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A Merry Little Christmas

Written by Julia Williams

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JULIA WILLIAMS

A Merry Little Christmas

AVON

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1

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For my gorgeous girls: Katie, Alex, Christine and Steph
And in loving memory of Rosemarie Williams

Prologue

The last rays of a winter's sunset sent streaks of orange and pink across the white fields. Dusk was settling as a motorbike roared its way through the snowy countryside. Large groups of birds took to the air as it sped past, and flocks of sheep ran wildly round in circles. The sound of the engine echoed down the country lanes, disturbing the chilly peace. The leather-clad rider wore a black jacket with a flaming sword emblazoned on his back which, along with his gold and orange helmet, made him resemble a modern day knight. As the rider stopped at the top of the hill overlooking Hope Christmas, he took off his helmet and stared down into the town. The Christmas lights were still twinkling in the High Street. The lamps from the houses down below gave the place a cosy homely feel, as if the whole town were drawing a collective sigh.

The rider flexed his hands, and smiled; the words, *Dux*, on one set of knuckles and *Michael* on the other, just visible underneath his fingerless gloves. He was good looking, with a dark complexion, devastating cheekbones, curly dark hair which tickled the collar of his jacket, and piercing blue eyes.

'So Hope Christmas, long time no see,' he muttered. 'Uncle Ralph was right, it's a beautiful little place. I shall look forward to renewing my acquaintance with you.'

He put his helmet back on, revved the engine, and roared

down the road and into town, noting the quaint little shops; the antiques market, flower stall, the bookshop and market square where a Christmas tree stood proudly in the centre. The town was deserted, with only one or two brave souls prepared to come out on such a cold night. One of them, a pensioner tootling along on a mobile buggy, stopped to say hello.

'Well, Michael Nicholas, as I live and breathe. Your uncle said you might be coming. It's good to see you after all these years.'

'And you, Miss Woods,' Michael smiled a devilishly handsome smile. 'It's been far too long.'

'Will you be staying a while?' she asked.

Michael looked around him. 'That, I think depends on who needs me,' he said.

'I think you'll find there's always a need,' said Miss Woods.

'Then yes, I think I'll be here a while,' said Michael, his smile crinkling up to his blue eyes.

'I look forward to it,' said Miss Woods. 'Happy Christmas.'

'And to you,' said Michael, before climbing back on his bike and speeding off to Hopesay Manor.

It was good to be back.

New Year

Cat Tinsall unwound the fairy lights from her suddenly bereft Christmas tree, then carefully placed them in the Santa sack which was bulging with the rest of the Christmas decorations. She sat back on her heels and looked out of the large patio door onto her frozen garden, where a lonely looking robin pecked at the crumbs on the bird table. It was a grey cold day, the sort that sapped your soul in early January. She sighed and tried not to feel too bereft herself. Even the Shropshire hills (the view of which was one of the reasons they'd bought this old converted farmhouse when they'd moved up to Hope Christmas four years earlier) were shrouded in grey gloom.

Christmas, her favourite time of the year, was over once more. The bright shiny new year, which had beckoned so enticingly at Pippa's New Year's bash through a happy haze of mulled wine and champagne, now seemed less so; reality being grey and drab in comparison. Noel was already back at work, groaning as he'd left in the dark to look at a project the other side of Birmingham, where he'd be meeting Michael Nicholas, Ralph Nicholas' nephew, for the first time. The kids were at school (Mel to mock-GCSEs for which Cat had seen no evidence of any revision over the holidays), and Cat herself had a pile of proofs to tackle for her new cookbook, *Cat's Country Kitchen*. They'd been

guiltily shoved aside in a pre-Christmas planning frenzy, but she knew she could ignore them no longer. She looked at the picture of herself on the front cover – thanks to the power of Photoshop, looking more glamorous and slimmer then she felt right now. No doubt it would add fuel to the tabloids' 'Top Kitchen Totty' moniker that had haunted her since the launch of her first book, *Cat's Kitchen Secrets*, three years earlier.

All in all it had been a good Christmas, Cat thought as she carried the Santa sack up the creaking stairs of their old country cottage, to put back up in the loft later. Even Mel's moodiness had done little to put a spanner in the works. It was weird how a previously model daughter had morphed into the teenager from hell over the last year. From having once enjoyed a close relationship with her daughter, Cat felt constantly baffled by Mel now. Noel was always telling her she needed to relax and not force the issue so much, but she couldn't help wanting to find out what was going on in her daughter's head – while realising that the more she pushed, the further Mel retreated from her.

It was just that now, with her mum's dementia having taken her away from them forever, Cat wanted that closeness with Mel even more. One of the most heart-wrenching sights this Christmas had been seeing Louise looking so bewildered as she sat down to join them for Christmas dinner. It still gave Cat such a pang to see her mother like this; to see her refer to Mel as 'Catherine', and watch her wander in to help with the turkey, stirred by some memory of Christmases long ago, then stand around with an air of uncertainty saying, 'This isn't my kitchen.' None of this behaviour was unusual, but somehow it was always worse seeing her mother away from the home, where for the most part there could be at least a pretence that things were quite

well. Cat knew she should be used to it by now. But she was not, and probably never would be.

The trouble was, every time she saw her mother, she remembered what they'd had, what they'd lost. It had just been her and Louise throughout Cat's childhood, a two-woman united team, and Cat had always assumed she would share that same easy closeness forever – and when she had children of her own, replicate it with her own daughters. Mel was proving her wrong about that on a daily basis. Cat tried to think of any major moments of rebellion in her childhood, but there hadn't been any. There had been no need. She loved her mum, knew how hard Louise had to work, and had no intention of making her life harder than it already was. Whereas Mel . . . Cat sighed. Where had she gone wrong with Mel? Maybe it was, as Noel seemed to think, that her daughter was jealous of the attention James had garnered as her cooking companion.

The TV company who'd produced her original series, *Cat's Kitchen Secrets* four years ago, had pounced on James when they spotted how often he was in the background helping her out. With his cute (then) ten-year-old goofy grin, cheeky manner and angelic good looks, they'd realised he was ideal TV fodder. Mel, a gawky twelve-year-old, was far too self-conscious to appear on the TV, even though she'd been given the option to.

None of them could have predicted what a success James would have been. Now fourteen, he was relaxed in front of the camera, and having been a natural cook from an early age, had always showed far more interest in helping her in the kitchen than his sisters. The girls enjoyed baking but couldn't be bothered to cook a meal, whereas James was developing his own creative ability to cook up tasty food. Although to be fair, his menus did include a lot of pizza

and nachos. Consequently, a TV series of his own aimed at kids was in the offing, and he was already (with Cat's help) writing his second book, *James' Top Tips for Hungry Teens*.

Cat had tried really hard to ensure that the attention hadn't gone to his head. Luckily James was a down to earth sort, just as happy kicking a football about with her friend Pippa's sons, Nathan and George, as lording it in front of the TV cameras. And as for writing cookery books, that was clearly far too much effort, so Cat was writing most of it for him. Cat tried to make up for the attention James was getting by focusing as much on the other things the girls did, like Paige's singing or Ruby's dancing, and so far they seemed unaffected. Paige was so sure she was going to be on *X Factor*, and aiming at being twelve going on thirty that she couldn't care less, while Ruby was still too young to notice.

Mel, on the other hand was another matter. One by one, she'd dropped the activities she used to enjoy, no longer playing tennis, attending Scouts, or to Cat's great disappointment, playing the piano. Instead she spent far too much time mooching about in nearby Hope Sadler where she worked in a café at the weekends. On top of that, having initially mixed with a crowd of pleasant, hard-working girls when they'd first arrived in Hope Christmas, Mel seemed to have dropped them all to hang out with the rebels of the year. From what little Cat had gleaned, they seemed to mainly spend their time in the local parks, smoking and drinking. Mel always denied joining in, but Cat had long since given up completely trusting her daughter. Something she'd never before imagined could happen.

Cat sighed again and climbed up into the loft with the decorations. Time to get back to reality.

* * *

Marianne North drove into the large sweeping farmyard of the home she shared with Gabe, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Their ancient farmhouse had never looked more welcoming. Gabe had been home for a week already. It was difficult for him to take any time away from the farm, so he'd come back early, while Marianne had ended up stuck at her mum's for pretty much the whole fortnight of Christmas, the longest time she'd spent there since university days. But Mum – feeling cheated that her precious grandchildren had missed their first Christmas at Nana's (Marianne's protestations that three-month-old twin babies were pretty nightmarish to take anywhere had fallen on deaf ears and despite an invitation to Hope Christmas, Mum had resolutely refused) – had been so martyred about how the twins' other granny saw so much more of them that Marianne had had to capitulate and trek down to London this year. Gabe's mother Jean, whom Marianne knew would miss the twins dreadfully, was fortunately immensely generous and said, 'I'll survive without you all. I do get to see the twins a lot more than your mother,' which was true, especially as she looked after them twice a week while Marianne was working. 'I had a demanding mother-in-law and always promised I wouldn't be the same. David and I will have a nice quiet time together alone.'

Marianne had hugged her with gratitude, and they'd had a pre-Christmas lunch with Pippa and Dan and their family the week before the big day. Marianne had then set off two days before Christmas, and Gabe and Steven had joined them on Christmas Day. Poor Steven had been nearly as bored as she and Gabe were. There was precious little for an eleven-year-old boy to do in the drab London suburb where Marianne had grown up, particularly when he knew no one there. Then Gabriel had taken Steven over to his mum, Eve, for a few days. Eve, though in the past an

unreliable mother, seemed in recent years to have sorted herself out, even managing to hold down both a good job and a rich boyfriend, Darren. Gabriel was much more relaxed about Steven visiting her now, and this time around Steven had leapt at the chance to go, Marianne noticed, a little sadly. She worried that since the arrival of the twins, Steven had felt left out, and it must be really hard to take on an extra set of grandparents, who, let's face it, weren't *really* interested in him. Though Marianne noticed, gratefully, that Dad had made huge efforts as far as Steven was concerned, but Mum just couldn't help herself from cooing over the twins. You couldn't blame her in a way, she'd waited a long time for grandchildren and then to get two for the price of one . . . Marianne loved her mother dearly, but it was the sort of relationship that benefited from distance – two hundred miles was just about right.

'Hi Gabe, we're home.' Marianne unloaded the car, while the children slept in the back. So much crap for two little people who hadn't reached the age of two yet; nappies, buggies, car seats, toddler seats for sitting at dinner, two travel cots . . . And that was without the presents Mum had insisted on buying – a pram set for Daisy and a toy car for Harry – nothing like clinging to stereotypes – as well as countless soft toys, rattles, shiny things with plastic knobs and buzzers on. Marianne felt sure her parents must be nearly bankrupted by the arrival of their twin grandchildren, but nothing she said would stop her mother from buying stuff for them. ('You can't spoil babies,' she'd trilled when Marianne faintly tried to suggest that maybe it was all a bit much.)

'And it's fab to see you.'

Gabe. Her heart still did that funny little skipping thing when she saw him standing in the farmhouse doorway in a thick knit sweater and jeans, his dark brown hair slightly

mussed up where he'd been running his fingers through it, those deep brown sensitive eyes. She loved that wonderful thrill of knowing he was hers.

'God, I've missed you so much,' said Marianne, burying her head in his shoulder as he enveloped her in a warm bear hug. 'Never *ever* let me stay that long with my parents again. Next year they are so coming to us. The twins haven't slept all week. I'm exhausted.'

'Me too,' yawned Gabriel. 'I had a lamb born last night. The mother had gone off in the dark, and it took Steven, me and Patch ages to find her.'

'Did Steven have a good time with Eve?' Marianne felt a pang of guilt. She should have been back in time for Steven to start back at school – she normally was. But her mum had insisted she stay an extra day and come home on Monday. Steven and Gabe had assured her they could cope, but she still felt bad. Since she and Gabriel had got together four years earlier, she'd always been around for the start of term. It didn't feel right staying away. But since having the twins and juggling her career with motherhood, Marianne had got used to a familiar feeling of being torn in two.

'I think so,' something in Gabe's tone stopped her. He looked pensive, the way he used to when they first met, when Eve had left him and he was coping with being a single dad.

'What's Eve done now?' said Marianne.

'You remember that choir school she mentioned back in the autumn?' said Gabe.

'Yes,' said Marianne, remembering a conversation about the impossibility of them affording to send Steven to a fee-paying school, however good his voice was.

'She's persuaded Steven he should try out for it,' said Gabe. 'She's talking about moving up near Middleminster,

and having Steven stay with her and Darren at the weekends. That means we're going to be fifty miles away, and they'll be on the doorstep. We'll never see him.'

'What does Steven say?'

'He wants to go,' said Gabriel. 'She's got him so excited about it, and I don't want to bring him back down to earth.'

'But surely we can't afford it,' said Marianne. 'Even if we all pitched in together?'

'There are scholarships apparently,' said Gabriel, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. 'I don't know, Marianne, I know it's a big opportunity. But to be away from us? I don't think I could bear it.'

'Maybe it won't come to anything,' said Marianne. 'After all, he's got to get in first.'

'True,' said Gabriel, 'but he's a clever boy, you said so yourself, and with your help he could do it. And Darren knows the Head of Music there. Eve seems to think he's got a really good chance.'

'Then you can't deny him a shot at it,' said Marianne firmly. 'If that's what he wants to do.'

'I know,' said Gabriel miserably. 'I feel really guilty about this, but I don't want him to go.'

Pippa Holliday slammed down the phone with uncharacteristic anger. 'Of all the small-minded, patronising, bloody useless pieces of–' A clicking to her left reminded her that Lucy was there, so she curtailed the expletive she was going to use and said, 'Oh Luce, it's that social worker.'

Lucy tilted her face to one side and pulled a grumpy face and shook her head.

'No, we don't like her,' said Pippa with a smile. Lucy always managed to make her laugh, even when things were really grim. 'She's being so unhelpful.'

Unhelpful. That was one way of putting it. Yes, Pippa

understood there were cuts. Yes, she also understood that Lucy's case was only one of many that Claire King dealt with daily, and yes probably to Claire-I've-no-idea-how-you-do-it King, Pippa and her family weren't a priority, living as they did in a comfortable house with a reasonably good income, and inconveniently Dan was neither an absentee father nor a wife-beater. Pippa knew she didn't help her case by presenting a calm unhurried manner to the world, but it was the only way she knew of coping with the difficulties life had thrown at her.

From the first catastrophic moment when she and Dan had been told that their precious longed-for baby daughter had cystic fibrosis, and would grow up needing constant care, Pippa had known she would manage, because what other choice was there? Besides, when she, to her everlasting shame, had fallen apart at the news, Dan had been so together, so strong for the two of them, she knew they'd get through it somehow. Without Dan, she doubted she would have been so calm, so capable, so *coping*. So many men in his position might have walked out on them, but Dan loved their daughter with a constant and devoted tenderness that Pippa could only marvel at and be grateful for. His support and love had kept them all afloat, making huge efforts to ensure the boys never missed out on activities because of Lucy; always trying to be there for hospital visits when he could, and running the farm to boot. Dan. Her perfect hero.

And they had coped and managed all this time because eventually, after long years and battles, Pippa had organised respite care for her daughter, giving the rest of the family precious time together. Pippa hated to use the word *normal* – but doing the things that other families took for granted, going for long walks in the country, having a pub lunch without establishing first whether they had disabled access,

and having to face out people's stares. People could be so cruel, even in this allegedly enlightened day and age. And now that was all about to be taken away from them, as Claire bloody King had just informed her that due to a tightening of budgets, Lucy might lose her precious respite care.

'It's not definite, but–'

Reading the subtext, Pippa knew Claire thought there were more needy, deserving families than hers. There probably were, but that didn't make it right. Since Lucy had been going to respite care, Pippa had had some precious time for herself. Not a lot, but enough for her to be able to cope with the demands of her beautiful, gorgeous daughter, and feel she was still looking after her boys and husband too. Without that lifeline she felt she might sink.

'I'm sure you'll manage,' said Claire, 'you're so calm. And you have so much support. It will be fine.'

'And what if it's not?' said Pippa frankly. 'Having the respite care is what keeps me calm. Without it I don't know what I'd do.'

She put the phone down in frustration. There was no point taking it out on Claire. The woman was only doing her job. But still. She looked at her precious daughter, sitting in her custom-made wheelchair, sighing to cheer her up – Lucy had an instinct for sniffing out when Pippa was sad and stressed, which was one of the most lovable things about her – and wondered how they would cope. Lucy was nearly ten now and getting bigger all the time. There might come a point when Pippa couldn't lift her or bath her, or do all the little jobs she needed. It was like having a toddler for life. A large overgrown toddler, with hormones. For the first time since that terrible day when Lucy had been born, Pippa really felt overwhelmed. What if, after all she *couldn't* cope? What would they do then?

Part One

Let Your Heart Be Light

January

Chapter One

Marianne was simmering a lamb stew on the Aga, in the homely country kitchen she and Gabriel had recently renovated in oak, while the twins sat in their high chairs banging spoons on the table, giggling away at each other. It was a deep and abiding relief to her that they were so happy in each other's company; they kept themselves usefully occupied when she was busy. It was a wintry Monday afternoon and Gabriel had taken Steven over to have a look around Middleminster. Marianne had thought of coming with them as she wasn't working, but decided that the twins would probably be too distracting, and it might be better for Gabriel to do this with Steven on his own. She also hoped that it might persuade Gabriel that this was really a good idea.

She was just serving the twins' portions into two identical plastic bowls when an animated Steven burst through the door, followed by Gabriel, looking slightly less than thrilled. Marianne was caught afresh with the realisation of how similar father and son were getting. Steven had grown a lot recently and his hair had darkened, and his eyes, though blue, retained something of his father's look about them.

'So what's it like?'

'It was fab, Marianne!' Steven was jumping about with

glee. 'They've got a brilliant football pitch and I could get to play cricket too!'

Steven had started playing cricket the previous summer, and been disappointed to learn that the local secondary school hadn't got cricket on the curriculum.

'What about the choir?' laughed Marianne, caught up with his infectious enthusiasm. 'I mean, that's the main reason for going.'

'It was cool, wasn't it, Dad?' Steven's eyes lit up. Unusually for a boy, he loved singing – and had a talent for it too.

'Very cool,' agreed Gabriel, 'but you have to get in first.'

'We'd better get started on those practice tests, hadn't we?' said Marianne, giving Steven a hug. Since the idea of Middleminster had first been mooted in the autumn, she had occasionally run through a past paper with Steven. He was a bright boy, and she saw no reason why he couldn't get in, but he needed more experience of the entrance tests if he were to stand a chance. Marianne looked at Gabe and gave him an encouraging smile. She knew how hard this was for him. On the one hand, he wanted to give his son the best chance he could have, of course he did. But on the other, Gabe had no desire to lose Steven to a choir school fifty miles away, despite Marianne's pointing out it *was* a good opportunity if Steven wanted to take it.

'Mum says Darren knows someone at the school who might be able to help,' said Steven.

'I gathered that,' said Gabe. 'If you're going to get in, I'd rather you did it on your own merits.'

'So you did like it then?' Marianne said as Steven disappeared upstairs to play on his Xbox.

'It's a great school,' admitted Gabe. 'And I could see Steven loved it. Hell, *I* loved it. You should have seen the facilities they have. I think Steven could do well there.'

'That's good isn't it?'

'Yes . . .' Gabriel had a slightly forlorn look on his face. One she hadn't seen in a long time.

'I sense a *but* here,' said Marianne.

'Eleven is very young to be away from us,' said Gabriel. 'I hate the thought of him going away. And if Eve does move up here, we won't even have him every weekend.'

'I know,' said Marianne, 'and I do understand, but if Steven really likes it . . .'

'And he does,' said Gabriel with a rueful smile. 'I'm being selfish.'

'No you're not,' said Marianne giving him a hug. 'You love your son. Which is perfectly natural, and is one of many reasons that I love you. And here's another.'

She handed Gabe Daisy's bowl, and she took Harry's, and together they fed the twins. It was one of the most fun parts of a hectically busy domestic routine, and one which always made her happy and grateful that she'd found Gabriel four years ago, when she'd nearly left Hope Christmas after Luke Nicholas had broken her heart. As she'd hoped, five minutes of making aeroplane noises for the twins cheered Gabriel up no end, and his mood was much lighter by the time they were clearing up.

'Try not to worry about Steven,' Marianne said, lifting Daisy out of her high chair and popping her into the playpen that sat in the corner of the kitchen. 'I know it's hard, but even with a nod from Darren's mate, he's not certain to get in.'

'True,' said Gabe, carrying Harry to join his sister. 'And even Eve admitted we can't afford it if he doesn't get a scholarship.'

'There, you see,' said Marianne, kissing him. 'No need to waste your energy on ifs and buts. It might never happen. Why don't we just enjoy what we have?'

* * *

Pippa was baking; her kitchen smelling warm, comforting, and safe. It was her default position when stressed. Plus she was part of the volunteer group who kept the local shop open, stocked and supplied with local produce and home baking. The rate she was going today, the shop was going to be well stocked for weeks. She'd spent all morning making chocolate brownies, blueberry muffins, and scones – all to put off facing up to the unpalatable news that Lucy's social worker, Claire King had given her that morning.

'I'm sorry,' had been Claire's opening gambit, 'but we're all having to cut our budgets for the next financial year, and one of my more unpleasant jobs has been working out which services have to be cut. One of the options we're looking at is reducing our respite care packages. It has to go on level of need, I'm afraid . . .'

The pause spoke volumes.

'And ours isn't great enough,' Pippa said flatly.

'I wouldn't go as far as to say that,' Claire was clearly floundering a bit, 'and I'm not saying this is a definite, or that you'll lose the respite altogether . . .'

'But it's a possibility?' said Pippa.

'I think it's more likely that Lucy will be receiving respite care once a month in the foreseeable future, rather than once a fortnight,' said Claire, 'and rest assured we will be working hard to sort out an alternative for you, but . . .'

But that was no guarantee of help in the long term. Reading between the lines, and given the level of cuts being imposed on social services, it was highly unlikely that Lucy would be having any respite care in a year's time. Pippa was desperately looking round for alternatives, but as far as she could see there were none. She'd written a letter to her MP, Tom Brooker – without much hope of success, given that it was his party implementing the cuts – and was now trying to drum up support from other parents

similarly affected. The trouble was, most of them, like her, were worn down by the years and years of fighting a system that at its best could be brilliant, but at its worst was cold, indifferent and cared little for individual sob stories.

Her next port of call was going to be Cat Tinsall. With her media contacts, Cat might be able to help, not just Lucy, but the other kids who got help from the Sunshine Trust. And Cat, Pippa knew, would understand. When Cat had first moved to Hope Christmas just under four years ago, they had instantly bonded over children, cooking and how hard it was being a carer. Cat's mother, Louise, suffered from dementia, and Pippa knew how tough she found it. She empathised with the guilt, the feeling that maybe you could do more, be better, be less selfish.

'Mmm, something smells good. Bad day?' Dan's six-foot frame filled the kitchen. He had a way of dominating a room. He'd come fresh from the outhouse where he scrubbed down after milking the cows, before entering the house. He'd been out since dawn and had come back now to have breakfast. Pippa's heart swelled. However hard life was, she had and always would have Dan. A sudden memory snuck its way into her brain, of her and Dan, lying together in their field at the bottom of the hill on a sunny day, Dan saying quite seriously, 'Love you forever,' when Pippa had only just got round to thinking the 'L' word. Everything was manageable with Dan by her side.

'How did you guess?' asked Pippa, lifting her last batch of scones out of the Aga and putting them on the pine kitchen island in the middle of the kitchen, replacing them with muffins. She took a broom out and swept away the mud Dan had brought in with him.

'You always bake when you're in a bad mood,' said Dan.

'And you always bring mud in from the farm,' she said.

'I did wash up,' protested Dan.

'But you forgot to take your boots off, as usual,' Pippa rolled her eyes at him.

Dan responded by picking up a scone and taking a bite. 'Delicious.'

'Oi, they're not for you,' said Pippa. 'But why don't you sit down and I'll make you a cuppa and a fry-up.'

'No, you sit down,' said Dan, 'and tell me all about it. What's that bloody woman done now?'

'Nothing more than usual,' said Pippa, loving him for so perfectly tuning into her mood. 'She's wrung her hands as much as she can, but the upshot is we still have respite care for the short term, but monthly not fortnightly.'

'Well, that's something at least,' said Dan.

'I know,' said Pippa. 'But it's the long term I'm worried about. What happens if we lose it altogether?'

'We cross that bridge when we come to it,' said Dan, handing his wife a cup of tea.

'Why are you always so positive?' said Pippa. 'Here I am finding problems, and you go round making out it will all be okay.' That was Dan all over, her rock, her strength. He always managed to help her see a way through, when she felt overwhelmed.

'One of us has to be,' said Dan, 'and you do enough worrying for the pair of us. Something will turn up, you'll see.'

'Oh Dan,' said Pippa, suddenly feeling a bit teary. 'Whatever did I do to deserve you?'

'I don't know,' said Dan with a grin, 'but if I'm allowed another one of those scones, you never know, I might even stick around a while.'

Cat was on the set of *Cat's Country Kitchen,* her new TV show which was due to air in the autumn, when her phone buzzed. She'd been busy talking to Len Franklin the director

about setting up a shot of her chopping onions for her Shropshire hotpot, which she was meant to be doing without crying. The phone buzzed insistently again. Damn. She thought she'd turned it off. Cat took it out of her pocket and saw, to her dismay, the school phone number. Her heart sank. Now what had Mel done?

'I'm terribly sorry,' she said to Len. She hadn't worked with him before, and found him a little taciturn and unfriendly, so she wasn't quite sure how he'd take the interruption. 'Would you mind if I take this?'

'If you must,' said Len in long-suffering tones. 'But please be quick, we've got a busy schedule and a lot to get through.'

'Thanks,' said Cat, smiling apologetically at the film crew, and wandered to the back of the studio.

'Hullo, Catherine Tinsall here,' she said. 'Sorry to keep you waiting. How may I help?'

She dreaded phone calls from school, which seemed to be happening with monotonous regularity of late.

'Mrs Tinsall?' The crisp tones of Mrs Reynolds, the school secretary, always made her turn to jelly. 'It appears that Melanie is absent from school, and we haven't heard from you. I take it she is ill?'

'Ill? No of course not,' said Cat in bewilderment. 'I saw her off to school myself. Did you send me a text message?'

'Of course,' said Mrs Reynolds.

'Oh,' Cat checked her messages. She'd missed one. 'Yes I did get it. I'm at work, and didn't pick it up. Didn't Mel come in at all?'

'Apparently not,' said Mrs Reynolds frostily. Cat knew it was paranoid, but she always got the impression Mrs Reynolds thought all mothers should stay at home till their children had left school.

'I am so sorry,' said Cat. 'I'll try and find out what's happened and where she is.'

She put the phone down, her heart thumping. Bloody hell. She'd had far too many conversations this year with Mel's form teacher about her bad behaviour, but usually it was about cheeking the teachers, or not working hard enough. She'd even been suspended for a day for being caught smoking. Why on earth would she have skipped school? It was probably because she was due to get her mock results. Mel had been grumpy as hell for the last few days, and judging by how little work she'd done over the Christmas holidays, Cat wasn't expecting miracles. It was the first time Mel had ever bunked off. That is, if she *was* bunking off, and not dead in a ditch somewhere. Oh God, Cat thought, what if something had happened to her?

'Don't even go there, Cat,' she muttered to herself, and rang Mel's mobile. Switched off, of course. She sent a text instead. *You've been rumbled. RING ME, Mum.*

She texted both James and Paige at school, though she knew, technically, they weren't supposed to have their phones on them.

Do you know where Mel is?

No idea. James' response was swift and to the point.

Paige took longer to reply.

Saw her talking to Andy outside school.

Andy who?

Dunno was the helpful response.

Great. Thanks for nothing, Paige.

'Ahem, if we could get on?' Len was tapping his watch, the film crew were looking bored, and Cat was conscious everyone was looking at her.

'Yes, of course, nearly done.' Cat made one last phone call.

'Noel, I'm really sorry to do this, but Mel's bunked off. I've no idea where she is and I was due on camera five

minutes ago. Can you deal with it? I assume she's in town somewhere. Possibly with a boy named Andy.'

'Cat–' began Noel.

'I know, I'm sorry,' said Cat, 'I'll get away as soon as I can, I promise.'

'Okay, leave it with me,' said Noel, 'I'll go out on a recce.'

'Thanks,' said Cat. 'I owe you.'

'*Again*,' said Noel, who had, she realised guiltily, been picking up more of the domestic slack than her of late. 'I'll bloody kill her when I find her.'

'Not before I do,' said Cat.

'When we're ready,' interrupted the director, sharply.

'Ready,' said Cat, turning her phone off.

She allowed the make-up girl to touch up her face, and stood in front of the shiny hot plates on which she was about to demonstrate making her twist on a traditional Shropshire stew.

'Hello and welcome to *Cat's Country Kitchen*, where I'll be showing you recipes old and new from Shropshire, the food capital of Great Britain,' she said, trying with all her might to forget about errant daughters and concentrate instead on cooking. After all, that's what she got paid for.