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Opening Extract from...

The Bookshop on Rosemary Lane

Written by
Ellen Berry

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Ellen Berry

the Bookshop on Rosemary Lane



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For Liam
Because I love the way you say *cookery book*

In The Beginning . . .

Of the hundreds of cookbooks in Kitty's collection, an extraordinary number were dedicated to cooking under difficult circumstances. *Meals With One Pan, Dinner For Pennies, The Frugal Hostess,* even *Cooking Without a Kitchen.* At ten years old, Della Cartwright was intimately familiar with her mother's personal library; she could instantly locate *Blancmanges, Jellies and Other Set Desserts*, and lay a finger upon *Rescuing Kitchen Disasters* with no problem at all. She knew, however, that there was no book in the house entitled *Rustling Up Dinner When Your Husband Has Left You For Another Woman.* Which was precisely what Kitty Cartwright needed right now.

Stillness had settled over the kitchen in Rosemary Cottage. Even the books, which entirely lined every inch of available wall space – promising infinite culinary adventures – looked forlorn. Usually the hub of the house, filled with delicious aromas as Kitty chopped and stirred, the room felt cold and uninviting now. A few shrivelled potatoes sat in the wire rack, and tiny flies drifted around them. The milk was sour in the fridge, and the Victoria

sponge Kitty had made over a week ago sat, hard and uninviting, beneath its fluted glass dome. Still in pyjamas at 2.30 p.m., Della skimmed her gaze over the books. They no longer promised treats. They *overwhelmed* her.

Della's stomach growled hollowly. Hunger had driven Jeff, her big brother, to his best friend Mick's house at the end of the lane, whilst Roxanne, the youngest, would occasionally emerge from her bedroom to snatch a Jacob's cracker or a handful of dry Sugar Puffs from the cupboard. Mostly, though, she remained in her room, styling the synthetic blonde hair of her army of Barbies.

Della, the middle child, had no interest in dolls. She owned a battered old Chopper bike – the one Jeff had outgrown – that she'd cycle through the mushy fallen leaves entirely covering the winding lanes of the small Yorkshire village of Burley Bridge. Mostly, though, she loved to stay indoors and cook. Kitty had never given the impression that she knew what to do with her children – it was as if they had been foisted upon her, forever requiring name tapes to be sewn into clothes, or to be driven en masse to Clark's in Heathfield for school shoes – but she did seem to appreciate a kitchen assistant. Della had made this her job. Together, mother and daughter would pore over the books. Whilst Kitty took charge in her rather flappy manner, Della would undertake menial tasks: peeling carrots, trimming green beans, and gathering up the eggshells her mother left strewn around in her wake. She felt useful then, as if she *belonged*.

Della ran her fingers along the spines of the books. *What to Cook Today* was where her hand stopped. Perhaps she hadn't known the whole collection after all. She didn't remember seeing that one before. She pulled it from the shelf and studied its plain brown fabric cover. It was

slightly stained and smelled musty, its title almost faded away. There were no pictures inside: just tiny type on mottled yellowing pages and a few scribbled notes in the margins. Della fetched a notebook and pencil and, installed at the well-worn kitchen table, she started to flick through the book.

Potato Soup, she wrote in rounded childish lettering. *Roast Chicken. Semolina Pudding.* Warm, comforting foods to coax Jeff back from Mick's and Roxanne away from her Barbies and, most importantly, their mother away from her glass of gin. Della was sensible enough to know Kitty needed to eat, and that gin and tonic didn't count as real food, even with ice and lemon.

Getting up from the wobbly kitchen chair, Della took an elastic band from the rubbery ball which Kitty, frugal to the last, had made by collecting the ones dropped by the postman, and used it to secure her thick brown hair in a ponytail. Then she lifted her own navy blue apron from the hook on the kitchen door and, aware of the distant chink of ice cubes in a glass, turned back to the chapter entitled *Soups and Starters.*

And so she began.

Chapter One

It wasn't a train she was trying to catch but her mother's last breath. So Della *couldn't* be late. 'Start, dammit,' she muttered, repeatedly turning the ignition key: nothing. Her car appeared to be dead. Her mother could be too, very soon, if her brother was right. He'd called just a few moments ago.

'Della,' Jeff had barked, 'things aren't looking good. You'd better get yourself over here right away.' It was the phrase that had stung her: *get yourself over here,* implying that she'd spent the past three days lying prone on the sofa, posting chocolates into her mouth, rather than keeping an almost permanent vigil at their mother's bedside. In fact, even before Kitty had moved to the hospice, Della had done most of the caring, driving over to Rosemary Cottage every day after work, not to mention weekends. Jeff, who was based ninety minutes away in Manchester, was generally 'too tied up' to assist. As for Della's younger sister, Roxanne: despite their mother's decline, this was the first time she'd deigned to venture to Yorkshire from London in three weeks. And just when

Della had dared to pop home to catch up on a little sleep, it had started to happen.

Cursing under her breath, she turned the key over and over. It was as effective as repeatedly jabbing at the button to call a lift.

She scrambled out of her car – a scuffed red Fiat Punto – and glanced around the quiet residential street in panic. Running to the hospice wasn't an option. Della wasn't built for speed, and Perivale House – which sounded like a luxury spa rather than a place where people went to die – was a couple of miles away on the outskirts of the bustling market town. You couldn't just hail a taxi in Heathfield – they had to be booked in advance – and Della couldn't think of anyone she knew who'd be around, ready and willing to drive her, at 3.17 p.m. on a grubby-skied September afternoon.

Whilst pacing at the bus stop she tried Mark on his mobile, knowing he wouldn't pick up; his working days were filled with back-to-back patient consultations. Often he didn't even break for lunch. 'Going to the hospice,' she informed his voicemail. 'It doesn't sound good, love. Jeff and Rox are with her right now and, can you believe this, my bloody car won't start. I'll call you later, okay? Or call me. Yes, please call me, soon as you can. 'Bye.' She tried to calm her breathing before calling Sophie, their daughter, who didn't answer either. Not because she was working – she was probably in Starbucks hanging out with her best friend Evie, or perhaps Liam, the boyfriend who seemed to be fading from her affections – but because MUM had flashed up on her phone. These days, Della was always pleasantly surprised and faintly honoured when her daughter did answer a call.

Finally – *finally* – the bus crawled into view. Della

perched on the edge of the front seat, as if that would get her there faster as it trundled through the bustling market town. Her mother was dying, for goodness' sake, couldn't the driver put his foot down? Of course, it wasn't his fault that Heathfield was especially busy today, it being the first Wednesday in the month and therefore farmers' market day. Never mind a seventy-seven-year-old lady with terminal cancer: people needed their onion marmalades and artisan cheeses. And the driver had to let passengers on and off; it was his *job*, Della reminded herself, conscious of her thumping heart. And her job right now was to be with Kitty, to hold her bony hand as she slipped away to . . . where exactly? Although Della didn't believe in the afterlife, she hoped her mother might drift away to a place where pain, confusion and toxic chemicals would be replaced by a steady trickle of gin.

Come on, bus. Come ON! It had stopped, not at a bus stop but due to a van parked outside Greggs, hazard lights flashing, blocking the lane. Seven minutes, it took, for a man in unforgiving tight jeans to reappear and drive it away. Della felt herself ageing rapidly as the bus finally nudged its way along the tree-lined residential roads and out into the soft, rolling North Yorkshire countryside towards Perivale House. The turreted Victorian manor came into view. The bus doors opened and Della sprang off.

Roxanne and Jeff looked up from Kitty's bedside in the small private room. Jeff muttered something – it might have been '*Here* you are' – but Della couldn't hear properly. All she could do was look at the tiny old lady whose facial skin had settled into little folds around her jawline. A little downy fuzz was all that was left of her hair now.

'Oh, Mum,' Della whispered, kneeling down on the

rubbery floor and taking her mother's hand. Kitty's slim fingers were cold, her ring with its chunky emerald a little loose. 'I didn't get the chance to say goodbye. I'm so sorry.'

Roxanne reached down and squeezed her sister's arm. Apart from pinkish, sore-looking eyes, she was her usual immaculate self in a plain but clearly expensive black shift, plus an embroidered cream cardi and low, glossy black heels. Della was wearing the leggings and faded turquoise T-shirt she'd napped in. Jeff, the eldest of the three and something important in banking, fixed her with a resigned look across the bed. As her siblings were occupying the only two chairs, Della remained kneeling on the floor. 'When did it happen?' she murmured.

'About ten minutes ago,' Roxanne replied.

'Ten minutes! I can't believe it. That's when I was stuck outside Greggs . . .'

'You went to Greggs on your way here?' Jeff gasped,

'No, of course I didn't. I was on the bus, there was a lorry blocking the road.'

'The bus?' gasped Roxanne, who probably hadn't travelled on one since 1995. 'Why didn't you drive?'

Della let go of her mother's hand. 'My car wouldn't start.'

Jeff let out a heavy sigh. 'For God's sake, Dell, you're an adult woman. When are you going to get a proper car that's not held together with string?'

At first, it had seemed like a terrible idea: for the three of them to drive over to Kitty's house less than two hours since she had passed away. But then, the Cartwrights weren't one of those families who gathered purely to be together. They needed a purpose: a birth, a marriage, a significant birthday – or a death. And coming to Rosemary

Cottage – in which all three of them had grown up – felt like the right thing to do. They had things to attend to. They needed, as Jeff put it with his customary directness, to 'figure out what needs to be done'.

Mark arrived, still in his work attire of crisp striped blue shirt and dark grey trousers, with Sophie in tow. 'Oh, darling,' he exclaimed, 'I know how hard this is for you.' He gathered Della into his arms and kissed the top of her head where her haphazard top-knot was coming loose.

'Thanks, love,' she said, momentarily soothed by the embrace.

'I'm so sorry, Mum,' cried Sophie, her own tears setting off Della's. 'My phone was out of charge. I'd just got in when Dad came home and said Gran had—' She broke off with a sob.

'It's okay,' Della murmured, hugging her daughter. 'We knew it was going to happen. And, remember, it's been tough for Gran for such a long time . . .' She turned to Mark. 'It's just, I missed it, you know. I was too *late*.'

'It doesn't matter,' he insisted. 'You've done what you could. You've been amazing . . . looking after her, sitting with her for hours and hours.' She caught him throwing Jeff and Roxanne a glance of irritation.

'I just wish I'd seen her more,' Sophie said, blotting away tears on the cuff of her faded red sweatshirt. 'It's too late now. I should've made more effort. I should've gone every day . . .'

'Sweetheart,' Della said, 'you went often enough. Gran knew you loved her. She knew we *all* did.' She caught Roxanne's eye, and a flicker of acknowledgement passed between the sisters.

'What I feel bad about,' Jeff announced, looking around their mother's cluttered kitchen, 'is the state of this place.

How could she have lived like this? We really should have done something about it.' He cast a derisory glance over the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves crammed with ancient cookbooks.

'Mum liked it this way,' Della pointed out. 'You know that. She refused to throw anything away.'

'But there's so much *stuff*!' he exclaimed. 'It's oppressive, so dingy and dark. It can't have been good for her.'

'Clutter doesn't make people ill, Jeff,' Della countered, trying to soften the defensive edge to her voice. 'Books don't cause cancer. It was the way Mum wanted it, we couldn't just barge in and take over.'

He exhaled loudly and peered at the shelves, running a manicured nail along the books' spines. Their sheer volume lent Kitty's kitchen the air of a second-hand bookshop. Perhaps, Della figured, the peeling white-washed cottage did seem pretty chaotic when you visited so rarely. Like Jeff before her and Roxanne soon after, Della had been eager to escape Burley Bridge, the once-pretty, now rather shabby and beleaguered village which had formed the backdrop to their childhood. She had, too – albeit settling only seventeen miles away in the nearest sizeable town of Heathfield. However, as Kitty had become more dependent, she'd been the one to make frequent visits. To her, Rosemary Cottage with its vast collection of cookbooks and the enormous pine dresser crammed with chipped china knick-knacks, seemed *normal*.

Roxanne, too, was examining the books. 'I'd forgotten how many of these she had. What was the point? I don't ever remember her cooking much.'

'She did when we were young,' Della reminded her. 'Not so much in later years, after Dad left. But, you know,

they were important to her and for whatever reason she couldn't let them go.'

Roxanne smiled, her eerily unlined face looking drawn and pale. 'I'm sorry you've had to deal with all of this, Dell. You know I'd have come up more often if I could. It's just, I've had crazy deadlines lately.' Although Della knew nothing about the world of glossy fashion magazines – apart from the fact that they featured handbags covered in gold buckles and costing £3,000 – she did know that Roxanne's came out monthly, suggesting that she wasn't deluged by 'crazy deadlines' *all* the time.

Yet, while more support would have been appreciated, in some ways it was easier for Della just to get on with things on her own, without Jeff hectoring her and Roxanne fussing and dithering and never quite managing to get anything done. Living the closest to their mother, of course Della had been the one to step in. While Jeff could be patronising – making it plain it was a pity she worked in a shop rather than in the loftier professions of banking or journalism – he couldn't find fault with the way she had managed their mother's care. At least, he'd better not, Della thought darkly. Kitty's doctors' appointments had been dutifully marked on the wall chart in Della's kitchen. She had taken to batch-cooking meals for her mother and, as Kitty had come to rely upon her, Della had noticed her prickliness ebbing away.

They had settled into a comfortable pattern, chatting about nothing much: the weather, their preferred biscuits, an antiques show on TV. The once-formidable Kitty had softened and, for the first time, Della could figure out how to *be* with her: calm, reassuring – like a mother, really. As a child, Della had always been rather afraid of her mother's quick temper. However, towards the end of Kitty's

life, Della could tell that her mother liked her at last, or at least appreciated what she did. So did it really matter than the number 43 bus had been too slow today?

'So,' Jeff said, pacing around the kitchen, 'I suppose we'd better get started.'

Della stared up at him. 'What d'you mean, get started?'

He blinked at her. 'I mean, figure out what needs to be done. Isn't that why we're here?'

'Jeff,' Roxanne said sharply, 'Mum only passed away a few hours ago. Nothing needs to be done—'

'And we're here because . . .' Della cut in, before tailing off. How could she put it: that it now seemed *right* for them to have gathered here in the very place where they'd forever complained that there was nothing to do, yet had somehow found infinite ways in which to amuse themselves? Long, lazy summers had seen them roaming through the undulating fields and rather scary woods, summonsed back for tea by Kitty's shrill calls from the garden. Winters had featured endless games of Monopoly and copious reading by the crackling fire in the living room. Irritatingly, Jeff had had the best collection of books, all neatly ordered and catalogued in the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in his bedroom. It looked – and indeed functioned – like a library. Frequently, Della had been fined twenty-five pence for a late return.

'Well, I'm glad we came here,' Sophie said firmly. 'What'll happen to this place now, Mum?'

Della grimaced. 'We'll sell it, I guess.'

'I'll help with that,' Roxanne cut in quickly, 'but with the funeral, well . . . I'm sorry, I just wouldn't know where to start.'

'It's okay,' Della found herself saying. In fact, she knew precisely what to do, having arranged her father's a decade

ago, when Jeff had been too caught up with his newborn twins to get involved, and Roxanne had been rendered helpless by grief.

Roxanne squeezed her hand. 'You're amazing, you know? The way you just . . . get on with things.' She swept back her long highlighted hair. 'I'm sorry, though, I'd better think about getting back. Early start tomorrow, and the weather's not looking too good tonight.' A little light rain, was what she meant.

'Me too,' Jeff said, 'but call me, okay, Dell? If there's anything at all I can help with. It's going to be a hell of a job, I'll do whatever I can.'

'Of course I will,' Della said unconvincingly. Minutes later Jeff was preparing to head back to his wife, their boys and fancy detached home in Manchester, while Roxanne was itching to return to London, to write about hemline lengths and the 'silhouette of the season', whatever that meant.

They hugged, the three of them, despite their differences, as they had never hugged before: the only ones who knew what Kitty was really like. But as he climbed into his gleaming BMW, Jeff cast Della a quick, disapproving look, as if he still suspected she had stopped off for a sly steak bake instead of catching their mother's last breath.

Chapter Two

In fact, it wasn't a hell of a job for Jeff or Roxanne because, despite their reassurances that they'd be readily available – 'I'm only a phone call away!' Roxanne had trilled before zooming away in her convertible – Della had organised everything. There had been a short service at the crematorium, then all back to Rosemary Cottage where the villagers had been invited for tea.

Mark hadn't involved himself in the preparations. 'You seemed to be handling everything so well yourself,' he remarked, when Della mentioned that a little help would have been appreciated. So she was immensely grateful to Freda when it came to sprucing up Kitty's place in readiness for the surge of guests. Della's friend since they had fallen into companionable chat while their daughters played together in Heathfield Park – the girls were still virtually inseparable – Freda had literally rolled up her sleeves and got stuck in. Together they had deep-cleaned Kitty's front room and dotted it with jam jars of late-flowering purple asters from the rampant cottage garden. They had gathered together all the china, sorting the

chipped from the unchipped, and made vast quantities of dainty triangular sandwiches and a variety of cakes. (Freda was an excellent baker. Since her marriage broke up – amazingly amicably, Della had thought – she had been supplementing her part-time teacher's salary by supplying speciality breads to delicatessens all over North Yorkshire.)

'Well, I think we've done a pretty decent job here,' she murmured above the hubbub of the living room.

'We have,' Della agreed. 'Thanks so much. Honestly, I don't know what I'd have done without you.'

'Oh, don't be silly. I couldn't just sit back and do nothing while you grafted away.'

Della smiled gratefully, catching snatches of Mark's and Jeff's rather awkward conversation about their working lives. While Mark was capable of appearing intrigued by Jeff's corporate world, her brother clearly found it difficult even to feign interest in Mark's podiatry practice. 'So, um, how *is* the world of feet?' he boomed.

'Oh, you know, rich and varied.' Mark rubbed at the side of his nose.

'Anything new occurring? Anything I should be looking out for?' Jeff chortled, and both men stared down at his black lace-up shoes.

'You tend to know when things are going wrong,' Mark observed, trying to sip from his wine glass before realising it was empty.

'But I thought it was all about prevention these days?' Jeff turned to his sister. 'You know all about this, don't you, Rox? In magazine land?'

'Not about foot problems, no,' she remarked dryly.

Jeff laughed again, possibly forgetting that this was their mother's funeral gathering and perhaps he shouldn't

be quite so jovial. 'Tell you what, Mark, you've got people like Rox to thank for all the cash you rake in.'

'How's that, Jeff?' Roxanne asked with a frown.

'Oh, come on, encouraging women to wear crippling heels that crush their feet and misshape their toes. Some of them look like – I don't know – Roman sandals with enormous platform soles! You see girls out in Manchester, hobbling around on a Saturday night . . .'

Della stopped tuning in. She offered sandwiches to the haberdashery sisters, as they were known in the village – Pattie and Christine ran a curiously old-fashioned store for anyone who needed an emergency zip or a spool of elastic – then continued her rounds with a tray of mini savoury tarts. 'Such a lovely idea to have tea here,' remarked Irene, who ran the general store-cum-post office and whose fluffy hair bore a curiously peachy hue. 'Kitty would have loved it, everyone gathered in her home to celebrate her life.'

'Yes, I know she would.' Della smiled. In fact, she wasn't entirely sure about that. Kitty had had an aversion to neighbours popping in, especially those who insisted on being helpful. *Irene Bagshott dropped by with a chicken and leek pie,* she'd exclaimed, just a few months ago. *What on earth would I want a pie for?* And she'd glared at the golden pastry lid as if suspecting that roadkill lay beneath. Today, though, the atmosphere was convivial, partly because Burley Bridge was that kind of place – a real, working village, where people actually cared about one another – and also, Della suspected with a twinge of guilt, because Kitty wasn't here.

'Such a terrible loss for you,' remarked Morna, a retired lollipop lady who lived in the next cottage down the lane, 'but what a full life she had.'

'Mum was in a good place, towards the end,' Della added. 'She was well looked after. The hospice staff couldn't have been more kind.'

'I'm glad. Such spirit, she had.'

'A real character,' added Len, who ran the local garage. 'One thing about your mother, Della, she knew what she wanted in life.' And so they went on: about how strong-minded she was, such a one-off. Ian the butcher agreed that 'things won't be the same around here without Kitty' – omitting to mention that she had once accused him of short-changing her for a rolled pork joint.

Della looked around the room. Pattie and Christine, who had run their shop together for forty-odd years, were clearly a couple of G&Ts down, while Tamsin, Jeff's nervy-looking wife, was admonishing their ten-year-old twins for repeatedly interrogating Sophie about her newly acquired wrist tattoo.

'Did your mum and dad let you get that?' bellowed Isaac, the bolder of the pair. 'Or did you just *get* it?'

'She just got it,' Mark announced tersely. 'No permission was sought.' Noah, Isaac's brother, laughed as if this were the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

'I'm eighteen,' Sophie said with a roll of her eyes, glancing at her boyfriend Liam, who merely shrugged in response.

'D'*you* like it?' Isaac asked him.

'Yeah, it's all right,' Liam replied.

'Wish she'd got one with your name on it?'

'No, 'course not.'

'Yeah, 'cause then if you split up, that'd be *so* embarrassing.'

'Isaac!' Tamsin snapped, causing him to totter back and shroud himself, like a toddler might, in the heavy velvet curtain.

Della caught Freda's eye and grimaced. In fact, she had been pretty dismayed about Sophie having her beautiful creamy skin indelibly inked, but then, what could she have done to prevent it? Seized her daughter's money or kept her under lock and key? Without prior consultation Sophie had taken herself off to Screaming Skulls, an insalubrious-sounding place in town – since boarded up, disconcertingly – and returned home with her wrist bandaged. The bandage was soon removed to reveal a wobbly line of scabs, which eventually fell away to reveal a daisy-chain design. 'My God, it looks so sore,' Della had exclaimed, examining the inflamed, puffy skin.

'It's fine,' Sophie insisted.

'Are you sure? It looks, I don't know, kind of angry.'

'You'd be angry,' Mark had muttered, 'if you'd been pierced with a needle thousands of times and pumped full of ink.'

Della glanced around the room, noticing that Terry and Val, Mark's parents, had just arrived, looking quite terrified as both twins twirled energetically in the curtains while neither Jeff nor Tamsin made a move to stop them.

'So sorry we're late,' Val explained as Della offered them their preferred cups of sweet, weak tea. 'The car broke down, we'd hardly been going five minutes . . .'

'Well, Val had put petrol in,' Terry admonished her.

'I thought it was diesel, dear.'

'But it wasn't.'

Della tried to placate them with mini tarts and fairy cakes, but no, they both had digestive issues at the moment – 'I couldn't stomach a thing,' Val whimpered – and they looked around Kitty's living room in awe, as if they had accidentally stumbled into a minor stately home. Everything seemed to intimidate them, Della

reflected. In fact, she had long been concerned about her in-laws, now in their late-seventies, living in their cottage on the North Yorkshire coast. Sparsely furnished and permanently cold, it had nothing of note nearby apart from a fume-belching refinery and an abattoir. Della worried about them, so stuck in their ways and rarely venturing out, but had long since given up on suggesting to Mark that they should invite them over more often. 'You know what it's like when they come,' he'd said, and Della did know; it was as if all their spirit had been directed into the raising of Mark, their only child whom they doted upon, leaving nothing left over for themselves. 'Excuse me, Della,' Val whispered now, 'could I possibly use your bathroom?'

Della escorted her to the antiquated loo upstairs and on her return gave Mark's hand a brief squeeze as she drifted by. He had escaped from Jeff only to be cornered by Nicola Crowther who ran the sole hair salon in Burley Bridge and who had only recently upgraded from the rubber cap method to foils. 'All these cookbooks,' she exclaimed, gesticulating towards the bookcases by the fireplace. 'I've never seen so many!'

'There are hundreds of them in the kitchen, too,' Mark murmured, '*and* in the bedrooms and bathroom. They're crammed into every room of the house.'

'Amazing,' she gasped as Roxanne strode past. 'Oh, look at you, Roxy Cartwright. I haven't seen you for years. Barely recognised you. You're so glamorous!'

'I don't know about that,' Roxanne said with a tight laugh. She had politely requested that no one should ever again call her Roxy before leaving for London.

'Seriously, are you planning to age at any point? You're putting us country people to shame . . .'

'You look great too, Nicola,' Roxanne murmured. Della saw the tendons tighten in her sister's long, slender neck.

'Thanks, but honestly, there must be something in that London water.' Nicola gazed at Roxanne reverentially as if she were a beautiful, unaffordable dress. 'You're only four years younger than Della, aren't you? Incredible! But then, you are very different physically, you with your lovely blue eyes and Della with brown.'

Something clenched in Della's chest. It was true, they barely looked like sisters at all, and at forty-six years old, Roxanne appeared eerily youthful: aided by whitened teeth, expensively honeyed hair plus, Della suspected, the occasional shot of Botox and a filler or two.

'Still working on that magazine?' Nicola wanted to know.

'Yep, still hanging on in there.'

'You must meet so many famous people! D'you get lots of free clothes?' While Roxanne insisted that she didn't – 'It's not nearly as glamorous as people think' – Della coaxed the twins out of the curtains with a plate of cookies, and caught snippets of village news from Len who, as well as running the garage, seemed to be the oracle of everything that happened in Burley Bridge. Virtually everyone else had gathered around Roxanne, as if hoping that a little of her London glitz might rub off on them. But no matter, Della decided: at least everyone was here to celebrate Kitty's life. That's why she had pulled out all the stops, having placed a notice – an open invitation really – in the window of Irene's shop. Virtually everyone had come, all the villagers who had known Kitty – for fifty-odd years, some of them – even though they hadn't been what you'd call close to her. Because *no one* was. Real friends had fallen away over the years, like dead-

headed flowers. There'd be some imagined slight, a hastily ended phone call, and their name would be angrily scribbled out of Kitty's address book.

Della nibbled a cucumber sandwich and wondered whether Morna, Kitty's nearest neighbour, had given any thought today to her run-in with Kitty over a visitor parking in 'her' space, even though the road outside Rosemary Cottage belonged to no one (maybe the council or the road department or something: Della had no idea. But she did know Kitty had no legal claim on it). She wondered, too, what Irene would have thought if she'd known that Kitty had scraped the chicken and leek pie into the bin, and whether Len was aware that she'd gone around complaining that he'd 'poisoned' her car by putting the wrong kind of oil in it.

The afternoon wore on, and then the villagers began to drift out amidst thank yous and hugs, leaving just Della's extended family – 'My tattoo,' Isaac announced, 'is going to be of a dog pooing' – plus Freda, who was rounding up glasses and crumb-strewn plates in the manner of an efficient waitress.

Reclining in an armchair while Tamsin admonished their sons, Jeff sipped his red wine. 'Well, I thought that went very well,' he said, his glow of satisfaction almost visible, as if he had fashioned those savoury tarts with his own, eerily baby-soft hands.