

THE GIRLS OF HEATHERLY HALL

Julie Houston



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For Debbie, Jo, Tracy and Helen –
The best ever writerly wordy mates who eat my lasagne
and supply the wine and wisdom while doing so!

I

The garden, its half-acre of lawn set squarely in front of the eighteenth-century vicarage in the pretty village of Westenbury, West Yorkshire, was alive and buzzing with the first signs of spring. Actually *thrumming* with the new season, Rosa Quinn realised before smiling at her indulgently romantic choice of words. A wooden bench towards the far end of the lawn was in need of something: paint or creosote, or whatever gardeners and handymen did to benches abandoned for too long by the previous incumbents of All Hallows Church. Doubtless she'd be the one to roll back her sleeves and rescue it.

The vicarage, adjacent to the church itself, sat steadfast, regal almost, behind a dense yew hedge which, Rosa also knew, if she didn't do something to thwart its obvious intention to take over the garden, would continue to run rampant. Resolving to tackle the burgeoning greenery once that morning's wedding was over, Rosa lifted the hem of her best white surplice and, relishing the feel of the damp, daisy-strewn grass beneath her bare feet, made her way across the lawn towards her church.

Her church. Rosa loved those two words. *Her church*. Alright, it was, she argued, *God's church*, God's house, but she still got a thrill of pleasure, seven months on from taking over at the helm in what had been, many years before, her grandfather Cecil's church. Miserable old devil that *he* was, Rosa remembered with a grin as she bent to pick a still-blooming specimen from the last of the daffodils before threading it through the top button of her surplice.

‘What are *you* smiling to yourself about, Vicar? And you need a carnation in your buttonhole, not a manky daff from the garden.’ Hilary Makepiece, churchwarden and mainstay of the parish council, wafted an expensive-looking cream and gold-bordered order of service in Rosa’s direction before frowning at the shoeless state of the vicar’s feet. ‘This is a pretty important wedding, you know, Vicar. Do you not think you should put some shoes on?’

‘I’m enjoying the feel of God’s good grass beneath my feet, Hilary.’ Rosa grinned. ‘Communing with nature you might say.’

‘Well, commune all you like, love, but you might want to smarten yourself up a bit: the groom’s the nearest we’ve got to *royalty* in this village. The bell-ringers have been at it all morning. I had to go up there with bacon sandwiches and coffee to keep ’em at it when they appeared to be going off the boil a bit. So, yes, the most important man in the village.’ Hilary ran a hand over her own neatly tied-back blonde hair and down her professionally laundered best choir surplice before nudging Rosa to make sure she was taking in what she was saying. ‘He’d probably always had equal ranking with the Marquess of Stratton but, you know, Rosa, since your dad passed over before Christmas...’ Hilary paused and Rosa wouldn’t have been surprised to see her piously cross herself ‘...God bless his soul, your groom today is solely in the number-one position. And, as such, I reckon you should put your shoes on before you go in there to join the pair in holy matrimony.’

Hilary had been one of the naughtiest girls in school – bar Rosa’s own sister Eva – when she’d been Hilary Caldwell, and they were all fifteen-year-olds at Westenbury Comprehensive, not averse to smoking in the toilets or legging it down to the town centre instead of sitting through an RE lesson. She always made Rosa want to laugh with her veneer of respectability now she was one of the churchwardens and married to Duncan Makepiece, the village’s family butcher, and mother to a troop of little Makepieces.

Hilary's face softened and she patted Rosa's arm sympathetically, looking long and hard at her face for any tell-tale signs of sorrow. 'Do you miss your dad, love?'

'As you know, Hilary, the marquess was mine, Hannah and Eva's biological father and we miss him very much. But *Richard* is our dad, our real dad, and *he's* very much alive and kicking. In fact, he's wanting to come on a trip to Paris with the three of us.'

'Paris?' Catching the potential smell of village gossip, Hilary raised her head, her ears on high alert like a sniffer dog's, and Rosa wanted to kick herself. 'Paris?' Hilary repeated. 'Why Paris? Is it *Disneyland Paris* you're off to? Getting some ideas for Heatherly Hall now that you three are in charge up there? Hey, that'd be a bit of alright, wouldn't it? Disney Westenbury? I can see that.'

Rosa knew she had to stop Hilary in her tracks before the whole of the village had it on Hilary's good authority that that's what the Quinn triplets had in mind, now that Bill Astley, twelfth Marquess of Stratton, had bequeathed his fifty-one per cent share of the estate management to his three biological daughters: Eva, Hannah and herself. A theme park was the last thing she, Rosa, had in mind for Heatherly Hall, although she wouldn't put it past Hannah, who was already mooting the idea of *Westenbury*, a Yorkshire rock festival to compete with – and even trounce and surpass – its southern rival, *Glastonbury*. 'No, no, honestly, Hilary, I can't see the Estate Management Committee agreeing to a theme park up at the hall. It would have been the last thing Bill would have wanted, and just think how expensive all those rides and equipment would be to install.'

Hilary nodded sagely. 'And the insurance? Blimey, my car insurance is bad enough. Insuring against someone flying off the Rollercoaster Galactica or the Beastie Nemesis into the hall's shrubbery would soon eat into all that money Bill left you and your sisters.' Hilary raised a hopeful eyebrow in anticipation of finally finding out just how much the Quinn triplets had inherited. 'Bet all that money will come in handy, now that you're no longer

earning the thousands you were on when you were in London and heading Rosa Quinn Investments?’ When Rosa deigned not to answer, Hilary went on, ‘I’ve always wondered why you washed your hands of your high-flying career to become a lowly vicar earning a pittance back in your grandad’s old church. Something happen down there? A broken heart, was it?’

Ignoring her churchwarden, Rosa bent to pick another daffodil, adding it to the first in her buttonhole and set off walking, Hilary in her wake.

‘So,’ Hilary opined, hurrying to keep up with Rosa and, as the latter appeared unwilling, as always, to confide anything re her years away from the village, changed tack. ‘You might find it all a bit difficult? A bit of a conflict of interest you could say?’

‘A conflict of interest?’ Rosa turned. ‘In what way?’

‘Well,’ Hilary went on, her tone confidential, ‘I reckon you’ll be trying to keep God happy by persuading folks to get married in the church? You know, like they always used to? Or...’

‘Or?’

‘Or, now that you, Eva and Hannah have inherited the place, pushing Heatherly Hall as the wedding venue of choice? Hmm? Difficult decision, Rosa,’ Hilary added sagely. ‘As I say, conflict of interest and all that? I mean, you don’t want to be seen to be putting financial gain ahead of what the Lord dictates. I’ve overheard more than a few conversations in the pub and in church.’

‘Which lord exactly are we talking about here, Hilary? David Henderson?’

‘No! You know exactly what I’m getting at, Rosa, so don’t play the innocent with me.’

‘So, David Henderson? Village royalty, you reckon?’ Rosa smiled, neatly sidestepping the conversation about any conflict of interest she may have re her position on the management committee of Heatherly Hall. As the village vicar, wanting people to marry in her church, should she, at the same time, be endorsing and celebrating the wedding venue up at the hall?

‘Oh absolutely. You can’t get much posher than David Henderson.’

And now, lovely, charismatic Grace Stevens, teacher across at Little Acorns, the village school, was about to walk down the aisle and she, Rosa, would join her and David Henderson together in matrimony. There were times when Rosa just loved her job.

The heady smell from masses of creamy longiflorum lilies was soon fighting for survival amongst the plethora of expensive perfumes wafting down the aisle, as beautifully dressed women, some holding children’s hands, others partners’ arms, made their way to the front of the church, taking up seats on either side dependent on whether they were ‘bride’ or ‘groom’. Rosa, now sporting a pair of black court shoes – as well as her brightest lipstick, in honour of the occasion – stood watching and smiling, welcoming everyone in as her church filled up with guests. Daphne Merton, All Hallows’ stalwart organist, was giving it all she’d got thumping out Elgar’s *Salut d’amour* – determined, it seemed, to rival the church bell-ringers who, obviously on a caffeine high, appeared to have upped the ante even further.

While both David Henderson and Grace Stevens had told her they’d wanted a really quiet wedding – it was, after all, they’d argued, a second marriage for both of them – it seemed the village had other plans and, on this beautiful April morning, the week after Easter, Rosa didn’t think she’d ever seen the church so full. Of course, she realised, it was still the school holidays. And as Cassie Beresford, head teacher of Little Acorns school, a shocking-pink hat set jauntily on her fair hair, walked through the huge open oak doors at the back, Rosa caught sight of what must have amounted to half the pupils of the village school excitedly waiting with mums and grannies, eager to see Grace arrive at the church. There were older kids as well, wanting to see their favourite primary school teacher arrive at church, now

gathered somewhat uncertainly and self-consciously, smiling their newly straightened and whitened teeth and showing off their designer gear while still finding safety in numbers.

Delighted to see them, Rosa walked quickly up towards the vestibule, ready to usher them in just as David Henderson, accompanied by his best man, made his way down the aisle towards her.

‘Good morning!’ Rosa welcomed the pair of them with a huge grin before walking out into the spring sunshine. Oh, but it was glorious out here. Looking forward to an afternoon in the vicarage garden bullying the yew into submission whilst hoping to catch a few rays to chase away her winter pallor, she uttered a quiet: ‘Thanks, God,’ before opening the heavy doors as wide as they’d go and beckoning those outside in. ‘Do join us inside. I know Grace will be delighted to see you all.’ The kids stared, shuffled, giggled a bit at being addressed by the vicar and then, following the lead of the more confident, walked en masse into the church.

‘She’s here, Mummy,’ a little tot shouted as a gaily beribboned Audi swept in front of the gathered onlookers and Rosa gave the thumbs up to Daphne on the organ before hurrying down to take up her own position in the sanctuary at the front. As Handel’s *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* hit the fifteenth-century church rafters, heads turned as Grace Stevens, on the arm of her father, walked forwards. Attended by her six-year-old daughter, Pietronella, as well as Grace’s best mate since school days, Harriet Westmoreland, Grace appeared overcome with emotion, her shoulders below the cream silk of her dress heaving, the hand not holding her simple bouquet of spring flowers wiping surreptitiously at her eyes. And Harriet wasn’t faring much better.

It was only when they were standing in front of her that Rosa realised the pair of them were actually having a total fit of the giggles and Rosa laughed herself, delighting in their joy and humour. David turned to Grace, his eyes raised in surprise as

she gave a final squeak of nervous laughter, before smiling down at her with such love and adoration that Rosa could only feel a bolt of pure envy. She, Rosa, had once been looked at in such a way by a man who'd loved her; a man whom she'd loved back unconditionally until it all went wrong.

Shocked and disappointed at herself for allowing such an unpleasant and pernicious emotion as envy to enter her mind on such a glorious morning, and on such an occasion as this, Rosa offered a repentant *Sorry God* sent up in a silent prayer of contrition to her boss, before turning to the congregation with a smile and saying: 'Dearly beloved we are gathered here today, on this wonderful spring morning, to join this lovely man to this fabulously lovely woman...'

'So, what was it making you laugh so much as you came down the aisle?' Rosa asked as the main wedding party moved into a side room to sign the register.

'Sorry about that, Rosa.' Grace started laughing once more. 'Harriet and I have always got each other into trouble, giggling at inappropriate moments. You know, we've been mates...'

'Joined at the hip,' David Henderson interjected fondly.

'...mates since our first day at Midhope Grammar,' Grace went on. 'When we were eleven? We've had our fallings-out but Harriet's always been there for me. Anyway, just as I was about to come down the aisle, on my best behaviour, she goes all gooey and sentimental and whispers: "You do know how much you mean to me, Grace, don't you?" and I turn, a tear in my eye and she goes on: "Love you always, Grace. You know, I'd take a bullet for you?" At which point I'm about to dissolve in snot-ridden tears and ruin my mascara when she adds: "I mean, you know, not in my *head*, or my *heart*, Grace, but, you know, in my *leg*..." and that made me laugh so much I couldn't stop... Sorry.' Grace obviously wasn't a bit sorry and as David, laughing himself now, scooped both Grace and Pietronella up into one

big hug, Rosa knew that here was a marriage made in heaven. A morning's job well done.

'Come on, Grace, there's something lovely waiting outside for you.' Harriet's eyes were shining.

'Oh jeez – sorry, Rosa – you haven't commandeered a big white horse to take me up to the restaurant, have you, Harriet? Because you know, much as I pretend not to be, I'm terrified of the great beasts. And I'm probably allergic as well...'

'Come on, or they'll be getting tired of waiting.'

'Who'll be getting tired of waiting? For what?'

'For you and David. Come on.'

Rosa followed the pair back down the aisle, the guests filing off behind them to the strains of Mendelssohn's *On Wings of Song*.

'Oh, how lovely.' Grace laughed in delight as she saw the guard of honour waiting for her and David at the church door. Cassie Beresford had obviously organised the children from Little Acorns into age order, the tall Y6 pair commencing the guard – not with an arch of sabres of steel, but with flower-festooned yellow plastic metre rulers – and finishing with the little ones from Reception.

'We've been practising this for days,' Cassie confided to Rosa, as David and Grace bent themselves almost double to go through the guard, at its conclusion five-year-olds who'd been standing stalwartly, attached to their rulers with pride and impatience, until the big moment. 'The nursery staff were a bit put out I wasn't prepared to include the three- and four-year-olds but, thank goodness I didn't. David would have ended up on his hands and knees...'

Cassie's words ended up floating somewhere round Rosa's head, their meaning lost as the blood in her ears started to pound. Joe Rosavina. He was there. She'd not seen him since before Christmas, when she'd agreed to have dinner with him in a fancy restaurant to hear him out. She'd managed both to hear him out and to finally convince herself she'd put her relationship with

the boy she'd fallen in love with when she was sixteen behind her. Joe, the boy who'd followed her to Durham University; the man who had stood shoulder to shoulder with her in London as she worked every hour God sent – and some he obviously hadn't – establishing Rosa Quinn Investments. Cheering her on and so proud of her when she won Businesswoman of the Year.

Joe Rosavina: the man who'd broken her heart when he'd slept with her PA and best friend, Carys and who now accompanied the result of that one-night stand, his beautiful daughter, six-year-old Chiara, as she determinedly held on to her metre ruler until David and Grace finally emerged, slightly pink-faced, at its conclusion.

As the metre ruler guard of honour was led to one side by Cassie and its respective parents, Chiara ran over to Joe who swung her up into his arms, kissing the top of her blonde head. Rosa saw that Joe's eyes were searching, searching the faces of the guests as they filed out, laughing and chattering, into the warm sunshine. And when his gaze finally met her own, unable as she was to reverse back into the cool safety of her church because of the people still making their way out, she was unable to decipher the emotion held in his beautiful blue eyes.

Rosa saw him raise a hand and realised he was about to come over to speak and her pulse raced – when a different hand was placed on her arm and a head bent to kiss her cheek.

'Hello, Rosa darling. How's my favourite vicar?' Sam Burrows, Rosa's partner for the last six months, stroked her back through her surplice. 'Just popped over from the surgery to catch the last of the nuptials. Did it all go OK? Quite a responsibility, I bet, marrying the Lord of the Manor?'

'Marrying him?' Rosa turned, feeling slightly anxious. Or was it irritation? 'As far as I'm aware, I'm still single – the spinster of this parish.'

Sam laughed, kissing her once more as the crowd of wedding well-wishers exiting the church behind her finally thinned to a trickle. 'You know what I mean, Rosa. Look, the press is out

in force. I bet that's *Hello! Magazine* over there.' Sam pointed towards the church gate where photographs were being taken. 'Quite the jet set here in Westenbury. I never thought, once I came to work at your sister's dental surgery, I'd be hobnobbing with the rich and famous.'

'I think you'll find its Darren from the parish magazine,' Rosa said drily, trying to concentrate on what Sam was saying whilst attempting to work out where Joe Rosavina'd gone.

'Isn't that your ex over there?' Sam asked, his head resting firmly on her own, his arms snaking possessively around her waist.

Rosa glanced towards the old timbered lychgate at the entrance to the churchyard where Joe, holding his daughter Chiara's hand, was now heading without a backward glance. Joe had kissed her for the very first time under that gate's covered awning, as they'd sheltered there from a sudden autumn downpour when they were both just sixteen. 'I don't know,' Rosa smiled, taking Sam's hand. 'Was it?'

Seeing Joe Rosavina outside her church had unsettled Rosa and, rather than spending the afternoon visiting her elderly parishioners before battling the yew tree as she'd originally planned, she wanted nothing more than to pull on her walking boots and tramp over the surrounding fields by herself in an attempt to erase the image of him standing there, gazing across at her. She knew she also needed to work out what she was actually feeling for Sam. She'd been convinced Joe was about to come over and talk to her but Sam, appearing at her side, his arms wrapped somewhat possessively around her, had put paid to that. Well, it would, wouldn't it? No one's ex-lover is going to come across and tell you he still loves you when you're in a tight clinch with your new man. *Still loves you, Rosa? Dream on, you daft vicar.*

Meeting Sam six months ago had made her think she could move on from her past – could start again with a new love. But, deep down, if she was being totally honest, shouldn't she acknowledge that she must share some of the blame for her break-up with Joe seven years previously? She'd obstinately – almost feverishly – refused to listen when, determined to be head of the best investment company in London – in the UK – Joe had implored her to slow down, to take time out for their relationship. She'd known he wanted to have a family with her, wanted to perhaps move out of London, quit the hectic life they'd made for themselves, but she'd steadfastly turned a deaf ear to his ideas, to his appeals for their starting-to-crumble relationship.

Instead, she'd continued in the same vein, driving herself on, ignoring his pleas, keeping herself awake with the uppers she regularly downed with her black coffee. And which Joe, once he'd found them, just as regularly – and furiously – threw down the lavatory...

Rosa reached up into her kitchen cupboard for a new pack of coffee, sniffing at its contents in an attempt to exchange the addictive, albeit often bitter, sensory pleasure of remembering past times with Joe, for that of her addiction to caffeine.

'Penny for them?'

'Sorry? Oh?' Rosa jumped as Sam appeared at her side. 'What are *you* doing back? I thought you'd appointments all afternoon?'

'You were miles away.' He gave a little laugh, patting her arm. 'Obviously deep in thought about something? *Someone?*' Sam looked at her meaningfully.

'Your appointments?' Ignoring Sam's raised eyebrow, Rosa held up the cafetière in his direction and he nodded. 'I thought you were rushed off your feet over at the surgery?'

'School holidays. Two families I was supposed to be seeing have apparently taken advantage of some last-minute deal to Majorca and cancelled. I've a couple of hours free...'

'Both of them? Bit of a coincidence that, isn't it?'

'...so, I thought I'd come back over and give you a hand with that yew.'

Rosa glanced across at Sam, taking in his fair hair, his classically handsome face that had, according to Eva, made him such a hit at *Malik and Malik*, her sister and brother-in-law's dental surgery in the village. 'Actually...' she smiled, indicating her walking boots '...change of plan. I'm going to walk across the fields and then call in to see Mrs Whittaker and Mr Dobson. They're both just out of hospital and could do with a visit.'

'I'll come with you.'

'To see Mrs Whittaker and Mr Dobson?' Rosa frowned. 'Why?'

'We need to show your parishioners we're a couple and that we're serious about each other.' Sam smiled. 'You know, with your being a single woman vicar...' Sam trailed off. 'Well, I'll come for a walk anyway. I want to be with you, Rosa.'

'In those shoes?' Rosa glanced across at Sam's polished brogues.

'In any shoes,' Sam said seriously.

'Right.' Rosa inwardly sighed and then berated herself for not wanting Sam with her. She was in a relationship with him, for heaven's sake. Wasn't she seriously thinking of settling down with him? Her last chance to have the children of her own she so badly craved? With two years to go to her fortieth birthday, and with ten of her eggs frozen in a laboratory in London, prior to her undergoing the chemotherapy that had saved her life, she just had to work out what she wanted. Where she and Sam were heading. And whether she even still wanted to be on this journey with him.

And, she *had* to get Joe Rosavina out of her mind. She suddenly felt cross that her ex had dared to intrude into the life she was trying to make for herself back here in Westenbury. The sooner bloody Joe Rosavina left the village and moved back to London, the better for both of them; she could get on with her new life with Sam. 'OK, listen, Dad left his wellies here last time he was helping me in the garden; they'll probably fit you.'

The April afternoon was surprisingly warm and filled with perpetual, insistent birdsong from frantically occupied nest-builders. Newly emerging carpets of bluebells unrolled below their feet as they left the village and made their way through the adjoining woodland and, once they were back onto the country lanes, daffodils in differing hues of orange and yellow, banks of tulips and gloriously creamy magnolia, azalea and cherry blossom vied with each other in the cottage gardens basking in the unusually warm spring sunshine.

Rosa began to relax and enjoy the walk, loving being outside on such a glorious afternoon. She took Sam's hand in her own, feeling a happy contentment with her life as the village vicar, and being this lovely man's partner. She took a surreptitious glance in his direction as they walked. He really was amazingly good-looking – conventionally tall and handsome as the hero of any good romantic story must be. And didn't Sam fit the bill of the romantic hero in this, her own particular story? He'd come into her life just as she'd returned to the village and the vicarage, whisking her off her feet so that, six months later, it was assumed by her family and the church parishioners who saw them together that they were a couple. And she really wanted them to be just that. To be with Sam and try for the family they both so very much wanted.

Encouraged by the offer of her hand in his, Sam appeared also to loosen up. He smiled down at her, but she could tell her dad's wellingtons were too small for his feet and, although he was making an effort to hide it, he was in some discomfort.

'Look, you go back,' Rosa advised after a good thirty minutes' walking. 'Those wellies are pinching, aren't they? You can double back here and go down past the post office and across the cricket field and the village green. You'll be back in fifteen minutes.'

'What about you?' Sam was obviously loath to leave her. 'Why don't we both go back? Have a cup of tea and a bun before I go back to the surgery? I don't seem to have managed to get you all to myself for ages.'

Rosa was equally loath to leave this quite glorious afternoon and return to the piled-up admin waiting for her in her office. 'I'm just going to carry on for an hour or so, and then I can do my round of visiting on the way back.'

'I'm not leaving you by yourself.' Sam frowned. 'You don't know who's hanging round these woods.'

'Don't be daft, Sam. I've walked these woods and meadows since I was a kid...' She broke off as Sam came to a standstill, holding a hand up to his eyes against the afternoon sunshine,

and almost leaning forward as he focused his vision on three figures up ahead of them, walking across fields separated only by drystone walls.

'Isn't that your ex over there?' Sam repeated the question he'd asked outside the church a couple of hours earlier.

'I think you're manifesting him when he's not actually there.' Rosa managed a laugh as she squeezed his hand.

'Oh, I think it's him alright.' Sam gave her a look. 'Is that why you didn't want me to carry on walking with you?'

'Well, your eyesight is a lot better than mine if you can make out an ex-boyfriend of mine at fifty paces,' Rosa tutted. 'And, to answer your question, Sam, I didn't want you to carry on walking with me because my dad's wellies are obviously a size too small for you. No ulterior motive. And I didn't really want to inflict old Mr Dobson – who is as deaf as a doorpost and bloody hard work – on you, knowing you've got to get back to work at some point.'

'Well, come back with me now, Rosa. Come on.'

'Sam, I *love* these fields. I want to carry on across them and head back home that way.'

'There's cows up there,' he started. 'I'm not overly keen on them.'

'Good job you're a dentist then and not a vet,' she said cheerfully.

'They can be dangerous. I was only reading the other day...'

'Oh, you big townie.' Rosa smiled but inwardly sighed. 'You live in the countryside now. Cow shit on your shoes and badgers under your back wheels, if you're not careful. You go back. I'm fine.'

'No, I'm not leaving you. I'll carry on with you. Make sure you're alright.'

'Why wouldn't I be? OK, OK up to you.' Rosa was beginning to feel irritated. 'Come on, if you're coming.'

'Why don't we go the other way?' Sam was insistent.

'Because I've been looking forward to going *this* way.'

'Because you've seen your ex across there? Hoping to bump into him? Unfinished business from outside the church this morning?'

'Sam, please don't do this.' Rosa shook her head and set off towards the fields. 'Come with me; I *want* you with me, but not if you're going to be so ridiculous. I haven't seen Joe – apart from outside church this morning – since before Christmas; since I had dinner with him and it just wasn't working. And now, I'm seeing *you*...'

'But wishing you were seeing Joe Rosavina?'

Rosa shook her head once more. 'I'm off. Are you coming or not?'

Without another word, Sam moved back to her side and in silence they climbed the first of three wooden stiles that took them across acres of farmland. Most of the fields were empty apart from a couple of large red tractors drilling oilseed rape in the adjacent one, and dressing and spraying cereal crops to their right. On their left, lambs that had been born at the beginning of March were already leaping around like teens at their first rave, headbanging with their mates, and Rosa gloried in the sight, laughing and pointing out their antics to Sam who remained sullenly unresponsive as they walked.

They'd just climbed over the fourth stile and were heading towards the lane leading back to the village, when two figures came towards them, one moving awkwardly and shouting, the smaller one running, but also screaming.

'Have you got a *phone*?' the taller one shouted down the field towards them. 'We need a *phone*. We need an *ambulance*... Oh, Rosa? Rosa, it's Joe...' Rhys Johnson, Joe Rosavina's almost-sixteen-year-old stepson, was limping towards her, completely covered in mud, while holding on to Joe's six-year-old daughter, Chiara, who continued to scream hysterically.

'What is it, Rhys? What's the matter? What's happened?' Rosa set off at speed towards him, pulling out her mobile from her jacket pocket as she did so.

'Daddy! Daddy! My daddy's dead. And Ron's poorly...'

'It's the cows...' Rhys managed to get the words out before suddenly swaying and sinking to the ground, holding his ankle. 'Think it's broken... my phone's broken too... left it in the mud...'

'The cows?' Rosa's heart was pounding as she took the hand of the little girl who was incoherent with crying.

'They've killed my daddy!' Chiara turned, pulling herself from Rosa's grasp, and started back up the field, running in hysterical circles, before racing back and pulling at Rhys's hoodie. 'Rhys, come and get *Daddy* and Ron...'

'Ambulance please... Cows... Yes, one man... actually, there's someone called Ron as well... I don't know... hurt as far as his children can tell...' Rosa couldn't believe this calm woman was herself speaking, when all she wanted to do was run and run and get to Joe in the next field. 'Erm, I don't know... Where are we...? Sam, where *are* we?' She turned, frantically appealing to Sam who, looking dazed, shook his head, unable to name the area and then to Rhys who had gone deathly white and appeared to be about to throw up. 'Head between your knees, Rhys,' Rosa automatically instructed, while pulling frantically at her hair, trying to get her bearings.

There was a swirling thick fog where her brain had once been, but she managed to tell the calmly questioning woman on the other end of the 999 call that they were in a field... 'Which field?' Rosa demanded of poor Rhys, who was obviously in some sort of shock. 'Come on, Rhys, which *one*?'

Rosa took some deep breaths, turning her back on Chiara who was continuing to shout, 'Daddy! Daddy!' and then 'Mummy! I want my mummy!' hopping pitifully from one to the other of her shiny red patent wellingtons while pulling at Rhys's clothes. Rosa scanned the landscape. Oh, thank goodness, there was Bracken Folly to her left and White Dean Farm next to it.

'OK,' she breathed, 'the field off the lane that leads to Bracken Folly and White Dean Farm, about half an hour's walk

out of Westenbury village. He's in the second field above the farmhouse... no, there's no one with him... well, yes, someone called Ron... no, I'm going there now... I'll keep my phone on... you've got this number...'

Rosa turned to Sam who was attempting to calm and reassure the children, his arm held protectively around Chiara. 'Come on, we need to get up there.'

'Is that a good idea...? I mean... the children...?'

'A *good idea*?' Rosa breathed, trying to remain calm. 'You stay and look after these two, Sam. I need to get down to the lane to direct the ambulance...' She turned to Chiara. 'It's alright, sweetheart, it'll all be alright. The ambulance will come and help Daddy... He'll be fine...' She set off up the field at a run, knowing that if Joe *wasn't* fine, if he'd gone, *she'd* never be fine again. Instead of staying with the shocked children, Sam ran with her, trying to catch at her hand, to slow her down, but Rosa was having none of it.

'Sorry, Rosa, blisters... shit... hang on...' Sam was obviously in pain and Rosa stopped, but only to tell him to walk and catch her up, and she was off once more.

She frantically climbed the high wooden stile, missing her step and grazing her hand as she fell and then, pausing to scan the landscape from her vantage point at the top, saw something that looked like a bundle of rags under a huge oak tree at the very edge of the field ahead. The herd of around twenty brown cows – not the black and white Friesians Rosa'd been expecting – had moved towards the far corner of the field and were nonchalantly grazing once more. A slight movement from what she now realised was Joe, his blonde hair and white face lying awkwardly and standing out against the dark-coloured trunk of the tree, filled her with hope.

'Thank you, God,' she muttered. 'Thank you, thank you, God,' only to be plunged into despair when she saw the movement was from a small blonde dog. Since when did Joe have a dog? This, then, must be Ron.

'Rosa!' Sam called from behind her, as he hobbled painfully over the stile. 'Don't even think about it. For God's sake wait until the ambulance comes. Those cows are looking over here again. Come back,' he ordered. 'Shit,' he added, his right foot missing the last bit of the stile in the ill-fitting wellington, before following in her wake.

The tiny blonde dog – just a puppy – flung itself at Rosa, crying pitifully as it did so, its back leg hanging at a strange angle.

'Joe?' Rosa knelt at his side, took his hand, scanning his face for any movement. *Please, God, let him not be dead. Please, God, let him not be dead.* Rosa sent up prayer after prayer in her head as she scanned his deathly white face, the huge ugly blue-black mark on his temple – testament to the injury he'd received. Blood was congealing in his fair hair and his left hand was bruised, cut and bleeding.

Sam hunkered down beside them, ignoring Ron who was whining and attempting to climb into his lap. 'Just move out the way, Rosa,' Sam said brusquely, taking over. 'Stand up, go on, stand up so the paramedics will see you from the lane. He knelt at Joe's side, tilting the other man's head back, his own face centimetres from Joe's as he looked and felt for any signs of breathing. 'He's OK, Rosa, he's breathing.'

Oh, the relief. Rosa sent up her silent thanks to God.

Sam moved Joe on to his side and into the recovery position.

'Should you be doing that?' she asked. 'I mean, what if his neck or back is broken?'

'Rosa, I'm a dentist. Do you not think I've had training in every single bit of a head and neck's anatomy.'

'Oh yes, sorry. Of course.'

'He'll be OK, I think. Possibly got several broken ribs. Look, you can see hoof marks on his middle...' He broke off as Joe stirred, his eyelids fluttering before he opened them.

'Rosa?' Joe frowned, attempting to sit up. 'How come...?

What are you doing here? Shit... the kids?' His voice was panicked. Are they alright? Is Chiara OK? I told them to run...'

'It's OK, mate.' Sam's voice was calm, reassuring and, more than anything, kind, and Rosa glanced across at him, remembering just why she'd been so attracted to him when he'd come into her life the previous year. 'Lie still – you've had a nasty kick to the head and possibly broken ribs.'

'I told Chiara to let go of Ron, but she wouldn't,' Joe muttered. 'They just appeared from nowhere. From behind that hedge... and sort of circled us. One of them kicked out at Rhys and he went down... I wouldn't have taken them across a field of cows at this time of year... calves...'

'You're better not talking, mate,' Sam soothed.

'...and I had to get between the herd and Rhys and... fuck it... totally surreal.' Joe put a hand up to his head, obviously frightened by the amount of blood that continued to seep from a cut there.

An incoming ringtone – the Backstreet Boys' 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' – made them all start, and Rosa scrambled to her feet from the long, wet grass, pulling her mobile from her jacket as she did so.

'Over here,' she shouted into the phone, waving her arms above her head towards the lane where a police car, and an ambulance, blue lights flashing, were just pulling up behind a rapid response vehicle. 'Over here!' She continued waving and gesticulating, before heading off towards them.

'Rosa, the cows,' Sam warned. 'For God's sake, are they still there...?'

'It's OK, they've moved right back into the far field and...' Rosa strained to see '...I think there's a Land Rover and a couple of farmer types with them now.'

'Arrest that cow,' Joe muttered with a slight smile before wincing in pain. 'Rosa, can you see to the kids?'

'I'll stay here with Joe,' Sam offered, and Rosa shot him a look of gratitude. 'You go and reassure that little girl her daddy's

OK.' Rosa realised Sam was probably remembering the horror of being told his own twelve-year-old son, Ollie, had died in a freak avalanche in Italy, several years earlier.

'Anyone else hurt?' A young paramedic, accompanied by an even younger-looking policeman took her to one side as two more, older paramedics, knelt down to attend to Joe.

'A possible broken ankle,' Rosa said, 'and shock, I would think. Two kids... they're in the next field. We need to get over to them.'

'Hang on, we can't just walk across this field with that lot...' The young officer indicated the herd of cows now calmly grazing up ahead, before surveying the patchwork of fields below. 'We're near enough here to the lane. We should be able to drive across the field from the bottom entrance.'

'I'll go and see to Rhys and Chiara, Joe,' Rosa said. 'We'll take them back to the vicarage and I'll ring your mum and dad from there.'

'I'll go to the hospital with Joe,' Sam said. 'I just need to ring the surgery to cancel my evening appointments.'

'That's so kind of you, Sam,' Rosa breathed. 'Thank you.'

Five minutes later, the police car was making its way through the gate at the bottom of the lower field, bumping painfully across tussocky grass and molehills, tyres churning up puddles and mud and splattering windows.

'There, over there,' Rosa shouted as the two figures came into view halfway up the meadow. Rhys was sat against a drystone wall, his arm around a white-faced Chiara who was now eerily quiet.

'It's OK, OK, Chiara. Daddy's fine,' Rosa shouted, carrying Ron over to the pair of them. 'Look, Ron's possibly got a broken leg, so we need to get him to the vet. Daddy's gone off in the ambulance, but he'll be fine.'

'Right, young man, let's have a look at this ankle of yours.' The young paramedic was all breezy bonhomie as she examined Rhys's legs and feet. 'Yep, looks to be broken; we need a pot on

that.' She grinned. 'You'll have all the girls writing their names on it by this time tomorrow.'

'Not sure how I'm going to work down at Rosavina's if I can't stand,' he said gloomily. 'I'm trying to save up to get to Australia to see Mum.'

'I'm going too.' Chiara wiped a filthy hand across her tear-streaked cheeks. 'I want to see Mummy too.'

'Right, OK, Vicar,' the police officer said, taking in Rosa's dog collar before looking at his watch. 'What do you want to do with these two?'

'So, if Rhys can go with you up to A and E...' Rosa smiled at the young paramedic '...I can take Chiara back with me to the vicarage and ring her grandparents from there and tell them what's happened. That OK with you two?'

Rhys nodded. 'Thanks, Rosa.' He turned to Chiara. 'Your dad's OK, Chiara. Go with Rosa and she'll look after you. She's a vicar; that's what she does.'