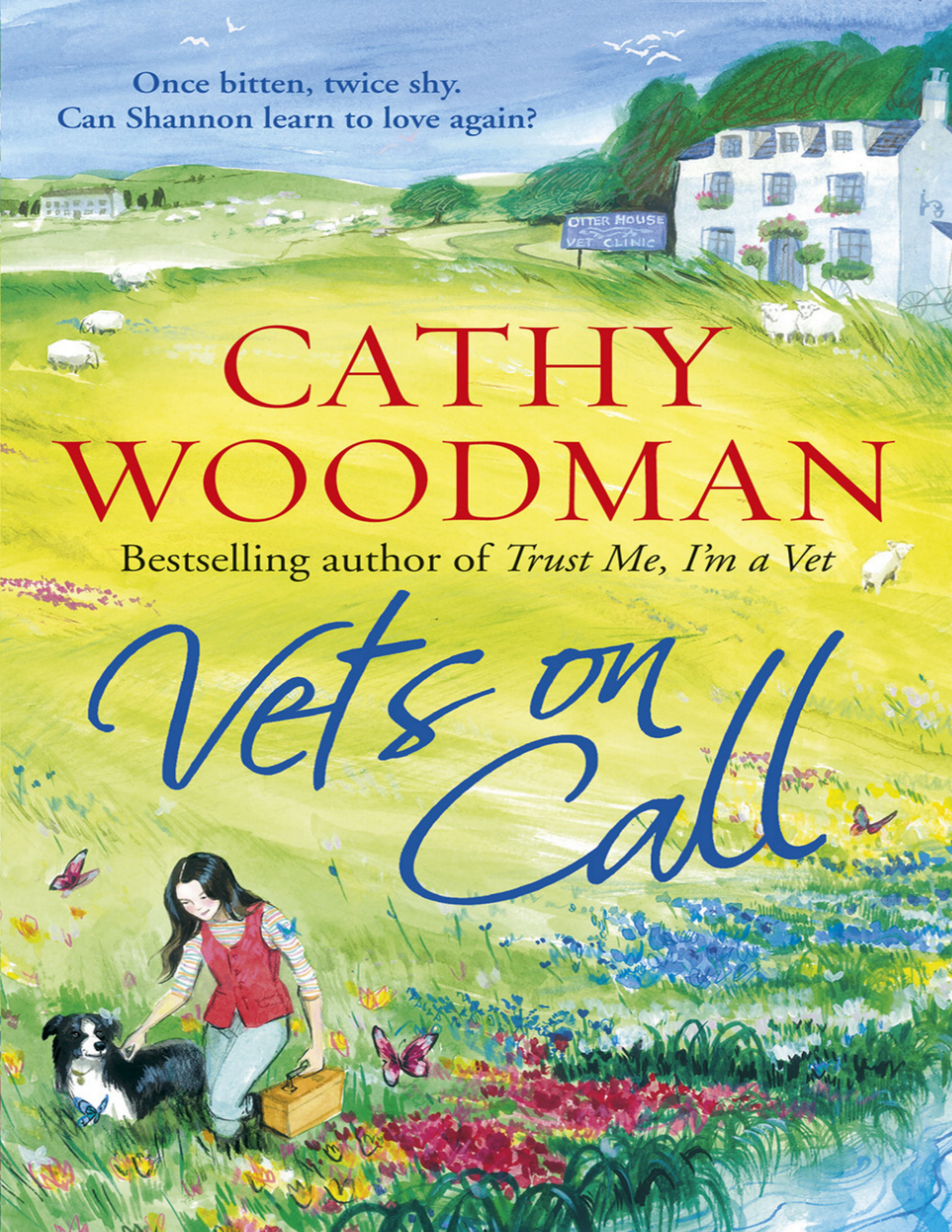


Once bitten, twice shy.  
Can Shannon learn to love again?

# CATHY WOODMAN

Bestselling author of *Trust Me, I'm a Vet*

## Vets on Call





## **Contents**

About the Book  
About the Author  
Also by Cathy Woodman  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Acknowledgements  
Map of Talyton St George

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two  
Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four

Copyright

## About the Book

### **Otter House has a new vet ...**

Motorbike-riding, leather-clad Ross looks like a bad boy, but underneath the leathers, he's a good-looking charmer and he soon worms his way into the hearts of everyone in Talyton St George.

Even vet nurse Shannon warms to him. So when she needs a place to live, it makes sense to move in with Ross. Just as a friend, of course.

As they grapple with escaped snakes and feral cats, their friendship deepens, until they can't deny their feelings for each other any longer.

But when a terrible accident leaves Shannon's life in tatters, it changes their relationship forever.

Because how will she ever know whether Ross is staying with her out of love or pity?

## About the Author

Cathy Woodman began her working life as a small-animal vet before turning to writing fiction. *Vets on Call* is the ninth book set in the fictional market town of Talyton St George. She took inspiration from the East Devon countryside where she lived as a child and learned how to ride a horse, milk a cow and give a sheep a pedicure. Cathy now lives with her two almost grown-up children, two Border Terriers and a cat in a village near Winchester, Hampshire.

## Other books by Cathy Woodman

*Trust Me, I'm a Vet*

*Must Be Love*

*The Sweetest Thing*

*It's a Vet's Life*

*The Village Vet*

*Vets in Love*

*Country Loving*

*Follow Me Home*

*The Three of Us* (a digital short story)

CATHY  
WOODMAN

*Vets on  
Call*



arrow books

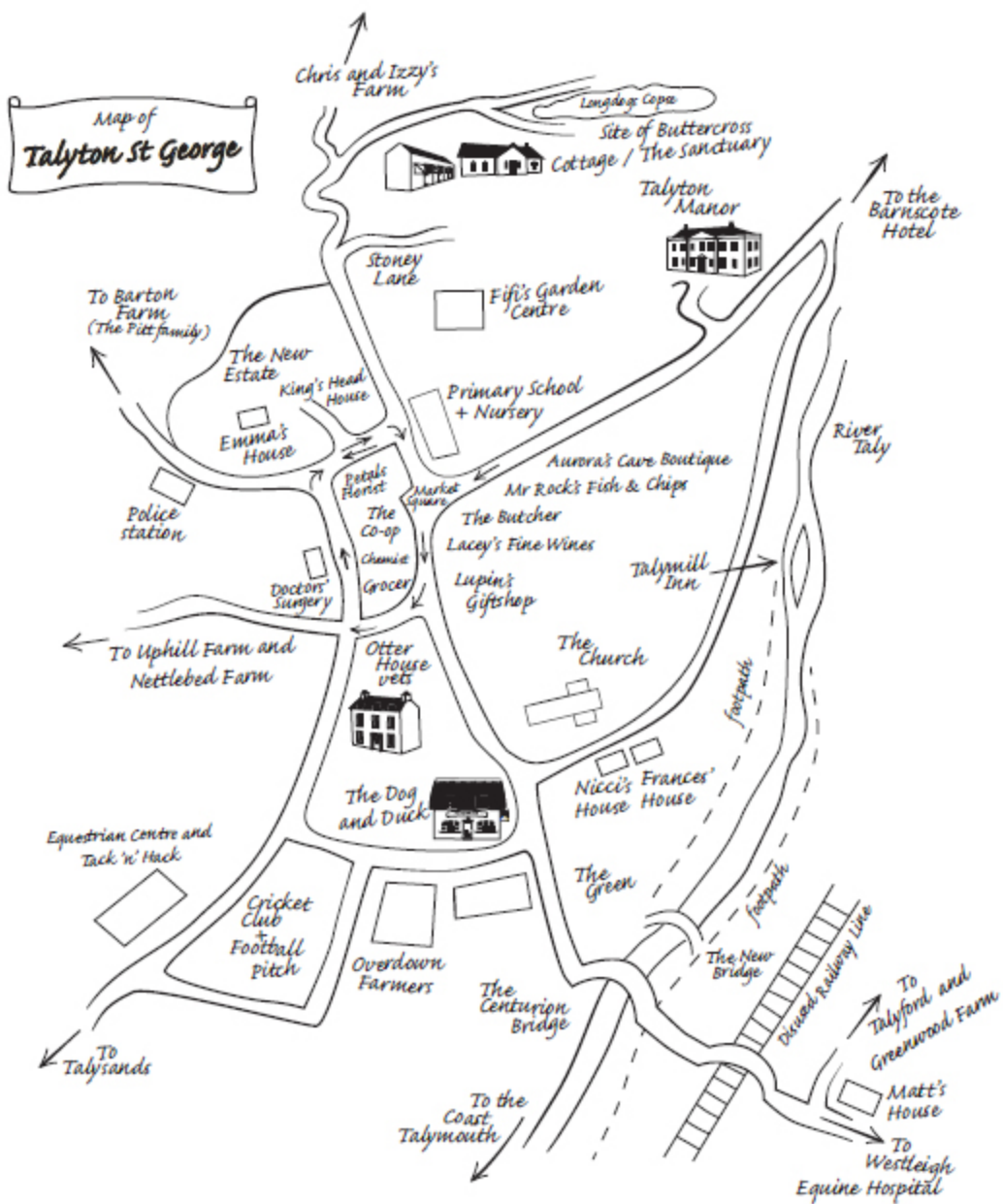
For Tamsin and Will

## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Laura Longrigg at MBA Literary Agents, and Gillian Holmes and the wonderful team at Random House for their enthusiasm and support for the Talyton St George series.

I'd also like to thank my friends and family for their patience while I've been writing *Vets on Call*.





# Chapter One

## *Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit*

I'm on the early shift so there's nobody about when I turn up for work at Otter House, which isn't unusual. What is out of the ordinary is the large cardboard box on the step in front of the glass doors at the side of the practice, which wasn't there when I locked up the night before. I take a closer look. The top is taped shut and pierced with holes, and someone has scrawled the words 'sorry, can't cope any more' along the side in pink felt-tip pen.

I let myself into reception and return for the box, struggling to carry it into the consulting room. It isn't particularly heavy, but it only just fits through the door. I lower it onto the table, when whatever it is inside starts to scrabble about. I tear off the tape and open the lid very carefully.

One, two ... no, six pairs of eyes look up at me. I stare back at six of the cutest baby rabbits I've ever seen: two cinnamon, three orange and one white, with pricked ears and manes of fluff.

'Oh, you are gorgeous,' I say, picking the white one out and cuddling it against my cheek. 'It must be my birthday.'

'Hello, Shannon. Did I hear someone say it's their birthday?' Frances joins me, placing her handbag on the table and lifting out one of the orange babies, which matches the colour of the nest of false hair on top of her head, and clashes with her purple and lime-green tunic. She's in her late sixties, too old to update her look and

redefine her style, I suspect. She's been on the verge of retiring from her position as practice receptionist for a while now. In fact, she reduced her hours and even left for a couple of months, but she's always come back. I can't imagine her not being here. She's like part of the furniture.

'How sweet,' she sighs, as she strokes her baby rabbit between the ears with the tip of her finger. 'This must be a vet nurse's dream.'

'It is, but I don't understand how anyone could bring themselves to abandon them. They can't be more than four or five weeks old.'

'Where did they come from?'

'I was hoping you might have some idea.'

'I'll keep an ear to the ground,' Frances says. 'On the subject of news, is it true that your mum is putting Petals up for sale?'

'I'm sorry?' My forehead tightens into a frown as she continues, 'Only several people have spotted one of the estate agents from Talymouth - Smith and Ryder-Cole - parked outside the shop.'

'When was this?'

'Yesterday afternoon.'

'There's no way she'd ever put it on the market. Floristry is her life. And, given it's also our family home, I think I'd know if my mother was planning to sell the shop. I guess even estate agents - with their reputation for outrageous descriptions and dodgy dealings - have occasion to buy flowers, just like everyone else.' Smiling, I return to the rabbits. 'I'd better take these little guys through to isolation - they'll be better off in there than in Kennels with the dogs and cats. Please can you call Jack from Animal Welfare when you have five minutes? He should look into this.'

'I don't understand why the person responsible didn't contact the Sanctuary direct. That's what Talyton Animal

Rescue is for – to take in and rehome unwanted animals without judging the owners.'

'It's easier to say than do,' I point out. 'Everyone knows that rabbits breed like rabbits, and I'd be pretty embarrassed at having to admit that I hadn't thought about contraception. They don't appear to have been badly treated; they have food and it wasn't cold last night. Do you think you'd be able to take a couple of them on?'

'I couldn't.' Frances puts her rabbit back in the box with the rest. 'I have three very messy hedgehogs at home already. How about you?'

'I couldn't have them, not with the dog. I wouldn't trust Seven with a small furry ...' The lining of my nose starts to prick and I pop my baby back before I sneeze. I make a mental note to take some antihistamines as soon as I can for the rabbit allergy I acquired a couple of years ago.

The phone rings in reception and Frances goes to answer it, taking up her post behind the desk, while I carry the box of baby bunnies out the back to isolation, where I make sure they have plenty of hay, food and fresh water. I put them all inside the stainless-steel cage and close the door. The sound makes them skitter about, scattering hay across the floor.

I sweep up the mess, catching sight of the reflection of a skinny young woman of twenty-six, with a naturally pale complexion, blue-green eyes ringed with black lashes and a couple of sets of studs in each ear. I have long straight hair, dyed a reddish-brown shade of Irish setter and pulled back from my face with a French plait. I strike a pose with the broom. Some people say I remind them of Kristen Stewart, but I'm not as pretty as her, I think, as Frances calls me away to admit two cats for neutering. I dispense a repeat prescription before I set up theatre ready for the morning's ops.

Later, I get to help one of the partners with a collie who's under sedation for X-rays of his elbow. Keeping an eye on

the dog, who's snoring lightly on the prep bench, I watch my favourite vet dithering over the X-rays. Maz is in her late-thirties, tall and slim with light blonde hair tied back with an elastic band. She's wearing black combat trousers with a top printed with cartoon dogs and cats. She holds the film up against the light of the viewer on the wall and is wondering aloud if the dog would really benefit from what the owner is pushing for – joint replacement surgery at a specialist hospital – when Frances appears, looking flustered.

'I'm afraid there's been a mix-up. Jennie's brought Lucky in for his investigations today instead of tomorrow. I've told her you're busy, but she won't budge.'

'That's just what I need when we're a man down.' Maz turns to me. 'I can manage here while you go and have a word with her. Looking on the bright side, though, if we do it today, we'll have a spare slot tomorrow.'

I join Frances in reception. A middle-aged woman dressed in a spotted summery dress, woollen cardigan and wellies is standing there with a scruffy dark grey terrier on a lead. Jennie is married to one of the local farmers and has a flourishing business baking cakes. Lucky has become what Izzy – our head nurse – calls a 'frequent flier' over recent months, attending the practice with various niggling problems from arthritis to a runny nose.

'Hello,' I say, before bending down to stroke the dog, who turns his back on me and faces the exit.

'Thank goodness you're here, Shannon,' Jennie says. 'I'm hoping you can make sense of the situation. According to Frances, Lucky isn't booked in, but she definitely told me to bring him today.'

'I've looked and he isn't on my list.' Frances scans her monitor with her glitter-framed glasses perched on the end of her nose.

'I don't like to make a fuss but, in my business, the customer is always right.'

I smile to myself. My mum follows the same principle – the customer is always right, except when they're wrong.

'I've just remembered.' Jennie pulls one of our appointment cards out of her bag. 'Look, Frances printed it out and told me to bring him in starved.' She hands it to me. 'I feel so mean – he's had no breakfast and he's been hanging around Reuben's highchair, waiting for a cornflake or some scrambled egg to fall from the sky.'

I check the date and time on the card as she continues, 'Please, don't tell me you have to rebook. I can't stand the stress. I just want this over with. I need to know what's wrong with him.' I notice how her dark brown hair is streaked with grey and there are shadows beneath her eyes. 'I'm so worried, I can't sleep.'

'Jennie is right.' I look to Frances. She does make mistakes – we all do – but it's becoming a habit.

'I must have had a moment,' she says, apologising.

'It's all right anyway because Maz says she can fit him in this morning.'

'That's brilliant, thank you.' Jennie's voice softens. 'I'm sorry for being so sharp, but this is a stressful time. Adam, my oldest, is very upset. He loves this little dog.'

I show her into the consulting room.

'Maz will go through the consent form with you as soon as she's free, and give him an injection of sedative.'

'I think it's me who needs the sedative,' Jennie says dryly, picking Lucky up while I collect the consent form that Frances has printed off at reception.

'I can't believe I did that,' she says sadly.

'Never mind. These things happen.'

'I know, but why do they have to keep happening to me?'

'Have you contacted Jack about the rabbits?' I ask to divert her.

'I have indeed. He's collecting them later. There's space for them at the Sanctuary until they find new homes.'



I'm pleased because with a bit of luck their new owners will register them with us for veterinary treatment and I'll get to see them again.

When Maz is ready, I fetch Lucky from his cage in Kennels.

'You wouldn't think there was anything wrong to look at him,' I observe as he tries to wriggle out of my arms.

'He's a typical terrier. They fight to the end.' Maz frowns as I utter three sneezes in a row, making the dog jump.

'I'm sorry. It's the rabbits.' I lift Lucky onto the prep bench and stroke his neck to calm him down, finding several lumps and bumps that shouldn't be there. I glance up.

'He has generalised lymphadenopathy,' Maz explains, drawing up some sedative. 'All his glands are up.'

I hug the dog tight to keep him still for her to administer the injection into the vein in his front leg, at which he grows limp in my arms and drops off to sleep. I lay him down on his side, check his heartbeat and the colour of his gums, and make sure his tongue is pulled forwards so he can breathe freely.

'Is everything all right?' Maz asks over the sound of the clippers that I've left clean and oiled on the bench.

'He's gone very deep.' I pinch his paw, but there's no reaction. The sedation has hit him unusually hard. I grab a mask from the drawer, attach it to a breathing circuit and slip it over his muzzle to give him some oxygen. 'He's breathing and his pulse is okay, but he's a bit blue.' After a couple of breaths, I check his gums again and they've turned pink, like litmus paper dipped in acid. 'That's better.'

Maz clips the hair from one of the lumps in Lucky's neck. I vacuum up the loose fur and scrub his skin while she prepares to take a biopsy. She also takes blood, X-rays his chest and tummy, and goes on to take some bone marrow to send off to the lab. Eventually, she injects the drug to

reverse the sedation, but Lucky remains out for the count. We stand together, watching and waiting for him to wake up.

‘I’m afraid he’s sicker than I thought,’ Maz says.

‘Is it cancer?’ I stroke the sleeping dog’s ears.

‘I’m hoping against hope that it’s some kind of infection. I was going to set up the microscope to see if I could give Jennie an answer today, but it’s packed away ready for the builders to start, so we’ll have to wait for the path lab to come back to us. I’ll ask Frances to organise a courier. If this is what I think it is, the sooner we start treatment the better. Wakey, wakey, poppet.’ Maz sounds like she’s talking to one of her children – she has three under seven: George, Henry and baby Olivia. ‘It’s coffee time.’

‘You go. I’ll stay with him,’ I offer.

‘Thanks, Shannon. You’re a star.’ She washes her hands and disappears through the swing doors into the corridor. I clear up, rinsing the used surgical instruments and soaking them in hot bubbles of detergent, keeping an eye on the patient at the same time. When I approach him again, he manages to lift his head.

‘Another ten minutes and I could have missed this week’s practice meeting altogether,’ I grumble lightly. I lift him up and put him back in his cage under a blanket to keep him warm. He responds with a wag of his tail. Smiling, I leave him to join the rest of the team in the staff room.

Tripod, the black and white practice cat who helps me and Izzy run this show, is perched on the back of the sofa. He’s called Tripod on account of him having three legs. Maz amputated the fourth one when Alex Fox-Gifford ran him over in the middle of the night and brought him to Otter House. According to Frances, he could easily have done the op himself at his practice at Talyton Manor, but at the time he was looking for any excuse to see Maz. It doesn’t seem like a terribly romantic idea to me, but that’s vets for you. They’re a breed apart.

Tripod reaches across and taps my shoulder with his paw as I sit down. Eventually I relent, and he hops down and settles on my lap, purring and gently kneading my leg with his prickly claws while I take a jam doughnut from the plate that Izzy holds out to me. Our head nurse has been forty-two for a few years now; she looks younger, with her freckled skin and short hair that has turned to silver. She's like Marmite – you either love or hate her.

'Have I missed anything?' I ask.

'We're discussing the plans for when the new vet arrives.' Emma, who set the practice up in the first place and persuaded Maz to join her as a partner later on, brushes some sugar from her cheek and grins. 'So much for the diet.' She's short and curvaceous, with dark brown hair cut into a geometric bob, and dressed in a blue and red patterned dress with a tie waist and navy Mary Jane's. 'It isn't so much that I wanted a second doughnut – it's more that I can't bear to see food go to waste.'

'It's still going to waste,' Izzy says lightly. '*Your* waist.'

'Very witty,' Emma says with a touch of sarcasm.

'I hope the new boy is going to fit in,' Frances says. 'He seemed very ...' It takes her a while to find an appropriate description, which is a little worrying. '... pleasant when he came for his interview.'

'Is that the best you can do? He's all right. Emma asked him all the right questions ...' Maz pauses and Emma finishes the sentence for her: 'Does he like doughnuts, for example?'

'It's an icebreaker, the first thing I ask at every interview.' Emma chuckles.

'I'm not bothered about his dietary preferences,' Izzy goes on. 'His suit was too small and his ego far too big. He seemed a bit raffish to me.'

'What do you mean by that?' I ask. 'I wasn't here when you interviewed him.'

‘Well, if you must swan off to Ibiza with your boyfriend,’ Izzy says.

‘Ex-boyfriend,’ I point out quickly, wanting there to be no confusion about my status as a single woman.

‘I’m sorry, I forgot you broke up with him when you came back. What I mean is that I thought that Mr Curdrige seemed a little unconventional compared with Will. In fact, I wanted to book him in for a dematt ...’

‘Maz and I have taken a lot of trouble to find the right vet for the job.’ Emma sounds slightly hurt at the criticism, even though she really should be used to it by now, due to Izzy’s tendency to suffer from bouts of foot-in-mouth syndrome.

‘The length of his hair has no bearing on his ability,’ Maz says. ‘He’ll be fine. Don’t you remember how long it took for you nurses to break Will in?’

‘He wanted to refer everything – even the simplest, most straightforward stitch – up for an MRI scan,’ Izzy says, ‘and he was an expert in what we called “foreverectomies”, because it took him so long to do any surgery as he was scared of cutting too much out.’

‘Better that way than the other,’ Maz says wryly. ‘It’s a pity he decided to leave, although I can imagine him teaching vet students.’

‘He’ll be very good at it,’ Emma says.

‘Except he’ll train another load of new vets his way, and we’ll have to start all over again with them,’ Izzy sighs.

‘Will was amazing,’ I say in defence of our assistant vet, who left to take up a post at one of the vet schools last week.

‘In the end,’ Izzy agrees. ‘Is there any other business?’

‘Yes, but it won’t take long. Two minutes at most,’ Maz says. ‘The builders are starting on Monday next week and we’re hoping—’

‘Against hope, I think,’ Izzy cuts in. ‘I don’t know why you’ve given DJ and his cowboys the contract to convert the

flat.'

'Better the devil you know,' Emma murmurs.

'I'm hoping,' Maz begins again, 'that they'll finish the work within two weeks as planned. I know we've had issues with DJ and his merry band before, but they've given us a reasonable estimate and were available to do the work as soon as Will moved his exotic pets out of the flat. DJ knows that if he messes up, I'll be on his tail like a shot.'

'Anyway,' she continues, 'although moving the lab and office onto another floor frees up space elsewhere, our client list continues to grow. People are travelling from further afield, which means we have to make plans for further expansion. As far as I can see we have three options: to move out of Otter House and set up in one of the barns up at Talyton Manor, to take on one of the industrial units at the end of town, or to keep Otter House and buy or rent a building as a branch surgery.'

'Move out of Otter House? No way,' Izzy says, and I can see from Emma's expression that this option isn't acceptable to her either.

'We *are* Otter House,' Frances chips in.

'I know that, but with more space, we could have a fourth vet and more support staff. We could increase the range of services we offer, like adding a hydrotherapy pool for our orthopaedic cases. We could attract veterinary specialists for patients like Merrie with her chronic skin.'

'I'd love to train for a qualification in hydrotherapy,' I say, warming to the idea, 'and we could expand the nursing clinics.'

'There's no way we're moving out of Otter House.' Emma puts her foot down. 'That was never in my vision for the practice. Not only that, we've invested a small fortune here.'

'So there's still the concept of a branch surgery, or two, maybe,' Maz goes on.

‘That would split the team,’ Izzy says. ‘Our clients wouldn’t like that.’

‘I understand why you’re all being so negative – that’s what happens when you instigate change,’ Maz goes on bravely. ‘We should embrace it, not be scared.’ She turns to Frances for support. ‘You’re on the front line. You know how hard it is to turn people away when we’re busy.’

‘I do my best to squeeze everyone in somehow,’ she says rather stiffly. ‘We do manage.’

‘I think you’re completely bonkers,’ Emma cuts in when Maz opens her mouth to pick up on what Frances has said. ‘I’ve told you, it’s too much to think about right now. I want to spend more time with the children, not less.’

‘I’m thinking of the future. When the children have grown up and left home, we’ll be free to work full-time again and, when we retire, there’ll be a nice little extra for the pension fund.’

‘If you retire,’ Emma points out with a wry smile.

I keep silent, not wanting to be seen to take sides. I love Maz. She saw my potential and gave me a chance when I was a rather awkward teenager, but I don’t know why she’s thinking about money and pensions when she’s married to Alex Fox-Gifford, who’s loaded. His family owns half the land around here, and I’m not sure she even needs to work. I like Emma too, and I can see how upset she is at her partner’s suggestion that they abandon Otter House altogether – it was her family home and she set up the practice as a tribute to her mother who passed away from cancer.

‘So, when’s the new vet arriving?’ I ask.

‘Tomorrow for eight, I hope,’ Maz says.

‘You hope? He’d better be here,’ Emma says. ‘I’ve arranged for Ben to have a daddy day with the girls tomorrow so I can show him the ropes.’

‘It’s okay. He’s texted me to say he’ll be with us by this evening. He’s staying at the manor with Sophia for now and



I must admit I'm nervous – I'm not sure how my mother-in-law will cope with a house guest. On the other hand, it'll be nice for her to have company for a while, now she's alone in that big old house.'

Izzy frowns. 'I hope it doesn't put him off.'

'I've told her that she's to look after him like he's one of the horses.' Maz grins. 'That way, he'll want for nothing, which will be fine as long as she doesn't feed him pony nuts for breakfast.' She grows serious. 'I'm sure I don't really need to do this, but I just want to remind everyone to make him welcome. Your job, Frances, is to persuade people to see Ross when they book appointments. Don't let them insist on seeing me or Emma, apart from the really special ones, that is.'

'I'm pretty sure that's all of them,' I observe brightly. All our clients are special, in more ways than one. 'Ouch!' Tripod turns and gives me a gentle bite to remind me to stroke him now that I've finished my doughnut. I run my fingers down his back, shocked to feel the knobbles of his spine.

'If we can transfer as many of Will's clients as possible straight across to Ross, that would be perfect. There's bound to be some teething trouble as there always is when a new vet starts.' Emma looks towards Maz. 'Are we done?'

'Not quite,' I say quickly before the meeting comes to a close. 'Has anyone noticed that Tripod has lost weight recently?'

'I thought he was at the water bowl more often,' Izzy says, as Maz and Emma shrug rather sheepishly.

'It's so typical of the vets not to notice anything.'

'That's why we have nurses.' Maz laughs. 'I'll have a look at him later, Shannon.'

'You won't forget?'

'You might have to remind me.' She glances at the clock on the wall. 'Let's get going. Emma, you're meeting with DJ about the plans for the flat, Frances, you're at reception,

and Shannon, you're helping Jack with the baby bunnies. I said you'd be happy to sex them for him before he boxes them up to take them up to the rescue centre.'

'You don't think they're too young?' It can be hard to tell the boys from the girls before they're six weeks old, and I don't want to make a mistake.

'You'll be fine. I'm supremely confident in your ability to distinguish male from female.' Maz turns to Izzy. 'You're with me for the visits.'

I head to the consulting room to unpack the drugs order, tidying the shelves and restocking the fridge with vaccines while Tripod 'helps', pouncing on imaginary mice among the boxes and packaging. When I've finished, I whisk him into reception to weigh him on the scales – he doesn't need a basket as he's an old hand, standing there waiting for the reading to come up. He has lost weight, which isn't good, but I'm quietly confident that he'll be okay. I help Jack with the rabbits, assigning three to the girls' carrier and three to the boys', and sending each of them on their way with one last cuddle. That doesn't help my allergy because, in spite of a dose of antihistamine, I'm still sneezing when Jennie arrives to collect Lucky much later in the day.

'Am I glad to see you?' Jennie scoops him up into her arms from the consulting room table, and plants a kiss on the top of his head. 'We've all been so worried.' The dog looks adoringly into her eyes. 'You look completely spaced out.'

'It's the sedation. It'll continue to wear off overnight,' I explain, before I show her out and lock up behind her.

'That's another day over.' Maz looks up from where she's filling in a form to go with Lucky's biopsy samples in the prep room.

'Haven't those gone yet? The courier should have been by now.'

Maz stares at me. 'I asked Frances twice to arrange collection.'

‘Shall I call her to check? She’s gone home.’

‘No, I’ll organise it. You’ve done more than enough today, thank you. I’ll have to have a little chat with her. This can’t carry on. I can’t keep sorting out her muddles.’ Maz grins ruefully. ‘I have enough of my own.’

‘Are you going to be around for a while? Tripod needs to see a vet,’ I remind her. ‘I don’t see why he shouldn’t get priority treatment, seeing as he’s staff.’

‘Let me do this first – I’ll be with you ASAP.’

I feed Tripod and clean the theatre from floor to ceiling – I learned a long time ago that Izzy doesn’t miss a trick. The tiniest fleck of dirt or a single hair and she’s onto it. As I empty the bucket and rinse out the mop, Maz pops her head around the door into Kennels.

‘I’m sorry, I’ll have to look at Tripod another time. I’ve got to dash – Sophia’s got the children and George has fallen over and bumped his head. He might need a couple of stitches.’ Maz’s face is etched with maternal anxiety, but she forces a smile. ‘Perhaps I’ll bring him back here and do it myself to save waiting in A&E. I am joking,’ she adds quickly. ‘You were about to ask me if I wanted you to get a kit ready, weren’t you?’

‘The thought did cross my mind,’ I admit. ‘You’d better go. I hope he’s okay.’

‘He’ll be fine. The Fox-Giffords are hard nuts to crack.’

I decide that there’s only one way to get Tripod seen by a vet – I book him an appointment for the following day before I walk the short distance home through Talyton St George.

As I glance back along Fore Street, I notice how the evening sun casts its rays across Otter House, lending extra warmth to its clotted-cream coloured render. There’s a poster in the window of the pharmacy, advertising the maypole dancing on the Green which happened over a month ago on the first day in May, as it has every year since anyone can remember.

On my way, I'm accosted by our biggest patient, a blue Great Dane who reminds me of Scooby Doo. He leaps up and plants his paws on my shoulders, almost sending me flying as he licks my face with a tongue like a dripping towel. I step back against the wall beside the greengrocer's as his owner shrieks at him and tries to haul him off.

'Nero, get down!' Mrs Dyer, the butcher's wife, struggles to drag him away. She's in her fifties at least, and has arms like a bodybuilder on steroids. 'I'm so sorry - he doesn't know his own strength,' she gasps, catching his lead around the adjacent lamppost to act as a brake. 'Are you all right?' she goes on as the bunting flutters in the breeze above us.

'I'm fine, thanks. It isn't every day you get a greeting like that.' I avoid Nero's gaze because I know that if I acknowledge him, he'll be back to give me another slobbery kiss.

'I must come in and make an appointment for him - he's been scratching at his ears something chronic.'

'You'll be able to meet our new vet.'

'I prefer to see someone I know and trust. You do understand?'

Unfortunately, I understand all too well. When you've had a bad experience, as both of us have with losing much-loved dogs before, you're much more wary the next time: once bitten, twice shy.

Mrs Dyer wishes me goodnight and releases the lead. I watch her go, being towed along the street, recalling the times I used to scurry away in the opposite direction or pretend to be on my mobile to avoid her. As an idealistic and rebellious teenager, I was involved in an act of vandalism, spraying the message, 'Meat Is Murder' across her shop window with red paint. I meant well. I was fighting for a cause close to my heart. The police knew who'd done it because a couple of friends and I had already been in trouble for chaining ourselves to the gates of the

fields in protest where the new estate was being built; we were taken to the station, where we had a meeting with Mr and Mrs Dyer and our parents. We apologised and paid for the clean-up – I was lucky not to end up with a criminal record.

I stroll on across the cobbles in Market Square, stopping outside one of the shops, the place I call home.

I look up above the window where 'Petals the florist' is painted in gold lettering on a green background. There's a smear of mould in the top corner of the glass that Mum must have missed – not an unusual occurrence, as she is both vertically and visually challenged. The sign in the door is turned to 'Closed', but the lights are on and I can see a figure beyond the shelves and buckets of flowers which form a riot of scarlet, pink, yellow and orange among the different shades of green foliage. My mum, dressed in a tatty sweatshirt and jeans that are too tight for her, is sitting at a table, where the light from a desk-lamp creates a golden halo around her frizzy curls as she concentrates on wiring the stem of a bird of paradise.

I slip the key into the lock, give it a jiggle and a twist and push the door open, at which the bell jangles, bringing a big black dog flying out from the shadows, claws clattering across the lino.

'Seven!' I exclaim as he jumps up, squeaking and wagging his tail.

'Hello, Shannon,' Mum calls.

'Hi,' I call back as I squat down to stroke his ears. He's a labradoodle, the product of an illicit liaison on the Green between a Labrador and a standard poodle. Maz delivered the puppies by Caesarean, and the seventh puppy to be born had a hare-lip, which meant he couldn't suckle. The owner of the bitch couldn't cope with the commitment of hand-rearing him, so he became ours.

'There's egg, beans, tomatoes and mash for tea,' Mum says, cutting up blocks of oasis and placing them in

baskets. 'Would you mind putting the potatoes on? I'm all behind, like the proverbial cow's tail.'

'Do I have to? I've been on my feet all day - I could do with a shower and a long sleep.' My nose fills with the scent of lilies.

'I've got this anniversary do at the Barnscote tomorrow and it's got to be perfect.'

'I'm sorry.' I walk over and hug her. 'I'll do cheese on toast, if that's okay.'

'Thank you, I don't know what I'd do without you, darling. Or you, Seven,' she adds, reaching down to pat him as he walks right in close to her and presses his nose against her thigh.

'He thinks you're having a hypo,' I point out.

'I do feel a little shaky.' She hunts along the counter among the bridal magazines and sample brochures for her tubes of glucose gel. She takes one and then uses her machine to prick her finger and check her blood.

'How is it?' I ask, peering over her shoulder.

'My sugar's been all over the place for the last few days.'

'Why didn't you say something?' I say, annoyed. 'Have you seen the doctor?' I look at her and she gazes back, her eyes small and her cheeks puffy. 'Clearly, you haven't.'

'There's no need to give me one of your lectures. I know all about diabetes. I have to live with it.'

'So you know how serious it is if it's out of control.'

'Yes, it could kill me, but I'm not going to let it. I'll see Dr Nicci tomorrow.' She relaxes a little and I can tell she's feeling better. 'Come on, lighten up. I don't want my daughter returning to the dark side.'

'Oh, Mum,' I groan. 'As if.'

She's referring to my Goth years when I dyed my hair black and hid behind dark, shapeless clothes. I change the subject. 'Frances says you had an estate agent round the other day. You would tell me if you were planning to put Petals up for sale?'



‘The agency dropped a leaflet through the door a while back. I thought there’d be no harm in having an up-to-date valuation.’

‘What on earth for?’

‘I don’t know,’ she shrugs. ‘One of the partners turned up – he says it’s a remarkably attractive property and he’d be delighted to market it personally, if that was what I wanted.’

‘So you aren’t selling?’

‘No,’ she confirms, looking aside as if she can’t quite meet my eye, which makes me wonder what she isn’t telling me.

## Chapter Two

### *Itchy Feet*

I'm first at the practice the next morning to find that a new inpatient has arrived overnight. Emma, who was on call with Izzy, must have admitted the dog, a black standard poodle. I know who she is before I check the record card that's clipped to the front of the kennel.

'Saba, what's happened to you?' She looks up with mournful brown eyes and promptly throws up at my feet. 'Oh dear.' I clear up quickly and give her a clean bed. 'Never mind.' She's Seven's mum and one of our favourites, having lost some of the aloofness of her youth. Her coat is rough and going grey around her muzzle, although she's still immaculately turned out. 'No breakfast for you, I'm afraid.' Emma has scribbled 'poss op' on the card.

I feed Tripod and hang out the wet towels and pet bedding on the line in the garden, keeping half an eye on the robin that's hopping about at the foot of the lilac. I can hear the starlings chattering in the roof where they've made their nest and hatched their first brood of chicks. It's very peaceful, apart from the sound of a car now and again on the road outside. I love this time of day, although it's often the calm before the storm. It won't be long before Kennels fills with yapping dogs.

Gradually, the sound of a motorbike cuts through the calm, starting as a faint buzz like an annoying wasp, and growing louder, until it's so noisy that it could be a whole flight of Hell's Angels roaring through Talyton St George

and heading this way. I hear it pull up somewhere outside Otter House, its engine throbbing like a pulse. It's the kind of sound that goes right through you, vibrating through your skull and all the way to your feet. Tripod flattens his ears and slinks back through the cat-flap. The robin flies up onto the garden wall and stays there, even when the engine eventually cuts out.

I carry on pegging out the last of the washing until the sound of the buzzer from reception calls me back inside.

'I'm on my way!' I hurry on through the practice, wondering which of Talyton's pets has come to grief and hoping that one of the vets will turn up soon, but when I get there, there's a man in a helmet and leathers leaning nonchalantly against the desk, one finger pressed down hard on the button for the buzzer.

'Ah, there is some sign of life, after all.' He lifts his gloved hand and raises his tinted visor to reveal a pair of lively dark brown eyes.

'I came as quickly as I could,' I say, bemused at his impatience. Where's the urgency? He doesn't have an animal with him. He isn't carrying any parcels, so I assume this isn't a special delivery either, and then I remember that the courier's due to take Lucky's samples to the path lab today.

'I believe you're expecting me.' His voice is rich and laced with dark honey. He's very well spoken. In fact, he's what I'd call well posh, much like Alex Fox-Gifford.

'Oh, yes, of course,' I say, a little affronted by his rather superior attitude. He removes first his gloves and then his helmet, revealing a mass of dark, almost black curls that fall to his shoulders, which I can't help noticing are broad and decidedly masculine. His complexion is tanned and his cheeks are adorned with dark stubble. He is heart-stoppingly gorgeous, maybe because he reminds me of Kit Harington, my actor crush of the moment – to look at, at least. I want to make the most of this occasion – it isn't

often, if ever, that a handsome guy, roughly my age, walks off the street into the practice, but I'm a little surprised when he places his helmet on the desk and unzips and strips out of his leather jacket. Underneath he's wearing a grey T-shirt with a wolf on the front, which is stretched taut across his chest.

This is getting interesting, I think, frozen to the spot, watching him, but if he's expecting coffee and a chat, he's going to be disappointed. I know what these couriers are like. They charge by the minute.

'Wait there,' I say, and I hurry out the back to grab the package I wrapped and labelled last night. I bring it back to reception. 'This is for you.' I hold it out to him and he stares at me, as if he's a bit dense. My forehead tightens as he places the package on the desk, depositing it between the display of dog tags and collars, and a cardboard cut-out of a big brown flea.

'Thanks for the welcome present, but there's no need.' He grins, showing off a set of perfect teeth, and holds out his hand. 'I'm Ross, the new vet.'

'Oh-mi-god, how embarrassing. I'm so sorry.' I shake his hand briefly. A great start, I tell myself. You've just mistaken the hot new vet for the courier. 'I wasn't expecting you to turn up on a motorbike.'

'It's all right. It isn't your fault. I take it that you're Shannon.' He smiles as if to put me at ease, but I can't help wondering if he's laughing at me being wrong-footed by his arrival. 'Maz and Emma talked about you when I came here for my interview.'

I'm not sure how to respond. I look away, focusing on the noticeboard and the posters on the walls advertising our puppy parties and our competition for Pet of the Month.

'Um, Maz isn't here yet. She's probably dropping the children off at school and nursery.'

'She's on her way. I saw her bundling them into the car up at the manor. I'm lodging - no, slumming it - with her