TRISHA ASHLEY

Wedding Tiers

AVON

Prologue: Ends and Beginnings, 1983

When Josie awoke in hospital, unscathed except for concussion and an impressive array of bruises, she had no recollection of the crash. Granny, red-eyed but stoical, had to break the news to her.

Somehow she managed to blank out most of the weeks immediately following the accident too, so that when she looked back later it seemed to her that one day she was living in St Albans with a full set of parents and several good friends, leavened with the usual teenage-years angst and a heartfelt, it destined to be forever unrequited, passion for Sting, and the next she was being whisked off alone to Granny's cottage in Lancashire, to start a new life.

'It's just thee and me now, flower,' Granny was all too often to remark, though with the best of intentions. But it wasn't likely that Josie would forget *that* fact, even if amnesia and anger were her current first lines of defence. For she was totally and illogically furious, both with her parents for so selfishly getting themselves killed, and with poor, grieving, gentle Granny for being truly ancient, so that Josie was convinced that she would also soon be snatched away, leaving her totally bereft.

It would be better to love no one, to feel nothing at all – much safer.

All that summer, she silently and sullenly followed Granny around the garden while she hoed, dug, planted and harvested,

or helped Uncle Harry (who lived next door and was not a real uncle, only having married Granny's cousin) to tend the poultry. And slowly Josie began to gain some comfort from the cycle of cultivation, the clucking hens and the drowsy, contented humming of bees; while across the Green, the ancient church bells repeatedly rang a joyful wedding peal, a signal that hope and happiness still existed and might one day be hers again.

Only in the evenings, lying in her narrow bed among the transplanted possessions of her former life, the mournful screams of the peacocks next door in the gardens of Blessings would pierce right to her heart with unbearable sadness, and she would put a pillow over her head and weep.

She didn't take the bus to her new school on the first day. Instead, Uncle Harry drove her there in the yellow Vauxhall Cavalier that was his pride and joy. And then, embarrassingly, he and Granny both stood at the gates like the oldest parents in the world while Josie went on alone. She turned once, and they waved at her, as she had known they would: it was comforting but deeply uncool.

Catching sight of her, a passing youth – tall and broad-shouldered, with floppy, light brown hair – stopped dead and gave her a big, drop-dead-gorgeous smile. Suddenly breathless, she gazed into his warm hazel eyes, and it was as though she already knew she'd found a kindred spirit, a soul mate – recognised that fate, having taken love away with one sweep of the dice, had then, fickle, tossed her a perfect six.

'Hello!' he said, his voice deep, friendly and confident. 'I'm Benjamin Richards – but you can call me Ben . . . or anything else you like.'

Flustered, she stammered shyly: 'I'm Josie. Josie Gray.'

'Nice to meet you, Josie Gray.' He smiled again before rejoining his waiting friends, who were all nudging each other and laughing.

She was jerked out of her trance by a voice at her elbow saying,

'You've been here five minutes and dishy Ben Richards *spoke* to you? Wow!'

A small, slender, impishly pretty blonde girl was looking her up and down from under her fringe as if she wasn't quite sure what the attraction had been. 'You must be the orphan – only we were told not to mention that.'

'You just did,' snapped out Josie, who had become used to people tiptoeing around her as though she were some kind of delicately balanced explosive device.

The girl shrugged. 'Well, you can't go pussyfooting around things for ever, can you? I'm Libby Martin, and if it makes you feel any better, my mother's an alcoholic slut and I have no idea who my father was.'

Strangely, it *did* make Josie feel better, and she grinned. Then the bell went and everyone started to stream towards the door.

'Come on – Miss Price told me I had to show you where to go and I've got to look after you all week' Libby said O 'God, I'm so glad you don't look half – apart from that terrible haircut.if we're going to be friends; you'll have to do something about it.'

'Granny cut it and I think it looks cool,' Josie said defensively, then added, '*Are* we going to be friends?'

'Oh, I think so, don't you? Probably end up BF.'

'BF?'

'Best friends.' Her blue eyes went wide. 'Where on earth are you *from*?'

'St Albans.'

'Huh.' Libby looked unimpressed – clearly she'd never heard of the place. 'I'll tell you about my big plan at break, if you like.'

'Big plan?' Josie echoed.

'Well, I don't want to be Libby Martin with the slutty mother from up the council estate for ever, do I? So I'm reinventing myself.'

'Great idea,' Josie conceded, suddenly dying to know what her new friend was going to reinvent herself as, and how she intended

to do it. 'What—' she began, but then the bell rang for the second time and Libby grabbed her arm and started towing her along. Practically everyone else had already vanished indoors, including the gorgeous Ben Richards.

'No time now – I'll tell you later, so get a move on or we'll be late. Though come to think of it, I suppose that's OK today,' Libby added, again with an impish smile. 'You're my "get out of jail free" card.'

At lunchtime Libby outlined her plan, which seemed to be directed at leaving Neatslake as soon as possible and marrying a rich man.

'Isn't that a bit . . .' Josie searched for the right word, '*mercenary*? Out for what you can get? What about love?'

'But I wouldn't marry a man unless I *loved* him,' Libby said, looking shocked. 'No way would I do that!' But I'm only going to let myself fall in love with someone well off, who will look after me.'

'Right,' Josie said doubtfully, because this kind of ambition had never cropped up when she'd been discussing future careers with her friends in St Albans.

'But first, I have to get ready to live that kind of life – you know, like in *Pride and Prejudice*, when they keep going on about all the accomplishments you need to be the wife of a rich man?'

'Well, yes, but I think they meant speaking Italian and doing embroidery, that kind of thing, didn't they?'

'Yes, but translate that into the twentieth century,' Libby said impatiently. She dug a notebook out of her bag and flipped it open. 'I've got a list of things I need to learn, like speaking without a broad accent. Mrs Springer, the English teacher, is helping me with that.'

'I like your accent,' Josie said.

'You're mad!' Libby said, then moved her finger down the page and continued, 'Horse riding, tennis, skiing . . .' Here she paused,

uncertainly. 'Rich people do a lot of skiing, but that could be difficult round here. We don't get a lot of snow and the nearest dry ski slope is miles away.'

'Are you sure you need all of those?'

'Some of them, anyway – as many as possible. You can help me.'

'OK, but I'm not mad about horses – they're so big.'

'Don't chicken out on me before we start,' Libby said. 'What about you, what do you want?'

'I don't know, really. My parents thought I ought to . . .' She suddenly trailed off, her voice trembling.

'Look, don't go all wobbly on me!' warned Libby, and to her surprise Josie saw that her new friend had tears in her large blue eyes. 'If you start crying, then I will too, and then everyone will know I'm as soft as butter and I'll be done for. I'm only cool to know because they think I'm hard as nails.'

Josie sniffed back the tears. 'Sorry. My – my parents wanted me to go to university, but I don't know . . . Now I just feel I'd like to stay in Neatslake for ever and help Granny with the gardening and Uncle Harry with the hens. Granny's teaching me how to bake and make jam and stuff too.'

'You can't make a career out of any of *that*.'

'Yes I could. I could be a gardener, and I think I'd like that.' She caught sight of Ben Richards in the distance, in the middle of a group of boys. He was taller than the rest so he was easy to spot.

Libby saw where she was looking. 'Ben's fourteen, in the next year up from us, and he's very popular. His parents wanted to send him to some public school but he decided he'd rather come here with his friends and he's very stubborn. He's brilliant at art – he's done his O level already – but he's totally thick about everything else.'

'I'm sure he isn't!'

'He's good at football,' she conceded. 'I'm not sure how clever you have to be for that, but it makes him popular with the boys too.'

They watched him in the distance and then Josie sighed and said, 'I don't suppose he'll ever notice me again. I suppose it was just because he practically fell over me and I was a new face.'

'Oh, I don't know' Libby said, looking at her thoughtfully, then added immodestly, 'You're not pretty like *me*, but sort of attractive in a different way. I've never met anyone else with hair that really dark red – or eyes that bluey-greyish-lilac sort of colour.'

'Thanks, but I'm not sure I want to be different.' Her eyes returned to Ben, now playing football with a group of other boys. She was also tall for her age . . .

'Ben asked me out once, but I had to turn him down,' Libby said.

Josie turned and stared at her new friend, feeling a pang of jealousy. 'Not part of the big plan?'

'No way.' She shook her head. 'And I think he only asked me because his friends dared him to. They probably told him I was easy, like Mum. Anyway, I don't want to get tangled up with some village boy; I have to concentrate on the bigger picture. I'm saving myself for Mr Right. Mr Rich *and* Right,' she added, then giggled. 'It might have been worth going out with Ben, though, just to see his parents' faces! They're so snobby and stuck up, especially his mother, they'd have had fits.'

'Oh? What does she do?'

'Absolutely nothing, but Ben's father's a hospital consultant and they live up a lane the other side of Church Green, in a converted farmhouse. Ben's already got his own studio in one of the outbuildings, because his mother doesn't like mess in the house.'

'How do you know all this?'

'One of his friends told me.'

'Granny's house is on the Green,' Josie said. 'That pair of cottages by the really old black and white building. My uncle Harry lives next door to us, but he's not really an uncle, he just married Granny's cousin.'

'The old house is Blessings,' Libby nodded. 'It's Elizabethan.'

'Granny says she used to go there to clean, years ago.'

'In that case, don't get ideas about Ben Richards. His parents would probably think a granny who was a cleaner was only one step above a slutty mother.'

'I don't see why,' Josie said defensively. 'Anyway, she was a nurse during the war, but it damaged her back so she took up cleaning afterwards. She still gets a bad back sometimes, but that's probably just because she's really, really old. My mother was a nurse too, and my dad was a policeman. We lived in a police house in St Albans.'

'Well, doing start crying again, or you'll set me off,' Libby said briskly.

Josie gave a watery smile. She'd got the measure by now of Libby's kind heart under her sometimes brusque exterior, and her friend's lovely blue eyes were, indeed, brimming again with sympathetic tears.

'A dad who was a policeman is at least a couple of rungs up from not knowing who your father is – and my sister, Daisy, doesn't know either, except that we have different ones,' Libby pointed out. 'Maybe it's better not to know.'

Libby left the bus before her new friend, at the other end of Neatslake, but Ben Richards and a couple of other boys got off when Josie did, suddenly swinging down the spiral stairs from the upper deck as the bus stopped, and jumping off first.

She didn't think he'd noticed her, but as she turned the corner toward Church Green, he fell into step beside her as if he'd been waiting for her. Which he had.

'I hear your granny makes the best cakes in Neatslake,' he said, with that warm, irresistible sideways smile, and Josie felt the glacier around her heart crack into a million fragments and melt away.

* * *

'Well, that's going to put the cat among the pigeons,' Granny said thoughtfully when Ben had finally – and reluctantly – gone off home, full of cheese straws hot from the oven and several slices of butter-rich fruitcake. 'But he seems a nice boy – considering.'

'Considering *what*?' Josie demanded, coming out of a pleasant trance. Her mouth ached a bit from all the smiling she'd done this afternoon, and she wondered if her face muscles had atrophied over the last few months from disuse. She got up and looked at herself in the small, cloudy mirror beside the coat pegs, but it was about as much good as a reflection on water, all ripply.

'If you two are going to be friends, I don't think Ben's parents, especially his mum, will be too pleased about it.'

'I've heard she's a snob, Granny. Do you know her?'

'Oh, yes. Many's the time Nell Slattery's sat here in the kitchen with your mother,' she said unexpectedly. 'They did their nursing training together and started working at the same hospital together too, and they were quite good friends in those days.'

Josie frowned. 'So why won't she be pleased if me and Ben are . . .' she blushed, 'friends.'

'Well, flower, for one thing her husband is a consultant pathologist and the very instant the ring was on her finger she chucked the nursing and most of her old friends with it, and got Ideas. And for another – well, her husband fell for your mother first, you see, and Nell got him on the rebound.'

'Ben's father once went out with *Mum*?' Josie said, amazed.

'No, she didn't have any fancy for him, but he pestered her until she met your father and they got married – then he turned and wed Nell instead. Since then she pretends she's never met me if we pass in the village. Cleaners are below her notice. Though I suppose,' she added with humour, 'if she *really* didn't, she'd be trying to employ me!'

'There's nothing wrong with having been a cleaner,' Josie said loyally.

'No, I'm not ashamed of having done good honest work, but I was proud of your mother, getting her nursing qualifications. And she was so pretty too. You look just like her at that age, Josie.'

'But *I'm* not pretty,' she said, surprised.

'Of course you are.'

'Josie shook her head definitely. 'No, I'm not. Libby Martin, my new friend at school, said she thought I was *unusual*. Libby really is pretty – small and blonde and slim.'

'Isn't she Gloria Martin's younger daughter? The talk of the village, that one is!'

'Libby isn't like her mother,' Josie said definitely.

'I don't suppose she is. Neither of the two girls has had a bad word said about them,' agreed Granny fairly. 'The older one is apprenticed to a hairdresser and doing well. What's she called? Some flower name.'

'Daisy, I think,' Josie said. 'So, can I invite Libby to come round here sometimes?'

'Yes, of course you can.'

'Cool!'

'I'm glad to see you making friends already, though I didn't think you'd be starting with the boys quite so quickly!'

Josie blushed. 'Ben's just being nice. I mean, it's not like he's asked me out. He *did* ask Libby out once but she turned him down.'

'Quite right too. At your age, friendship is better,' Granny said firmly. 'I don't mind him coming here to see you, but no goings-on.'

Josie blushed furiously. '*Granny!*'

Later, in her room, she took the framed photograph of her parents out of the drawer where she'd hidden it away and looked from her mother's smiling face to her own serious one in the dressing table mirror. Her mother *was* pretty, even with laughter lines and a bit of extra weight plumping up her cheeks, but

Granny was just being kind, for surely her eyes had been bluer and her skin less sallow than Josie's own?

Then she tried to remember what colour her father's eyes had been, but already the memories were fading, along with the first sharp edge of pain and anger.

As the years passed, she forged a bond of hopes, dreams and laughter with Libby and moved seamlessly from friendship into love with Ben. But, deep down, she never quite lost that slight feeling of insecurity, the fear that those she loved might just be snatched away from her at any moment.

And she always hated the cry of peacocks.

Chapter One

Cakes and Ale

The Artist has gone off to London again, for the opening night of an exhibition that includes his work. The source of his inspiration may come from the countryside, but these increasingly frequent trips to the metropolis are yet another necessary compromise to our way of life.

We aim to be as self-sufficient as possible – and still the twenty-first century constantly intrudes. Realistically, we're doing well if we can strike and eighty/twenty balance! Even this diary is now written directly onto a laptop and emailed straight off to the editor of Skint Old Northern Woman magazine, just one example of the constant contradications involved. And, of course, many of you now subscribe to the online version.

But it has to be admitted that the Artist has a weakness for all kinds of gadgets and bits of technological wizardry that I don't share even when, with the best of intentions, he presents me with something like a breadmaking machine, which he is sure will make my life easier . . .

'Cake and Ale: the musings of a backyard good-lifer'

The sun was making a brave attempt to warm a dank and fuzzy mid-October morning when Ben, looking as big, tousled and wholesomely delectable as always, turned on the doorstep to say goodbye.

'Oh, I *wish* you didn't have to go,' I said, putting my arms

around his neck to pull him down to kissing level. Honestly, you'd think he was going on some exotic foreign trek into uncharted territory, rather than to stay with old friends in London for a couple of days. I really must get a grip! But these moments do sweep over me occasionally, because when you've been orphaned as a child and then lost the grandmother who brought you up, it's hard not to be afraid that fate might also decide to snatch away the person you love most in the whole wide world.

'You know I wouldn't go if I didn't have to, darling.' Ben enfolded me in a reassuring if asphyxiating hug, like a good-natured grizzly bear.

'Liar, liar, your bum's on fire!' I chanted rudely. 'You're loving your bit of fame, admit it. These days there's a glint in your eye and a spring in your step every time you set off for London.'

He grinned, though guiltily, his fair skin flushing slightly. 'Perhaps – but aren't I always more than happy to be back home again, with you?'

'Maybe,' I conceded, because it was true that he always came back exhausted and more than ready to slip back into the old, familiar rut as if he'd never been away – until the next time. 'But then, maybe you're just missing your home comforts?'

'*You're* one of my home comforts,' he said, squeezing me again and then letting me go. 'I'll ring you as soon as I get to Russell and Mary's flat – promise.'

'That's OK, I don't really think anything awful will happen to you between here and Camden, unless things have changed radically since I last came with you.' I paused reflectively, trying to remember when that was, and then added in surprise, 'Do you know, that must be more than a year ago!'

'Is it?' he said. 'It doesn't seem like that long.'

'No, the time has just flown. I feel I'm losing touch with Mary too, and we used to be such friends, but now if I phone she's always about to go out and never rings me back like she says she

will. I really *must* find someone who would look in on Uncle Harry and walk the dog, so I could start coming with you again.'

'You know Harry's too independent to let anyone else keep an eye on him and too frail to leave on his own,' Ben pointed out patiently. 'Anyway, you'll be much happier here, doing something with all those baskets of apples and pears Dorrie keeps giving you.'

'Actually, I always enjoyed my trips to London, catching up with everyone and visiting my favourite places,' I protested, which was true, especially when Libby was in town so we could meet up. 'But you're right, there's a huge amount to do here at the moment. I'm appled out and I still need to get the last of the marrows in, make green tomato chutney and start pickling beetroot – plus I have a really tricky wedding cake to finish icing. It's just that I do miss you when you're away.'

'And I miss you too, darling,' he said, but absently, looking at his watch. 'I'd better go – speak to you later!'

He gave me a kiss and then off he strode across the Green towards the High Street and the bus to the station, swinging his overnight bag, while I mopped a weak and pathetic tear from my eye with the belt of my blue towelling robe and summoned up a bright smile in case he turned round to wave.

He didn't, but that was probably because Miss Violet Grace whipped around the corner on her tricycle just as he reached it and he had to take sudden evasive action.

A collision was averted and Ben vanished from sight. Spotting me, Violet veered rapidly in my direction, the bobbles of her gaily coloured Peruvian-style knitted helmet flying in the breeze.

'Isn't Ben an early bird?' she called, coming to a sudden halt in front of me, so that her hat fell forward over her eyes. She pushed it back and peered upwards, and what with her mauve lipstick, pale complexion and fringe of silvery hair, she would have looked quite other-worldly had it not been for the faint flush on her cheeks engendered by pedalling hard. 'Off to London again, is he?'

'Yes, and I would have driven him to the station in the van, but he insisted on catching the bus. At least, I *hope* he's caught it, because I held him up a bit,' I said guiltily.

Violet had been to fetch the newspaper from Neville's Village Stores. However hard she and her two elder sisters might find it to make ends meet on their pensions, their father, General Grace, had always had *The Times*, so it was unthinkable to them that they could possibly start the day without it.

'Ben is a brilliant artist – *The Times* said so.' She looked doubtful, though willing to believe anything written in that august organ. 'I thought I would just pop across to remind you that there is a wedding at St Cuthbert's today – ten thirty. Will you be there, dear?'

The Three Graces and I are all wedding junkies, lurking outside the church as the happy couples emerge, although this was a habit I had so far managed to keep from Ben, who was stubbornly anti-Establishment in the matter of legal wedlock. He hadn't always been so adamant about it; it sort of came over him by degrees while he was a student.

'I'll try, but I have a wedding cake to ice and more green tomato chutney to make. I'll put some in your fruit and veg box later, shall I? And did you say you wanted some frozen blackberries? I've got loads.'

'Lovely,' she agreed, preparing to cycle off, 'yes, please. Dorrie Spottiswode's giving us some apples, so we can make apple and bramble pies. Pansy's knitting her a tam in exchange, from some leftover mohair. We thought that was about equal value in Acorns.'

Pansy isn't some kind of ingenious squirrel – Acorns are simply a unit of currency I devised a few years ago, to help a little group of us to swap produce and services.

'You can have the latest copy of *Skint Old Northern Woman* magazine too. I've read it. And I must finish off the next instalment of "Cakes and Ale" and get it off to them,' I added guiltily.

My deadline was always the twentieth of the month, which wasn't that far away.

'Righty-oh, see you later!' Violet cried gaily, and then cycled off round the Green to Poona Place, leaning forward over her handlebars, earflaps flipped backwards like psychedelic spaniel's ears, while I, suddenly shivering, went back inside.

In the kitchen, under a tea towel, Ben had arranged root vegetables and green tomatoes into a heart shape and added a carrot arrow.

It was a pity he'd created this earthy symbol of our love on the immaculately clean marble surface dedicated to making my wedding cakes, but it still made me smile.

Later, sitting in our cosy living room overlooking the garden, logs burning in the stove and a glass of Violet's non-alcoholic but fiery ginger cordial by my elbow (three Acorns per bottle), I was trying to wrap up the latest episode of my long-running 'Cakes and Ale' column for the alternative women's magazine.

I'd written the obligatory 'what's-happening-with-the-garden-and-the-hens' bit, describing September's mad scramble to get all the fruit and vegetables harvested and stored, clamped, preserved or turned into alcohol, processes that were still ongoing, if not quite so frenetic. Some things, like the elderberries, were quite over and well on the way to being turned into ruby-red wine.

I do love the season of mellow fruitfulness, and there's nothing quite so blissful as having a larder full of pickles, chutneys and preserves, crocks of salted beans and sauerkraut, and wine fermenting gently by the stove . . . So maybe *I* am the squirrel and that's why my subconscious decided we would call our barter currency Acorns!

Anyway, I finished that part of the article off with Ten Delicious Things to Do with a Plum Glut' (crystallised plums – oh, be still, my beating heart!) and then, after an eye-watering gulp of ginger

cordial, embarked on the philosophising section, my reader's favourite:

> If we are not quite living off the fat of the land, as self-sufficiency guru John Seymour once put it, we are at least utilising the cream clinging to the edges. And *what* cream, cheese and yoghurt there has been recently, provided by friends who keep goats, and a Dexter cow or two, at their smallholding on the outskirts of the village . . .

Mark and Stella, our friends with the smallholding, are a much older hippie couple, and I've often wondered whether Ben and I were behind the times or ahead of them when, as teenagers, we dreamed of one day being self-sufficient. Whichever, I was more than happy that the way we lived was suddenly very trendy and aspirational so that the magazine, and especially my column in it, had something of a cult following. I love to share – ideas, inspiration, tips, food . . .

Granny and Uncle Harry were a great early influence, managing to produce practically all their own fruit, vegetables and eggs, plus the occasional hen for the pot, just from their combined back gardens in Neatslake, which is quite a large and pretty village in Lancashire, not far from Ormskirk.

Ben and I had more of a country smallholding in mind, even if we were hazy about how we could ever afford it – unless Ben's paintings began to sell really well, of course. That was the dream: we would work our plot together, and he would paint while I baked and bottled and preserved. It sounded such bliss!

But just as Ben was finishing off the final year of his post-graduate course at the Royal College of Art in London, and I was living with him and helping make ends meet by working in a florist's shop, Granny suddenly died and left me this cottage.

Since she'd taken me in at thirteen when I was orphaned, and was my only remaining blood relative, I was absolutely devastated.

It brought back lots of long-forgotten memories of my parents and how I felt after I lost them . . . and I know all this orphan business sounds a bit Charles Dickens, but I can't help that – that's the way it was!

But I couldn't contemplate selling the cottage, which was my home as well as a link with Granny, and nor did I want to leave Harry, of whom I was very fond, to cope alone. But then, I didn't want to be parted from Ben either!

I expect I was a bit neurotic, needy and tiresome for a while, but Ben was always there for me, in his strong, silent way. And in the end he came up with the solution, suggesting that he go back and complete the last weeks of his course alone, and then we'd settle down together in Neatslake.

Despite it being Ben's idea, his parents never forgave me for dragging him back from what they were convinced would have been instant fame and fortune in London; but then, they've never thought me good enough for him anyway. At one point they even threatened to cut off the small allowance they were making him, though they changed their mind. I thought he should tell them to stick the allowance where the sun don't shine as a matter of principle, but he wouldn't, so we had one of our rare arguments. I've never used any of the money – it goes straight into Ben's account to pay for art materials and CDs and all those gadgets that mean so little to me and so much to him.

But his parents were wrong, because here we still were, living a version of our dream on a slightly smaller plane than we'd envisaged, perhaps, but none the less very happy, for all that. Perhaps one or two things hadn't worked out how we planned . . . though as Ben said, as long as we had each other, nothing else really mattered.

And luckily, it was all the compromise involved in trying to balance living a greenish life in the middle of a village, against earning enough to pay the inescapable bills, that interested the readership of *Skint Old Northern Woman* magazine enormously.

While they didn't pay a lot for my articles, it formed a regular part of my income, and then the icing on the cake came, quite literally, from my hand-modelled wedding cake business, catering for the alternative market – sometimes *very* alternative:

JOSIE GRAY'S WEIRD AND WONDERFUL WEDDING CAKES
Do you want something different? Original? Personal? Truly unique?
Josie Gray will design the cake of your dreams!

Or at least it had formed the icing, until Ben had won a major art prize about eighteen months previously, and his work began to get the recognition it deserved at last *and* fetch much greater prices.

Looking back now, I suddenly had an uneasy feeling that the equilibrium of our lives and subtly changed at that point . . . but maybe I was being over-imaginative?

Ben bought me a shiny, expensive breadmaking machine to celebrate his win, which he said would take away all the endless kneading. Though, actually, I always rather enjoyed doing it, going off into a dreamy trance and forgetting time, which made for *very* light bread.

But that, and one or two other little gadgets he'd brought back for me from London, seemed against our whole ethos, though it could be that I was unsettled by them because I simply didn't like change. It made me uneasy. I just wanted us to go quietly on as we always had, happy as pigs in clover.

The wood-burning stove crackled quietly and nearby a door slammed, waking me from my reverie. The top of Harry's felt hat appeared as he shuffled slowly down his garden, hidden by the dividing fence, to feed the hens.

There was an arched gateway between our two plots so we could both come and go freely, for though Harry was nominally

in charge of the hens, we shared our gardens and what grew in them. But these last few months, as Harry had grown increasingly infirm after a fall, it seemed I was doing the lion's share of the work.

Ben used to do most of the heavy digging, but lately he'd either been shut up in the wooden studio at the end of the garden, built against the tall stone wall separating us from the grounds of Blessings, or he was in London.

Each time when he got home and enfolded me in a big, warm hug, swinging me off my feet and telling me he loved me, it *almost* made up for his absence . . . but not quite.

I looked down at the laptop and sighed heavily, having totally lost the thread of what I was going to say to finish off.

The little wicket gate between the two gardens squeaked open and Harry came through, followed by his sheepdog, Mac. Harry carried a hoe in one hand and a stout walking stick with a ram's-horn handle in the other, and I had to give him full marks for effort even if I expected to find him lying full length among the brassicas one of these days. *And* there was the problem of his failing eyesight, so that half the time he was nurturing seedling weeds and tossing the veggies onto the compost heap . . . Still, that wasn't too much of a problem in mid-October, and he was heading for the pea and bean beds, which needed clearing anyway.

Behind him, stepping delicately, followed the pale, speckled shape of Aggie, the escapologist hen. The others were all fat, cosy, brown creatures, whom I couldn't distinguish apart – and didn't want to, since they were quite likely to end up on my plate. But Aggie, with her inquisitive nature and skill in escaping from enclosed places, was different, and Harry was forbidden from even *thinking* of culling her, whether she deigned to lay eggs or not.

Opening the door I called, 'Tea in twenty minutes, Harry?' and he made a thumbs-up sign.

I went back in, took another look at my notes, and then rattled

off the rest of my article, before changing all the names as usual. Even though I never tell anyone's secrets, or gossip about local people, I wouldn't feel half as free to write what I wanted if everyone knew it was me, and where I lived!

Then, with a click of a button, I sent it on its way to the magazine.

It was then I suddenly remembered that in the summer, after one of my cakes had featured in the coverage of a terribly smart local wedding, *Country At Heart* magazine had contacted me. They were interested in the way I combined my wedding cake business with the self-sufficiency too – but, of course, they didn't know I was the author of 'Cakes and Ale' in *SONW* magazine, and I didn't tell them!

They interviewed me by email and telephone, and then sent a photographer to take some pics, but I hadn't heard anything since, so perhaps they'd thought better of it, or found someone more interesting to feature.

'Our Sadie's been after me to up sticks and go and live in New Zealand with them again,' Harry said, selecting a ginger biscuit from the tin after careful inspection, and then dunking it in his mug of tea. A bit crumbled and fell, but was neatly snapped up before it hit the floor by Mac, who lunged silently shark-like from under the table and then retreated again. 'She's sent me a photograph of the extension they're building onto the side of the house, like a little self-contained flat.'

'Granny annexe, they call them. She's obviously very keen for you to go, Harry,' I said brightly, trying to sound encouraging, even though I would miss him dreadfully if he did go.

'She says I should *want* to live near my only daughter and grandchildren, but it was her chose to go and live on the other side of the world in the first place, not me! There's no reason why *I* should have to end my days somewhere foreign.'

'Well, I suppose they've made their life there now and the

grandchildren are New Zealanders, and when Sadie sent you the plane tickets and you went out to visit, you had a great time.'

'Liking the place for a holiday isn't the same as wanting to live there, away from all my old friends.'

'I suppose not,' I agreed, though since Harry's old friends were popping their clogs with monotonous regularity, a fact he pointed out with some relish from the obituary columns in the local paper, that wouldn't be an argument he would be able to use for very much longer. The group of cronies he met in the Griffin for a pint of Mossbrown ale most evenings had reduced to three, one of whom had to be helped up the steps to the entrance.

Harry seemed to realise this himself, for he added morosely, 'Not that they aren't dropping like flies anyway. But *I'll* die here, in my own place – and when I've gone, you make sure and give that tin box of papers and medals to Sadie, when she comes over for the funeral.'

'Of course I will – but I hope not for a long time yet, because whatever would I do without you?'

'Time catches us all in the end, lass. You'll find my will in the box too. Sadie'll get most of what I've got to leave, of course. Blood's thicker than water, and you can't get away from that, even if *you've* been more of a daughter to me than *she* has.'

'No, of course not. I'm only distantly related to you through marriage,' I agreed, because Granny and Harry's wife, Rosa, hadn't even been first cousins, so I hadn't been expecting him to do anything else. It was true that I'd been spending more and more time looking after him, but then that was only fair, seeing how much help he gave me and Ben when we moved back here after Granny died. Anyway, I loved him, and he and Granny had been such good friends, widow and widower, understanding each other.

Harry was still wearing his battered felt hat, which I rarely saw him without, though in times when he was pondering some

weighty matter he would run his earth-stained finger around the inside of the band, as now.

'I saw a piece in a magazine at the doctor's last week,' he said. 'It said how I could claim a medal for the six months of minesweeping I did right after the war. There was an address to send to – I ripped it out. The receptionist said I could.'

He produced a much-folded piece of thin paper from his pocket and handed it to me. 'What do you think of that?'

I read it carefully. 'Yes, why not? You're entitled to it, aren't you? It did seem so unfair to me, that after being in the navy in the Far East and fighting on for longer than lots of other people, they made you go and do something even more dangerous for six months before they let you demob!'

It was only in the last couple of years that Harry had started to talk about his war service in the navy. A quiet, sensitive man, what he had seen and experienced had harrowed him and driven him into himself, especially after he lost his wife.

'There was never anything fair about the armed forces, Josie. You did what you were told, or else! But having to go minesweeping when I wanted to get home to Rosa – well, that was a bit of a blow. And it was dangerous work. You never knew when a mine was going to go up and take you with it, and in those little wooden boats we wouldn't have had a chance, we all knew that.'

'It sounds dreadful, and you've certainly earned your medal!'

'So you really think I should apply for it, then?'

'Definitely – another one for the grandchildren. Do you want me to write the letter for you?'

'No, that's all right, I'll do that, but you could take it to the post office later.' He began the painful task of hauling himself to his feet, but I knew better than to offer him any help.

'I've left you the hens and the piano,' he said abruptly, once he was upright. 'The piano was my mother's and Sadie won't want to ship it out there.'

'Thank you – how lovely,' I said, touched but not at all sure how I would fit the piano into my small house, or the hens and their coop and run into the vegetable garden. The thought of Harry gone and a stranger one day living next door was very disturbing . . .

'Well, there's no need to cry over it, you daft lump,' he said bracingly. 'You're too soft for your own good, you are. Cry if a hen dies, cry over a dead hedgehog, cry every blessed time that Ben of yours goes off to London!'

A peacock distantly wailed from the grounds of Blessings, as if in agreement, even though I thought it was a bit of an exaggeration. I'm not that soft.

I dabbed my eyes with the edge of my sweatshirt. 'Of course I'm not crying, it's wood smoke. That last lot I put in the stove must have been damp. And there's no reason for me to get upset, because you've got lots of good years left in you, Harry,' I said, more positively than I felt, because look what happened to Granny, who was several years younger. And now I had only Harry and Ben – and my friend Libby, of course. But not only did she live far away, she was also rather like a cat in that, though fond of me, she had her own agenda and came and went as she pleased.

'I've got thick vegetable soup on the stove – I'll bring you some and fresh bread rolls later, when I take Mac out for a walk,' I said. Harry is fiercely independent, but I fill his little freezer with single portions of soup, casseroles and all kinds of things, with the heating instructions written on the lids. And I make sure he has fresh bread and biscuits – whatever I've been cooking.

'I like that minestrone best,' he said ungratefully, pausing with Mac on the threshold and letting gusts of October air, redolent with autumnal garden bonfires, into the room. 'Got a bit of news, I nearly forgot to tell you. Mr Rowland-Knowles has put Blessings on the market.'

I stared at him. 'But he's only just moved back in!'

'Yes, but he found that stepmother of his had run the place into the ground. She only used the modern wing and let the rest go hang, and you need to keep on top of these Elizabethan houses or they quickly start to go downhill.' He shook his head at the waste of it all. 'He came round yesterday afternoon and asked me to look over some rotting woodwork and tell him what I thought.'

Harry, who'd been an expert carpenter in his time, has done work in most of the old houses in the area, so that made sense.

'It was in a right state – windows blown in and the rain's made a mess of the floor in one bedchamber, not to mention the woodworm taking hold and the roof needing repairing. The poor man's desperate not to part with it, but he can't afford to put it to rights.'

'That's such a shame!'

'Vindictive. His stepmother had the right to live there unless she remarried, but now she finally has, it's a mixed Blessing!' He grinned, happy with his little joke.

'But what will happen to Dorrie's home if Blessings is sold?' I asked, for Miss Doreen Spottiswode was Tim's aunt, his mother's eldest sister, who now lived in a dilapidated cottage in the grounds and, together with an ancient gardener, did her best to stop the place running completely wild.

'I don't think they can get her out. She'll be like a sitting tenant, I suppose,' he said. 'Mrs Rowland-Knowles never managed it, try though she might, for Miss Dorrie had just as much right to see out her days there as *she* had to live in Blessings. But Miss Dorrie's looked after that garden since she came here to live with her sister, just after she married. She loves it, and it will hit her hard if strangers take it over.' He shook his head sadly.

'I suppose Tim Rowland-Knowles thought about all that before he came to his decision, and there mustn't have been any option, Harry.' I didn't know Tim well, because he hadn't been near

Neatslake since his father died, and not often before that, since he and his stepmother hadn't got on.

But I suddenly remembered the summer when we were fifteen and Libby's game plan (which involved acquiring the skills she thought would be necessary in order to become a rich man's wife) had led her to wangle invites for us to tennis parties at the vicarage. Tim was often there, because the vicar's drippy seventeen-year-old daughter, Miriam, had a crush on him. He's tall and thin, with a shock of untidy white-blond hair and vague blue eyes, and you couldn't imagine him being terribly successful as a solicitor.

At the time Libby was convinced she resembled Debbie Harry, which she didn't, and her efforts to make her cheekbones stand out meant she constantly appeared to be sucking a lemon. As for me, all I wanted was to look just like one of the black-clad female guitarists in the Robert Palmer 'Addicted to Love' video. We were both totally deluded and neither look really went well with tennis clothes, so it says much for Tim's good nature that he directed the occasional kind smile in our direction.

When Harry had hobbled back into the garden I emailed Libby, though I had no idea whether she was in her pretty London mews house or in Pisa, where she had a rather palatial flat complete with a roof terrace covered with lemon and olive trees in huge terracotta pots. Ben and I had been out there a couple of times, for holidays – she'd always been terribly generous and her second husband, Joe Cazzini, who died last year, had been a lovely man.

'You remember when we were at school and were taken round Blessings in the fifth year?' I wrote. 'You said you wanted to live there, and one day you'd have a house just like it. Well, here's your chance, because Tim Rowland-Knowles (do you remember we used to play tennis with him at the vicarage?) has had to put it up for sale . . .'

Of course, I didn't *seriously* think she'd want to buy it! Libby's

plans had always involved shaking the dust of Neatslake off her dainty feet for ever, and her visits here since her first marriage had been mere flying ones, in and out, to catch up with me. No, I was just using the news as something exciting that might break the monotony of my emails to her, because she's not that interested in making jam and mixed pickles.

Her emails were always much livelier than mine and I always enjoyed reading them, though I wasn't jealous of her lifestyle at all. I much preferred my rooted and settled existence to her butterfly one.

But as I pressed 'send', I realised that my roots were feeling frail and threatened, as if they had been undermined by a stealthy mole and were dangling in the air. I supposed all Harry's talk about dying had unsettled me.

I wished Ben – big, solid and as familiar to me as myself – was home right this second to give me a reassuring hug. He was my rock – and I knew that was a trite and overused phrase, but in my case it was true. But then, our life here kept his flighty artistic soul anchored to reality too, and that couldn't be a bad thing.

Chapter Two

Sweet Music

My wedding cake business, creating personalised fantasies in fondant icing, has really taken off recently. They are based on a rich, dark, organic fruitcake covered with natural marzipan, though there is nothing healthy or wholesome about the icing outer layer! Last week, as I finished off a cake in the shape of a magician's top hat, complete with emerging bride and bridegroom rabbits, it occurred to me that this dichotomy neatly sums up the life we lead – eighty per cent healthy and wholesome, and twenty per cent the enjoyable but unnecessary icing on the cake.

'Cakes and Ale'

The next morning found me putting the finishing touches to a violin-shaped wedding cake, and although I absolutely adore creating something new, this one had *really* tried my skills to the limit!

For a start, I couldn't think how to put the arch in the neck, until I hit on the idea of building it in wedges of cake like a bridge, propped up underneath until the keystone piece was inserted to hold it all together.

Now it was neatly encased in white icing, polished smooth with powdered sugar, and with the name of the happy couple and 'IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE, PLAY ON' lettered around the edge, subtly highlighted in edible silver.

The strings had also taxed my brain, until I thought of pulling

white toffee into long strands, then laying them out to harden on greaseproof paper, before attaching them. I was just completing the last of some spares, in case of mishaps, when the front door suddenly flew open, letting in a brisk breeze, which blew it into a bow.

Three Chanel suitcases in descending sizes thudded onto the mat one after the other, closely followed by the petite but elegant figure of Elizabeth Cazzini, alias Libby Martin, my oldest friend.

I was not really surprised to see her because Libby usually comes and goes as she pleases, without warning, but I yelled, 'Close the door!' as the rest of the hardened toffee strings showed signs of rolling off the counter.

'OK, there's no need to shout!' She shut the door and then regarded me with astonishment while I played a losing game of cat's cradle with the last toffee strand before it hardened.

'Oh, well,' I said resignedly, putting it to one side. 'I already have several spares.'

'What on earth are you doing?'

'Putting strings on this violin cake.' I gave her a quick kiss, at arm's length because of my sticky apron, and said, 'Look, just let me fix them into place with sugar paste, and then the really difficult bit's done and I can relax and have a break. Put the kettle on.'

'OK,' she agreed.

With a bit of concentration I managed to attach the strings, then turned to find she'd made two mugs of strong, steaming tea and was rummaging in the biscuit tin. She came up with a pecan puff. 'How many calories in these?'

'I've no idea. But what are you doing here, Libby, and where did you spring from? I wasn't expecting you, was I? I only emailed you yesterday and I thought you might still be in Pisa.'

'I was. And you *should* have been expecting me, after telling me Blessings was for sale! But I can see if the Griffin has a room free, if you can't put me up? And unless you've done something

radical to that Spartan bathroom, it would be much more comfortable anyway,' she added frankly.

'Of course you can stay,' I said, ignoring this slur on my house, which I admit was shabby and comfortable and not terribly modernised. In fact, apart from installing a wood-burning stove in the living room for heating, it wasn't much different from when it was Granny's, right down to some ancient and nameless precursor to an Aga in the kitchen inglenook. 'I just wish you'd let me know. The spare bed isn't made up and it's covered in marrows.'

'How *very* seasonal,' she said, cutting the pecan puff in half and putting the rejected piece back in the tin. Libby is very easy to feed because she will eat anything, but only in tiny, doll's-house portions, which is probably how she retains her figure. 'But it's OK, Josie, I'm going out shortly to look over Blessings – I've got a viewing order – so you'll have plenty of time to sort it out.'

I carefully carried the cake into the larder and came back, removing the headscarf I'd covered my hair up with and the enormous flowered wrap-around pinafore. Freed from the possibility of getting her rather glorious suit stained with foodstuffs, Libby got up and gave me a proper, warm hug that belied her crisp and cool manner, but then I know the real Libby under that sophisticated (and sometimes sarcastic) shell.

'Seriously, Libs, you actually got the first flight back in order to view Blessings?' I asked incredulously, returning the hug. 'Not that it isn't good to see you,' I added hastily.

She sat down opposite me at the big, scrubbed pine table, her forget-me-not-blue eyes open wide. 'Of course! I told you that one day I would like to live there, you said so yourself.'

'Yes, when we were fifteen, and Tim Rowland-Knowles's father let the school take our class round the house, as part of a history lesson, Libby!'

'I remember – the teacher took our class photo in the garden

afterwards and I had a Princess Diana haircut while you were a New Romantic. I'm not sure which one of us looked worse.' She shuddered at the memory, but since she looked very pretty in the photo (which I still have) it must have been the thought of *my* outfit that did it.

'Even then, I didn't think you meant you intended living in that *particular* house, Libs, just one like it.'

'Yes, but that was because I never thought that it would come on the market. It was my ideal. And, if I recall, *you* once said you were going to be a gardener, marry Ben, have two children and live in the country – but just because you never did any of that, it doesn't mean that I can't fulfil *my* dream, does it? As soon as I got your email I contacted the estate agent and then got on the next plane.'

'I *am* a gardener, Ben and I don't need to get married to prove our love for each other, and Neatslake is *surrounded* by countryside,' I said defensively. I didn't mention the children, which, as she knows, just never came along . . .

Libby, not the most sensitive of flowers, took a minute or two to evaluate what she'd just said, and then apologised. 'Sorry, Josie. I take it Ben is still refusing to have any investigations done to see why there are no *bambini*? That man has a stubborn streak a mile wide!'

I nodded guiltily, because I'm sure Ben would have been horrified to discover that I discussed our private affairs with anyone else. He'd always been a bit jealous of my close friendship with Libs and he tended to say things about her sometimes that made me think that, despite having several weird arty friends from the wrong side of the tracks himself, some of his parents' snobbery must have rubbed off on him. That had certainly never stopped him accepting her invitations to holiday at her flat in Pisa, or to take us out to dinner at the flagship Cazzini restaurant near Piccadilly, the first one that ever opened.

'But it isn't just stubbornness,' I explained, 'it's because he's

seen how traumatic the whole IVF cycle thing has been for Mary and Russell, and he doesn't want to put me through that. Anyway, we have each other. That's enough.'

'Yes, I can imagine him saying so,' she commented drily, 'just like when you moved down to London to live with him when he was doing his MA at the Royal College of Art, and he suddenly started saying neither of you need the outdated trappings of marriage to show your commitment.'

'Yes, that was a bit odd, when we'd talked of marrying before. We did row about it, because Granny had old-fashioned ideas about things and it would have meant so much to her if we had got married, but he wouldn't change his mind. But then, he does suddenly get ideas in his head and simply won't change them, no matter what – he always has done. I don't see why he won't agree to a few simple tests, though. I mean, it would be good to at least know which of us has the problem, wouldn't it?'

'Sometimes there is no problem.' Libby said. 'It just doesn't happen. But I agree you ought to explore all the avenues before you give up on the idea.' She changed the subject. 'What have you done to the kitchen? It seems to have a split personality. The left-hand wall has gone all high tech, chrome and utility. And isn't that a second fridge and sink?'

'I suppose it does look a bit strange,' I agreed, seeing it suddenly with her eyes. Most of it was just as it always had been, with jars of wine bubbling round the old stove, herbs, lavender and strings of onions and dried apple rings hanging from the wooden rack over the kitchen table, bright gingham curtains and braided rug, and crocks and pots of earthenware everywhere. But one wall had been transformed into an ultra-modern and terribly antiseptic kitchen workstation.

'It's Health and Safety. Even little home cake businesses like mine need to be checked over and meet standards. There are all sorts of rules and regulations! It's not like the days when I knocked out a few cakes and some jam on the kitchen table and

sold them at the WI Markets,' I said regretfully. 'Once things took off, it seemed easier to convert part of the kitchen to a sort of production line.'

'So, the bride cake business is booming?'

I nodded. 'It *really* took off last year when I was asked to design a cake for the Pharamond wedding, over at Middlemoss, and there was loads of publicity. It was a bit of a challenge, what with him being a well-known chef and cookery writer and Lizzie a keen cook too. They could easily have made their own, except they couldn't agree which of them was going to do it.'

'Didn't she write those *Perseverance Cottage Chronicles* that you used to love reading, all grow-your-own and recipes?'

'Yes, she still does. It was her books that really inspired me and Ben to try and live as self-sufficiently as possible. The cake was quite easy, three tiers in the form of apple pies.'

'Weird. Why apple pies?'

'I don't know, except that she and her husband had some long-running feud about who made the best one. The cake featured in the wedding pictures in *Lancashire Life*, and so did the one I did earlier this year, when Sophy Winter over at Sticklepond married her gardener. That was trickier – one big square cake with knot gardens in the corners, and a circular maze in the middle, with a bust of Shakespeare at the centre. I told you all about the discovery of a link between the family and the Bard, didn't I? Secret documents in a hidden compartment seeming to infer that the Winters were descended from Shakespeare? It was all a bit Da Vinci code!'

'I could hardly have missed the story! But it seems very unlikely to me and it's still not proven, is it?'

'No, I expect they'll be arguing about it for years, but Sophy has built a whole business out of it. They get loads of visitors to the house and garden now.'

'You know her?

'Yes, we got friendly while working out the design for the cake.

She's really nice, and so is her daughter, Lucy. Which reminds me, how is my lovely goddaughter these days? And *where* is she?'

Pia, christened Philippa, is Libby's daughter by her brief first marriage. Her second husband, Joe Cazzini, adopted the infant and doted on her, despite already having grown-up children and grandchildren of his own, but her relationship with Libby became increasingly stormy once she hit the terrible teens. Libby tended to be a bit strict with her and I expect having a young-looking, beautiful and glamorous mother around becomes a liability rather than an asset at a certain age. You could hardly have called Gloria Martin a good role-model for acquiring parenting skills, either, but Libby did her best.

'God knows where she is,' she said gloomily now. 'I text her all the time, but if I get a reply, it's just something like, "AM OK", which she would say anyway, whether she was or not. I thought you might know – she tells you things she doesn't tell me, sometimes.'

'No, I haven't had an email for a few weeks now . . . and I have a feeling then that she said she was somewhere in the Caribbean, on an island.'

'The Caribbean is all islands.'

'No, I meant a *little* island, belonging to someone.'

'Possibly. Once she came into her trust fund at eighteen and I lost all control over her, she could be anywhere. Joe must have been mad, doing that!'

'Well, remember what we were like at that age? We thought we knew it all! You finished your art foundation year and blagged your way onto a fashion course in London, and I horrified poor Granny by often staying overnight with Ben in his Liverpool digs, when he was doing his fine art degree.'

'Yes, but the rest of the time you were living sensibly at home, working in a nursery garden and studying for your horticulture qualifications on day release,' she pointed out. 'And I was *entirely* focused on my future and getting to where I wanted to be. Pia's

quite different – she goes around with a group of complete wasters who seem to have no ambitions at all, other than to have a good time, though she keeps saying she's going to go to college eventually.'

'Well, you did and then you barely lasted a term before you got married.'

'Becoming a student was just a means to an end, to get me to London, and then you have to strike while the iron's hot,' she said, then looked into her mug and reached for the blue and white striped teapot under its knitted hen cosy (one of Pansy Grace's making, in black-speckled white yarn – it looked just like Aggie).

'Phillip was such a sweetie, wasn't he?' I said. 'Once I met him, I knew you were really in love with him. It wasn't just his wealth!'

'Of course not,' Libby said indignantly and I grinned, remembering how I'd asked her when she first knew she was truly in love with Phillip and she'd quoted that bit in her favourite book, *Pride and Prejudice* (which has always been her blueprint for perfection), where Lizzy tells Jane she first knew she loved Darcy when she saw his beautiful ground, at Pemberley!

'I loved Phillip, and I was devastated when he died within a year. And then Joe came along and I fell in love all over again.' She sighed sadly. 'You know,' she confided, 'the trouble with marrying wealthy elderly men is that they've always already signed over their business interests to the offspring of their first marriage, who are usually old enough to be your parents, if not grandparents, and have their own families. So although they've left themselves plenty to live on, there's never a huge legacy for the *second* wife. Neither Phillip nor Joe left me a huge inheritance, but Joe arranged Pia's trust fund with the rest of the family when he formally adopted her – they always considered her one of the Cazzinis, even though she was no more related to them than I was. She's dark like Phillip, though, so she looks like one.'

'Oh, come off it with the poverty-stricken bit. You're loaded!'

'Comfortable, not mega-rich,' she insisted, though she always seems to me to be fabulously wealthy and able to do anything she wants. 'If I buy Blessings, I might have to sell the flat in Pisa.'

'Or the London house?'

'Tricky. Pia mainly uses that as her home base when she does deign to grace me with her presence. And that's good, because when she's in London, she gets taken over by the Cazzini uncles and aunts and cousins, especially Joe's youngest sister, Maria, and they might manage to knock some sense into her head eventually. She's more likely to listen to them than to me. The relations in Pisa are a bit too distant to have much clout. Anyway, I like having a base in London.'

She got up. 'I'll just go and tidy up a bit and do my face, then I'm off.'

'You aren't letting the grass grow under your feet!'

'I can't afford to. The estate agent said there'd been lots of interest in Blessings already, almost all from the actors in that *Cotton Common* soap series that they shoot in Manchester.'

'I suppose there might have been They've been moving into the area, especially round the Mosses, in the last few years.'

'Well, they're not moving into Neatslake,' she said firmly. 'Oh, and is Ben home? I forgot to ask,' she added as an afterthought.

She and Ben had a fairly spiky relationship and I thought he was a little jealous of her. But it wasn't like we didn't both have other friends too, though come to think of it, they were mostly couples, like Mark and Stella who keep the goats, or Russell and Mary. Libby – after Ben, of course – was my *best* friend . . .

'He went to London yesterday.' I looked at the clock. 'He usually gives me a ring about this time, if he can.'

'I hope you gave him a clean hankie and told him not to speak to strange women before he left,' she said tartly, before vanishing into the bathroom, which was inconveniently located downstairs, off the living room. As the door closed behind her I hear her exclaim, 'Bizarre!'

I expect she was impressed by my cherished collection of knitted French poodle toilet roll covers. Whenever the Graces seem to be running short of Acorns, I ask for a new one and Pansy obliges, with whatever wool comes to hand. The last one was in glitzy speckled silver yarn.

The post, including a plastic-wrapped copy of *Country at Heart* magazine with the article about me in it, arrived immediately after Libby had left for her viewing. I almost phoned her mobile to tell her about it, but then thought it would wait.

The pictures were rather nice – one of me wearing a big floppy straw hat, digging in the garden, with Aggie waiting for worms, and Ben in his studio painting one of his three-dimensional creations. There was also a lovely one of Harry sitting in a deck chair under the plum tree, Mac curled at his feet, and a couple of smaller shots of me in the kitchen and the wedding cake I had been making (a fairy cake – lots of fairies).

Then I read the article, and really, I don't remember saying most of the things it said I had! How odd. It all looked and sounded terribly idyllic, though.