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Deceived

A True Story

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With Kate Snell

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Happy Days at Blue Door

Almost eleven years earlier
Sarah Smith, Shropshire

Radishes. That's the subject of my dissertation. I'm observing the difference that spacing and watering can make to their growth. I bend over my young seedlings planted in perfectly spaced rows, casting them a loving glance before jotting down their latest measurements in my notebook. Nothing in the world of farming is hurried; growing crops needs patience. But I'm not in a rush. I move through the dome-like greenhouse at the speed of a snail. The air is redolent with warm, sweet earth, in contrast to the brittle coldness outside this cocoon. I'm looking forward to finishing my degree next year and working as a farm manager somewhere in the English countryside. Perhaps I'll be able to get a job in Oxfordshire where I spent my sandwich year. First, I'm hoping this latest batch of radishes will give me some decent results to help me finish my dissertation.

Farming is in my blood. My parents have been growing wheat and cauliflowers on the Isle of Thanet in Kent all their lives. Their parents and grandparents did the same before them. In fact, my mother's family has been farming in east Kent for the last 400 years. My family's 600 acre farm stops just short of the North Sea, and in this south-eastern corner of the country the wind is so fierce that even conifers grow in a shield formation. This is where I spent my childhood, my hair whipped sideways and my nose constantly

running with the cold. Nether Hale – my parents' farm – was the safe and loving world I grew up in.

It was only natural for me to follow in this well-established tradition, which is how, after some stops and starts, I come to be at Harper Adams Agricultural College in Shropshire. There's something about the solidity of the imposing red-brick building that chimes with my own traditional values and wholesome upbringing. I feel happier than I've ever been. I give my radishes a last watering before closing the door on the glasshouse and leave feeling utterly content.

It's the start of my final year and six of us – four girls and two guys – have decided to share student lodgings in a house we've nicknamed 'Blue Door' on account of the massive blue-painted wooden front door that lends the house an air of grandeur despite the peeling window frames.

The boys are John Atkinson and his friend Jim Cooper. My friend Hannah Wilson suggested they join us at Blue Door, and as they were looking to share a student house they agreed on the spot. John's family are cattle farmers in Cumbria, and he speaks with a broad northern twang. I can't help finding him attractive; his sense of humour, bonhomie and quick-fire repartee are infectious. I've known Hannah since I started my degree course. She is slender with short brown hair that's spiky on top. We're close friends and share confidences. The other girls are Maria Hendy and Marie Gilroy. We are serious about our careers; we're all studying to be either farm managers or take up food marketing once we've graduated.

We're also typical students, a boisterous group who like a drink and a good time. And at the moment there's a typical student problem vexing us: where to park our cars.

A couple of months ago my parents lent me a brown VW sports car, a Scirocco Storm. Sounds very grand, but it's a car with a history and I'm just the latest occupant of the well-worn driving seat. It once belonged to my aunt, before being passed on to my eldest brother, then it was used on my family's farm. But I love the

car, it gives me a feeling of independence, and driving it soothes away any frustrations and anxieties. On the road I feel free.

But there's nowhere to park the Scirocco, or any of my housemates' cars. Blue Door sits right on a busy main road on the fringes of Newport, a couple of miles away from the college, and although we've explored various options, so far none of us has come up with a suitable parking place safe from traffic wardens and, we hope, thieves and vandals.

By chance, our local pub, The Swan, has a huge car park, twice as big as the pub itself, and it always seems to have free spaces. I wonder if we can come to some arrangement with the landlord and park there. John reckons it's worth asking.

The Swan is just two minutes' walk from Blue Door. The ceilings are low slung, and the two rooms that flank each side of the bar are cramped, but it makes for an intimate and cosy atmosphere as the six of us – John, Hannah, Maria, Marie, Jim and I – sit round a table socialising with our friends. The pub is filled with locals. Newport lies at the heart of a rural farming community, and many of the town's families have connections to the land that go back several generations.

John goes to the bar to order another round. The landlord, a cheerful oval-faced individual, pulls on the pumps.

'Any chance we could use your car park to park our cars?' John enquires.

The landlord looks up with a weariness that suggests he's been asked this question a thousand times before.

'We'll bring good business to the pub. We'll be regulars and bring our mates as well,' John enthuses. 'We're practically your neighbours,' he adds hopefully, pointing in the vague direction of Blue Door.

'How many cars?'

'Six.'

'Robert!' The landlord turns and shouts to his colleague, who's serving in the other half of the bar. 'What do you think of letting

some students use our car park?'

Coming round from the other room, the barman swings into full view. He is slim, with dark hair and angular features.

'If they use the pub as their regular and encourage all their friends to join them I won't object,' he says looking over to where we're all sitting.

It seems the perfect solution to our problems. At last we have somewhere to park, somewhere to leave our cars without worrying if they'll be safe.

Manchester, 3 December 1992

Two IRA bombs explode in the centre of Manchester, one in the heart of the city's financial district, the second near the Anglican cathedral. Sixty-five people are injured.

Sarah, Blue Door

'Robert's coming round with some food. He says he's going to cook for us,' announces Hannah. Since we started parking our cars at The Swan two months ago, the barman, Robert Freegard, has become a familiar figure in our lives. We see him frequently, either at the pub or at Blue Door. In fact, he always seems to be around.

The news reaches me through the open door of my bedroom, where I'm pinning up another Athena poster. Our social gatherings tend to revolve around meal times.

'What time?'

'In about an hour.'

Good. That gives me time to finish what I'm doing. Bit by bit I've plastered over the ugly dirty wallpaper of my bedroom with posters. When I think of the rest of the house, the only word that comes to mind is 'brown': brown sofa, brown curtains, brown wallpaper and brown dining table. In protest, I've covered every inch of the walls in my own room with bright pictures; all available surfaces are alive with knick-knacks. I think I may have gone

overboard, but everyone else seems to like the riot of colour. They call it 'the common room' because the door is always open and everyone piles in towards evening, usually to escape the drabness elsewhere.

I seem to have become the group's agony aunt, helping sort out everyone's problems. 'Sensible Sarah,' that's me. Maybe it's because I don't have the same boyfriend troubles as my other flatmates – for the simple reason that I don't have a boyfriend right now. I like having male friends but I've never been very confident around men, probably because I don't feel secure about my appearance and don't think they'll be interested in me. Make-up and high heels are not my style; give me a baggy sweater any day. John is different though. We come from similar backgrounds, loving families, solid farming stock. I feel relaxed with him and he makes me laugh.

This evening, we sit around our brown Formica-topped dining table, exchanging news about the day. As usual Rob is jovial, oozing energy and self-confidence. The other girls think he's charming, and good-looking with it. Our flatmate Maria Hendy has been going out with him for a month now. To be honest, I don't find him that attractive. He's known for having a string of women, aged anything from sixteen to forty-five, who are all apparently besotted with him. Something about him doesn't quite gel with me, but I'm not losing sleep over it. After all, he's just the local barman; it's not as if he's going to be in my life for ever.

'How's the car?' Rob asks, interrupting my thoughts.

In October, when The Swan car park had been full and I'd had to park elsewhere, my beloved Scirocco had been broken into twice. The first time, the roof was scratched and a window broken. Days later the windscreen was smashed and the stereo was stolen. I've now had an alarm fitted.

'It's OK, but you know it's weird, Maria's had problems too. Her car went missing and they found it twenty miles away, in Wolverhampton. And John's car has been broken into. There's definitely something strange going on around here.'

'Maybe it's the IRA?' volunteers John.

'Don't joke about it!' says Hannah.

'Well, it wouldn't be the first time,' says Jim.

They're referring to the bombs that went off in Shrewsbury – four of them, just before the start of term. The IRA claimed responsibility. Everybody thinks it's because of the city's links with the military.

'Scary,' Marie says. 'So close!'

'It's much closer than that,' says John. 'Don't forget the college link with the IRA.' There are a few raised eyebrows around the room. 'Remember that lad who was arrested for gun running for the IRA? What was his name? O'Donnell – Kevin Barry O'Donnell. He was a Harper student.'

'The one who was shot dead?'

'Yeah. Cleared of the gun running but then shot in an SAS ambush in Northern Ireland. Weren't you here when the police came round? I was. Heavy stuff. They told us not to make jokes about terrorism, or even wear balaclavas. Pity. I always wanted to turn up to lectures in a ski mask.'

'Would have been an improvement for sure,' jokes Jim.

The details come back to me. By all accounts Kevin Barry O'Donnell was a committed IRA activist. In 1989, just six months before we all started at Harper, the army barracks down the road at Ternhill was bombed. The bombs were aimed at the parachute regiment which is based there. Although the authorities never proved O'Donnell's connection, it was strongly suspected he was involved. Shropshire has made front page news more than once because of all the IRA activity around here.

These are troubled times, and we're all aware of the risk the IRA poses to mainland security. How could we not be? Britain is in the middle of the biggest IRA campaign on its soil since the 1970s. And then there was the Manchester bombing only four days ago. Even Manchester now feels too close for comfort.

'Where did you learn to cook, Rob?' asks Hannah, trying to lighten the mood.

'Worked as a chef in a London hotel for a while,' Rob replies,

stabbing his fork into his food. 'Between studies, of course,' he adds.

'Up north we leave cooking to the women. It's what they were invented for,' John chimes in with a grin. 'Strikes me as a most sensible idea.'

'John, you're just a Luddite,' says Hannah.

'Unlike me,' says Rob. 'I'm a fine chef and one day I'll make a fine husband.' He turns to Maria and gives her a cheeky wink.

I get up to put on the CD that Rob has brought with him, *Liberty* by Duran Duran.

'Good taste,' says Rob. 'You know they've got another album coming out in February. My brother's given me a sneak preview of one of the tracks. "Ordinary World" it's called.' He looks pleased with himself, clearly expecting a reaction.

'How'd your brother get that then?' says Jim.

'Didn't I tell you? He's their bass player.'

'What? John Taylor?'

This is a surprise. Everyone's heard of Duran Duran, they were one of *the* pop bands in the Eighties. We're sceptical of Rob's claims, though.

'So why's your name not Taylor?'

'You don't think it's his real name, do you? Come on!'

'Can we meet him?'

'Well, he's away a lot; travelling, on the road, you know how it is. But yeah, I'll see what I can do.' My girlfriends exchange looks of disbelief. Can the brother of a pop star really be in our midst?

There's a raucous atmosphere round the table and the wine passes liberally between us. Rob asks who the television belongs to.

'That's Sarah's, of course,' says Jim Cooper.

'Sarah's got loads of gadgets and gizmos, high-tech electrical stuff,' explains Hannah. 'And she buys CDs like we drink water. Her room's full of them.'

That's a bit of an exaggeration. 'The TV is old and crappy, and I don't have that many CDs,' I say in my defence.

Led by John, the conversation degenerates into a happy

argument about age and Rob challenges us to guess his. John puts him at anywhere between twenty-two and forty-two.

'Forty-seven,' says Jim Cooper.

'I want to bid at forty-eight!' shouts Marie Gilroy. Bedlam erupts as we descend into silliness.

'Give the guy a break,' says Jim. 'He's not *that* old.'

We laugh until we're not sure if we're laughing or crying. 'I need a refill,' says Jim, thrusting his empty glass towards the middle of the table. The wine continues to flow. When things have quietened down, Rob looks at us all with great seriousness and announces, 'I'm twenty-nine, almost thirty.'

My mother nicknamed me the 'Chancellor of the Exchequer' because of my careful attention to money. While my brothers Ian and Guy seemed to spend all their pocket money the minute they got it, I preferred to save mine. Despite my parents' relative affluence, built on the solid foundation of the English countryside, I was thrifty from a very early age, putting aside money for my future.

Nether Hale has no immediate neighbours, and my nearest friend lived several miles away. The fields were my companions, haystacks and tractors my swings and roundabouts. Above all I was obsessed with riding. As a child it was all I thought about, and from the age of eight I owned a horse, Czarina, who was my constant companion; we grew up together and she was my passport to the outside world. I rode beyond Nether Hale, along the Kent beaches, a young free spirit.

If I wasn't riding I was helping out on the farm, so my childhood world was dominated by horses, tractors and trailers. Unlike other girls my age I wasn't interested in fashion; I was happiest in a pair of jodhpurs and riding boots; dresses were alien to me.

When I was nine, my parents sent me to boarding school. It was as if I'd been slammed into another world, one I couldn't relate to. I never felt I belonged and was truly miserable. The only salvation was that the upper school had stables and I was allowed to keep Czarina in a field in the school grounds.

When I turned sixteen I pleaded to go to St Lawrence College in

Ramsgate, a mixed school where my younger brother Guy was a pupil, and where I thought I'd be happier. There I encountered a new challenge: boys. I felt clumsy and shy. Growing up in an agricultural world and mucking in with everyone else on the farm meant I'd never felt the need to be particularly feminine – in any case it wasn't practical. This hadn't bothered me in the slightest. I was happy with my family and my horse. I didn't exactly avoid boys, I just never sought them out.

The biggest shock came when I was eighteen. My careers advisor persuaded me that I shouldn't waste time applying for degree courses in agriculture. Farming was a man's world, he insisted. This was a severe blow. I had always known that Nether Hale itself wasn't an option, since my elder brother Ian was already destined to run it when my parents retired. Now I was finding out that my gender meant I had little hope of succeeding in farming in the outside world.

With the occupation I'd always dreamed of pursuing apparently closed to me I embarked on a Computing in Business course in Huddersfield. I took this to mean business studies using computers, but I was wrong; it turned out to be a systems analysis course and involved writing computer programmes, which in turn required advanced maths. I was hopeless, and by the end of the first year I had failed so many modules I was told it wasn't worth carrying on.

Yet Huddersfield marked a social change for me. For the first time in my life I had a group of largely male friends. I felt part of a social circle, and in this North Yorkshire town I also met my first boyfriend, Hugh. We went to parties, took spins in the car and I got to know his family. Perhaps I was making up for lost time, but I had an absolute ball.

Despite the social life, my nine months in Huddersfield made me realise how much I missed the outdoors, so I vowed to make a life for myself in farming. I was determined to prove the cynics wrong. The course at Harper Adams Agricultural College at Edgmond in Shropshire sounded just perfect. I wasn't disappointed.

*

'Why did the hedgehog cross the road?' asks John Atkinson. I'm laughing before he's even told me the punch line. Today we're giving blood, and John is lying next to me in the mobile blood donation unit, his arm outstretched, eyes parked on the ceiling.

'Come on, Sarah.' John wiggles his feet at the end of the bed, impatient to deliver the one-liner. I've become very fond of this man. He has an impish irascibility about him, without being loud and insensitive, a mind like quicksilver, and a warm heart.

'I don't know. Why did the hedgehog cross the road?'

'To show his girlfriend he had guts.'

I'm still laughing as he fires off the next one, and within no time the nurse arrives saying we're all done. We roll down our sleeves. With term finished, we're now off home.

'Have a good Christmas, then,' he says, bounding off the bed.

'You, too.' I smile wistfully in the knowledge that I won't be seeing him for a couple of weeks.

As I leave the unit and cross the lawn, heading back to my room, I picture Mum's turkey with all the trimmings on the large farmhouse kitchen table. I can already hear the snapping of crackers and the telling of more corny jokes. I feel utterly content. The future seems alive with possibility.

We're all back at college after the break, and I've been roped in to help behind the bar at The Swan in return for some free drinks, and of course the continued use of the pub car park. This evening I'm in the kitchen doing a bit of general tidying when Robert Freegard appears. He's in a flirtatious mood and edges up close to me. 'I'm going to make this your lucky day, Sarah.' I don't like him being in my space, so I retreat to the other side of the room and put some glasses away.

'The two of us should get it together.' Rob comes up behind me and whispers in my ear. He's still dating my flatmate Maria Hendy and his proposition makes me feel distinctly uncomfortable. Moving away, I brush him off light-heartedly, while silently cringing.

'No way. Anyhow, you're going out with Maria.'

Rob picks up a carrot and starts munching on it.

'This pub work is only temporary, you know. I've got a masters degree in psychology from Oxford University. That's a qualification that could get me a job anywhere, Sarah. I've got major prospects.'

I've heard that Rob's mother is staying in the flat above the pub while the landlord is away on holiday. I hope she doesn't decide to come down now.

'Thanks, but no. I really don't want to get into a relationship right now. I've got exams coming up next term and a dissertation to finish.'

I seize the opportunity to change the subject. A friend of mine has been wondering whether to give pyramid selling a go and I ask his opinion. 'I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. She'll end up being conned out of a fortune,' Rob counsels.

It's good advice. Rob does seem worldly-wise and authoritative, even if he's totally out of order when it comes to chatting up his girlfriend's friends. He's six years older than me and has obviously been around the block. I feel I can trust his judgement.