Sorry about this,' I said to Rajat.

He shrugged. 'It may be cold, but it is still less damp than Cambridge or London. And you have some interesting antiquarian books in your library.'

Valerie bounced into the room. 'I went to see Tinkerbelle's baby with Daddy this morning. She is sooo sweet! She has a blaze on her nose, exactly like Tinkerbelle. Daddy said you saved them both.' She flung her arms round my neck, making me choke on my bacon, and sending pain shooting through my shoulder again. 'I think Noelle is the perfect name for Tinkerbelle's baby, don't you?'

'Yes, darling,' I coughed.

Gareth returned with a tray piled with tea things, and a plate of fresh toast. 'Who needs a cup?'

Rajat laughed. 'The English magic elixir.'

‘Oh, you found that history of Wessex by Bradley-Smith?’ Gareth handed me a piece of toast and cup of tea and settled into a relaxed conversation with Rajat while I wolfed down breakfast, anxious to get outside and see the damage for myself.

Sounds of voices and doors opening and closing made us all prick up our ears. In a few moments, Mummy and Mrs Scadden entered the living room, others trailing in their wake. Our cook-housekeeper resembled a roly-poly pudding, bundled in an overcoat stuffed with mufflers and shawls.

She unwrapped her headscarf. ‘Glad to see all’s well enough here.’

‘Tea?’ I offered.

‘Don’t mind if I do, Miss Ros. It’s damp and chilly out there.’

Gareth put out a hand. ‘Finish your breakfast, Ros. I’ll do it.’

Mummy unbuttoned her coat. ‘It’s bad news down in the village. The power lines are out, and two telephone poles were blown down. One of them damaged the front of the pub, the other one fell onto the postmistress’s house. The high street was flooded.’

‘The water’s not pumping properly,’ added Mrs Scadden, ‘And a cart got blown into the village shop window. Then of course the rain got in, and it’s half destroyed. Poor Mrs Dyett. Her home and her shop.’

Daddy appeared in the doorway. ‘Everyone who needs to should come to stay here.’

Mummy turned to him. I caught her hesitation, and knew what was going through her brain in that split second before she smiled and said, ‘Of course.’ Feeding and housing half the village would push us close to the red for the year. Not to mention how or where to do it.

Livvy stood. 'How many should we expect, Mrs Scadden? Shall Simon and I prepare some rooms in the west wing?'

Mrs Scadden took a sip of tea. 'Ah, that's better. Those as can will go to relatives, but of course, with no telephones, we can't tell if we'd be going to worse situations.' She shook her head. 'Hard to say, Mrs Woodford. A dozen or two?'

'The heating in the west wing is still non-existent,' said Mummy. 'It might be better to make a camp in the Great Hall for those who don't mind dormitory-style accommodation. One huge fire is better than several small ones.'

Harry grabbed two pieces of toast from the tray. 'I can organise a camp.'

'Good idea,' said Daddy. 'You and Aiden work on that. What's the road like coming from the village, Mrs Scadden?'

'There's a couple of trees down, lots of branches. Nothing a tractor and some strong arms couldn't move. Some of the men have already started clearing the way.'

'I can't drive a tractor, but I can move branches,' offered Rajat.

'Warm work too,' I grinned. 'I'll drive. You and Teddy can be my crew.'

'Jamie, you take charge on the farm,' said Daddy. 'I'll need to go down to the village and see what we're up against. Gareth, will you help him?'

Gareth nodded. 'I'm at your command, Jamie.'

'Make sure Ginny and the baby get up here,' said Mummy. 'Sinclair is very young. He needs to keep warm.'

'I'll fill all the thermoses we have before you lot get on your way,' said Mrs Scadden.

'And hip flasks,' added Teddy.

Daddy encircled Mummy in his arms and gave her a smacking kiss. ‘Phoebe my love, that’s for always insisting we pay for a good insurance policy.’

She pushed him off, smiling. ‘Don’t thank me until the inspector has been.’

When everyone had their marching orders, Teddy, Rajat and I set off to the tractor shed. ‘You two drag out that trailer,’ I said. ‘There’s a pile of old sacks you can use for cushioning.’ I rummaged along the shelf for some work gloves. ‘Here, you’ll need these. Teddy, get that heavy rope. We’ll want it for the tree Mrs Scadden told us about.’

I reversed the tractor out of the shed and jumped down. ‘Teddy, can you hook up the trailer? I’m going to take a peek at Tinkerbelle before we leave.’

Inside the cow shed, Tinkerbelle and her baby lay in their thick bed of straw, the calf leaning against her mother’s flank, both quiet and contented. I smiled down at them. ‘How are you liking Manor Farm, Noelle?’

She blinked her liquid brown eyes at me. I rotated my shoulder, suddenly glad of every stab of pain that reminded me of what I had achieved. But now, there was more to do.

Teddy had spent summers and most Christmases on the farm his whole life, and was always a useful extra farmhand. Happily, Rajat turned out to be a good learner. I drove slowly down the road, mostly one handed, stopping at intervals for the two of them to hop off and load the trailer. Soon, Rajat and Teddy had to walk behind me. Three quarters of a mile down the road, we hauled a beech tree to the ditch and had a nip of brandy to celebrate. Another half mile brought us face-to-face with the village team, led by Eric Legg, our mechanic, driving an old van with a horse box hitched behind for an improvised trailer.

We hopped out of our vehicles to confer. ‘Your dad’s gone down to the village to see who needs evacuating,’ Eric explained to me. ‘What a mess. And Christmas Eve tomorrow.’

‘Is everyone safe?’ I asked.

‘Thank the Lord, yes. Well, Mr Rigg twisted his knee trying to move that telephone pole from in front of the pub, daft bugger. We told him to wait for a tractor or the telephone company, but he said it’d be New Year before any telephone men thought our village was worth coming out to. Mrs Rigg was right cross with him. Called him names she must have learned in London. Oh, don’t mind if I do,’ he said, as Teddy proffered the hip flask.

I yawned. ‘How’s your shop and home, Eric?’

Eric passed the flask to the next man. ‘The house is all right, just a bit of water in the kitchen. But that wind ripped up the corrugated roof on the workshop. Better that than our house, though. It’ll be easy to fix.’

‘Is the road clear on your end?’ Teddy asked. ‘Do you need us to drive further down towards the village?’

Eric shook his head. ‘No, it’s good enough to get a car through.’

‘You can pile your debris inside the estate gates if you’ve nowhere better to leave it,’ I said. ‘Do you have room in the van to give Teddy and Rajat a lift back? Our trailer is full.’

‘We can walk,’ said Teddy. ‘We’ll clear any stray branches on the way.’

I was thankful for a cup of thermos coffee before setting back. The disturbed night was catching up with me. Back at Manor Farm, the Great Hall had become a makeshift camp, with folding beds and old mattresses lining the walls, heaped with what looked like the entire contents of our airing room. A huge fire blazed in the ancient chimney breast below the swags of pine and holly that crowned it. Yet somehow, it felt right. The place had embraced countless people over the centuries; it seemed content to be doing its job.

Livvy staggered in with a tower of blankets, which she piled onto the long dining table. ‘Thank goodness no one every throws anything away around here. Oh, poor thing, you look ready to drop’ She put an arm around my shoulder. I winced. ‘Sorry, darling. Get upstairs and catch a nap before the onslaught.’

‘I wonder how many will come?’ I said.

‘We’re ready for an army,’ she replied stoutly.

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The caravan of cars and vans, and even a horse cart or two, crunched up the driveway around lunchtime. Darby, who had finally made it in, stood with our parents to meet them. Gareth and I returned from clearing the orchard as people spilled out of vehicles. Adults clutching bedding, children dragging suitcases. Mrs Coombs, who ran the village tearoom, with an ancient cat in her arms. And crates of food, thank goodness.

‘Come in, come in.’ Daddy waved people on. ‘Tea and hot punch in the great hall.’

The two Mrs Dyetts, sisters-in-law who ran the post office and village shop, emerged from Eric Legg’s van, coats over their shop aprons.

‘We brought any food from the shop that might go off quickly,’ said the elder Mrs Dyett. ‘And the accounts book,’ she added.

‘I brought the post,’ said the younger Mrs Dyett. ‘I know that’s not strictly legal, but with the shop so damaged, I couldn’t leave it.’

‘Any post for people not here can be put in our safe,’ said Mummy.

The Reverend Vaughn pulled to a halt in his car. His wife, Ginny, stepped out holding a bundle of blankets that had to be their new son, Sinclair.

‘I guessed you still have a cradle,’ she said to my mother. ‘I thought it was better to squeeze a couple of tea urns into the back of the car instead of the baby paraphernalia.’

‘Bless you, Ginny,’ said Mummy. ‘Yes, we’ve got everything you’ll need for the baby.’ She took him out of Ginny’s arms and rocked him. ‘We lit a fire in the nursery for any young ones. I’m sure lots of girls would love to play nursemaid.’

*Not Valerie*, I thought. She wasn’t interested in anything without four hooves and a mane.

Soon, bedding was flying in all directions, children were playing stuck-in-the-mud around the camp beds, and old women were telling each other over cups of tea how they ‘mustn’t grumble’. Mrs Coombs’s cat was curled up defiantly in the centre of Wilfrid’s basket, leaving the spaniel cowering on the cold floor. Definitely time to get back to the farm. I edged out of a conversation and crept from the room.

‘We’ll just keep them in tea and alcohol,’ Darby whispered to me as I passed, ‘and it’ll be all right.’

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The next morning, Daddy left the farm to me and Jamie while he went back to the village with several other men, including Gareth, to work on house repairs. Jamie took the early morning round, looking annoyingly bright-eyed when we met in the kitchen, despite the fact he’d spent the night camped in the living room with Harry, Teddy, Rajat, Aidan and all three dogs.

I stole a couple of rashers of bacon from the pan on the stove and slapped a bacon sandwich together. Rajat appeared with a tray piled precariously high with crockery, a harassed look on his face, and dark circles under his eyes.

I rescued the tray from him. ‘Come on, Rajat, do the farm rounds with me.’

He raised his eyebrows but took the Barbour jacket and wellingtons I offered and followed me outside. I wolfed down the bacon sandwich as we made our way to the cowshed.

‘Why did you ask me to come?’ he said. ‘Were you impressed with my stick-gathering abilities yesterday?’

I swallowed the last bit of crust. ‘From the looks of you, I thought you might need a break from people.’

He shrugged. ‘That was kind, but villages are much alike in any country: everyone thinks it is their right to know everyone else’s business, and outsiders are suspects to be interrogated or shunned. I can put up with a few stares and kindly meant, if inappropriate, questions. If I look weary, it is because your brother Jamie snores, and your father’s old dog has flatulence.’

I burst out laughing.

‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘you appear to be the recipient of inappropriate questions yourself. I have heard more than one person ask when your wedding will be.’

I stopped laughing and grimaced. ‘I’m an old maid to them.’

Rajat cocked his head. ‘Gareth is an honourable and loyal man. Teddy tells me you have been courting for six years.’

‘Not you, too,’ I groaned. ‘I thought you and Teddy would be sympathetic.’

‘Do you not think I would marry Teddy if I could?’ he said quietly. ‘You have the chance to declare your love and commitment to the world. We only get to share our love with those we most trust.’

The idea of two people of the same sex marrying, even Teddy, whose happiness was paramount to me, was so preposterous, I was flummoxed. Perhaps it was not so outrageous in India? I swallowed. ‘Well, Teddy is a seasoned farm hand, so I’m helping you show your commitment to him by teaching you a thing or two about the farm.’

In the cowshed, Noelle was on her feet butting at her mother, who ate with a renewed appetite. I added extra cow cake to Tinkerbelle’s fodder and glanced at her udders for any signs of soreness or blockage. All looked well.

‘Is the legend about cattle kneeling at midnight on Christmas Eve true?’ asked Rajat.

I smiled. ‘I’ve never sneaked out to check. It would be like waiting up to catch Father Christmas delivering presents. He never comes when you’re awake.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said, scratching Tinkerbelle’s nose, ‘that is your problem. You are waiting and looking too hard for the perfect solution for you and Gareth. Maybe you should trust in a Christmas miracle.’

‘Hmm,’ I replied. There seemed more chance of meeting Father Christmas or witnessing cows honouring Christ’s birth than finding a way for Gareth and I to be together and fulfil our career dreams. ‘Let’s turn the cheeses.’ Surely cheese could not offer the occasion for another lecture.

When we returned to the hall, Daddy and the others were back and in the middle of giving their report during yet another tea break. Darby had not been joking about endless supplies of tea and alcohol.

‘...Mr Woodford went to Wareham to check what was happening there,’ Daddy was saying. ‘Their power is partially out. Most of the help is being channelled to the bigger towns, so we’re on our own for now. But we’ve already mended every roof in the village that

had slight damage, and got tarpaulins on those in worse condition. Flood damage is varied, but the insurance man can't make it until the twenty-seventh. Aidan Woodford documented the damage with photographs. We're all alive, and we've suffered worse.'

'The church?' asked Ginny.

Her husband stood. 'The church radiators aren't working, which isn't a problem. But we can't have a late night service. Too many people will need to travel back here in the dark.'

'Oh dear,' said Ginny. 'The Nativity and Midnight Mass will have to be cancelled.'

'There's no reason we can't have a Christmas Eve service here,' said Daddy.

'Reverend Vaughn has brought the altar things.'

Ginny sighed. 'All that work on the Nativity for nothing.'

Rajat raised a hand. 'Isn't this the ideal traditional English setting for a Christmas play? The great hall in the manor house, the yule log in the hearth, mead, et cetera?'

Ginny looked around. 'Not all of the cast are here. Some went to shelter with relatives.'

'I think everyone present could ad lib the Nativity story,' said Teddy. 'Except maybe Rajat.'

'I have studied your Gospels,' said Rajat. 'I found some most interesting correlations between your Christ and Lord Krishna.'

The Reverend Vaughn raised an eyebrow.

'Why not?' said Mummy. 'We're a community.' She rubbed her hands. 'How about a rehearsal after luncheon?'

‘We’ll have a combined Christmas service and Nativity play in the early evening,’ said Reverend Vaughn.

Cheered, Ginny moved around the crowd, pulling together her new cast. Eventually she made it to our corner of the room and smiled at Rajat shyly. ‘Could you be one of the Wise Men?’ she asked. ‘It’s tradition, you know...’

‘To have them be exotic, she means,’ said Teddy with a grin.

Ginny blushed. ‘I don’t want to offend.’

Rajat inclined his head. ‘No offence is taken, Mrs Vaughn. I am willing and able to lend a little Asian flair to the proceedings.’

‘I’ll show you where all the old dressing-up clothes are kept, Mrs Vaughn,’ said Teddy. ‘We had loads of fun with them when we were kids. Mum has a talent for fashioning costumes. I bet she’ll help you kit people out.’

‘One more thing,’ said Ginny. ‘My baby can be Jesus, but we need someone younger than me to be Mary.’

‘Don’t look at me,’ I said hastily. ‘I wouldn’t know which way was up. Besides, I need to be free for any farm emergencies. Let children take the parts.’

‘You know which end is up on a cow or sheep,’ Teddy pointed out. ‘How much difference is there?’

Ginny Vaughn looked rather taken aback at the comparison of her precious only child to a farm animal, but she swallowed it in a smile. ‘Really, Ros, you’d be perfect.’

‘Gareth could be Joseph,’ Teddy added. ‘Maybe we could make him a beard...’

‘You know what?’ I interjected, ‘I’ve had a brilliant idea. Why don’t we have live animals for the manger? I’ll mange them. Tinkerbelle is practically house-trained, and she’s just had her calf. We could bring in some of the hurdle fencing for a couple of sheep, if Nathaniel doesn’t mind. And Mr Thomas’s donkey is good-natured. He always gives rides at the summer fete.’

‘Brandybuck can come,’ Valerie piped up.

‘Val, since when was there a Christmas pony?’ I asked.

‘Some Nativities have the Wise Men riding horses and even elephants,’ she said. ‘It’s not all camels. And there’s no way you’d get our Shire horses inside.’

‘Why not?’ Ginny’s eyes shone. ‘Oh, this will be even better than in the church. God really does move in mysterious ways.’

‘Well, we’d better get plenty of hay and some shovels inside, because I know what “wonders” the animals will perform,’ I said. ‘I’ll talk to our farmhand, William. I think he’s around somewhere.’

Ginny bustled off happily on her mission.

‘Did you make that offer to get out of holding a baby, or so you didn’t have to pretend I’m your husband?’ Gareth murmured in my ear.

I looked up to see a teasing smile on his face. I elbowed him in the ribs. ‘The baby, first and foremost. And you should thank me for getting you out of being Joseph.’

His face grew more serious. ‘I think we got caught the other night. Your parents have been making veiled remarks to me. Maybe it’s time to do more than pretend to be married.’

He spoke lightly, but my stomach knotted. Couldn't he understand how heart-wrenchingly impossible it was to make that decision right now? 'We're in a crisis, Gareth. At least wait until the lights are back on.' I kissed him softly on the cheek by way of a peace offering. 'I'm off to talk to Nathaniel. Maybe you should go and hammer scenery or something.'

He shook his head. 'I'm on a mission, to see if I can make it to Bovington Camp. I still have some connections there from my time in National Service, and I'm going to see what, if anything, can be done about our situation.' He cocked his head. 'Maybe the lights will come on after all.'

'It won't be a repeat of last time.' I smiled, recalling how six years before, I'd persuaded Gareth to commandeer a tank and block the road to our farm, to protect it from being closed on a false accusation of Foot and Mouth disease. He'd promised to always be there if I needed him, and he'd kept that promise.

That was why I couldn't commit until I could keep my own promise for the rest of my life.

The remainder of the day flew by. Mummy was right. We were a community, and a solid one. The men drove and forth to the village, clearing, repairing and fetching more belongings. Mr Rigg returned to the pub for some barrels of beer. Mrs Scadden reigned in the kitchen with Mrs Rigg and the elder Mrs Dyett, her closest friends and the only women she would let into her realm. Livvy was in her element as wardrobe mistress and Mummy – well, she seemed to be everywhere, as usual.

Finally, the setting was complete. The hearth, piled with logs, threw out a roaring heat. A trestle table, swathed in linen, became the altar, bedecked with tall beeswax candles and gleaming plate from the church. More candles and lamps flickered along windowsills.

The giant silver papier-mâché star, also rescued from the church, hung from the rafters above a stage marked out with sheep hurdles and hay bales. Little angels adjusted their scratchy tinsel halos, the innkeeper prodded the cushion that made a fat belly under his robe, and the two shepherd boys were having a sword fight with their crooks.

Time for the animals. I made my way back out to the cowshed. ‘Well, Tinkerbelle, Father Christmas has granted your wish. You get to visit the house.’ I slipped on a bridle. She needed no prompting. With a nudge to Noelle, who tottered after her across the yard, we wended our way up to the house. Nathaniel, our shepherd, waited outside with a ewe and twin lambs.

He nodded at Noelle. ‘Got a new one, I see.’

‘Full breech birth,’ I said proudly.

‘Aye? Did you deliver ’en?’

I nodded. He nodded back slowly. High praise.

‘How are the rest of the sheep?’ I asked.

He pushed his cap back from his forehead with a weathered hand. ‘Still lambin’. Had three in’t thunderstorm, but me an’ the dogs got them all snug under the hut.’

Nathaniel spent winters in a freezing shepherd’s hut supervising his lambing. I bet he hadn’t batted an eye at the storm.

‘I brought my most placid yeow,’ he said. ‘But if them shepherd boys get handy with their crooks, I’ll get handy with mine ’cross their backsides.’

I grinned. ‘Tell them yourself, you’re more frightening than me.’

Soon, the sheep and cattle were settled in place with a hay bale to nibble on, under Nathaniel's watchful eye. Valerie rode Brandybuck in through the front door, much to the delight of the other children. Mary, played by Mrs Riggs's granddaughter, stood nervously by the donkey. I wove my way through the congregation to stand at the back with Gareth. The organist belted out 'O Come, All Ye Faithful,' on the piano we had wheeled out from the living room.

'Any luck at Bovington?' I whispered. 'You smell of beer.'

'We'll see. I had to buy a round or three while I was there. Also, I got through to –'

'Shh, the play's starting.'

The Nativity went beautifully. True, the ewe nibbled the hem of Mary's dress while she was reclining on the hay bale with baby Sinclair, one of the angels needed to run out for a pee, and Nathaniel leaned over to clip a shepherd boy round the ear when he poked a lamb. But all was taken in good spirits.

Rajat seemed to be enjoying (or making fun of) fulfilling everyone's cliched ideas of him as some sort of Rajah, and had made liberal use of our spare paste jewellery to decorate his kurta. Teddy paced behind him, looking gorgeous in an ancient silk smoking jacket, gazing intently at his lover's back. It was clear, to me at least, who was Teddy's star.

I became suddenly aware of Gareth's jumper brushing my arm, his familiar scent, at once sensual and comforting. My own guiding star. But would I ever find a way to follow him? I glanced at my father, his arm around my mother as they shared a hymn book. Daddy wasn't yet sixty – surely he and Jamie could manage the estate between them until it made enough money to employ an estate manager from outside the family. But to leave Dorset and the farm would be like severing a limb. Rajat was right about one thing. Only a miracle could bring us together with our hearts intact.

At last, all was finished, and we burst into ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing.’ As the music died away, there was a pop and the Christmas lights sprang on.

‘Merry Christmas everyone!’ yelled Harry.

‘We’ll be in our own beds tonight, thank the Lord,’ muttered Mrs Coombs.

As the service drifted into the beginnings of a party, the organist began a soft rendition of ‘Away in a Manger’. I swear Noelle turned her head to gaze at me. I couldn’t help it; I began to weep silently.

‘Ros,’ Gareth hissed, ‘I need to talk to you.’ Before I could answer, he dragged me through the congregation, out of the hall and towards the library.

My stomach churned. *The lights are on.* ‘Not now. I have to get the animals back.’

‘You’re not the only farmer here. They’ll survive for five minutes.’ He pulled us into the room and shut the door, then turned to face me. ‘I need to give an answer. I don’t have much time.’

Now? On Christmas Eve? The dam broken by Noelle, I began to cry in earnest. ‘Gareth, I love you. I love you so much, but I can’t leave the estate yet. You saw that calf. She’d be dead if it wasn’t for me, probably Tinkerbelle too. My heart is yours, but right now, it has to stay here. This is my calling.’

He clutched my arms. ‘No, listen. I said I need to *give* an answer. Today, when I got to Bovington, I was able to contact someone I’d been waiting to hear from. Exeter University is building up their archaeology department, and they’re willing to offer me a position as deputy head.’

I gulped, stunned. ‘Why would you leave Cambridge?’

‘Exeter’s an up-and-coming university. I’ll have a chance to make a difference, not just wait twenty years for the old professors to die at their desks in Cambridge. Anyway, my main work is done in the field. And Exeter’s close enough to here. I can commute to teach my classes, maybe stay there two or three nights a week. And,’ he added with a grin, ‘I’m doing it for you, of course, you gorgeous, exasperating woman.’

‘For me.’ I drew a trembling breath.

He pulled me in close. ‘Ros, I’m not asking you to leave your bloody cows. I’m not even asking you to have my children or darn my socks. I’m asking you to be my wife. I love you.’

I looked into those green eyes, snaked my hands up into his thick, red-brown hair. ‘I love you too, Gareth.’ Pulling his face towards me, I kissed him passionately.

‘So, erm, was that a yes?’ he asked when I released him.

‘Yes,’ I laughed, ‘but I think you’d better pretend you haven’t asked me and speak to Daddy first. He’d be a little hurt if you didn’t.’

We wandered back towards the celebrations. The Christmas lights twinkled on the massive tree in the entrance hall. The strains of a wassail song drifted out from the great hall. Nathaniel tipped his cap at us as he walked through, behind his dog who herded the sheep. The ewe stopped to nibble at a paper chain on the tree. Wilfrid bounded out, the remains of a crushed mince pie falling from his jaws.

Gareth linked his fingers in mine. ‘Come on, I’ll help you get Tinkerbelle back to her stall.’ He squeezed my fingers. ‘Merry Christmas, future Mrs Easton.’

I squeezed his back. ‘Merry Christmas, darling.’