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Written by Katie Fforde

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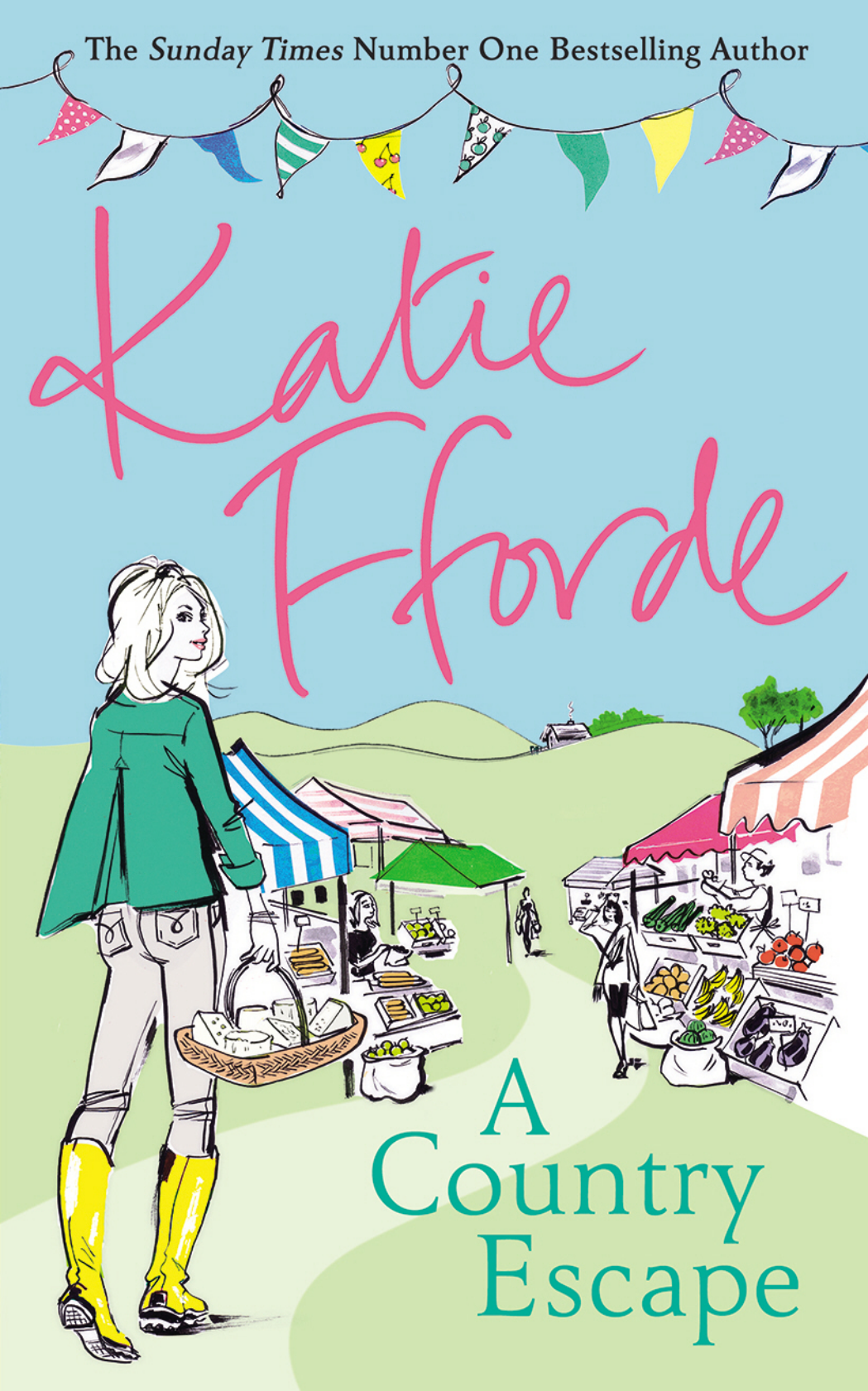

A Country Escape

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Katie Fforde

A Country Escape

CENTURY

Chapter One

The farm gate clanged shut behind her as Fran steered her little car up the steep track. Now she and Issi had found Hill Top Farm for certain – the name was written (not very clearly) on the post box – she felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness. This was either going to be a wonderful adventure or a humiliating mistake. She decided not to mention her feelings to her best friend. Issi probably guessed how she felt already.

'I always wanted to be a farmer when I was a little girl,' Fran said instead.

Issi, who'd just got back in the car having helped deal with the gate, seemed surprised. 'Really? I never knew that and we've been friends for years. I thought you'd always wanted to run your own restaurant.'

'That came later. I'd forgotten myself,' said Fran, 'but Mum reminded me at Christmas.'

'Do your parents think you're mad to do this?'

'Yup. But they're being supportive. My stepdad thinks I'll be back with them before the end of the month, but I'm in it for the long haul.' She paused. 'Which may only be a year, if I don't make it.'

'Come on,' said Issi, 'let's go and find this farmhouse you might inherit.'

'It's not just the farmhouse, remember? It's the whole darn farm.'

Fran rounded a steep corner and tried to push her nerves to the back of her mind. Now she was finally here she realised no sane person would leave their comfortable life in London and move to a farm in Gloucestershire that they might not even inherit. No *sane* person, obviously, but maybe someone like her whose normal life had stalled rather, and who relished a challenge.

A couple of minutes later, they arrived, having bumped their way to the top avoiding as many potholes as they could. 'I'm not sure a Ka is the right vehicle for this track,' Issi said.

Ignoring her friend, Fran got out of the car. 'But look at the view!'

The farmhouse was on a plateau at the top of a hill that overlooked hills and wooded valleys. Beyond them lay the Severn, a silver snake in the far distance, and beyond the river was Wales.

'I think I remember this landscape!' Fran went on. 'We came here once when I was a little girl. I'd

forgotten all about it until we were discussing the farm over Christmas, and Mum reminded me. Mum said we'd all been here when Dad was alive, but I must have been tiny – after all I was only five when he died. But this feels faintly familiar.'

'It is stunning,' Issi agreed.

'Come on,' said Fran, 'let's look at the house while it's still light. It'll be dark by about four, so we'll need to turn the leccy on. I've got a torch.' She paused. 'January's probably not a good time to move on to a farm.'

Issi laughed. 'It is what it is. Let's get in.'

After failing to open the front door, they went round the back. 'I don't think people use front doors in the country,' said Fran as they made their way round the building. 'Here we are.' She fitted the key into the lock and turned. Seconds later they were in.

'Wow! It is dark,' said Issi.

'Hang on. I think I've found the fuse box. I'll just get my torch out. There! We have light!'

They were in a fairly big farmhouse kitchen. The friends looked around in silence for a few seconds, taking it all in.

'An open fire!' said Issi excitedly. 'How lovely to have an open fire in a kitchen.'

'As long as it's not all I have to cook on,' agreed Fran, looking round. Although the central light was on, it wasn't very bright and created shadow-filled

corners. 'Oh, look,' she went on, relieved. 'There's a Rayburn. Probably a prototype it's so ancient. I do hope it's not run on solid fuel.'

'But you're a chef. You can cook on anything!' said Issi, laughing at her friend.

'I'm fine with the cooking,' Fran agreed, 'but I have no experience of lighting fires. Oh phew, it seems to run on oil.'

'And look, there's an electric cooker as well. You're in culinary clover.' Issi seemed to find Fran's dismay over the cooking arrangements highly amusing.

'I'll be OK,' said Fran, more to herself than Issi. 'I'm here to farm, not to cook, after all. And I really like all the freestanding cupboards and things. And the sink has a lovely view of...' She lifted the net curtain and peered through the window. 'Ah, the farmyard. But it's lovely beyond that. Come on!' Suddenly she was more excited than dubious. 'Let's go and explore some more.'

The sitting room, which was at the front of the house, was a good size, and the windowsill was covered in pot plants. Some had died, but the geraniums seemed to have survived. There was a three-piece suite draped in crocheted blankets, and a profusion of tables and whatnots covered in photographs. Fran picked a photo up. 'A woman and a cow, or maybe a bull. There's a rosette. How sweet!'

Issi joined her. 'They all seem to be of cows or bulls. There's nothing to tell you anything about the old lady who owned them.'

'Except that she was really into cows,' said Fran, putting down the photo she was holding. 'Oh, look at the fireplace!'

'It's tiny. You'll need something else if you're going to warm this room up.'

'I know it's tiny, but look at the beam above it. I bet there's a wonderful original fireplace behind this little coal-burning thing. I long to take a sledgehammer to it.'

'I'd wait until you're sure you're staying put, but I understand what you mean,' said Issi, looking around her. 'It's not exactly shabby chic, but I do like it. This room could actually have been two or maybe even three rooms.' She looked up at the ceiling, which had large beams at intervals.

'It's "old-lady chic", that's what it is,' Fran decided. 'And I like it too. Although I wish I could investigate the fireplace. I bet there's something amazing behind all this thirties stuff.'

'An old bread oven or something to cook on? You said yourself, you're here to farm not to cook,' said Issi. 'If you thought you were going to miss cheffing, you should have stayed in London, cooking for the pub.'

'No,' said Fran determinedly. 'This time I'm going to work for myself and make my own

decisions. But I suppose you're right, I can't knock the house around, not if I haven't actually inherited it yet.'

'So tomorrow you're seeing your aunt – cousin – what is she?'

'I can't remember exactly how we're related but she's some sort of connection to my read dad. I'm Amy's – I suppose I'd call her Aunt Amy – I'm the only relation she could trace. She's been running Hill Top on her own since her husband died. Now she's had to go into a care home she thought she should try and leave it to one of her relations. I think she got in touch with another one but, according to the solicitor, he never replied.'

'Which is why you're here.,' said Issi, who then paused. 'Shall we investigate the bedrooms? They may be damp and we've got to sleep in a couple of them tonight.'

'Thank you so much for coming with me,' said Fran as they made their way up the stairs. 'This would all be a bit daunting on my own.'

'I'm just sorry I can't stay longer. It's such an adventure!' Issi paused. 'Would you have preferred Alex to come with you?'

Fran shook her head. 'No way. One of the reasons we broke up was that he wasn't up for adventure. He seems very happy being an intern for his uncle in New York…Although going on the fact there are supposedly very few straight

men in NYC I suspect he has another motive.' She sighed. 'No, I really don't miss him, apart from as a friend, sort of.'

Was she over Alex? Fran knew that Issi was still concerned about this, but she definitely was. He was a kind and lovely man but, when it came down to it, too safe and a bit dull. They'd broken up a few weeks ago after a couple of years together.

Fran knew they'd been going through the motions for a while but the catalyst had been this opportunity – challenge, even. If Alex could have hacked the countryside (unlikely) he couldn't cope with the uncertainty. A straightforward inheritance might have been different – but probably not. Fran, on the other hand, although terrified, was very excited by it all.

A few minutes later, Fran and Issi were making up beds, helping themselves to soft, old flannel sheets they found in the airing cupboard. Then they found hot-water bottles and filled them, although they agreed they didn't think the house was damp. Then it was time for supper.

'So,' said Issi when they'd eaten most of the moussaka that Fran had made and brought with her, and heated up in the electric oven. 'You're seeing Amy tomorrow?'

'Yup. After my meeting with the lawyer. He said in his letter he's arranged for me to have a bit of

money to run things with but I don't expect it's very much.' She sighed. 'It is quite daunting when I think about it. I know nothing about farming – and yet here I am. I could have said no when I first heard from Amy's solicitor but…' She paused. 'I wanted to challenge myself.'

'See if you can run the farm for a year and make it pay?'

Fran nodded. 'Of course I don't have to look after the cows myself. There's a herdsman. Amy would never let her precious cows be looked after by an ignoramus, which is what I am as far as farming is concerned.'

'And cows are quite big, aren't they?' said Issi.

'Are you afraid of cows?'

'More to the point, are you?'

Fran swallowed. 'I really hope not but actually – I think I am!'

Issi laughed. 'Let's finish the wine and then get an early night. You have to be up with the lark tomorrow. Better set your alarm for six. Get used to your new life.'

Although Fran knew Issi was joking, she also knew what she said was true. As for being afraid of cows, she'd just have to find out when she met them.

The next morning they were standing in the kitchen, shrouded in layers of woollen jumpers and clutching steaming mugs of tea. Fran's long

bob had not been straightened that morning, and her blue-grey eyes had no trace of make-up. Nor were her freckles toned down with make up. She felt she looked like a scruffy ten-year-old but had more important things to think about than her appearance. Issi was looking pretty natural as well.

'It's the lawyer first? Then your Aunt Amy.'

Fran nodded. 'I'm not sure how long it will all take. Will you be OK here on your own?'

Issi nodded. 'I'm going to sort out the pot plants, and maybe do a bit of exploring. I might even move the furniture around a bit and clear out the odd cupboard. Would you mind?'

'Not at all. I'm so grateful you're here. I wouldn't grudge you a bit of entertainment. In fact I think you're going to have a better time than I am.'

'In other words, Mrs Flowers is a distant cousin, a couple of times removed.'

To Fran's huge relief, Mr Addison, the solicitor, a kind, tired man in his fifties, finally summed up the complex relationship that involved different generations and marriages.

'What do you think I should call her when we meet?' asked Fran, who was getting nervous at the thought of meeting a woman who, although very elderly now, had apparently been formidable in her time.

'She'll let you know, don't you worry about that,' said Mr Addison. 'Now let's go through the finances a bit. Mrs Flowers has arranged six months of care in her home. She has set up an account with a thousand pounds in it for your use. There is a bit more money but I'd honestly prefer you didn't encroach on it. Although Mrs Flowers is very well looked after and frail, she may need more than six months' care, which is going to be expensive.'

'But in an emergency?'

'You can apply to me.'

'And what about wages for the herdsman, and other people who work for her?'

'There are a couple of relief milkers employed as and when they're needed, and their wages are all arranged too. For six months.'

'But she wants me to stay for a year? What happens after the first six months? In July?'

He shrugged. 'I think she hopes the farm will be earning money by then.'

Fran noted his careful choice of words. 'You mean, it's not making money at the moment?'

Mr Addison sighed. 'Mrs Flowers has been slowing down for a while. Things have been let slip.'

'So I'm not taking on a going concern. Things are in a bad way?'

'I wouldn't say a bad way; just not a desperately profitable way.'

When she'd first heard about it Fran had thought it was a romantic, dramatic idea to have been brought in to look after the family farm, but she was no longer quite so sure.

'Is that you being tactful?' said Fran. 'You would tell me the truth, wouldn't you?'

Mr Addison's expression closed down. 'I have to act in my client's best interest. I'm sure you're going to do a good job.' He stood up. Fran realised he'd explained everything to the best of his ability but he obviously felt he could do no more.

'What happens if it turns out I'm afraid of cows?'

He shook his head and smiled. He obviously thought Fran was making a joke. 'I'm sure we don't need to worry about that.'

*

When Fran arrived at the care home, she'd anticipated it taking her a while to explain why she had come. But no, everyone knew exactly who she was. And for the first time that day she wondered if she was dressed right. When she'd got up, after a night disturbed by an uncomfy mattress and strange noises, she'd just put on the clothes she'd worn the previous day, more concerned with getting down the drive, finding the solicitor and then the care home than how she looked. Now she wondered if leggings, boots and a tunic that revealed quite a lot of leg was acceptable.

Still, it was too late to worry about it now. She was following a care worker down a carpeted corridor, her boots scuffing against the pile.

The nurse stopped and opened a door. 'Mrs Flowers? It's your young relative.'

The room wasn't huge but it was bright and sunny. There were pictures on the walls and the furniture would have fitted into the décor of the farmhouse. Fran went into the room, not sure what to say.

'Hello – Aunt – Cousin – Mrs Flowers…' She paused. The old lady was sitting on a chair, looking very neat and upright.

'Better make it "Amy", dear,' she said crisply. 'Otherwise I might die before you decide what my name is. And sit down, do.'

Fran sat and inspected her companion. Her eyes were bright and blue and shone out from a pink, slightly weathered complexion. Her thin grey hair was twisted into a knot on top of her head. She wore a long tweed skirt and a neatly ironed white blouse with a lace collar. She seemed bright, cheerful and well cared for. She had obviously chosen her care home well.

'Hello, Amy, it's lovely to meet you finally,' Fran said, sensing it was important that she appeared confident, even if she was anything but. The meeting with the solicitor had turned a year learning about farming and a bit of an adventure into a huge undertaking loaded with responsibility and concern.

Amy nodded, possibly with approval. 'Well, dear, I'm very glad you came. I didn't want my farm to go to rack and ruin while I'm in here.'

'But you realise I don't know very much about farming, don't you?' Amy obviously wasn't the sort of person who appreciated 'how are you' conversations, so Fran got on with what was on her mind.

'Yes, and – please don't take offence – believe me, if there'd been anyone else I would never have got in touch with you. But we are related. I'd have preferred one of my husband's relations – it was his farm – but although I tracked one down, they never replied to my letter. So you're all I could find.' She paused. 'I was eighteen when I married and I lived on the farm ever since, until I came here.'

'Goodness.' Amy seemed to need to tell her story and Fran hoped she'd sounded encouraging.

Amy nodded and carried on. 'The farm had been in his family for many generations. We never had children and it was a great sadness to us both to think it would all end with us. My husband died twenty years ago and I've been on my own since then. I've been worrying about who to pass it on to all that time.'

Fran was touched. 'I can understand that.'

'It's the herd, you see. They're Dairy Shorthorns and quite rare. The cows on the farm now – and I've known them all personally – are related to the

original herd. That's very unusual.' She gave a little smile. 'Cows can live to be quite old, you know, if they're looked after. If I don't leave the farm to someone who'll carry on with it, it'll be sold. The herd will go and all that unbroken pedigree will be lost. That would be a tragedy. So it's for the cows, the farm, that I tracked you down and now here you are.' Amy smiled as if this was a satisfactory conclusion.

'I do hope I don't let you down.'

Amy shook her head. 'You won't. I remember you as a little girl. You liked the cows. You liked their red and white colouring.' This had obviously stuck in her memory. 'It's the herd that's important,' she repeated. 'The bloodline. It must be kept going.'

Amy obviously felt extremely strongly about her cows, even given old people's tendency to repeat themselves.

'I see.' Fran offered a little prayer that she still liked cows herself.

'And you have Tig, my herdsman. I would never have left you my herd without someone to look after them. But you have to look after everything else – the office work, feed ordering, looking after the buildings: things like that – so he can look after the cows. I've paid him six months in advance so he won't leave.'

Fran wanted to ask why Amy hadn't just left all of her farm to Tig, but realised this too was to do

with bloodlines. Tig was not related to Amy, and she was.

'And there's a bit of money to keep you going, but you have to run the farm for a year and then I'll decide whether you should inherit.' Amy's expression emphasised what a massive reward she thought this was. 'So you will try, won't you, Francesca?'

No one ever called Fran 'Francesca', not even her mother when she was cross. She realised she liked it. 'About the house—'

Amy interrupted her. 'I really don't care about the house. Do what you like with it. But don't let anything happen to the herd.'

Fran nodded, instantly thinking about the fireplace she could now investigate.

'Oh, and don't let that scoundrel who lives next door have anything to do with you. He's always wanted my farm and it's your job to make sure he doesn't get it! Vineyards, indeed!'

'Tell me—' Fran began.

But Amy had closed her eyes and had apparently gone to sleep.

'She does that,' explained the nurse who appeared in the doorway at that moment. 'Bright as a button one minute, fast asleep the next.'

'When is she likely to wake up again?' asked Fran, who felt she really should find out about the scoundrel-neighbour as soon as possible.

The nurse shook her head. 'Not for a while. You'd do better to come back tomorrow, or as soon as it's convenient.'

'OK,' said Fran. She got up from her seat. 'I'll come back. I haven't learnt nearly enough about things.' She went to the door, stopped and addressed the nurse. 'But – are you allowed to tell me? She's generally well, isn't she?'

'Oh yes. She's very good for her age. I suppose she's always led a healthy outdoor life. Never smoked, never drank alcohol.'

'And nothing's likely to happen to her within the next six months?'

'I can't see into the future, but she seems well enough at the moment – although with the elderly you can never really be sure.' She frowned slightly. 'She has got a weak heart but she's managing fine at the moment.'

'That's good enough for me.' Fran smiled. 'Thank you so much for looking after her. I'm looking forward to getting to know her better.'

The nurse returned the smile. 'She's a great favourite with us all here.'

By the time Fran got back to Hill Top Farm it was early evening and nearly dark, she was freezing cold and wanting to open the wine even though it was really only teatime. After her visits, she'd spent a little time investigating the town, then she had

got lost trying to get home and so most of the day had melted away. She pulled up in front of the house and saw lights peeping out from behind the curtains, which made the house seem welcoming. As she collected her handbag from the back seat of the car she realised how bright the stars were here, miles away from any light pollution.

Minutes later, Fran was in the sitting room, looking around it. The room, which had been cluttered and a bit claustrophobic, was now far more sparsely furnished. And every suitable surface supported a teacup with a flickering candle in it. It was welcoming and restful, just what Fran needed after her day.

'Wow! You've done some good stuff here – and lit the fire. And candles!'

'Tea lights,' corrected Issi. 'Knowing what a fussy-knickers you are about lighting, I put some in my bag. When I found all the teacups in a cupboard, I put them together. Good day?'

'It's gorgeous! So cosy and pretty. Daunting day – got lost coming home but I'll tell you later. But I can knock the fireplace out! Although not now, obviously.'

'You asked Aunt Amy?' Issi was surprised.

'Not specifically but she said I could do anything to the house as long as I looked after her cows.' Fran collapsed in one of the armchairs drawn up next to the fire and started tugging at the heel of a

boot. 'I am so tired. I think it was meeting people and having so much information fired at me.' She looked around. 'It looks far better in here now. Thank you.' Then she frowned. 'Oh, why did you keep that dreadful painting up?'

'Because it hides a patch of wall that really needs redecorating and if you do one bit you'd have to do the whole lot.'

Fran nodded. 'Fair enough. Apart from that, you've made it looked great.'

'Well, I needed something to do and you gave me permission to play.' Issi paused. 'Although the changes haven't been approved by everyone.'

'What do you mean?' Fran pulled off the other boot. 'Who else has seen them?'

'You've had a caller. Mrs Brown. She's coming back tomorrow morning. She used to look after Aunt Amy a bit before she had to go into the home. She seems to know everything about the farm. She looked around with one eyebrow raised, obviously disapproving like mad. I reassured her that everything is still safe. I haven't burnt the nests of tables and whatnots and all the other clutter, but she seemed a bit put out.'

'Where have you put all the stuff?'

'There's a little room at the end of the house. It had quite a lot of things in it already so I just stacked more bits on top. I don't think you'll need that room. It's quite a big house, really.'

'Amazing. Is there wine?' The extent of her potential inheritance wasn't a top priority just at that moment.

Issi nodded, very pleased with herself. 'There's wine and there's dinner. I asked your visitor how to light the range and she showed me. Then I put in the lasagne you brought.'

'Sorry,' said Fran. 'Lasagne is a bit like moussaka but I wanted to bring food that was easy to heat up and didn't need saucepans.'

'I can't believe you haven't brought your pans and things.'

'I brought my knives but I didn't want to bring everything I owned. I've left a lot of stuff in my parents' garage.' Fran closed her eyes. 'I've got a lot to tell you but not until I've had something strong to drink.'

'It's still teatime really,' Issi objected.

Fran shook her head. 'No. It's dark. Winetime. At least, today it is.'

'I'll get it. Do you want your dinner early, too?'

'Yes please, Mummy…'

Fran felt revived when she had eaten and was ready to elaborate on how she had got on. 'I feel a bit confused. Both the solicitor, and Amy – she asked me to call her that – told me a lot but left out a lot too. The solicitor said there's a thousand pounds for me to use and although there is more money, it has to be kept for Amy's care.'

‘I know care homes can be expensive,’ said Issi.

‘But I don’t need to worry about that for six months because Amy’s paid for that long. She’s thought it all out. And there’s the herdsman, who looks after the scary cows. She’s paid him, too – and his relief milkers.’

‘And if they’re not scary?’

‘It should all be fine!’

But Fran knew their cheerfulness was a little false. She may not be able to do this at all.

‘I really want this to work,’ she said. ‘I’ve left my job and packed up my life to come here, and although I could go back I’d always wonder if I could have made a go of it. Very few people get chances like this. I can’t waste the opportunity. It’s my chance to make something of my life.’

Chapter Two

Fran awoke early, aware that it was raining. Not a good beginning for her first proper day as a farmer but then she remembered that Mrs Brown was due to call, giving Fran the perfect excuse not to go out and meet the cows. She had to bake if she had a visitor.

'So no cows this morning, Is,' said Fran, crunching toast. 'I'll have to bake instead. Do you think Mrs Brown likes flapjack?'

'How would I be able to tell?' asked Issi, amused.

'I'll do flapjack and shortbread,' Fran decided. 'Then there's a choice. And I'm sure the herdsman would appreciate whichever one Mrs Brown refuses.'

Issi had gone for a walk, in spite of the rain, but promised to make sure she was back to help Fran entertain Mrs Brown, leaving Fran to prepare for their guest. As Fran mixed butter into flour and

sugar she looked out of the kitchen window to the farmyard beyond.

It had a cobbled courtyard and was surrounded by outbuildings, but not, she realised as she peered through the gloom, the one that housed the cows. These buildings were too small for that, although she knew the herd was not large. None of these buildings seemed to be in use so the cows must be somewhere else. This was a bit disappointing. Fran had hoped she could observe them from the safety of the kitchen.

However, it was potentially a pretty yard, and she could picture it with stone sinks filled with flowers, hanging baskets and possibly some charming though defunct farm implements decorating the walls.

Then she laughed at herself – and made Issi laugh when she appeared sometime later and Fran told her of her mad plans to civilise the yard. 'Like it's ever going to be pretty! When am I going to have time to put in bedding plants and find old ploughs to hang on the walls?'

'Well, you're probably not going to have time for ages but you might do one day. But I saw your cows while I was walking. They're all in a fairly new building. I saw the cowherd feeding them.'

'Oh? What's he like?'

Issi frowned. 'I couldn't really tell but he's not chatty, that's for sure.

Fran's heart sank a bit. 'He's going to resent me terribly for not being Amy. I just know it.'

'Give him a chance!' said Issi. 'He was a bit younger than I'd imagined. I could just about see him under his hat.'

Mrs Brown, although not old, seemed suspicious as she came in through the back door and into the kitchen. She was wearing a drover's coat, a brimmed hat pulled well down and big wellington boots. It was an outfit Fran instantly envied for its protective qualities.

Mrs Brown took off her boots immediately, and was wearing thick grey socks underneath. She appeared to be a woman who didn't give anything away until she wanted to and although she'd divested herself of her boots right away, she was a bit reluctant to give Fran her dripping coat and hat.

'Really,' Fran insisted. 'They're soaking. It is such terrible weather today. Let me hang these over the range so they can dry off a bit.'

'Very well,' said Mrs Brown and unbuttoned her coat and handed Fran her hat.

'Now let's go through to the sitting room,' said Fran, trying to behave as a hostess, as if she hadn't arrived just two days before.

Fran suspected Mrs Brown considered it too early in the day for a fire. Fran personally thought it added brightness to the January morning.

‘Sit where it’s warm,’ said Fran, ‘and would you like tea or coffee?’

Once it was established that tea was the preferred beverage, Fran left Issi to make polite conversation while she made it. Issi did offer but the thought of Issi doing it made Fran feel a bit awkward, as if Issi were a servant, not a friend.

At last, tea was poured and shortbread handed round.

‘Oh, this is very nice!’ said Mrs Brown, surprised.

‘I was a chef in London,’ explained Fran, ‘and although many chefs don’t bake, I started baking with my mother at home and I still enjoy it.’

‘So not really a suitable person to take on a farm, then?’ said Mrs Brown.

‘Not at all suitable,’ Fran agreed – it couldn’t be denied. ‘But as I expect you know, I was the only blood relation of Amy who could be traced and I did come here as a little girl. Amy told me I liked the cows.’ She put the rose-patterned cup back in its saucer. ‘I am determined to make a go of it. Especially now I know how important it is that the farm carries on after Amy dies.’ She frowned. ‘Although I’m sure that won’t happen for years and years.’ Fran couldn’t help wondering how on earth the care home could be paid for without the farm being sold.

Mrs Brown seemed to read her mind. ‘And that care home won’t be cheap.’

'Amy has paid upfront for six months,' said Fran, hoping this information wasn't secret. 'So with luck I'll have got a grip on things by then.'

Mrs Brown looked doubtful. 'It'll take more than luck and it won't be easy for you, you being a townie. But you've got a very good herdsman.'

'Oh? What do you know about him?'

'Quite a lot. He's my son.'

'Goodness me!' said Fran, thinking that Mrs Brown really was a woman who kept things close to her chest.

'Amy thinks the world of him,' the herdsman's mother went on.

Fran took a sip of tea. 'I don't know her well but I'm willing to bet she's a very good judge of character.'

Mrs Brown relaxed just a little. 'She is.'

'And you'll be around? I can ask your advice?' Fran's life experience told her that people were more likely to be kind if you asked their advice. People liked that.

'Not as much as I used to be for Amy. I made a point of it for her or she wouldn't have managed at all. But I've got my sister to think of and she's not local.'

'Oh. Maybe I'd better ask you everything I need to know now!' Fran sounded and felt a bit desperate.

'Go on then.'

Although Mrs Brown's expression was not encouraging Fran felt fairly sure she'd know the answer to the question uppermost in her mind. 'Can you tell me about my neighbour? What is so wrong with him? Amy was just about to tell me when she fell asleep.'

Issi refilled Mrs Brown's cup and Fran proffered the shortbread. Mrs Brown took a sip, a bite and then a breath. 'Well…it all goes back to his father. No, his grandfather.'

There was a frisson of excitement at the knowledge that good gossip was going to be shared.

'Amy's never told me in so many words but I got the strong impression – when she was talking about him – that there was an understanding between her and old Mr Arlingham.' Seeing Fran and Issi looking confused she explained: 'You know, romantically?'

'Ah!' said Fran, in the picture now.

'Anyway, it came to nothing.' She paused for dramatic effect, possibly enjoying the rapt attention of the two younger women. 'Now, I don't know what happened but it was something to do with the land. Maybe she suspected that old Mr Arlingham only wanted her so he could get his hands on the farm. I don't know if you've seen it on a map but Hill Top Farm cuts into the Park House Farm land – that's owned by the Arlinghams – like a thumbnail. I reckon it's always irked the Arlinghams that they don't own all this bit of the valley.'

Fran refilled Mrs Brown's teacup, anxious lest this outpouring of very useful information should dry up.

Mrs Brown accepted another bit of shortbread and carried on.

'I do know that young Mr Arlingham – Antony – came to see Amy a couple of years ago. I happened to be here working in the kitchen. She let him in with a welcome but he went out again looking like thunder. She had her feathers ruffled too. She didn't go into details but I gather he wanted to buy the farm.'

Fran bit her lip for a second before speaking. 'But really, she had no one to leave the farm to. Why didn't she want to sell it? She may need the money, after all, to keep her in her care home.'

'It's what he wanted to do with the land that so upset her,' Mrs Brown explained.

'And what was that?' said Issi.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Brown. 'Could have been factory farming, or raising birds for a shoot, or maybe a place to ride motorbikes. Amy would never see her precious cows sold to make way for motorbikes.'

'No, that would be awful,' said Fran, although she wasn't quite as horrified as she thought she ought to be. 'Amy mentioned vineyards.'

'Whatever the thing is,' said Mrs Brown, 'this land has never been ploughed, not during the war, not ever. That makes it very special.'

'Oh my goodness!' said Issi. 'That is incredibly rare. No wonder Amy doesn't want it used for anything else. That's an outrageous idea!' She paused and then obviously felt obliged to explain her passion. 'I'm doing a PhD on land conservation. There's less than two per cent of this sort of land left in the country. It must be preserved at all costs.'

'But I thought everyone had to "Dig for victory" in the war,' said Fran.

'These fields are too small to plough and too steep,' said Mrs Brown proudly. 'That's what makes this farm unique. So don't you go having anything to do with Mr Antony Arlingham, not on any account!'

'I won't,' said Fran, feeling much more in the picture.

'Anyone who'd even consider – even for a moment – ploughing up fields that have never been ploughed to turn them into a motorbike track is beyond the pale!' said Issi passionately. 'It would be a desecration.'

'That's the word,' said Mrs Brown, satisfied. 'Desecration.' Then she got up. 'I'll leave my number in case you need any more information about things but I expect you'll manage just fine.'

'I hope so,' said Fran, not convinced.

'That was very nice shortbread, I must say,' said Mrs Brown.

'Oh, I'll just wrap up the rest and you can take it with you,' said Fran, running to the kitchen before Mrs Brown could decline the offer. She felt she needed to keep Mrs Brown on side.

After Mrs Brown's outer garments and boots had been returned to her and she had been ushered out with as much gushing as Fran thought they could all cope with, Fran looked at Issi. 'Let's put on our wellies and inspect the farm. I need to know what I'm facing. Although I know it's still raining.'

'Are you feeling a bit overwhelmed?' asked Issi.

'Mmm. I'm determined to do it but it is a big thing.'

'It's a massive thing,' Issi agreed. 'But if anyone can do it, you can.'

Fran handed Issi her parka. 'Thanks, Is. It would be a lot easier if you didn't have to go home tomorrow, but your faith in me makes it seem possible. Now pass me my boots, there's a love.'

As they went out of the back door Issi said, 'I don't expect this yard has seen Cath Kidston wellies before.'

Fran looked at her feet. 'Maybe I'd better get some proper farmer boots.'

'Not until those are worn out,' said Issi.

'True. I've only got that thousand pounds from Amy to live on, and run the farm. Apart from a bit of money of my own that's all there is.'

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They walked out of the small enclosed yard that Fran had already furnished with flowers and decorative items in her head. Now she could properly inspect the outbuildings. They peered through the dirty windows.

'The buildings seem in fairly good order,' commented Issi. 'But nothing's happened in them for years.'

Fran tried a door and found it opened. 'Absolutely full of stuff,' she said after a few seconds. 'And I bet if I did gussy up the farmyard, I'd find everything I'd want as decorative items right here.'

'What's that?' asked Issi, pointing to something that looked like a press of some kind. 'Do you think it's for cider?'

'If it is it explains why it hasn't been used for years,' said Fran. 'The nurse in the care home told me Amy was a strict teetotaller.'

'Look at those wonderful scales!' said Issi. 'This is fascinating.'

'Let's not get sidetracked,' said Fran. 'I really want to see Tig before he disappears off somewhere.'

'Let's do that,' said Issi. 'This stuff will wait, after all.'

They went through the gate out of the yard and into the short lane that led to the cow byre. Fran looked for Tig, keen to introduce herself, but there was no one about, only the cows.

'We've missed him,' said Fran.

'We might find him later,' said Issi. 'In the meantime, there are the special, aristocratic cows with the wonderful pedigree.'

Fran looked at them dubiously. They were in a large, chilly barn and they were chewing and looking at her. They were very large and had horns.

'No prizes for guessing what they're thinking,' said Fran. 'That we're two right old townies wearing really silly wellies.'

'They're very handsome though, aren't they?' said Issi. 'I love the way the red and the white mingle. Would you call that that "dappled"?'

'They're Dairy Shorthorns,' said Fran. 'Amy told me. I must google them, when we get back in, see what I can find out.'

'That might be a bit difficult,' said Issi. 'There doesn't seem to be an internet connection at the farm. I tried when you were visiting your old lady.'

The thought of being without an internet connection gave Fran a nasty pang. 'Oh God, well, I'll have to sort that out. But let's carry on round. I think the rain is easing off a bit.'

'Really?' said Issi, obviously not convinced.

They had walked for half an hour and were standing at the top of a field that swept down to a stream. Beyond the field was a row of trees, more trees and hills past that, and then the river, and beyond that the mountains of Wales.

'I know I'm sounding boring now,' said Issi, 'but I think this is the most beautiful spot on earth. The view is great from the farmhouse but up here, it's even better.'

'We've both said it a few times and we're right,' Fran agreed. 'It is beautiful. And the thought that someone is thinking of spoiling it, turning it into a scrambling course for trail bikes or something, is terrible.' A movement by the farmhouse caught her eye. 'Look! I think that must be Tig. Let's go back down and say hello.'

As they walked down the muddy track to the house and round the back to where the cows were kept, Fran felt nervous. It was terribly important that she got on with Tig. If he despised her for being a townie (and Fran felt it was inevitable that he would) this farming thing would never work. She was dependent on him, just as Amy had been. Although at least Amy had knowledge and experience; she, Fran, had nothing. If this farm fell apart he could always get another job.

'Hello!' said Fran, hoping fervently that she didn't sound like an overenthusiastic Labrador greeting a friend. 'I'm Fran, Amy's – Mrs Flowers' – um – relation.'

Tig nodded. He was younger that she'd imagined him, well dressed up against the weather. He wore a hat the same as his mother, with a wide brim. A

cracked old Barbour jacket was done up closely and his waterproof-trouser-covered legs ended in muddy boots. He looked the part.

'I've just met your mother, and I'm really pleased to meet you.' She offered her hand. 'This is my friend Issi who's staying for a couple of days to help me settle in.' Now she was near she noticed that he had very bright blue eyes as if he spent a long time looking at the sky.

Tig nodded again.

'I'd love you to tell me all about the cows,' said Fran. 'They're so – so pretty.' She knew this wasn't the word she was looking for but desperately wanted Tig to like her. No – she *needed* him to, but, although she had plenty of charm and confidence with people, he wasn't like anyone she'd ever met before.

Unexpectedly, she saw the weather-beaten face move and the blue eyes crinkle at the corners and she realised he was smiling. He nodded. 'They are pretty. So, what do you want to know about them?'

Issi shivered beside her; they were both freezing to death in their townie clothes and Fran wished she knew the right questions. She smiled.

'What do you think is the most important thing about them?'

Tig inclined his head. 'This herd goes back a long way, longer than most herds. That's important. They give good rich milk and they're good mothers.'

He went on to tell her about milk yields, how much they ate and the different temperaments of individuals.

As Fran stood there listening, her feet turning to ice, she realised he loved his cows, the herd, with a passion. He didn't actually say as much but it was obvious in the way he looked at them, told them the names and personal characteristics, described how they were related and who their mothers and grandmothers were. None of them would suffer as much as an insect bite without Tig noticing, and doing something about it.

Fran asked a question she hoped was intelligent. 'Do you – we – they have large vet's bills?'

Tig shook his head. 'Not if I can help it.'

Which didn't really answer Fran's question.

'I must go in now,' she said. 'I need to make a phone call. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Tig nodded and turned back to his cows.

It was hard saying goodbye to Issi at the station the next day. She was going back to London to continue her studies. It was raining and quite cold and it made the parting seem more poignant, somehow.

Although they'd had a very positive conversation on the drive, Issi saying that with Tig Fran could learn about it all slowly, get to know what he did and why. Fran realised this was true, and that Amy would never have left the farm in her hands if she

felt Fran's ignorance was in any way a problem. But having Issi there had made it an adventure. Knowing she was going to be alone in the farm, with no internet, and only a landline as a method of communication, was a bit daunting. Still, she'd found a whole bookcase full of old novels, and Fran knew, if things got too tough, a book was a wonderful place to escape to.

'And of course I'll be down as often as I can,' insisted Issi, having given Fran an enormous hug. 'I love it down here. And now I know how unique the pasture is, I could even call it work! I won't be the only one of your friends who comes either. You'll be the weekend spot of choice.'

'Hmm, not sure I want a lot of townies coming down here expecting me to cook for them while they lie about looking at the view. I'm a working farmer, you know.'

Issi laughed. 'You're also a chef, and quite sociable. You'll need to get friendly with the locals or get your mates down here.'

Fran imagined her London friends in this rural, old-fashioned setting and decided she'd invite them later, when she'd brought the farmhouse up-to-date.

'I think I'll do a supper club,' she said as if that was a plan and not an idea that had suddenly popped into her head. 'I bet people would be curious to see Amy's house.'

'If they can get up the lane, that is,' said Issi. 'But I suppose the locals all drive farm vehicles that can go anywhere.'

'And there's somewhere to park halfway up. I'm getting quite keen on the idea now.'

After another long hug, Fran left Issi, got into her car and set off home. As she drove she tried to think of the important questions to ask Amy when she next saw her. She wanted to make some notes before she went again, so if Amy was awake, she could get some information. Did the farm actually make money seemed the most important one. And by the time Tig had had wages and the cattle had been fed, was there any left over?

Preoccupied, Fran missed the turning to the farm and found herself driving up the hill and along a road that took her quite a way from Hill Top Farm. Confident that she'd be able to find her way back as long as she got home before dark, she allowed herself to carry on driving. She fancied a little local exploration, in spite of the rain. And she might find a bit of coverage for her phone.

The high hedges suddenly turned into beautiful stone walls and Fran realised she was driving past a very valuable property. Although it was raining harder now, she was curious and wanted to see if a mansion would suddenly reveal itself. It didn't, but a gateway with a large pair of electric gates did. The name of the property, Park House Farm, was

etched on to a piece of stone. It all looked new and prosperous.

Fran decided to use the gateway to turn in and pulled into the side of the road to see if there was any coverage. She'd just opened the window so she'd hear any traffic before getting her phone out when a car sped up the road towards her. It shot past, far too fast in Fran's opinion and obviously went through a puddle because water jetted in through her window, soaking her and the car.

Fran shook herself like a dog and growled like one too. She then swore loudly and impotently at the driver who was probably miles away by now. She hadn't seen the car in detail but knew that it was large and flashy. She was certain he – she'd glimpsed that the driver was male – belonged in the property with the Cotswold stone walls and equally certain she hated him. And by the time she'd got home and her dripping self inside, she was almost as certain that this was her neighbour whom Amy hated so much and had warned her against.

Righteous indignation warmed her as much as her cursory bath did. (Installing a shower was a priority, she decided, just as soon as she knew if she could afford it.)

She made herself hot chocolate and lit the fire, all the while planning a hideous end for the driver of the car who wanted to turn Hill Top into a motorbike scrambling centre or whatever. Somehow