

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 clammers 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.'

I thank him and he disappears into his consulting room, leaving me with Janet, the receptionist.

'Have you seen Claire?' I ask her.

'Not yet,' Janet says.

'How long do you think it will be before she mentions the W-word?'

Janet smiles behind the lock of lank, mousy hair she holds across her mouth. She's very quiet for a receptionist; that's probably why Ben chose her, recognising a calm, kindred spirit. 'About a minute?'

'I'm guessing ten seconds.'

Claire is the practice nurse and one of my best friends – I've known her since we were at school. We took our A Levels in the sixth form and went off to do our degrees, hers with my sister in nursing and mine in midwifery, and we've ended up working from the same surgery.

'I'm here.' Claire rushes into reception in her bright magenta uniform. She runs her fingers through her hair, which is currently dark brown at the roots and copper at the tips, while I start counting down the seconds. 'What a nightmare! I overslept,' she explains. 'Kev switched the alarm off before he left for an early shift.' Kevin's the local policeman and Claire's fiancé. 'Sometimes I could kill him, the dopey sod. He's doing a spell in Traffic, but I can't see how he'll ever

catch anyone. Hey, I need to talk to you about the bridesmaids' dresses.'

'Ten seconds. I was right,' I say, laughing.

'What are you going on about?' Claire frowns.

'Janet and I were guessing how long it would be before you mentioned something related to the W-word.'

Claire chuckles. 'I don't talk about it that much . . . Do I?'

'I don't think a minute goes by without you mentioning it.'

'I can't help it. It isn't long until the wedding and there's so much to do.' Claire hardly stops to draw breath. 'Anyway, I've seen these amazing gowns in petrol blue.'

'Are you sure you want blue?'

'You don't like the idea?'

'I thought you wanted the bridesmaids in pink.'

'I did, but the blue will have much more impact. You will look amazing, I promise.' Claire changes the subject. 'Are you up for the weigh-in at fat club tonight? I thought we'd go to the pub afterwards for a white wine soda – to celebrate, or drown our sorrows.'

'I'm sorry, I can't make tonight,' I say quickly. 'I've had a fat week. Living with my gran is no good for the diet.'

'Oh Zara.' Claire sounds disappointed. 'I'm relying on you to keep me motivated.'

'Next week, I promise.' We've been on a mission to lose weight and live healthily for the past six months,

joining a slimming group as part of the build-up to the wedding. I check my weight on the scales here at the practice while awaiting my first appointment, grimacing as I take off a few pounds to account for my clothes and breakfast. I'm a size sixteen to my sister's ten or twelve and for a health professional I'm not setting a very good example.

I have a few notes from Nicci who has seen Rosie, a teenager, for a pregnancy test that turned out be positive. She's approximately nine weeks gone and has a supportive mother, but there's no mention of the baby's dad, apart from the fact he's eighteen years old. Janet has arranged for a twelve-week scan and has entered the booking-in appointment in my diary.

I call Rosie, who's accompanied by an older woman, through to the nurse's room.

'Come in.' She's only seventeen, and who knows how she will cope, but I don't judge. People have sex and contraceptive accidents can happen to anyone. They are part of life and there have been many times when I've wished one had happened to me.

'Can Mum stay?' Rosie asks as the woman with her introduces herself.

'If you'd like her to. Pull up another chair, Michelle.' I've already read the notes, but I take another look. 'So you're nine weeks pregnant, Rosie?'

'I think so.' She's slim and has her hair in a sleek dark bob that suits her elfin features. 'I'm not sure exactly, but I've missed my period twice. The first time I thought it was due to stress – I've been doing my mocks.'

'She's supposed to be doing her exams in May,' her mother says.

'There's no reason why you can't carry on as planned,' I say, keeping my focus on Rosie. 'When you have your scan, we can check the baby's healthy and see if the measurements tie in with your dates.'

'I'm living with my parents for now.' Rosie bites her lip when I ask about her home address.

'What do you mean, for now?' her mother says.

'You know Dad's threatening to kick me out.'

'Of course he isn't. He's upset, that's all. He'll come round. I'll make sure he does, anyway.'

'Are you planning to continue with your studies when the baby comes?' I ask tentatively.

'No,' Rosie says at the same time as her mother says, 'Yes, of course you are, and I'll look after the little one while you go to uni.'

'Mum, it's my baby. I'm going to look after it.' Rosie strokes her flat belly. Her complexion is pale beneath a layer of orange foundation and fake tan and her eyes are dark with exhaustion and mascara. She's wearing a top which reveals more than a hint of bra strap, and a pair of the shortest shorts I've ever seen over a pair of thick tights, and wedges.

'You'll soon discover you can't do everything,' her mother says. 'You think this will be so easy.'

Rosie rolls her eyes. 'You managed to look after a baby.'

'I know, but it was different for me. I was a lot older and I was married.'

'Don't keep going on about how I'm going to be

a single parent. It's happened. I'm pregnant and I'm going to have this baby and I'm not going to let you hijack it. Get over it.' Rosie stares resentfully at the floor.

I don't say anything, but I think I understand both Rosie's determination to stand on her own two feet, and her mum's disappointment and concern for her daughter's future.

I check Rosie's blood pressure and take a blood sample.

'I want a homebirth,' she announces when I'm filling in the request form for the lab.

'It's a little early to think about that,' I point out.

'I have thought about it, and I don't want to go to hospital. I hate hospitals. And I've read up on it on the Internet and I'm entitled to a homebirth as long as it's safe for the baby.'

She knows her own mind, I think good-humouredly as I suggest we get on with testing the urine sample she's brought in with her, and do a physical examination.

'Mum, I want you to wait outside now,' she says firmly.

'I want to be here. You shouldn't have to go through any of this on your own.'

'I'm not on my own. I have Zara here. Please, this is private.' She pauses. 'I haven't taken my clothes off in front of you since I was three. Go away!'

Reluctantly, Michelle gathers up the coats and bag and leaves the room.

Rosie breathes a sigh of relief. 'OMG, she drives me mad,' she groans.

‘She wants the best for you and the baby.’

‘Yeah.’ She bites her lip. ‘I’ve been lucky – Dad went ballistic when he found and Mum wasn’t happy but she’s calmed down now.’

‘So, was this pregnancy planned?’ There’s a question on my booking-in sheet about asking the pregnant woman if she’s ever had fertility problems – I skip it when Rosie confirms she fell pregnant while on the Pill.

‘I tried the implant,’ she says, ‘but I didn’t get on with it. Don’t start going on at me about . . .’ she raises her hands and holds her forefingers and middle fingers straight like rabbit’s ears, bending them to indicate inverted commas, ‘the options. I want this baby more than anything.’ Her eyes grow bright with sudden tears. ‘It’s been awful. My mum told the dad’s mum that she’d make sure I got rid of the baby, and when I said I wasn’t going to get rid of it, she told her she wouldn’t let the dad or his family have any contact with the baby.’

‘It must be very difficult for you,’ I say. ‘The last thing you need is to be in the middle of a family feud. You must let me know if you want any support.’

It’s a personal and sensitive question, but I ask her if the baby’s father is supportive of the pregnancy.

Rosie falls silent for a while before responding: ‘My boyfriend ended it when I told him.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I try to put myself in the place of an eighteen-year-old boy who’s just been told his girlfriend is pregnant. I can imagine his sense of panic and fear of responsibility.

‘He can do what he likes. I don’t care any more,’ Rosie says, but it’s clear from the vehemence of her denial that she does.

‘I understand that it’s tough now but, for what it’s worth, think about keeping him in the loop about what’s going on. You never know when you might need each other – not as boyfriend and girlfriend, but as parents.’

‘Mum says I shouldn’t have anything to do with him.’ She smiles suddenly. ‘Not that I’ve ever taken any notice of what my parents say.’

‘Let’s concentrate on you and the baby. You two are VIPs. If you’d like to make your way over to the scales we’ll check your weight, height and the size of your bump. Do you have a bump yet?’

She looks down. ‘Not yet, but my boobs are killing me.’

‘That’s perfectly normal,’ I say, as I put on gloves to test the urine sample that Rosie’s brought along with her. That’s all normal too, apart from some grit at the bottom of the pot. I take a closer look – yes, I’m a midwife, it’s what I do – and find that it’s green and sparkly. ‘All is well with the sample, except for the fact that you seem to be passing glitter,’ I say, amused.

Rosie blushes. ‘I’ve got my Christmas knickers on. Mum said I should wear decent underwear for my appointment.’

‘My gran says I should wear clean pants at all times, in case I end up in A&E.’

Rosie smiles for a second time.

‘Here’s my phone number.’ I hand her one of my

cards. 'If you ever need to talk, or have anything you want to ask me, no matter how stupid it seems, call me.'

'Thank you. You're pretty cool for . . . an older person.'

'Thanks, but I'm not that old,' I say dryly.

'What I mean is that I'm glad you're going to be my midwife.'

'That's good, because we're going to be seeing quite a lot of each other in the next few months. I'll see you at the next appointment. Make sure you bring the pics from the scan with you when you get them – I can't wait to see this baby of yours.'

'I will,' she says, getting up. 'Goodbye.'

Having seen Rosie and completed six more antenatal checks, I spend some time at the Midwifery Centre in Talymouth catching up with phone calls and paperwork before I head out on my rounds, visiting three mums and their newborn babies before going up to the farm.

It's gone three and growing dark and I'm running a little late. I call Emily on the hands-free, but the mobile battery's flat and then the car starts to pull to one side and I just know I'm going to have to stop. I pull in tight to the hedge along the lane to inspect the damage, a nail driven deep into the tread of one of the front tyres, which is completely flat. I try pumping the tyre up, but it deflates instantly. I start to change the wheel, but when I try to loosen the nuts, they won't budge, so there's only one thing for it. I'll have to walk the mile or so to the farmhouse, see Daisy and Emily and

borrow a longer spanner from Murray. It isn't great. It's freezing, I'm allergic to exercise, and I should be sitting in the warm, cuddling my baby niece.

When I begin to make my descent on the other side of the hill, a black pick-up comes rattling along with its headlamps cutting swathes of light through the shadows, but although I'm hoping for a lift, I don't think the driver sees me, because it keeps coming, forcing me to step onto the verge where I trip, lose my balance and land on my bottom in the mud. The driver stops and reverses back up as I'm pinching myself to check that I'm still alive.

'What the . . .?' I catch the gleam of a pair of eyes and the chiselled outline of a jaw with a dimple on the chin as a man leans out of the window. 'What do you think you're doing, Emily? It's dark. I didn't see you until the last minute.'

'I'm sorry,' I stammer, completely shaken up as I regain my feet.

'You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

'I'm on my way to the farm to visit Emily and the baby. My car has a puncture and I can't undo the nuts to change the wheel.' The garage in Talyton must have done them up too tightly. I move closer. 'Hello, Lewis.'

'You aren't Emily? You're Emily's sister, Zara, the midwife.' The driver's voice softens. 'I couldn't understand how she could have got down here so quickly, seeing I've just left her up at the farm. I thought I was hallucinating. Look, I'll give you a lift then I'll come back and have a look at the tyre. Jump in.' Lewis leans across and opens the passenger door

for me. Not one, but two collie dogs with wild eyes and massive white teeth come piling towards me and my heart starts hammering furiously. I freeze.

'Thanks for the offer, but I'll walk,' I blurt out.

'You can't be serious? You'll either die from hypothermia or get run over. Get in!'

'Really, I'm fine.' My voice wobbles slightly.

'Am I going to have to get out, pick you up and throw you in the back like one of the ewes?'

I shake my head, even though the idea of Lewis manhandling me appeals far more than it should.

'Zara, I hate to ask, but are you completely mad?'

One of the dogs barks. I recoil.

'I don't do dogs – they make me nervous,' I say. 'I know, it's pathetic, isn't it?'

'Not really,' Lewis says, sounding unconvinced.

'Let me put the dogs in the back. Wait by the tree.' He jumps out, sticks his fingers in his mouth and whistles, at which the dogs follow him round to the rear of the vehicle. 'Jump in,' he calls, and I'm not sure if he's talking to me or the dogs, but I get in anyway, sliding into the passenger seat.

'They can't get you now,' Lewis says in a teasing voice as he gets back in and turns on the engine. 'Not that they would,' he adds quickly, perhaps noticing the look of horror on my face. 'They are the softest creatures on earth.' He goes on to apologise for the smell of wet dog, sheep and straw as we roar off up the hill. 'I had a ewe in the back earlier.'

'Oh?' I'm not sure how to respond. 'If you don't mind me saying, that sounds a bit weird.'

He grins. 'I could have found a better way to put that, if I'd realised how your mind works. Give us your key.'

'What for?'

'So I can change that wheel while you're with Emily and the baby. You're looking worried. Are you afraid I'll steal your car, or something?'

'Well, I hardly know you,' I say archly.

'We can soon fix that. Come on, give me the key.'

I drop it into his outstretched hand.

'Thank you,' he says as we reach the farm and pull into the yard.

'No, thank *you*. If you hadn't turned up, I'd still be walking down the lane in the dark.' I hesitate, my hand on the door-handle.

'You can get out now. You have reached your destination,' he continues, speaking like a sat nav.

'The dogs . . .?'

'They won't come after you. I promise.' He clears his throat. 'Um, Zara . . .'

'Yes?' I catch my breath, distracted by the sight of his face in the beam of the outside light on the barn. He is completely and utterly gorgeous and I'm reluctant to tear myself away as he continues, 'I'll catch up with you later, I hope.'

'Thanks again.' I find myself hoping the very same as I walk quickly up to the house, keeping an eye over my shoulder for the dogs who are watching me with their mouths open and tongues hanging out, from the back of the pick-up.

'Hi Emily, how are you?' I slip my muddy shoes

off in the hall. The door is unlocked – my sister never bothers with security, whereas Murray is obsessed with locking up his tractors and other equipment.

‘Well, thank you.’ Emily appears in the doorway to the living room in her leggings and sweatshirt, the first time I’ve seen her dressed in anything but her pyjamas since Daisy was born. ‘I’m a bit sore, that’s all.’

It’s surprising how quickly a mum forgets the pain of labour, I think, and lucky for the future of the human race that they do.

‘I can tell you I feel a whole lot better than I did this time last week, though. Come on through.’ Emily glances at my trousers. ‘What happened to you?’

‘I thought it was a nice day for a walk in the country,’ I say ironically. ‘Actually, I had to leave the car down the lane with a puncture. Lewis gave me a lift.’

‘Murray can fix it.’

‘It’s all right. Lewis is already on the case.’

‘He’s lovely, isn’t he?’

‘He’s definitely fit,’ I say.

‘He’s single too.’

‘And?’ I face my twin, mirroring the way she stands square to me with her arms folded. ‘Emily, don’t waste your time matchmaking. I’ve only just met the guy and, even if he was the most perfect man ever, it would never work – he’s too young for me.’

‘He’s twenty-three, not some teenage toy-boy.’

‘And he won’t hang around here for long,’ I go on. Murray’s only given him a temporary contract. ‘How’s Daisy?’

‘I’d forgotten you’re working,’ Emily says. ‘Daisy’s

asleep.’ She shows me into the living room where the baby lies snug beneath a blanket, her wavy red locks peeking out from beneath the woolly hat that Gran knitted. Her hands are curled into small fists up by her ears, and covered with white mitts to stop her scratching her face with her tiny fingernails.

‘Where’s Poppy?’

‘She’s in her room, having a nap. The baby’s keeping her awake all night too. I really don’t know if it’s possible, but it’s as if she belongs to some alien nocturnal species. I don’t remember Poppy being like this.’

‘I think she was.’

‘I was going to give her a full bath, not just top and tail her, but I don’t like to disturb her. Do you really have to wake her up?’

‘I let her sleep last time. I really should do the heel prick test today. Oh, let’s let sleeping babies lie for now. Can I get you anything, Emily? Tea, or a milkshake? Toast?’

When I return from the kitchen with tea and toast, Poppy is coming down the stairs with the toy cat under one arm and bumping a kid’s travel case in Barbie pink down behind her.

‘Hello.’ I block her progress towards the front door. ‘Are you going somewhere?’

She looks at me through her curly fringe. ‘I’m going to live with Grandma.’

‘I think you’d better let Mummy know,’ I say, diverting her to the living room. ‘Look who I’ve found, Emily.’

'Poppy, I thought you were asleep.'

'I'm going to live with Grandma,' she repeats.

'Oh no, you can't do that,' Emily says. 'We need you here. Your baby sister needs you. Poppy, I want you to be as quiet as a library full of church mice because Daisy's asleep and I want her to stay that way, please.'

'I hate my baby sister.' Poppy explodes with red-faced rage and rushes over to the Moses basket and pulls Daisy's blanket off. I've never seen Emily move so fast, but she fails to intercept her and Daisy wakes up, fills her lungs and screams. Emily scoops her up and hugs her to her breast, while holding Poppy to her waist and shrugging with despair.

'I don't know what to do,' Emily says once we've calmed Poppy down with a bowl of ice cream and chocolate sauce, and helped her unpack.

'Give it time,' I say when we're sitting down at last.

'It would have been easier for them to have been twins, like us,' Emily observes. 'We have a really special bond.'

'We still fought when we were younger.'

'We didn't.'

'Oh yes, we did.'

'I know . . .' Emily sighs as I check Daisy over and weigh her. 'Sisters. Who'd have them?'

'Hello,' Murray says, walking into the room with a sack of potatoes in his arms. 'I've got your keys, Zara. Your car's ready in the yard. Lewis says to apologise for not having time to valet it.'

'Where is Lewis?' Emily pauses from stroking

Daisy's hair. 'He could have handed the keys over himself.' She glances at me and I know exactly what she's trying to achieve. It won't work, though. Lewis isn't my type, although I would admit that I'm slightly disappointed not to have seen him again to thank him in person, not for any other reason. I look away, picking an imaginary hair from my top to hide the blush that is spreading across my cheeks.

'He's taking a ewe over to Talyton Manor for a Caesar,' Murray says. 'One of the vets is waiting for him.'

'Oh, Murray, not another one,' Emily says, looking concerned. 'We can't really afford it.'

'It's the way it is. It has to be done. You have good days and bad days. That's farming for you. Here, Zara. Catch!' Murray throws me the keys and, to my surprise, because I've never been good at ball games, I catch them.

Emily claps and Poppy joins in. 'That's the first time you've caught anything more than a cold. Have you been practising for Claire's wedding?'

'What do you mean?'

'Catching the bouquet. She mentioned it to me when she came up to see me and Daisy.'

'Emily, what are you like?' I say, appalled. 'I've been married before, remember? I've been there, got the T-shirt . . . Never again!'

'Don't be silly. Think of what you had with Paul as a trial run.'

'I'll see you soon,' I say, changing the subject. 'I must go.'

‘Give our love to Gran,’ Emily says. ‘I’ll pop in and see her when I’m in Talyton tomorrow, if I can get the three of us out and dressed.’

‘Will do.’ I smile. ‘I hope she’s been behaving herself.’

‘You sound like me talking about Poppy,’ Emily observes. ‘I thought she was supposed to be looking after you.’

‘We look after each other. Thank Lewis for me, won’t you? Tell him I’m sorry I missed him.’

I drive home with the rich aroma of sheep and dog in my nostrils, and when I check for the source of the smell, I find Lewis’s coat on the back seat of my car. I pick it up and take it indoors, leaving it on the counter while I greet my grandmother.

‘I thought I heard someone rummaging around in the shop,’ she says.

‘It was me – I couldn’t resist a quarter of fizzy cola bottles.’

‘I hope they aren’t going to ruin your appetite.’

‘Gran, they won’t. I’m thirty-one, not thirteen.’

‘Sometimes I think we should have a guard dog,’ she says. ‘That way I’d feel more secure.’

‘I’m here now. I’ll keep you safe.’ Gran knows that if she ever decided to bring a dog to live here, I would have to move out.

I call Emily for Lewis’s mobile number. Poppy is bawling in the background so we don’t get to chat. I text Lewis to say I’ll bring his coat back to the farm ASAP, but he’s on his way back from the vet’s, so he arranges to drop by to collect it.

I don’t know why, but I run upstairs to brush my

hair and change into jeans and a long cream jumper with a belt around the middle, before he turns up.

'You look nice, dear. Who's the lucky young gentleman?' Gran says. 'There must be one.'

'I always change out of my uniform when I get home.'

'Yes, into your sweat top and jogging bottoms.' Gran's like a dog with a bone. 'Will he want tea?' She means dinner. 'There's plenty in the pot.'

'He won't be stopping. He left his coat on the back seat of my car by mistake.'

'If you say so,' Gran says, and she makes an excuse to be downstairs when Lewis arrives, unbolting the door to let him in and accompanying him to the counter.

'Thank you for fixing Zara's car, my lover. Your coat's just there.'

'Let me get it,' Lewis says. 'It's a bit of a health hazard.'

'How can we thank you?' Gran asks. 'Zara, offer the young man some sweets.'

'No, I'm fine.' Lewis stands by the counter, hugging his coat, apparently struck down by an uncharacteristic attack of shyness in front of my grandmother.

'Gran, I think I can smell something burning,' I say, wishing she'd leave us alone for a few minutes.

'Me too,' she says with a wicked glint in her eye. 'The fires of passion.'

'Gran! I mean you could just check . . . upstairs.'

'In a mo,' she says brightly, apparently having no intention of making herself scarce.

'How is the ewe you took to the vet?' I ask eventually.

‘She’s good, thanks. She’s in the back of the pick-up with her lambs. Come and see them.’

‘You stay here, Gran. It’s too cold for you outside,’ I say quickly, before following Lewis out onto the pavement where the pick-up is parked on the double yellow lines. In the back, one of the woolliest sheep I’ve ever seen lies propped on her brisket in the corner. She’s panting so fast she looks as if she’s having a panic attack.

‘Mum’s a bit stressed, not surprisingly,’ Lewis observes. He reaches over and lifts the lid on a big plastic crate. ‘Here are her babies.’

I move closer, brushing up against his arm, to peer inside, where there are three lambs curled up together.

‘Ah, she’s had triplets,’ I say, captivated, until an icy blast whisks along the street, making me shiver.

‘I would offer you my coat,’ Lewis says hesitantly.

‘That’s kind of you, but . . .’

‘You don’t want to smell of sheep for the next week,’ Lewis interrupts. ‘How about sharing some body heat instead?’ He turns his head and gives me the most wicked grin. ‘I seem to have plenty to spare at this minute.’

‘What are you saying?’ I gasp.

‘Oh god, I’m sorry. I hope I haven’t offended you.’ He steps away from me. ‘It’s just that with you standing so close . . . What I’m trying to say is that you have quite an effect on me, and that’s a compliment. It wasn’t supposed to come across as creepy.’

‘No offence taken, Lewis.’ I can’t help giggling at his reaction. ‘It’s rather flattering to find out that I have

this effect on you, but I won't take up your offer right now.'

'Maybe another time,' he says with a chuckle.

'Maybe,' I flirt back. 'I'd better go back indoors.'

'And I'd better get these little guys back to their nice warm barn,' Lewis sighs. 'I hope to see you again very soon. Goodnight, Zara.'

'Goodnight.' I return to the shop and lock up, turning to find Gran at my shoulder. 'Gran, you made me jump – and thanks a lot for being so embarrassing.'

'It's a pleasure,' she says with glee. 'That Lewis, he's nothing like Paul.'

'What does that have to do with anything?'

'Don't tell me it hasn't crossed your mind? He's devilishly handsome. If I was sixty years younger . . .'

She might be teasing me, but she has touched a nerve because it's true. It's the first time a man has caught my eye since Paul, unless you include Leonardo DiCaprio and Henry Cavill, but I don't think they count. It's odd because I haven't looked at a man in that way, let alone flirted with one, for quite a while. I must be getting my mojo back.