

Chapter One

Rhys Roberts, lying in his lonely bed, heard the storm approaching, but thought little of it; storms in Snowdonia at this time of year were not uncommon, especially amidst the high peaks. They had enjoyed a mild but windy autumn at Cefn Farm, a cold but snow-free November, and now, with December well advanced and Christmas only a matter of days away, the muttering of distant thunder, and the snow – or hail – which he could hear tapping against the window pane, should have been expected.

Looking at the sky as he made his way up the stairs, Rhys had decided to put extra blankets on the bed, and now he reminded himself how much warmer he would have been had his dear Molly been beside him. She had been away for only three days but already the time seemed endless. He knew that as soon as the hospital had something to report they would notify him by telephoning the village post office; so far he had visited the post office three times every day, but without success. The maternity hospital was always busy but the staff were kind and realised that he was worried, and with good reason. Molly had had a bad time with their first child, little Chris, who lay in his bed in the slip of a room close by, slumbering peacefully, Rhys hoped. When Molly had felt her first pains she had been at Cefn Farm,

assuring Rhys that he was not to worry, that she and the nurse would soon have the child born. However, on that first occasion she had been in labour for three days and nights, for Chris's had been what they called a cross-birth, and when it was discovered that she was expecting again Dr Llewellyn had advised that she should go to a proper maternity unit, with staff who could call on all the most modern equipment should Molly need help with the birthing of her second child.

Rhys put out a strong brown hand and felt under Molly's pillow for the little wisp of nylon which had been her trousseau nightie. The touch of it comforted him, made him remember their first meeting. He had been a sergeant in the RAF, she a Waaf, secretary to a wing commander on a bomber station not far from Lincoln. They had met at a dance, fallen in love at first sight, and married a month later. Their wedding had been typical of the times; austerity and all that, Rhys thought now, cuddling the nightie. No wonderful white dress, no piles of presents, no honeymoon in Paris, or anywhere else; just two days in a bed and breakfast in the city and then back to work. They had managed to rent two rooms above a cycle shop near the Saracen's Head, the public house most popular with the air crew stationed nearby, where they were idyllically happy until the war ended.

When Rhys and Molly were demobbed, things had moved fast. Rhys's parents had both died a few years previously, leaving everything they possessed to their only son, and Molly had inherited her grandparents' small flat and all their worldly goods, which was not saying a lot. But when they combined their assets they

found they had sufficient capital to take out a mortgage on a hill farm, which was the desire of Rhys's heart, and after very little searching they had chanced upon Cefn Farm. It was not large, but it was not expensive, either, and the land was in good heart, the sheep fat with the good mountain grass, and the owners, both in their eighties, eager to give the young couple all the help and advice possible.

It was summer when they took possession and very soon they realised that a baby was on the way, so that their cup of happiness seemed full to overflowing. Rhys once remarked that Molly never stopped smiling, and this, they both knew, was because they were so happy. Hard work, small returns and the fear that they might make mistakes were all offset by the clean mountain air, the sweet silence after years of noise, and their very real affection for their livestock, their horses and their prick-eared, tongue-lolling Border collies, without whom they would, Rhys knew, have made many bad mistakes.

But it had been a hard labour, and this time Rhys had agreed with the doctor that his wife would be better in a proper maternity hospital, so a couple of days before the expected birth Molly had gone off to Liverpool, promising Rhys that she would ring the post office as soon as she had news to impart. She had taken with her a couple of sensible cotton nightgowns, some of Chris's old baby clothes and a couple of farming magazines, and when Rhys had found her flimsy honeymoon nightie when tidying their room he had taken it to bed with him, enjoying the faint flowery smell of the talcum and soap she used, finding it a comfort.

The storm was getting closer, and a good deal louder.

Rhys half sat up, wondering whether he should go to Chris, tell him that the thunder posed no threat. But before he had done more than swing his legs out of bed there was a crack of thunder so intense that it sounded like a bomb exploding, and his little son appeared in the doorway, crying for his mummy.

Immediately, Rhys held out his arms and the little boy struggled into them, his own small arms curling round his father's neck, his curly head butting Rhys beneath the chin. 'I'm frightened; I shake,' he muttered. 'Where's Mummy? I want Mummy!'

You aren't the only one, Rhys thought, cuddling his son's small body and dropping a kiss on the child's damp curls. 'Don't you remember, old lad? Mummy's gone to Liverpool to bring you home a little brother . . . or sister,' he said, aware that Molly wanted a daughter though he would have preferred another son. Farmers need sons as fish need water and Rhys was no exception. However, Chris was only a baby still, probably didn't know what a sister was, for the farm was remote and though Molly took him into the village a couple of times a month he was too young to play with other children or indeed to pay them any attention. He likes animals better than people, same as I did when I was a kid, Rhys told himself. The way he behaves when Molly is busy, staggering round after the sheepdogs as though he were a small pup himself, is enough to make a cat laugh. He reminds me of Mowgli, Rhys thought, remembering the boy who was brought up by wolves in Kipling's *Jungle Book*.

Another tremendous crash of thunder brought with it a gust of wind so strong that the curtains were dashed to one side. As the vivid lightning flashes lit up the room

Rhys clutched the baby involuntarily, expecting that Chris would begin to cry once more, but this time Chris seemed rather more interested than afraid. He wriggled out of his father's arms and ran over to the window. 'Where doggies?' he asked anxiously. 'What made the big bang? Train? Car? Tractor?'

Rhys hurried across to draw back the curtains so that he could see what was happening in the yard outside, and saw with real dismay that the corrugated iron roof on the pigsty was flapping up and down in a manner that boded ill for the occupants. Rhys hesitated. He dared not leave the baby whilst he ran into the yard and tried to secure the roof, but he could not take the child out with him, for the storm, far from easing, seemed to get wilder with every moment and the sleet and the cold were intense. He was fond of the pigs but they would simply have to take their chance, along with the rest of the stock, most of which was out on the hillside. He and Chris had better simply sit in the kitchen and wait for the storm to pass over.

He scooped up his son and went down to the kitchen, sat in one of the well-cushioned and comfortable basket chairs and watched quite enviously as Chris's thumb slid into his mouth and his eyelids drooped. Wish I could sleep, he thought, but the noise of the storm alone would have kept him awake even had he not been worrying over Molly.

The roof of the pigsty, which had been crashing at regular intervals, was suddenly silent. Rhys heard what he thought was a frightened grunt, but then the thunder roared again and through the closed window he could see the lightning, bright as day as it stabbed to earth. In the lull which followed the last crash, Rhys heard Feather,

the mother of his two other sheepdogs, barking outside. He got carefully to his feet, still holding Chris in the crook of his arm, and opened the back door. The dogs tumbled in, wide-eyed, ears a-prick, seeming to say that it was about time someone remembered them. They crowded round Rhys as though anxious for an explanation, but he could only ruffle their heads and soothe them with promises that it would soon be over and everyone would be able to sleep.

But the storm raged on and Rhys began to fear for the trees which protected the cottage and for the hay in its ancient Dutch barn. Then there were the horses in the stable, for though a good deal of his work on the farm involved the ancient tractor, on the steep hillsides horses were essential. They had two, Guinness and Porter, as well as Cherry the pony, and all three were as liable as any other of their kind to take fright at loud unexpected noises or movements. Rhys thanked his stars that he had decided to bring them in tonight, for the stable building was old and solid, built of stone and roofed with shingles.

Thinking of the work he would have to do to repair the storm damage brought Rhys's mind full circle, back to Molly, who would normally have helped him but now was fighting her own battle – one in which he could no more help her than she could help him in his.

Rhys sighed and looked longingly at the kettle. The fire in the range had been out for days and rather than relighting it he had been heating water, Chris's food and anything else which needed cooking on their small Primus stove. Molly, good little wife that she was, had cooked soups, pies and loaves of bread before she had left for the city; Rhys just hoped these would last until