I

I stood at the gate with my laden wheelbarrow and ran a practised eye over my acres which stretched away in a plateau before me, rising gently to the hills beyond. I wished I felt more romantic and wistful about it – this sylvan scene and all that. I didn't, though: I felt tired, bleary-eyed and, frankly, fed up. There was barely a paddock I could enter these days without fearing for my safety, and feeding my sheep had become a matter of high subterfuge and low cunning. If I fed the boys first, the ewes in the far field were instantly alerted and came rushing across for their breakfast. But if I fed the ewes it involved going through Buddy's field, and Buddy wanted to have his way with me – the only one who did these days – and Buddy was a big ram. So desperate – and confused, obviously – was he, he'd knocked me clean over in his lather yesterday. He'd been separated from the flock because he'd already impregnated the ewes, most of whom had lambed, and was now in solitary confinement. Whilst it was driving both of us mad, I certainly didn't want him messing with my girls again, and he was not to be trusted with last year's boy lambs who were going to market soon, hopefully in one piece, with no black eyes, cauliflower ears or obvious signs of grievous bodily harm.

I pulled my hat down low, sank into my coat and set off with my mighty barrow of concentrated sheep nuts, which was darned heavy. As I went I dreamed of a quad bike like my friend Anna's, who fed her pigs with the wind in her hair, throttle out, lippy on. Buddy was no fool and came dashing

across to ambush me, but I'd thought ahead and distracted him with a scoop of feed on the grass. Wrong-footed, he dithered, wondering which was his greatest urge, and by the time he'd decided and given chase, I'd made it to the ewes' field. I just managed to shut the gate on his indignant black nose before being surrounded by forty-five hormonal females, all desperate for my nuts.

Sometimes I wished I started the day with a pot of tea delivered by a handsome man with a charming smile. Often, actually. Instead, I sliced open the feed sack with a Stanley knife and shoved my barrow ruthlessly through the sea of moving white wool to the yards of galvanized trough lying on the ground. Nipping ahead of Nora, who was head girl and horribly bossy, I poured from one end of the trough to the other. They rushed in a veritable surge, almost knocking me over before somehow sorting themselves out to feed in two reasonably straight lines on either side. A biddable sheepdog would be good, too, I reflected, watching them, instead of two hysterical Border terriers who were more of a hindrance than a help and consequently shut up in the kitchen. At length I sighed and turned for home, mission accomplished.

To be fair, the man I'd had, my husband David, would have been brilliant. He'd be wrestling the barrow from my hands this minute were it possible, absolutely in his element out here. It was everything he'd ever fondly imagined he'd be doing, in fact, before fate had so rudely intervened. Always an early riser, he'd be up with the light, feeding and tending these characters, before pottering off to Ludlow for a few hours' gentle conveyancing in his sleepy solicitors' office, the one he'd swapped for the City slickers' firm he'd come to hate. David had been a partner in a rather ritzy legal establishment in Liverpool Street, but the strength-sapping hours

and the workload had eventually ground him down. We'd snapped up this rural idyll he'd spotted – literally in the front of *Country Life* at the dentist's – with its pretty farmhouse and ninety acres, and then he'd found his easy-going job a short drive away. Everything had slotted ridiculously simply into place, no doubt because David was at the helm. We'd taken the children out of their pushy London schools, I'd given up my job, and we'd come down here, all ready for the Good Life. And good it had been, fleetingly. Until, disappointingly, one day David had taken our car to the village to get some shopping and never returned. I paused with my empty barrow a moment. I say disappointingly, in that ironic, deliberately shocking way, because if I delved any deeper into my grief I'd be back to square one. Back with my sleepless nights, my inability to motivate myself, my weight loss, and my three distressed children. So five years down the track I've adopted this splendidly sort of upper-class, stiff-upper-lip approach to my husband's death, to stop myself from gagging when his name is mentioned. And actually, I can quite see how it got people through a war. It certainly works for me.

I trundled my empty barrow back to the barn, reloaded it with a bale of hay for the boys in the far meadow – who charged me, predictably, but with less ferocity, it being only dry grass – and then walked back to the yard, wondering if anyone at the house was even up, had fed the dogs, or emptied the dishwasher, and by that I meant one of the lodgers rather than the children, the likelihood of the latter managing any of the above being little short of a miracle. Actually, ditto the former. The married Chinese accountants who were currently installed in the best bedroom were delightfully smiley but permanently attached to some piece of technology, so anything practical, like letting a cat out,

induced a look of panic in their eyes. It was their last day today, though, I thought with some relief, thinking of the cheque on the kitchen table and having my bedroom back. I didn't take lodgers as a rule, but the occasional B&B helped enormously, particularly when it had become clear that the minuscule pension David had collected from Perkins and Dawson, and the tiny one I'd paid into, were not going to go anywhere near supporting us once death duties had taken their toll. I paused a moment before I went into the barn to dump the barrow: gazed at the row of uninterrupted hills rolling away in the distance behind the house. How he would have loved this. And how pissed off he would have been to miss it, on account of a stupid, worn-out brake pad. That had been my overriding emotion for a long time, I recollected, as I went on to feed the chickens and ducks. Anger. At how hacked off he would have been to miss all this: his dream, his reward for all those years in an over-lit, open-plan battery farm in the City. His putative gold watch.

We'd been here all of six weeks. Five and a half, to be precise. The house was still full of packing cases and two of the children hadn't even started back at school. It was the end of the summer holidays. When it happened, Minna and Nico had been on the grass tennis court at the bottom of the garden, now a sea of weeds. I remembered that long walk out there after I'd had the visit from the police: remembered them lowering their rackets as I approached and as they saw my face. I knew they'd had a flash of recognition before I spoke, before I told them that their lives would never be the same again. I remember that like it was yesterday. Lucy's face I still can't even bring myself to remember.

But as I say, that was five years ago. And however much you think life will never move on one jot, it jolly well does, at

a rickety-rackety pace. And right now I had more pressing problems, like how we were going to stay here – my pledge, all those years ago to David's ghost – and how all my various concerns, the horse-dealing, the lavender soap, the sheep farming and, more recently, the boxer shorts and scanty ladies' underwear business, were going to keep us afloat. How they were going to collectively re-tile the stable roof, pay the bills and, more to the point, keep my eldest daughter, who I spotted through the kitchen window looking dubiously into the fridge, in designer yoghurt.

I mention this because I wanted Lucy to come down and peer in my fridge as much as possible now that she'd moved to London, and there was not a great deal to attract her these days. She was very definitely not dressed for Herefordshire today, I noticed, in tailored black trousers and a nipped-in white jacket. She wrinkled her nose as she lifted the plastic lid on a packet of curly bacon before replacing it with disdain.

'What are you doing up?' I shut the back door on a blast of air. Two clearly unfed dogs yapped in delight and hurled themselves at my legs. I took in the debris of last night's wine and fag fest with her brother and sister, which clearly no one had thought to clear up.

'I'm going back to London. Can you drop me at the station?'

Please, I thought to myself. 'I thought you said the shop was shut today?' I gathered the empty ashtrays and glasses from the table and put them in the sink to hide my face; to try not to show I cared. 'And you were going to help Minna with her project?'

'It is shut, but I still need to be there; there's loads of admin to catch up on. And it's pointless helping Minna with her project, it doesn't exist. She only said that to get you off

her back in the holidays. It was a ruse, Mother. What d'you think she is, eight? Counting haystacks and colouring them in or something?'

'Right,' I said shortly.

'Is this orange juice OK?' She sniffed it dubiously.

'I don't know, darling, try it.'

She peered instead at the sell-by date. 'Fourth of March!' She recoiled in horror.

'Yes, but it's concentrate, that keeps for ever.'

'Because it's full of preservatives. You should buy fresh.'

'I should,' I agreed cheerfully. 'And if I could afford it, I would.' I banged the washing-up down harder than I might on the draining board.

'The bailiff came again,' Lucy told me.

I swung around, appalled. 'Did he?' She was leaning against the dresser sipping her black coffee, unconcerned. I abandoned the washing-up and sat down at the table, clutching the edge. 'Oh God. Which one?'

'The nice one, Tia.'

'Oh, thank the Lord. What did you say?'

'I said you'd sort it by the end of the week, or at least the following one. Don't stress, Mum, she was nice. I didn't give her the silver or anything.' She ran a hand through her mane of silky blonde hair.

'I've already sold the silver,' I said abstractedly, getting up again, knowing now I'd have to sell the farm, as I romantically called our smallholding. The bailiff. *Again*.

'You haven't paid the council tax,' Lucy said gently.

'I know.' My mouth was dry. 'But I told her, I'm paying it this week. Today, in fact, just as soon as I've got a cheque from Lu and Sam.'

'They left it.' Lucy plucked it from the mountain of detritus on the table. 'They went about twenty minutes ago. It's

precisely three hundred and eighty pounds, Mum. They were only here a week. The council tax is a deal more.'

'I know, but I'm getting loads from that chap who's buying Nutty.'

'Yes, I told her that, and she was fine about it, I told you. Although she did ask if Nutty was a relative or a horse.' She grinned. 'I rather liked her. Isn't she the one you do book club with? Maybe give her a ring?'

'Yes. Yes, I will.' I flew to find my phone on the overflowing dresser, riffling in panic under papers and bills and soap wrappers, rotting fruit in the bowl.

'What's this, by the way?'

I turned, mid-riffle. Lucy was gingerly extracting a purple thong with a fingertip and thumb from a pile she'd found on the table.

'What d'you think it is? I'm branching out from the gents' boxers into ladies' stuff. Is my phone under there?' I dived beneath the towering pile of lingerie.

'Why so sparkly?' She peered at the encrusted sequins on the front.

'Because it excites the gentleman friend, I imagine – or maybe it excites the lady as she's trollying round boring old Tesco's – I don't know, use your imagination. Ring my phone, would you, Luce?' I patted my pockets, glancing about the chaotic kitchen.

'And you're charging nineteen pounds fifty?' She blinked at the price tag in astonishment.

I snatched it. 'OK, so make that Waitrose.'

She dropped the thong disdainfully back on the pile. 'So the Faulkner family are flogging kinky underwear now, are they? Classy.'

'The Faulkner family will flog whatever it takes, frankly, and if you want to be kept in fresh orange juice, Lucy, I

suggest you come down off the moral high ground and help me find my sodding phone. I need to ring Tia. Where the hell is it?' I swung about.

'Here.' Lucy pulled it out from under a pile. 'But my train is in twenty minutes, Mum, so maybe when you get back?'

Muttering about a child who would rather skedaddle off to London than ensure her mother was not marched from the premises in handcuffs, I seized my car keys. But I stopped short at the back door. Cocked an ear up the back stairs which descended into the kitchen.

'Who else is up?' Distinct signs of life were emanating from above.

'Oh yeah, Minna is, like, awake, but she's in deep negotiation with Toxic Ted.'

'I don't care how deep she—' I leaped to the foot of the stairs. 'Minna? MINNA!' I yelled. 'Get down here and take your sister to the station, I've got better things to do!'

Silence, obviously.

'Go and get her,' I snapped furiously. Lucy had already slunk past me. 'And please ask yourselves why your lives are so much more important than mine!'

When they came down, Minna looking thunderous with a coat over her pyjamas and Uggs on her feet, I'll admit I was going for the sympathy vote. I sat slumped at the messy kitchen table, an array of bright red final demands and the bailiff's letter spread out before me on the undies, head in hands.

'Why can't Nico?' she snarled.

'I imagine he's still asleep.'

'Golden Boy.'

I ignored her and they slunk out to the car together, no doubt discussing how impossible I was. I raised my head. Or maybe not? I was so insignificant these days they were

probably already on to Toxic Ted, Minna's on-off boyfriend with whom she was in the process of splitting up, or actually, the other way round. I listened to the engine. Knew it wouldn't start first time. It didn't. They waited. The third time it fired, but only because they'd rested it between the second and third try for precisely three minutes. Which meant – I glanced at the clock – they'd now be late. I ran outside as Minna executed a smart three-point turn in the yard. 'And don't race! So what if you have to get the next train? Don't race like idiots to catch it!'

Two pairs of bored, blank eyes, one lightly and beautifully made up, the other red-rimmed and tearful, stared back at me. They roared out of the yard, scattering ducks and gravel in their wake, leaving me standing in a cloud of dust.

As I went back inside, something made me look up. A curtain twitched and fell back again. Ah. So Nico *was* up. Just avoiding the fracas. And who could blame him? Nevertheless, out of some sort of warped sympathy for his sisters, I banged around the kitchen, slamming cupboard doors and noisily putting plates in a rack, radio blaring, so that inevitably he came and sat on the stairs behind me, hunched in his dressing gown. Always his favourite spot from which to view proceedings, it had the benefit of spindles for protection, and an escape route back to his room, should the situation demand it.

I made a pot of tea for us, my mind on what to sell next should Nutty, my gelding, fail the vet. Ah yes, the transaction was subject to a vet's examination and report, which scuppered half my sales these days. Megan had only scraped through last year because the new owners had decided to overlook the laminitis and take her for a thousand pounds less, which had left me with precisely eight hundred pounds. I went hot at the thought of losing that amount on Nutty.

A huge, involuntary sigh unfolded from my wellies, which I'd yet to remove. I handed a mug of tea wordlessly to my son. His pale, bony, nicotine-stained fingers reached through the spindles like a Hogarth illustration.

'Why so gloomy, Ma? So theatrically careworn?'

Nicholas, or Nico, the last of my brood, my only boy, regarded me in amusement from under a shaggy, recently peroxided blond fringe. Nothing sleepy about those eyes. He'd clearly been on Facebook for hours.

'We're going to have to move, Nico. It's final now. Lucy says the bailiffs have been back.'

'Ah.' He nodded, unmoved. 'Very David Copperfield.'

I shrugged, matching his composure. 'She says these days they don't come in and nick your DVD player, just politely ask for a cheque. That's certainly all they did last week.'

'And you know they have to come through the door? I Googled it. That's the only entry route available to them now. Doesn't a whole screenplay of other historical routes play out in your head? Accompanied by a seventies soundtrack from *The Sweeney* or something? Kicked-in windows? Smashing glass?'

'Thanks for that, darling.'

'And you have to actually invite them in. Even when you've opened the door, they can't just step over the threshold.'

'I'll bear that in mind. Feed the geese and the horses and the cats, would you? I need to mend that fence in the bottom paddock. Buddy's been rubbing his bottom on it.'

'Well, I'll feed the cat but I think you'll find she's very much in the singular these days. Cleo's buggered off to live with the Nelsons.'

'Permanently? I thought she just popped in and out. I'm sad about that.'

'Cleo's not. She's living on salmon and cream.'

I sighed. 'Well, feed the rest for me, there's a love.'

'And put some drugs in Nutty's?'

'Certainly not! He hasn't been lame for months. I don't sell dodgy horses.'

Muttering about a mare with a persistent cough who I'd moved on last year, and one just before Christmas who he'd test-driven out hunting and who didn't seem to have any discernible brakes, Nico nonetheless took his tea upstairs to get changed, go out, and feed what remained of our stock.

'Also, I opened a lot of your brown envelopes,' he said, pausing at the top of the stairs. 'The ones you hide down the sofa. They made interesting reading. But one was that tax rebate you've been waiting for.' He delved in his dressing-gown pocket and frisbeed an envelope down to me. It landed on the table. I fell on it. Ripped it open. A cheque fell out.

'You can at least get the council tax paid.'

I stared at it. Then I clutched it to my bosom and gazed up at him, starry-eyed. 'Oh *Nico*! Why didn't you say?'

He shrugged. 'I just have. You have to open this stuff, Ma. Not all of it's bad.'

And off he went; tall, skinny and dishevelled, knowing he'd delivered the best news of the week.

I instantly rang Tia and promised her that once it had cleared the money would be hers, to pay whatever bills she thought best.

'All of them,' she said happily. 'Get the lot off your back. Oh, I'm *so* pleased. But Molly, you're still going to have to think about selling. Tax rebates don't fall out of the sky every month.'

'I know.'

'Shall I get Peter to come round?'

Peter Cox was the local estate agent in the office next door to hers on the high street. Kind, avuncular and tweedy, he

was no shark and would, I knew, have my best interests at heart. Get me the very best deal. I hesitated.

'Why not? It's just . . . the animals, Tia. What am I supposed to do with them all? In a cottage? In the village?'

'Who says you can't find a cottage with a few stables? And paddocks?'

'But probably only a two-up two-down if it's got land. And then what about the children?'

'They're huge, Moll, and migrating to London. Couldn't Lucy and Minna share a room?'

'They could . . .' But then they might not come back, I thought, but didn't say it. Also it was premature. Minna was still at college locally. So maybe not destined for London eventually. All her friends were here.

'And if they did decide to stay,' she went on, reading my mind – oh yes, Tia and I had shared a lot of tea and biscuits – 'they could even pay some rent. Most kids around here do.'

'Yes, but not for ages. Lucy's the only one who's got a job, and I can't ask her to send back money like some mother in the Philippines.'

'I'd say Herefordshire is the British equivalent of the Philippines,' she said darkly. 'And let's face it, your own mother would have no such scruples. I saw her just now in town, by the way. She said your uncle had died. Sorry about that.'

I frowned. 'I don't have an uncle.'

'Oh. How strange. Funny name. Custer or something.'

'Oh. Cuthbert. David's uncle. Has he? I didn't know. Not sure I even met him, actually. How sad. But he must have been ancient.' I frowned. 'How on earth did Mum know that?'

'No idea. That famous crystal ball? Perhaps for once it really did give off some information. She was on her way to see you, anyway. Perhaps she got a vibe.'

'Perhaps.'

At that moment a throaty exhaust pipe backfired in the yard, making me glance out of the window. An old black Volvo was pulling in. Ah. Talk of the devil. The woman herself was getting out and going round to open the boot to remove some shopping. 'She's already here, Tia. The eagle has landed. No doubt come to press-gang me into lending a hand at the Hereford show, where she's taken a tent – reading palms, no less.'

'Blimey, remind me to give that a swerve. OK, I'll let you go. Come and have lunch with me next week, though, Moll. We can even splash out and try that new veggie place. My treat.'

'You're on.'

I put the phone down as my mother came beetling across the yard, shopping bags in hand. Her hair was piled up in a sort of mad haystack bun but then, as she said, it befitted her image as Cosmic Pam, which the children had originally called her as a joke, but which had stuck and become, God help us, her professional name. Oh yes, I was lucky enough to have a mother with psychic powers. She paused to stroke Nutty's nose over the stable door and I noticed her eyes were very bright this morning, her cheeks flushed. She turned, headed, no doubt, for the Romany-style caravan sitting in my back garden where she read tarot cards and now, it seemed, palms. I'd let her park it there temporarily a year ago as her own back garden was minuscule, but since one of the wooden wheels had rotted and fallen off last winter, I think we both knew it was moribund and permanent. I didn't mind. In fact, I liked having her close by. And I'd hazard she liked it too. It might even be why she was there. Also, we had rules to prevent the situation becoming a time-waster. She'd breeze on by with a cheery wave first thing and I'd wave back. We didn't

chat and eat biscuits for – ooh, ages – although the children had no such scruples. They were in there a lot, fascinated by their fates.

This morning, however, I wanted a word, and so, apparently, did she. She came straight to the back door when I opened it, and before she'd even said hello, to the point.

'Uncle Cuthbert's died,' she told me importantly as she swept past me. She set her shopping down on the floor and jangled a veritable armful of Gypsy Rose bracelets as she reached for the mug of tea I'd been about to drink myself on the side. 'Thanks, love.' She fixed me with beady dark eyes as she slurped and settled herself down on a chair at the kitchen table.

'I know.' I shut the back door behind her. 'Tia told me. Apparently you've seen fit to spread the word around town before you even told me. And he wasn't even my uncle, Mum, let alone yours. He was David's.'

'Exactly. Your husband's uncle. And he was his only relative.'

'Who was?'

'David.' She gave me those eyes again.

I stared at her for a long moment. Then slowly I sat down opposite her. I had a nasty feeling I knew where she was going with this.

'Mum . . . if you think for one moment . . .'

She raised her eyebrows disingenuously. 'What?'

'I know the way your mind works.'

'Well, it's a thought, isn't it?'

I gaped at her in disbelief. 'Oh, don't be silly,' I snorted eventually. 'Cuthbert's an uncle-in-law, he's not going to remember a woman he's barely met! I'm not even sure I did meet him. And anyway, how do you know he's died?'

'I read it.' She reached in her bag and flourished a copy of

the *Telegraph*. Cosmic Pam had some surprisingly trenchant right-wing views. 'I make it my business to know these things. After all, you never know who might be trying to get in touch.'

'How d'you mean?'

'From beyond.' She jerked her head meaningfully. 'Particularly if they've only just popped off, all sorts of things they might have meant to say. Important to read the announcements.' She set her reading glasses on her nose and peered down at the Court and Social page, which she'd already folded into a neat quarter. 'Ah – here we are.' She cleared her throat and raised her chin importantly. 'Faulkner: Cuthbert James Christopher. Died peacefully at home on April the sixth.' She removed her glasses and looked up.

I blinked. 'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Bit sort of . . . short, isn't it? Aren't they usually much longer? Funeral details? Stuff about flowers? Donations?'

'Exactly.' My mother was making her famous face. The one with wide eyes and pursed lips. 'Interesting, eh? Sort of . . .' She contrived to look concerned, '. . . solitary.'

'No, not remotely. Just succinct. And anyway, even if he doesn't have family, he'll have left whatever he had to – I don't know – friends, a dogs' home, a charity. Something close to his heart.'

The lips became a pucker. A cigarette was placed between them, set alight and inhaled deeply. She removed it and released the thin grey line ceilingwards.

'He might,' she agreed thoughtfully, eyes following the smoke. 'But on the other hand,' she lowered those bright eyes for dramatic effect, 'he might not.'

2

I regarded her, the Wise Woman of the West Country, no less, on her metaphorical throne, my old Windsor chair. I took a deep breath. Let it out wearily.

'I despair of you sometimes, Mother. I really do.'

'Look, love, I'm just being realistic. In all probability you're right, his estate will go to a charity or something, but it could go to his nearest blood relative, and judging by this announcement,' she jabbed it with her finger, 'it doesn't look like he's got anyone else. No children or it would have said so, beloved father of Jimmy and Anne or whatever – so that's you.'

'Oh hardly,' I scoffed, turning to make more tea. 'A niece-in-law. Not much blood there. And actually, Mum, I'm ashamed of you. The poor man is barely cold and you're rubbing your hands with glee, wondering what's in his coffers. Talk about ambulance chasing.'

'I don't think you'll find it's an ambulance I'm pursuing,' she remarked, sotto voce, bending down to pull a packet of digestive biscuits from her shopping bag.

I swung about. 'What?'

'Nothing,' she said hastily, opening them and munching furiously. 'And I'm not being gleeful, just practical,' she continued, with her mouth full. 'The man was ninety-odd, for heaven's sake. Had a rich and fulfilled life. It's not like I've bumped him off.'

'How d'you know he was ninety-odd? How d'you know anything about him?' I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. 'You

haven't been researching him, have you, you dreadful old druid?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' she said, feigning hurt. 'I certainly haven't stalked his deathbed or anything, if that's what you mean, but there's a great deal to be learned through esoteric channels.' She affected a vague, mystical expression.

'And from a computer, by Googling him.' I shoved the cutlery drawer in hard with my bottom so it rattled. 'Frankly, I can't think of anything more vulgar than profiting from a death, Mum. I've had one myself and the mere fact that it could be spoken of in the same breath as money is hideous. Can you imagine if David's relatives had popped out of the woodwork and clustered round? Wondered what was in the kitty?'

'They did,' she said, brushing crumbs from her skirt. 'At least, one or two godchildren did, although you were too grief-stricken to notice. Soon backed off when they realized he hadn't even managed to provide for his family – and I know,' she said quickly, seeing my face, 'that he wasn't expecting to have to do that, at his age, had no reason to think he should have made some clever investments, started a proper pension, I know that, Molly. I'm just saying you've been up the creek for five years now, and getting all pious about a tiny bit of good fortune that might finally have come your way is a bit short-sighted, that's all.'

'Good fortune. You don't know anything about him. Don't know what state his affairs were in.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'I assume you mean Cuthbert's affairs? You are now talking about Cuthbert's estate?'

'No! Absolutely not. Not in that way. I'm just saying—'

'Obviously I've no idea,' she interrupted crisply. 'But when I met him he struck me as a very grand and very civilized old gentleman.'

'You've met him?'

'Of course I have. At the funeral.'

'Oh!' I sat down. Gripped the tea towel I was holding. 'Was he there?'

'Of course he was there,' she said gently.

I'd barely been there myself. Had been in such a fog: such a mist of tears and shock and disbelief, I hadn't rallied at all. I had since. Long-term I'd been pretty good and had kept the children on track – just – making sure they'd got through school and university – well, college, and only Minna – and had kept the farm and my small businesses going, and actually, had felt better as the months and years had gone by, as the self-help books said I would. More recently, albeit rarely, I'd even sat smiling in restaurants with other men, a glass of Merlot in hand. Ghastly. But, no, short-term I'd been a mess. Which was the right way round, everyone said. None of that stoic fortitude for the first few months and then collapsing in a heap later: I collapsed first. To the extent that I barely remembered the funeral. Here, in the village, in the little church in the valley. Barely remembered who came, except that it was full.

'How far did he come?'

'He was living in London at the time.'

'What was he like?'

'Delightful, as I've told you. And very sweet and sad about David. But quite ancient, even then.'

I thought back. 'On two sticks? Sitting with a rug on his knees in the corner?'

'Er . . . possibly.' She looked shifty. 'Although that might have been Albert.'

'White hair?'

'Um, yes, swept back.'

'Oh. OK. Vaguely.' I summoned up a hazy mental vision

of Cuthbert. David's own parents had died in the Boxing Day tsunami ten years ago, on a much longed-for holiday, so they hadn't been there. Oh yes, we'd had our share of tragedy in this family. And I for one would not be profiting from any of it. I roused myself: regarded her sternly.

'Get thee to thy crystal ball, you old witch; I want none of your dark side. Be gone, and get cracking on your pubescent predictions instead. How's that going, by the way?'

Mum had recently been recruited by *Just 15* website to write the horoscope page, something the children and I found hilarious, since she couldn't, in reality, predict the next five minutes, let alone a week in the life of the entire female teenage population.

'Oh, frightfully well,' she beamed. 'Although I'm a little stuck on Taurus. Their celestial circumstances are a bit turbulent this week. Venus is in ascendance and being an absolute madam. But I thought I'd couch it in terms of: "Challenging times ahead, but a great opportunity to assert independence."'

'The boyfriend's dumping them?'

'Precisely.'

She'd got into this slightly bizarre ethereal world the way most people do, apparently, by going to see a medium herself and being told she was 'extraordinarily spiritual'. She'd rushed home, fag clenched between her teeth, thinking she was the Second Coming. 'The woman literally flinched when she touched my hand!' she'd gasped. 'So much electricity, she said!' The children and I had clustered around excitedly to witness her powers and discovered the extent of them was to peer into a cupful of tea leaves which Minna had made, frown and say . . . 'You're in a crowd . . .'

Ignoring our hilarity, she'd persevered. Never one to start small, with a course, perhaps, with fellow budding psychics, or some sort of workshop, she'd gone the whole shebang

instantly, buying herself a tepee in which to read palms – it leaked, hence the caravan found on eBay – and setting herself up as Cosmic Pam, so that practically overnight, there she was – ta-da! – a bona fide mystic. And in rural Herefordshire, what with the recession and unemployment and long winter afternoons, people had many gloomy moments: they needed a bit of hope. Plus Mum didn't charge much and provided tea and biscuits, so they came in their droves, mostly because her news was always cheerful. 'An unexpected pleasure is coming your way!' Vague, too, note: could be a new lover, could be a cream cake. 'Something is definitely on the rise!' Could be a promotion, could be a soufflé. They all left beaming, vowing to return again next week and cross her palm with yet more silver.

I sighed and hung the tea towel on the rail of the old Rayburn I'd never got around to replacing. 'You're a charlatan, Mum. But never let anyone suggest you don't do it with charm.'

'I like to bring a little joy into people's lives,' she agreed, getting up and replacing her packet of digestives in her bag, one of three packs, I noted. Mum lived on digestive biscuits, strong coffee and gin, and not necessarily in that order. Her eye was already wandering to the cupboard where I kept my own bottle so I pre-empted what was coming.

'No, I'm not going to join you at lunchtime for a quick one in the garden, principally because I've got a lot to do today, so if you wouldn't mind sugaring off to your own lair, I've got a business to run here. I've got a couple of hundredweight of boxer shorts to send off in brown envelopes, and that idiot Paddy Campbell is coming to vet Nutty at twelve.'

'Oh, they've chosen Paddy, have they, your purchasers? Well, you won't get a dodgy fetlock past him. Give him a bit of anti-inflammatory – I would.'

'Mum, I'm not drugging my horse to get it through a veterinary examination. I don't know what sort of person you – and Nico – think I am!'

She shrugged as she sashayed elegantly to the door. 'The sort to sell a three-legged gelding to an unsuspecting buyer, but not to take advantage of a real stroke of luck when it comes your way, in the shape of a straight-up, no-wool-pulling inheritance, which if you're not sharpish someone else will snaffle.'

'Well, if it's that straight up it'll come to me in the form of an official solicitor's letter, won't it?' I countered sweetly, to which, I was pleased to note, she looked a bit stumped.

Ah. See? Not so straightforward. Definitely some monkey business going on. There always was with Mum. Nothing downright dishonest – when she read palms or wrote horoscopes she genuinely felt she got a glimpse of the future – but just a little shading of the truth: a little blurring of the facts to work to her advantage. As she wiggled away, hips swinging under her beaded skirt, I noticed her first lucky customer, Ena Mason from the village, already shuffling through the garden gate. I decided her last aside had been interesting: Cuthbert, in reality, probably had a whole host of relatives she wanted me to queue-barge. Mum might be the warmest, strongest, most resourceful person I knew, but she had a nose for a deal and she sharpened her elbows by night with a file. And don't let the Gypsy Rose stuff fool you. She and Dame Fortune might be in cahoots today, but tomorrow she'd be in a blue suit, hair smooth and immaculate, on the forecourt of a Volkswagen dealership in Rainsborough covering for someone on maternity leave. Then on Thursday, she'd be in a white overall stuffing sausages with my friend Anna up at her farm before flogging them beside her in Ludlow market on Saturday. Mum was a grafter. She rolled her

sleeves up and she didn't care what colour they were as long as there was money to be made. She was regarded with awe and not a little terror throughout the valley, and if it was apt to go to her head, only my father, a mild-mannered man who lived solely for cricket and golf, could occasionally slap her down with a firm, 'That'll do, Pam.' We all remembered The Great Terracotta Pot Disaster when a lorryload of frost-resistant urns she'd bought from Greece and flogged locally had promptly cracked during their first winter. Dad had made her refund everyone. Likewise he'd put his foot down when she'd advertised in the local paper to give A-level History tutoring without a GCSE to her name. Her acquisitiveness baffled him. He couldn't understand why the modest amount of money he made from the academic tomes he edited for a publishing house wasn't enough. And surely if the sash windows in their cottage fell to bits when you opened them, well, don't open them. Open the door instead. Mum and Dad were surely from different planets.

Right now, though, my parents' unlikely yet successful alliance was the least of my worries. I swept armfuls of underwear from the table and shoved them into a black plastic sack. Right now, I had other things on my mind. Like how to get the men to whom I regularly sold boxer shorts to buy attractive undergarments for their wives or girlfriends – to this end I added a fistful of brochures featuring scantily clad ladies to my sack – and how to get an absolutely first-class gelding past a totally biased, anally retentive vet. I hurried with my sack and car keys to the door and thence to the village. Any suggestion that I might be a chip off the old block, incidentally, I regard as utterly scurrilous.

Coming back from the post office some time later, having stuffed and sealed and stamped countless brown envelopes, roping in my friend Lauren behind the counter to lend a

helping hand, I got out of the car and encountered Nico in the yard, leading Nutty from his stable. Paddy Campbell's red pickup over by the barn confirmed my fears. Damn. He was early, as usual. I glanced at my watch. Or, OK, on time. And I'd hoped to get Nutty out for five minutes before he came to loosen him up a bit. Not that he needed loosening up, but no gentleman of a certain age wants to trot smartly from a standing start – which was what I could see Paddy was about to get Nico have him do – when they've just opened their eyes of a morning, do they? I hastened across.

'Morning, Paddy!' I cried jovially, hoping to set the tone for the next twenty minutes or so. 'What d'you think of my lovely boy, then?'

'Well, he's an old boy, we all know that, don't we, Molly?' He glanced round as I approached: tall, broad-shouldered and with tousled auburn hair and a narrow, intelligent face. He'd be attractive if he wasn't always so cross and busy.

'Oh, he's got a bit of maturity for sure, but that's what purchasers want these days, isn't it? A reliable sort who's been there, done everything, is always in the rosettes and is not going to spook at the first ditch he sees. No one wants to buy anything under ten these days.'

'He's well over fifteen,' he said as Nico brought him trotting back, jogging beside him.

'Thanks, darling,' I said gratefully, seeing my son looking mutinous.

'No problem,' he replied, dropping the head collar rope. 'Just the first two hours of my revision down the drain with all this bloody animal maintenance. Your loss, Mother.' He slouched off into the house, already rolling a cigarette as he went. *My* loss.

'Anyway, he's a fine-looking horse, don't you think?' I said, keeping a bright smile going. 'Our Nutty? Galway

Nuthatch is his registered name. But he's more like thirteen or fourteen, I agree.'

He ignored me, bending down to feel his legs.

'Nothing wrong with those,' I chortled, wishing the Hiltons had asked for old Charlie Parker instead. He was much more of a pushover, almost bribable with tea and biscuits and a plea to tell his country yarns which went round and round and which we'd all heard umpteen times, before he signed the requisite form and headed off to see to someone's elderly Labrador.

'Cup of tea, Paddy?'

'No thanks. Trot him up again for me, would you, Molly? Nico barely got him out of a walk.'

I gave Nutty a smart tap on the bottom with the end of the rope and we set off briskly up the track, turning at the corner. I smiled delightedly as we came back in an effort to distract Paddy, but his eyes were firmly on the horse's legs, not mine. If he smiled occasionally it would help, I thought irritably. He was so flipping serious all the time, although Anna, with the pigs, told me otherwise.

'Oh no, he's frightfully smiley, Moll, he loves my brood. Thinks I should show my sows, and I might at the county show. He's definitely got a sunnier side. He's probably a bit po-faced with you because you're a horse dealer.'

'You mean the rural equivalent of a second-hand car dealer? The oldest profession in the land besides prostitution?'

'Something like that.'

'I'm a sheep farmer, too,' I'd reasoned.

'Yes, but you hardly ever get him out for those any more.'

'Because he's too bloody expensive.'

'Well, quite. But you can't expect him to beam at you when you're trying to get a dodgy flexion test past him.'

That bit was coming up next, I realized, when I'd come to a grinning halt. Paddy was about to pick each of Nutty's legs up in turn, hold it bent backwards for thirty seconds then ask Nutty to trot smartly off again. On the last leg Nutty faltered slightly for the first couple of paces, as anyone would, I told Paddy, if someone suspended your leg in the air for a protracted amount of time.

Again, no comment, just the pursed lips as he wrote something down on his pad, then a stethoscope in his ears as he went to listen to Nutty's heart.

'I expect that's pounding a bit, mine certainly is!' I told him, wishing I'd thought to brush my hair and put some lippy on before this wretched man came round, criticizing my livestock. God, the Hiltons loved this horse and were mustard-keen to buy him and have young Samantha trot off to pony club shows on him. They were only having him vetted because they were new to the game and every busybody in the valley said they should. In my opinion it was entirely unnecessary unless you were contemplating Badminton. I tried this tack with Paddy.

'Did you ride as a child, Paddy?'

'Of course.'

'Ever had a horse vetted?'

'I very much doubt it. We just rode whatever was in the field, or on offer from friends. I grew up in rural Ireland, don't forget. If anyone bought a horse it was bound to be their uncle's or their cousin's. No one looked too closely.'

'Exactly!' I exclaimed, seizing on this scrap of humanity.

'But Molly, times have changed.' He took his stethoscope from his ears and looked at me squarely. Nice, steady brown eyes in a tanned face. 'The Hiltons are paying me a sizeable fee to examine this horse. I'm not going to lie to them, am I?'

'Good heavens, no! I'm not suggesting such a thing. Not

even suggesting there's anything to lie about,' I said as he lifted Nutty's tail and peered, suspiciously, up his backside.

'No warts. No laminitis,' I assured him and he nodded, agreeing for once. 'I'm just saying in this bureaucratic, litigious world, it's all got a bit ridiculous.'

He dropped the tail and gave me a level look.

'You mean, I'm more nervous about being sued by the Hiltons because I pass him and then he goes lame in a fortnight?'

I shrugged, kept the bright smile going. 'Well . . .' It was exactly what I meant.

'Molly, trust me, I'd love to pass your horse. And I'd love for the Hiltons to buy him and for you to get some creditors off your back and for everyone to be happy.'

'Yes,' I breathed, thinking, now you're talking. In this small valley everyone knew everyone else's business.

'But if he's in any way wide of the mark they've asked me to judge him by, you know I can't do that.'

'But he's not, necessarily.'

He packed his stethoscope back in his bag and made for his car.

'Charlie would,' I muttered as I tailed him.

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that.'

'OK. And I totally take it back. Charlie would be as professional as you are.'

'Quite.'

As he threw his bag of tricks in the back I wondered where in Ireland he'd grown up. I hadn't known that: he didn't have an accent, but I didn't like to ask. I turned to where I'd popped Nutty back in his stable, threw my head back and beamed.

'He's got the sweetest face, don't you think? A really kind eye?'

'He's not bad-looking, I agree. Not as handsome as the one Biddy Price got from the Morgans, though. You were a bit slow there.'

'I was at a bloody trade fair!' I fumed, still furious about that. Typical. When a local couple with a computer business and a yard full of hunters had gone bust overnight, where was I? 'I was in effing Newcastle, buying sodding lavender soap,' I told him.

'Not Provence?' He gave a tiny smile. 'Like it says on the label?'

'Lavender grows in Newcastle too, Paddy.'

He laughed. 'Of course it does.'

'What did she get? Biddy?' My teeth were grinding even as I asked.

'A seventeen-hand hunter out of Barley Clover. Paid three thousand, sold it the other day to someone in the Cottismore for seven.'

Shit. I'd had my eye on that hunter. I knew exactly which one he meant, a lovely type who'd carry anyone over the biggest country. Bugger. I felt faint with disappointment. 'So you'll pass him, will you, Paddy?' I asked anxiously as he got into the cab of his red pickup and slammed the door. Paddy rested his elbow through the open window and broke into the first proper grin of the day, which caused many ruddy creases to appear.

'Now Molly, you know the rules. That's for me to tell my client, Mark Hilton, and for you to find out.'

'Ah yes, of course.' I feigned mock surprise, slapping the palm of my hand on my forehead. 'I clean forgot.' But I was encouraged by the joke and the smile. He surely wouldn't lead me on like this if he was about to fail him, would he?

'Nice to see you anyway, Paddy,' I called through the window, striking what I hoped was an attractive pose in the

yard, hands in the pockets of my faded skinny jeans, the wind in my hair.

'You too, Moll.' Having smartly reversed in an arc he paused to change into first gear. His expression changed too. 'Oh, and by the way, I was sorry to hear about your uncle.'

Without waiting for me to reply, he took off through the open gate in a crunch of tyres on gravel, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

3

I stood there a moment in the empty yard, watching the red tail gate disappear down the lane. Then I turned on my heel and beetled around the back of the house and up the grassy slope to where the wooden gypsy caravan, painted in green and yellow swirls, perched on the terraced lawn. Leaping the rotten steps to the door I knocked, but only in a perfunctory manner. Whatever I'd be disturbing could easily be resumed, and I was bound to know whoever was inside. As it happened, when I burst into the predominately pink, softly lit interior – throws on the walls, fringes everywhere, candles burning – Cosmic Pam was at her table dispensing words of wisdom to a couple of very familiar customers. I stared. Put my hands on my hips.

'I thought you were doing crucial Politics revision?'

'Oh. Yeah.' Nico withdrew his palm from his grandmother's grip. 'I just wondered if Granny had any thoughts on another referendum. You know, in Scotland. It's very topical, Mum, and we've been told to expect a question on it.' He flashed me a grin before slinking past, off down the steps.

'And I thought you were going to help Lucy source some flowers for her shop?' I demanded of Minna, who was curled up on a sofa in the corner, awaiting her turn as she shuffled through some tarot cards, clearly putting the best ones on top.

'I am. I've got a meeting with a guy with a field later. Chill, Mum. Granny and I were just going to have a chat.'

'A field? What – you're going to grow them? I thought you

were going to find a producer for next year? Doesn't Mick Turner grow daffodils?'

'What, and include a middleman? What sort of a family d'you think I'm from?'

'Yes, well, Minna, maybe I'll do your cards later,' said Mum, catching a dangerous look in my eye. Minna sighed heavily, heaved herself wearily from the sofa – still not dressed, I noticed – and shuffled off too. I rounded on my mother.

'Mum, did you tell Paddy Campbell my beloved uncle is dead?'

'I might have mentioned it when I bumped into him outside Budgens, yes. Why?'

'Because I know what you're doing. I know exactly what you're doing. You're building up momentum. Building up a head of steam so that by the end of the week everyone in the village will be consoling me about my uncle who I was apparently so close to, and then the following week, they'll be asking me if I was the nearest relative, and then the one after that, if I was the only *remaining* relative, and after that, whether he'd, euphemistically "remembered me".'

'What nonsense,' she countered smoothly, shuffling the cards Minna had deposited in a heap on the table. She adjusted the strange beaded headscarf she wore around her brow for these occasions.

'*Stop* being such an interfering old bag,' I told her sternly before turning and exiting myself, banging the door shut and falling right over Minna who was perched on the bottom step, and who'd clearly been listening at the door. I ignored her because everyone listened at doors in this family, nothing was ever private, and stalked off to the house. As I went I wished, very fervently, that I lived alone: preferably on a Caribbean island, where I'd run a beach bar, without any wretched sheep, who, having spotted me, were trailing me

along the fence line, bleating piteously, because the grass was still not through and they wouldn't mind a touch more expensive concentrate if I could spare it. I couldn't. At £2.75 a kilo they'd have to wait until their rations tomorrow.

'Granny's got a point,' Minna told me, tailing me at a shuffling trot in her Ugg boots.

I ignored her and hurried on, knowing I had to get some packaging organized by Friday if I was to stand any chance of getting the soap I'd found from a cheap supplier in Gateshead – I might not have got the hunter but my trip to Newcastle had been a success – wrapped in attractive mauve tissue and off to my outlets for the summer season. Oh, and sealed with a sticker Lauren at the post office, who was also a freelance designer, was creating for me with something French-sounding on it. I might tell her to steer clear of '*Savon de Provence*', though, after Paddy's remark, and go for something a bit vaguer. '*Savon à la française*', perhaps. I didn't want to be sued under the Trade Descriptions Act, which I knew was what he'd been getting at. Bastard.

'Hasn't she?' Minna insisted as we hot-footed it into the kitchen, where Nico was on his laptop, presumably back on Facebook, not a folder or textbook in sight. I glared at him and he rolled his eyes and dripped upstairs, like Minna, still not dressed, taking his laptop with him.

'Mum.'

'What?'

'Hasn't she got a point?'

'About what?' I countered, playing for time.

'About Dad's uncle. I mean, if we are – or you are – the beneficiary, surely it's only right?'

'I didn't know him, Minna.' I scooped up armfuls of mauve tissue paper from the dresser and moved them bodily to the table. 'How can that be right?'

'So what?'

'So everything. And, as I've told Granny, if anything's legally due, it will appear, won't it?'

'No, because you have to make a claim. He died intestate. There's no will. Granny's checked. So what you have to do is get in touch with his solicitor, say you're the nearest relative, and claim the inheritance. You'd be mad not to at least try, Mum.'

'And who, pray, is his solicitor?'

'Hamilton and Simpson, sixty-four Onslow Terrace, London SW3,' came floating down from upstairs. Nico, his Apple Mac open on his lap, was sitting in his position on the top step. 'His telephone number's here too, Mum. I'll print it all out and leave it on the kitchen table. Just give him a ring. It's an understandable enquiry under the circumstances. Where's the harm?' He smiled his most engaging of smiles through the bars, looking so much like his father it hurt my heart.

Later that day, when I'd delivered the sticky labels to Lauren, whose house I was supposed to be returning to for book club that night – I told her it depended on how many pieces of tissue I'd cut out, and also that I hadn't read the book, and she said, so what, just come for a drink and a laugh – I wondered if I was in the wrong business. Or businesses. What if I just chucked in all my sidelines and retrained? There hadn't been much call for PR executives in rural Herefordshire – I'd tried – which was why I'd diversified in the first place, but what if, I don't know, I became a nurse or something? Years of training, of course. But might it pay off in the long run? Or a doctor, perhaps. I turned the corner into the lane that led to my house. My fields bordered this lane and I stared forensically as I drove along, mentally checking the water, the lambs, the chaotic fences tied up with bits of binder

twine. My life had essentially consisted of Getting By these past few years, but now that the children were older and possibly about to leave home, why shouldn't I be – no, obviously not a doctor – but a civil servant or something? Like Tia? I'd popped in to see her on the way home and delivered a cheque, and even she – whilst agreeing it wasn't her dream job, and certainly not her first choice – had conceded it nevertheless paid the bills.

'I was a court usher,' she told me as we sat huddled in her little cubicle, one of hundreds in a vast, open-plan office. 'Greeting everyone, showing in the judge and the jury, feeling really rather important. I loved it. And then I was made redundant but offered this.' She hopped to her feet to peer over the partition and see who was listening. 'It stinks,' she whispered, sitting down again. 'And I hated the very idea of it, but who am I to sniff at twenty grand a year with an unemployed husband?'

'Well, quite.'

I emptied the remains of the packet of Maltesers we'd been sharing on her desk and we ate the last ones.

'I mean, obviously reclaiming people's DVD recorders is not top of my career wish list, but most people are reasonable about it when they see it's a woman. It works in my favour.'

'A tiny one at that.' Tia was petite and blonde.

'Exactly. Some bloke carried his own stuff out to my car the other day when he could see I couldn't manage. And his son pumped up my tyre. Turns out he went to school with Tom. Thanks for this, Molly,' she said, popping my cheque in a drawer. 'I'll see it gets there.'

'Yes, but, um, Tia, maybe not for a few days?' My turn to hop up and pop my head over the adjoining, happily empty, cubicles. 'It'll bounce,' I whispered, sitting down again, 'if my rebate cheque hasn't cleared. And I was also maybe

hoping to pay Ronnie for my chicken feed, he's been waiting ages . . .'

'Oh, righto. Tell you what, why don't I email the council, tell them you've come up with the money for the council tax, but there's a bit of a hold-up this end, and they can expect it from me within the next fortnight?'

'Splendid,' I beamed, admittedly part of the reason for my visit paying off, and no one under any illusions, either, I thought as we said goodbye warmly. I liked Tia, and knew from Biddy, her horse-dealing sister of the envy-making hunter, that she made the best of a shit job to keep her family on track, and I knew she liked me too and didn't want to see me disappear down the plughole of life any more than she wanted to join me, so if I popped in and used a little charm to oil the wheels, so what?

Two weeks' grace, I thought gratefully, mentally calculating in my head that I could also pay Anna for the concentrate she'd kindly lent me for the sheep, saying her husband Jim wouldn't miss it for a bit, and perhaps even get Nico's car through its MOT so there was at least some point in him having passed his test. Feeling buoyed up and happy with life, I swung into my yard, thinking I might actually put a saddle on Nutty, who I'd come to love and wished I didn't have to sell, and head off into the hills, taking a picnic lunch with me.

My mobile rang as I came to a halt and, recognizing the number, my heart lurched. I took the call. Sounding really rather upset because Samantha had so set her heart on him, Beatrice Hilton was ringing to tell me that sadly Nutty had failed the vet's examination because of the flexion test, and since they really wanted an entirely sound horse, they wouldn't be buying him. Offering him at half-price, which, frankly, was a complete bargain – this horse would jump a

stable door, flexion test or not – couldn't tempt this woman who lived, I knew, like most people did, and like I used to live when I was a normal person, via sensible rules. Not by the seat of her pants and on the smell of an oily rag. I accepted her commiserations, apologized for wasting her time, and when we'd said goodbye, I moaned low and banged my head on the steering wheel three times, like Basil Fawlty.

When I raised it, eyes full, I'll admit, it was to see Paddy Campbell getting into his van around the far side of my hay barn. I stared, horrified. Then I got out and dashed across, furious.

'What the hell are you doing here?' I barked, thinking I might actually bite him. Take a chunk out of his arm. 'You are absolutely the last person I want to see!'

He shrugged. 'Minna called me. And quite right too. You've got a ewe with mastitis, Molly.'

'I know,' I snarled. 'And I've been expressing her twice a day myself. I don't need some expensive veterinary surgeon, who not only ruins my horse-dealing livelihood but charges like a wounded rhino, coming round here and—'

'She needs antibiotics,' he interrupted. 'And she'll need some more tomorrow.' He tossed me a plastic bag with a syringe and a bottle inside. 'And no, they are not on the house. I don't like treating distressed animals any more than you like paying for them, Molly, but needs must.'

Angrily, he turned on his heel, folded his long legs into his cab and, with a last black look, sped off.

When I got to the kitchen, Nico was at the computer at my desk under the stairs, pressing 'send' on an official-looking document, his phone to his ear.

'It's on its way, Luce.' He was also clearly talking to his sister.

'What are you doing looking at my emails?' I snarled,

circling him like a wild animal, in no mood for anything other than a fight.

'It's the email the court solicitor sent you last week which you hadn't bothered to open. Presumably because you thought it was yet another summons, and which they sent in desperation because you didn't respond to their letter. I imagine that's *under* the sofa, rather than down the side of it. I didn't think to look there. Playing the backwater hillbilly with all these supposed strings to your bow is all very well, Mum, but try not to pass up the main chance, hm? Even Del Boy wouldn't do that.'

I stared at him for a few moments. At length I crept up behind him to look at the screen. 'What d'you mean?' I whispered, peering over his shoulder.

'Sit,' he ordered, getting up. He steered me around and propelled me to sit in the chair he'd vacated. 'And read.'

I did.

Dear Mrs Faulkner,

We act on behalf of the Treasury Solicitor and also on behalf of the late Mr Cuthbert Faulkner, whose estate we are instructed to oversee as trustees. Mr Faulkner died intestate and our preliminary research indicates that your late husband, the son of Mr Faulkner's late brother, was his only blood relative.

Consequently, subject to how your late husband left his own estate, you could conceivably be a legitimate beneficiary. We therefore invite you to make an appointment with us at the above address to proceed with enquiries into this matter and discuss it further.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,
P. D. Hamilton, Esq.
Hamilton & Simpson, LLP

I digested this for quite a few moments. Then I swung around.

'Oh!'

Three pairs of eyes met mine. Nico's, bright blue and victorious, Minna's the same colour, smaller but just as bright, plus my mother's beady brown ones peering around the corner from the hall. I told you, listening at doors is a family trait. She took the cigarette from her mouth and leaned forward to stub it out in a dead pot plant on the dresser.

'Now will you do something about it?' she demanded softly.