

# CATHY WOODMAN

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

There's a new  
love affair  
in the village

Follow  
Me Home



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## About the Book

Everyone deserves a second chance at love ...

Life has been tough for village midwife Zara. Recently divorced and living with her grandmother, Zara is struggling to get back on track.

Until one day, love walks in, in the form of an abandoned puppy.

Although Zara adores her new friend, the puppy causes havoc wherever they go, so she is grateful when local shepherd Lewis offers to train her.

But Lewis has an ulterior motive for helping. And though Zara may be able to trust him with her naughty dog, can she trust him with her bruised heart?



## About the Author

Cathy Woodman was a small animal vet before turning to writing fiction. She won the Harry Bowling First Novel Award in 2002 and is a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association. She is also a lecturer in Animal Management at a local college. *Follow Me Home* is the eighth book set in the fictional market town of Talyton St George in East Devon, where Cathy lived as a child. Cathy now lives with her two children, three exuberant 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*

CATHY  
WOODMAN

*Follow  
Me Home*



CENTURY

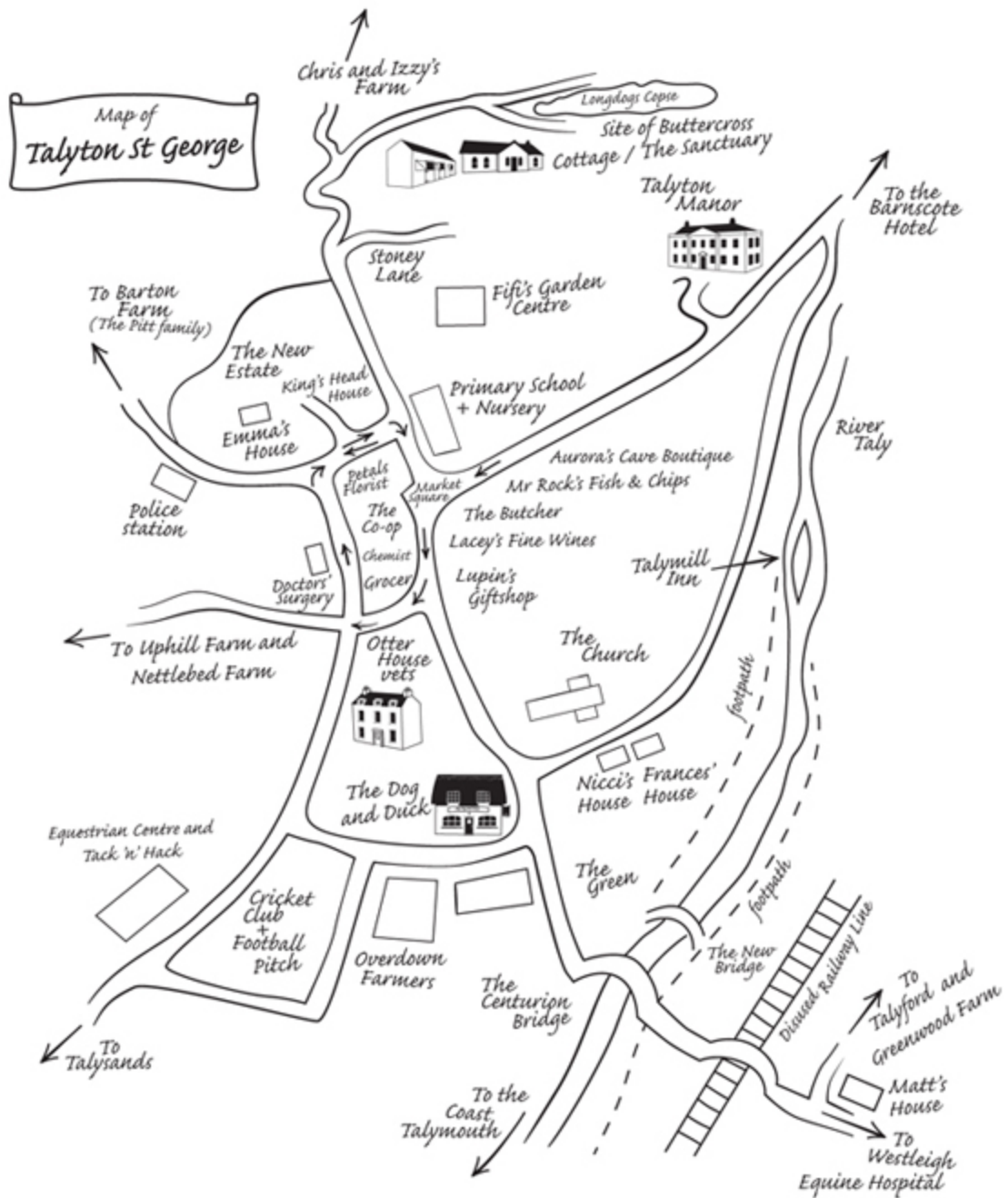
To Charlotte and Millie

# Acknowledgements

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Special Delivery*

I'm not sure whether to be excited or scared when the call I've been waiting for comes at last, but I'm on my way. I leave the Village News, the newsagent's, and drive through the empty streets of Talyton St George on a cold February afternoon with the sleet pelting against the windscreen and the antique streetlamps dancing reflections on the puddles. I pass King's Head House, and Petals, with its colourful window display of flowers, before turning right at Mr Rock's fish and chip shop and Lacey's Fine Wines. Mrs Dyer, the butcher's wife is walking, or – it would be more accurate to say – is being walked by her giant dog that reminds me of Scooby-Doo. I wave, but with two hands on the lead, she can only nod back as the dog tows her out of the churchyard towards home.

I switch the heating up and continue out of town, following the signs for Talyford and beyond, where torrents of orange water rush down the sandy banks dotted with bushes and bare-rooted trees on both sides of the road, and flood across the lane on the way to Greenwood Farm.

My mobile rings – I answer it on the hands-free.

'Zara, when are you going to get here?' Murray, the father-to-be, is panicking.

'I won't be long. Two minutes max,' I say calmly, although my heart is beginning to beat faster. 'How is she doing?'

'I reckon she's about to drop,' Murray says in a broad Devon accent as his wife utters a high-pitched wail in the background.

'Why didn't you get in touch earlier?' I ask him.

'Emily didn't want to bother you too soon.'

'It's my job. I'm supposed to be there.' My fingers tighten on the steering wheel. 'How often are the contractions coming now?'

'Since her waters broke, every three or four minutes. I don't know. I've lost count.' Briefly, he recovers his sense of humour. 'I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I can't wait for you to turn up.'

I smile to myself. In Murray's opinion, I spend far too much time with Emily.

'Murray, calm down, will you? We always thought it would be quicker this time.' I try to reassure him. I wouldn't mind betting that Emily's in transition at least, which means this baby will soon be here. I hope I'm not going to miss out. 'I'll be with you at any minute. Tell her to remember to breathe,' I add lightly.

'I heard that. I am bloody breathing,' I hear Emily yell back before the mobile signal cuts out. Emily never swears. I put my foot down, speeding up along the lane before slowing and turning into the driveway just after the leaping deer that Murray created from brushwood last summer and placed by the gate to mark the farm entrance. I pull in off the muddy track into the yard and park between a tractor and a pick-up in front of the cob and thatch farmhouse where the door is open and the lights are on. I grab my bag and trolley from the back of the car and head inside, leaving my shoes on the mat in the hall and checking in the mirror above the table that I've remembered to tie my hair back. I straighten my uniform too, navy trousers and a royal blue top with our midwifery team logo, Topaz, embroidered onto it.

‘What kept you?’ Murray, Emily’s husband of five years, pops his head around the living-room door. He’s thirty-three, two years older than me and Emily, and six foot four tall with a freckled complexion, a mop of curly red hair and hazel eyes. ‘Seriously, I’ve never been so pleased to see you, Zara. Come on in.’

I follow him into the room where the scent of lavender oil drifts through the air, displacing the smell of sheep and farmyard from my nostrils.

‘I thought you were all for delivering this baby yourself,’ I say, observing that he’s had time to change out of his outdoor clothes into clean jeans and a chunky-knit sweater.

‘I shouldn’t joke about that. I thought I was going to have to.’ He wipes his palms on his thighs. ‘Where’s Kelly? I thought she’d be here too.’

‘She will be.’ Kelly’s my partner in our close-knit team of community midwives, and we usually attend a birth together, at least when delivery is imminent. ‘She’s coming from Talymouth, but the road’s been blocked by a landslip. The last I heard she was stuck in traffic.’ I make my way to the sofa where Emily is on her knees in a long grey T-shirt with her blonde hair loose around her shoulders. She rests her arms on the seat, rocking back and forth and biting into a cushion.

‘Emily, how are you?’ I kneel down beside her and she answers with a low moan. Her brow is beaded with sweat and her expression is pained. The lights flicker as if they’re coming out in sympathy with her.

‘How are you doing?’ I repeat gently.

‘How do you think?’ She swears out loud and glares in my direction as if she blames me for putting her in this situation. I can see myself in her, in the deep blue of the eyes, the plumpness of the cheeks and the shape of the mouth. I can feel her pain as the contraction peaks and dies away once more, giving her a short respite during which

time I make quick checks on her and the baby. Emily's fully dilated and the baby's heartbeat is strong and regular.

'It won't be long,' I say, smiling despite my anxiety because, although all my babies are precious, this one is a particularly special delivery.

Murray waits perched on the arm of the sofa while I stroke Emily's back. There is a stack of logs burning in the grate behind the fireguard, plastic sheets and blankets thrown over the sofa and sponges strewn across the carpet. A cross-eyed teddy bear looks down from the mantelpiece in the direction of a wooden crate overflowing with toys, as if to say, put me away so I can have some peace and quiet, as Emily moans again with the onset of another contraction.

I check my fob watch. Where the hell is Kelly? I thought she'd have found an alternative route and be here by now. At this rate, I'll be catching Emily's baby single-handed. The realisation of what I've agreed to do suddenly hits me.

Emily had such a traumatic labour giving birth in hospital the first time around – I wasn't her midwife on that occasion – that she wanted a home birth and a better experience for her and the baby. She was reluctant to ask me initially, but I would have felt hurt if she'd asked anyone else. Emily's children are the closest I'll ever come to having children of my own.

'I want to push,' She says through gritted teeth.

'Go for it,' I say.

'I need something for the pain,' she goes on. 'I'd forgotten how bad it is. It hurts sooo much.' She gasps as she starts to bear down. 'I want the gas and air. Now!'

I set up the Entonox and hand her the mouthpiece, but she can't really concentrate any more.

'Do you want the music on, my darling?' Murray says.

'No thanks,' Emily says.

'Are you sure? I spent ages putting those tracks together.'

'I said no,' Emily snaps, and I'm glad because although my sister's taste in music under normal circumstances is similar to mine, I wouldn't put it past her to have chosen something soothing like pan pipes. I have delivered so many babies to the sound of pan pipes, I never want to hear one again.

'Concentrate on your breathing,' I say. 'That way you'll get the full effect of the gas and air.'

There's a strong gust of wind, which rattles the windows and the lights go out, leaving us in near-darkness.

'Am I hallucinating, or has it just gone dark?' Emily says.

'It's a power cut,' Murray says. 'I expect the overhead power lines are down.'

'Have you got candles or torches?' I've never had to deliver a baby in the dark, and I don't want to start now.

'I'll get the candles,' says Emily, attempting to stand up.

'No, you won't,' I say firmly. 'You aren't going anywhere. Murray will get them.'

'Lewis has a couple of storm lanterns in the barn.'

'He'll need them for the ewes,' Emily says.

'I think our baby is more important, don't you?' Murray walks towards the door.

'Don't leave me, not when you got me into this state,' Emily shouts.

'I'm here. Emily, calm down,' I go on with sisterly impatience. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

Murray returns within five minutes.

'Let there be light.' He places a lantern on the side table before striking a match and lighting several candles and tea-lights around the room, his presence seeming to enable Emily to regain her focus on the imminent birth of her baby.

'Let me check the baby's heartbeat again before the next contraction.'

'It feels like it's got hiccups,' Emily says, frowning, and I check with the Doppler. The baby's heart rate is slower

than before.

'Something's wrong,' Emily goes on. 'I know it.'

'Baby's heart rate has dipped,' I say, as the lights flicker on and off again. 'It's getting a little stressed, that's all. It's perfectly normal.'

'It isn't. I can tell from your voice. Zara, you can't hide anything from me.'

'I'm not hiding anything.'

'You would tell me, wouldn't you?'

'Of course I would,' I say, lying through my teeth.

'Everything will be fine. All you have to do now is concentrate on pushing as hard as you can – between as well as during contractions.'

'Should I call somebody, Kelly or an ambulance?' Murray asks.

'I need you to help,' I say, knowing that by the time an ambulance reaches us, it will be too late. I have to help Emily get this baby out as soon as possible. I look towards Murray for help to get her into a better position so I can use suction to assist the delivery if necessary. Five minutes later, although it feels like much longer, the baby's heart rate comes back up, but then it begins to dip again. I'm more worried than (I hope) I am letting on.

'Come on, Emily. Push,' I urge her. 'Push as hard as you can.'

'Come on, love,' Murray joins in.

'I am pushing,' she says through gritted teeth as she bears down. 'I can't push any harder.'

Come on, baby, I say inwardly, wishing Kelly was here with me to make the decisions, because I'm wondering if I can trust myself, if – as my supervisor suggested – I'm too close to my sister to make rational decisions over her care. I thought I could do it. I really thought I could, but I'm beginning to have doubts and this is really the wrong time

...



'I can't push any more ...' Emily moans as her body begins to relax, the contraction fading. 'I'm finished. I can't do this any more.'

'Don't waste your energy on talking.' Murray looks down at the marks on his arm where Emily has loosened her grip with her fingers. 'Come on, love, squeeze my hand, take another breath and push. You can do it.'

Emily grimaces and closes her eyes and pushes and I can see the top of the baby's head.

'Pant,' I tell her as I attach the ventouse and apply suction, explaining what I'm doing as I go along. The baby's head is swollen and ominously blue rather than purple. Birth can be – and usually is – a wonderful, positive experience for all concerned, but this one might be one of those occasions when it isn't. I ignore Murray's white face and focus on getting the baby out.

'Now push again. Harder than last time,' I urge her.

'I can't.' Emily seems exhausted, shattered by the effort and shock of what has proved to be a rapid labour.

'You have to,' I say a little curtly, knowing what Emily doesn't, that the cord is loose around the baby's neck, but getting pinched as its shoulders pass along the birth canal, causing the baby's distress. 'Push as if your life depends on it. Emily, please, listen to me.'

'Oh no,' she wails. 'It's all going wrong like the last time.'

'Emily, just shut up! Trust me. One more push should do it.'

Emily succumbs to the next contraction and pushes and I'm waiting with bated breath when out comes the baby's head, then the shoulders, followed by the rest of its body and a gush of fluid. I catch her – it's a girl – in a towel and, watching her the whole time and praying for some sign of life, I place her on the mat on the side table in the fractured light of the storm lantern.

I rub her mottled skin, trying to stimulate her to breathe, while checking for a heartbeat – there is one bumping

faintly beneath my fingertips – and fumbling for the Ambu bag on my trolley, as well as keeping an eye on the seconds that are ticking away all too quickly.

Just as I open my mouth to tell Murray to call an ambulance, the baby screws up her face and opens her mouth to take her first gulping breath, and a second and a third, before expanding her lungs to their full extent and letting out a pitiful cry, at which Emily cries with relief and exhaustion, and Murray cries, and I want to cry too, but I can't because I'm supposed to be the professional here.

At five minutes, the baby's Apgar score is up to seven from five and I'm happy to hand her still damp and covered in the vernix that looks like shea butter, over to Emily to meet her new daughter.

'Congratulations, you and Murray have the most beautiful baby girl.' It's what I say every time – some babies are more beautiful than others and this one is absolutely gorgeous. I can't wait to have a proper cuddle.

Emily sinks gingerly onto the sofa as she holds the baby to her breast.

'What's that lump on her head?' Murray asks.

'The chignon? It's from the suction cap I used to assist the delivery. Don't worry – it will go down within a couple of days.'

'Are you sure?' Murray says.

'It will be fine.'

'Only Lily had a mark on her head ...' I notice how Murray swallows hard, keeping his eyes fixed on his new daughter. Emily reaches out and touches his arm.

'Oh, Murray, I'm so sorry,' she murmurs. 'I wish ...'

'I know, love. Seeing this baby brings it all back, somehow.'

I stand back, a lump in my throat, as they recall the baby they lost.

'It was my fault,' Emily says.

‘We’ve been through this over and over.’ Murray’s tone is rough with renewed grief. ‘It was a risk we took for the farm, for our family. We’ll never forget her, never stop loving her, but we have a new baby and Poppy to concentrate on now.’

‘I know,’ Emily sighs.

My heart goes out to them. Not only did Emily dismiss my advice, she trained as a nurse before she married Murray, so she should have known better than to work with the sheep while she was pregnant. She lost the baby through an infection caught from delivering lambs. This time, she’s been ultra-careful.

She kisses her daughter before looking up at her husband. ‘Thank you, darling. I’m sorry I yelled at you.’

‘It’s all right,’ he says ruefully. ‘You bit me the last time. This time, you cut off the circulation to my hand. I can still feel the pins and needles.’

‘That’s good, then – that means your hand isn’t going to fall off.’ Emily turns to me. ‘Thanks, sis. I couldn’t have got through it without you.’

‘Thank you for asking me to be here,’ I say in return, my eyes burning with tears of relief and happiness. ‘I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.’

‘Baby, say hello to your Auntie Zara.’

‘Hello, niece.’ I reach out and touch the baby’s cheek. With Murray’s hair and Emily’s nose, she’s a real cutie. Silently, in the flickering candlelight, I wish her a long and happy life. ‘I wonder what Poppy is going to make of her new baby sister,’ I begin, after I’ve taken photos of the three of them together.

‘I dread to think,’ Emily says with a small smile. ‘I hope Mum’s convinced her to give the baby a chance. I’m afraid she’s going to be really jealous. She’s been an only child for four years. It’s going to be hard for her to adjust.’

‘I’ll get the phone,’ Murray says. ‘We’d better not keep your mum and grandmother in suspense any longer. As

soon as you've let them know, I'll call my side of the family and give them the news.'

'Gran's been calling all day. If you look at my phone, you'll find hundreds of voicemail messages.' Emily smiles. 'Zara, can you put her out of her misery? I'm not sure I have the energy left to speak to her right now.'

'One of us will bring her to see you,' I say, sympathetic to my sister's opinion, 'but we won't let her stay too long.' I know very well what she's like. There are times when she can't stop talking. I contact Kelly to let her know she isn't needed this time.

'I could have done with you here,' I tell her, explaining out of my sister's earshot what happened. 'I so nearly misjudged it ... I'd never have forgiven myself—'

'It was a successful outcome, though,' Kelly points out. 'You should be proud of yourself. I wish I'd been there.'

'Have there been any other calls?' I ask. 'I haven't been answering my phone.'

'Just one, Celine, and I've sent her off to see the emergency doctor for antibiotics for a possible UTI.' I know Celine well – her pregnancies are never straightforward. 'Tell Emily I'll pop in for a cuddle when I'm passing. I'll see you at work tomorrow, Zara.'

'Unless another of our ladies decides to go into labour tonight.'

'All's peaceful, so I'm quietly optimistic that I'll be able to have dinner, take a bath and slip into my PJs without being disturbed.' Kelly is five years older than me, in her mid-thirties, with a husband and two kids. 'Bye, Zara.'

I wish her goodnight and wait for Mum who, in spite of the weather, turns up in less than twenty minutes, which means she must have driven like a demon taking the longer route to avoid the landslip. We've barely had time to boil the kettle on the range when she and my niece arrive, Poppy stumbling indoors, dressed in a red pinafore, woolly

tights and shiny purple wellies, and carrying a fluffy black and white toy cat.

‘Mummy’s had the baby,’ Murray says, gathering her up, wellies and all, into his arms and resting her on his hip.

‘We heard her crying all the way from Talymouth.’ Mum smiles warmly. She’s almost sixty and wrapped up in a grey turtleneck sweater, flowing lilac cardigan and wide-legged trousers in an attempt to disguise the fact that, like me, she’s a few pounds overweight. She tucks a curl of her bob of ash-blond hair behind her ear.

‘We didn’t hear her.’ Poppy frowns and shakes her golden ringlets of hair. ‘I didn’t hear a baby.’

‘Oh, you are wearing your grandma out with all your arguing, Poppy. Emily, you are such a clever daughter.’ Mum moves across to the sofa and embraces my sister and the baby and I feel a sharp pain in my chest, a pang of love and envy combined.

‘Where’s Dad?’ Emily asks.

‘He’s coming up to see you all later. He’s been held up in that traffic coming back from the cash-and-carry, and I told him I couldn’t wait a moment longer to see the baby. It’s been the longest nine months ever. Now Poppy, come and see your new sister. Have you got her present, the one you’re going to give her to welcome her into the world?’ Mum continues.

Murray holds Poppy so she can see the baby up close, but Poppy isn’t impressed.

‘Mummy, I don’t want a sister.’ She clutches the toy cat to her face.

‘I thought you’d be pleased,’ Murray says. ‘You said you didn’t want a brother.’

‘I want a kitten.’

Murray laughs. ‘You know Mummy can’t have kittens.’

‘Or a snake. Mummy, send it back. Put it back in your tummy.’

‘Mummy can’t do that.’ Mum reaches up to stroke Poppy’s head. ‘There isn’t room for her any more.’

‘You must give her away. Auntie Zara hasn’t got a baby. She can have her.’

‘Auntie Zara doesn’t want a baby at the moment.’ My sister looks at me, her expression one of apology, knowing how much I wanted a baby with Paul. ‘Besides, Daddy and I wouldn’t dream of sending the new baby – or you for that matter – to someone else. We’re going to be one big happy family now.’

‘No,’ Poppy squeals.

‘Pops, give the toy to your baby sister,’ Murray says.

‘Nooooo!’ Still hanging onto the cat, Poppy sticks her fingers in her ears and starts kicking out at her dad. Murray puts her down and she collapses onto her bottom, crying inconsolably.

‘Leave her for a minute,’ Murray says when I move to comfort her. ‘She’ll calm down.’

I wish them luck, I think. They’ll be needing a visit from Supernanny before they know it.

‘Have you decided on a name?’ I ask.

‘We were going to ask Poppy to help choose,’ Emily says, ‘but considering the circumstances, I think it’s better that we don’t. I can’t imagine what she’d call the baby.’

‘I can,’ Murray says dryly. ‘I’d lay bets on a particular bodily function.’

‘Well, I still like Daisy,’ Emily says.

‘I’m not so sure about that one,’ Murray responds. ‘It’s the kind of name you’d give to a dog.’

‘She looks like a Daisy,’ Emily says, looking wistfully at her husband.

‘I thought we’d decided on Esther for a girl.’

Emily tips her head to one side. ‘Oh, Murray, please ...’

He smiles and sighs, ‘Anything for you, my darling. I suppose Daisy isn’t too bad, as it goes.’ I think Murray’s so

relieved that both mum and baby are well, that he'd agree to anything right now.

'I think it's the perfect name for a wonderful new grandchild,' Mum says. 'Poppy, come with me and we'll phone Great Grandma to tell her the good news.'

'Bad news,' Poppy interrupts. She scrambles up from the floor, runs to her mother and clambers onto the bed before trying to whop the baby with the cat. Murray restrains her.

'Come here, Poppy,' Mum says. 'You can help me cook the tea for everyone. What did we buy at the butcher's?'

'Sausages,' Poppy says, more cheerfully.

'Come on then. Hurry up. I expect Zara has things to do here.'

'I want Daddy to come with me,' Poppy insists, but Mum takes her firmly by the hand and almost drags her away.

'Sometimes Poppy makes me wonder why we went ahead and had another one,' Murray sighs.

Emily reaches out her hand to him. 'She'll come round eventually.'

'Let me recheck Daisy, then you can give her a cuddle while I have a look at you, Emily. You're going to need a couple of stitches this time.'

'Do you really think I'm going to let you sew me up by candlelight?' She says lightly.

'It'll be okay, I promise. Unless you'd prefer me to call Kelly and ask her to do it.'

'No, let's get this over with.'

Later, after Dad arrives to greet the baby, Emily insists on taking Daisy downstairs to the warmth of the kitchen where we sit at the table by candlelight while Mum dishes up sausages, boiled potatoes, carrots and lumpy gravy, evidence that the cooking gene skipped a generation in our family. Emily perches on a cushion while the baby feeds at her breast. Poppy is now more curious than antagonistic as regards her new sister, especially since Murray has run through a long list of reasons why a sister is better than a



kitten. Poppy seems pleased that the baby will have nappies, whereas a kitten would have to have a litter tray, or 'stinky box', as her dad describes it.

While we're chatting, the temporary shepherd who's filling in for Emily strolls into the kitchen from the utility room at the side. His brown hair is windswept and his face clothed in stubble. In his early twenties, he's tall and incredibly fit, in more ways than one, and he's wearing a beanie hat, a tatty waxed jacket, moleskin trousers and workman's boots. He carries a tiny lamb with a speckled face tucked under one arm and I can't help thinking how cute the pair of them look as he walks across the kitchen tiles leaving a trail of muddy footprints.

'Hey, Lewis, leave your boots at the door,' Emily scolds. 'How many times?'

'I'm sorry. I'll mop up.' He looks a little sheepish as he unlaces his boots with one hand, keeping the lamb close to his chest with the other, and removes them, scattering straw from his socks. 'I'll sweep first,' he adds with a rueful smile.

'This is a house, not a barn, in case you hadn't noticed,' Emily goes on lightly.

Lewis stops and stares. 'The baby - she's arrived! That was quick.'

'Meet Daisy,' Emily says as Lewis looks away awkwardly, having perhaps just realised my sister is breastfeeding.

'Congratulations,' Lewis says. 'That's great. How are you, Emily?'

'Well, thank you. It was so much better than the last time,' Emily looks towards me with a smile on her lips, 'thanks to my lovely midwife. This is Zara, my twin.'

'We've met briefly,' Lewis says.

I smile, meeting his gaze. Lewis has been working at the farm for about a month now and we've said hello two or three times when I've been up to see Emily for her antenatal checks and have brought Gran to visit her. I

touch my face – it's burning, and not because I'm sitting close to the range.

'What's up with the lamb?' Murray asks as Lewis kicks a cardboard box out from under the oak table and pops the lamb into it, where it lies tucked up and shivering, its coat damp and curly.

'This is one of triplets and the others are pushing it out,' Lewis starts. 'I've tried putting it with another ewe who has a singleton, but she isn't having any of it. It's a bit of a wuss. I hope you don't mind me bringing it indoors, but it's getting cold and I can't use the heat lamps while the electricity's off.'

'Come on in,' Murray says dryly. 'Oh, I see you already have.'

Lewis grins. 'Would you like to feed this one, Poppy?'

'Yes, please.' Poppy's face glows as she plonks herself down beside the box.

Lewis warms a baby's bottle from the fridge in hot water on the range before testing the temperature on his wrist and handing it over to Poppy with instructions. The lamb bleats plaintively – there is no other way to describe it – and waggles its tail as it feeds and butts its nose against the teat of the bottle, dripping milk over Poppy's fingers. She licks it off.

'Poppy, I don't think you're supposed to do that,' I say.

'It's nice,' she says, doing it again.

'Let the lamb have it, please.' Murray rolls his eyes.

'It's attention-seeking,' Mum comments. 'She's bound to feel insecure.'

The lamb drains about half the milk and Lewis takes the bottle back.

'Thank you. Are you going to stay up to give her another feed later?'

'Yes, please,' she smiles, grabbing the opportunity to have a pet, even if it is only transitory, and maybe

recognising a kindred spirit in the lamb that has been cast aside by its siblings.

‘Oh, don’t encourage her,’ Emily groans.

‘I don’t think it matters what time Poppy goes to bed tonight,’ Mum says. ‘None of you will sleep.’

‘I’m going to.’ Murray yawns. ‘It’s been a long day.’

‘Hey, what about me?’ Emily gives him a gentle prod.

‘There’s some dinner if you’d like it, Lewis,’ Mum says.

‘And a glass of champagne to wet the baby’s head,’ Murray adds.

‘Thanks for the offer, but there’s another ewe about to lamb. I need to get back out there.’

‘I must get going too,’ I say, feeling ridiculously disappointed that he has to leave so soon. ‘Gran will be wondering where I am.’

‘I’ll fetch her up here tomorrow, if that’s all right,’ Mum says. ‘Dad can cover a couple of hours in the shop, can’t you, Jim?’

My father grimaces at the thought, but says he’ll do it.

‘I’ll be back tomorrow for a home visit.’ I watch Murray at his wife’s side, the baby feeding at her breast and Poppy bouncing up and down on his knee and the pang of envy I felt earlier grows into a heavy ache in my chest. I love my sister and her family. I just wish I had one of my own. I almost did. I was this close with Paul and then my dream gradually unravelled.

Back in my car, I check my mobile to see if Paul’s tried to get hold of me. He sent the last text three days ago, just to say hi, check I’m okay and ask if Emily had had her baby yet. I’ve texted him twice since. I touch the screen to bring up his number to call him, change my mind and drop the phone into my bag. What is that phrase Gran uses sometimes? Out of sight, out of mind.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Sherbet Lemons and Mint Humbugs*

On the Tuesday morning a week after Daisy's birth, I wake up in the flat above the newsagent's, shower and grab a piece of toast and butter as I'm getting ready for work. It's dark outside and when I look out of the kitchen window across the street, listening to the purr of the ancient fridge, I can see the roofs of the buildings opposite sparkling with frost. Ron's float pulls up outside to deliver the milk.

I eat a second piece of toast, a cereal bar and a packet of smoky bacon crisps before I head downstairs past the green, pink and gold wallpaper that harks back to the 1980s, looking out for the elderly tabby cat that has taken offence to me living here.

At the bottom of the stairs, I walk along the corridor, past the cuckoo clock and through the multi-coloured plastic strips of the fly curtain which hangs across the doorway into the shop, where I find my flatmate wobbling precariously on top of a set of wooden steps beside the display of old-fashioned sweets, the ones you buy from jars by weight and scooped into paper bags.

'Good morning, Gran,' I say. 'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

'Zara, dear, have you seen your granddad?' Gran asks without answering my question. She clutches a jar of sherbet lemons to her chest. Her silver hair is swept back

from her face and she wears small gold hoop earrings, a black dress, pink cardigan, black tights and purple slippers, and most remarkably, she is almost as round and cuddly as she is tall. I'm five foot four and the top of her head just reaches my shoulder – when we're standing on the same level, that is.

'Please get down. Let me do that.'

Only last week, I found her on a stepladder, hanging a Union Jack in the window to complete her new display of patriotic red, white and blue china, which Uncle Nobby, who's actually my great uncle, bought at a knock-off price from some anonymous bloke at the Dog and Duck, and sold on to her. It's no wonder it was cheap – it looks cheap and it is cheap, but Gran insists there's no money in newspapers any more and she has to stock anything that sells, which means the place is looking more like a bric-a-brac stall than a newsagent's. She hasn't sold a single piece of china yet, but people do come in for sweets, lottery tickets, scratch-cards and cigarettes, and – most of all – to pass the time of day.

'You promised me you'd keep your feet on the ground,' I remind her.

'I'm fine,' she says brightly. 'Please don't keep treating me like I'm some old biddy. Haven't you heard that eighty's the new twenty-five?'

'I think you're rather exaggerating.' I can't help smiling as I make my way between the counter and the newspapers that are still stacked on the floor when they should be on the shelves or in the bag for the paper boy by now.

'Not at all.' Gran tips her head slowly to one side. 'You sound just like your mum. It's time you started going out again and having some fun, my lover.' She calls everyone 'my lover' – it's a Devonian thing.

'I do go out, although you're right, I'm struggling to remember when I could say I last had fun. Does mine and Claire's attempt at Zumba count?'

‘If it made you laugh and made your heart beat faster, then yes.’

‘It did. We were hysterical, shimmying and shaking our booty, and bumping into each other.’ The steps rock and Gran wobbles. ‘Please get down. Here.’ I reach up for the jar and place it next to the aniseed balls by the till before taking her hand and helping her down to safety. ‘Those papers should be sorted by now, shouldn’t they?’

‘I know, but I’ve lost your granddad and I don’t like to start the day without him.’

‘Let me do the papers and then I’ll help you look for him. He can’t have gone far.’

‘You mustn’t make yourself late for work. Those babies won’t wait.’

‘None of my ladies are due during the next week – not that you can rely on due dates. I have a couple of antenatal checks, a clinic and a visit to the farm today, so I can spare a few minutes.’ I pause for a moment. ‘Are you sure you haven’t left him upstairs like you did the other day?’

Gran looks at me, her forehead crinkled and pale, and not for the first time, I wonder how much longer she will cope with running the shop and what will happen when she can’t.

‘I’ll check,’ she begins, but I go for her, looking in the living room, where every surface is filled with Gran’s ever-expanding herd of porcelain horses, and in her room, where Norris, the tabby cat, is lying curled up on a pillow on the bed. Keeping a close watch on Norris as a bloodcurdling growl crescendoes in his throat, I pick up the photo from the bedside cabinet and run for it before he can launch one of his full-scale attacks, which usually ends with me being scratched to pieces and on antibiotics. He’s drawn blood four times so far, and I’ve no intention of letting him have a fifth attempt. I don’t know what it is about animals; they always seem to go for me.

Halfway down the stairs, I glance at my granddad's whiskery smile in the picture as he and Gran stand arm-in-arm with the snow-covered Alps behind them on what was their last trip together to celebrate their sixtieth birthdays. Granddad passed away four years later when I was fourteen. Emily and I spent a lot of time with him, and I'll never forget how we'd sit on the counter after school while he fed us sweets until we felt sick.

'Thank you, Zara.' Gran kisses the photo when I hand it over. Her eyes are soft with love and affection and I think back to Paul and our wedding vows. Our marriage didn't last, despite my best intentions, whereas Gran still thinks of herself as Granddad's wife.

'One day I'll forget my head.' She places the picture in front of the mint humbugs. 'Where is that boy?'

'He's here.' James, the paper boy, is outside the shop, leaning his bike against the lamppost.

'He looks as if his mother never feeds him,' Gran observes. 'He's such a stringy bean.'

'Shh,' I say, as the door opens and the bell jangles, announcing his arrival, stamping his feet and shaking the rain from his hair. He's tall and skinny for thirteen, with dark-rimmed glasses and braces on his teeth. His fingers are blue with cold.

'Hi, James. I'm afraid we're running a little behind.' I grab the list and a pen from behind the till and start making my way through the papers, scribbling house numbers onto the top right-hand corners with black pen, and wondering how there can be so many people left who don't read the news on the Internet. I fold the papers over and hand them to James to pack.

'Don't dawdle,' Gran says. 'I'll make sure your envelope is waiting for you when you get back.'

'Thank you, Mrs Witheridge,' James says, weighed down by the fluorescent yellow bag slung over his shoulder.



I check the time. I've really got to go. 'See you later, Gran. Promise me, no more mountaineering.'

'Have a good day, Zara,' she says, not promising anything. 'Give little Daisy a hug from me and tell Poppy I'll see her soon.'

'Will do.' I check my mobile for messages on the way to the surgery, which is a short walk away. I don't take my car unless I'm going out on my rounds or down to the centre in Talymouth.

Ben, or Dr Mackie to the older generation of Talyton St George, holds the door open for me as I enter the surgery. He's wearing his check shirt, jacket and tie, and looking very much the country GP.

'Morning,' he says in a low voice, as though he's about to deliver bad news to a patient. He is very reserved, well-respected in Talyton St George, and a good doctor, but I can't say I really know him in the same way I know Nicci, the other GP in the practice. Ben is married to Emma, one of the Otter House vets, and has twin daughters, Elena and Lydia. 'How are you today, Zara?'

'I'm well, thank you,' I respond.

'I wish everyone I met on a daily basis could say that,' and I smile even though it must be the hundredth time that I've heard him crack that joke. He has a crooked nose from playing rugby, but from the look of his growing waistline, his days as a sportsman have long gone. He scratches at the stubble at the side of his head – the rest of his scalp is bald, his hair having long gone too. 'The twins have brought some friends back from nursery.'

'That's nice,' I say, confused.

'Head-lice,' he adds in explanation.

'Oh, I see.' And I find myself scratching my head at the thought.

'I dropped by to check on Emily and her new baby the other night. I hear all went well, thanks to our wonderful midwife. Good job, Zara.'