

Chapter 1

It was snowing. Fat, fluffy flakes, as large as cotton balls, tumbled from the sky, while dawn struggled valiantly to herald the day through the canopy of dense cloud. Marigold stood by the kitchen window with her cup of tea. A stout figure in a baby-pink dressing gown and matching fluffy slippers, she watched with delight as the landscape was slowly revealed to her in all its glorious softness. Little by little the garden emerged out of the night: the yew hedge, the borders and the shrubs, the trees with their gnarled and twisted branches, all hunched and still, sleeping deeply beneath a luxurious quilt. It was hard to imagine life there in the frozen soil. Almost impossible to picture the viburnum and syringa flowering in the spring. Impossible to think of spring at all in this dead of winter.

At the bottom of the garden, beside her husband Dennis's shed, the apple tree was materializing through the falling snow. With its thick trunk and knobby branches it resembled a mythical creature caught in suspended animation by an ancient spell, or simply petrified by the cold, for it really was very cold. Marigold's eyes caught sight of the feeder hanging forlornly from one of the branches. It was still attracting the odd intrepid bird which fluttered around it in the hope of finding an overlooked seed. Marigold had filled it the day before but now it was

empty. Her heart went out to the hungry birds who survived the winter on account of her feeder. As soon as she'd finished her tea, she would put on her boots and go out to refill it.

She sensed she was being watched and turned to see Dennis standing in the doorway, gazing at her with a tender look. He was dressed for church in a dark blue suit and tie, his grey hair parted at the side and brushed smooth, his beard clipped. He was handsome to Marigold, who still saw him through the eyes of the twenty-year-old girl she had been when they'd met over forty years before. She lifted her chin and smiled back at him playfully. 'What are *you* looking at?' she asked.

'You,' he replied, denim eyes twinkling.

She shook her head and turned her attention back to the garden. 'It's snowing,' she said.

He joined her at the window and they both stared out with equal pleasure. 'Beautiful,' he sighed. 'Really beautiful.' He put his arm around her waist, drawing her close, and planted a kiss on her temple. 'You remember the first time I held your hand, Goldie? It was snowing then, wasn't it?'

Marigold laughed. 'You remind me of that every time it snows, Dennis.'

His smile was bashful. 'I like to remember it. A beautiful woman, a beautiful night, falling snow and her hand in mine. It was warm, your hand. You didn't take it away. I knew I was in with a chance then. You let me hold it. That was a big deal in those days.'

'What an old romantic you are!' She tilted her head, knowing he would kiss her again.

'You love your old romantic,' he whispered into her hair.

'I do,' she replied. 'You're a rare breed. They don't make them like you anymore.' She patted his chest. 'Now go and sit down and I'll bring over your tea.'

‘They don’t make them like *you* anymore, either,’ said Dennis, moving towards the kitchen table where Mac the black-and-white cat sat awaiting him on his chair. ‘I knew I’d caught someone special when I held your hand.’

Their daughter Suze shuffled sleepily into the room in floral pyjamas, a long grey cardigan and bed socks. Her blonde hair was unbrushed and falling over her eyes in a thick fringe, her attention on her smartphone. ‘Morning, sweetheart,’ said Marigold cheerfully. ‘Have you seen the snow?’

Suze did not look up. She had seen the snow. What of it? She sat down in her usual chair beside her father and mumbled a barely audible ‘Good morning’. Dennis caught Marigold’s eye and a silent communication passed between them. Marigold took down two mugs. She’d make Dennis his tea and Suze her coffee, just as she did every morning. She enjoyed the routine. It made her feel needed and Marigold loved feeling needed. Then she remembered they were no longer just three and took down another mug.

‘Oh dear, have you seen outside? Snow! The whole country will grind to a standstill,’ said Nan gloomily, wandering into the kitchen. Marigold’s mother searched hard for the negative in everything and was only truly happy when she found it. ‘Do you remember the winter of ’63?’ She sucked air through her lips. ‘We were stuck indoors for a week! Your dad had to dig us out with a spade. It did his back in, that did. He came out of the war without a scratch but did his back in digging us out with a spade.’ She pulled her dressing gown tighter across her body and shivered. ‘I’ll never forget the cold. Oooh, it was Siberian.’

‘Have you ever been to Siberia, Nan?’ asked Suze in a disinterested tone, without taking her eyes off her phone.

Her grandmother ignored her. ‘We didn’t have the luxury of

central heating like you do, Suze,' she said. 'It was bitter. There was ice on the inside of the windows and we had to run across the garden to use the toilet. We didn't have an indoor toilet back then. You don't know how lucky you are, you people.'

Marigold glanced out of the window. The sight of snow had lifted her spirits. The country might grind to a standstill, she thought happily, but it would look like a winter wonderland.

'Lovely,' said Nan as a cup of tea was duly placed in front of her. At eighty-six her curly hair had turned white, her body was frail and her face as creased as crêpe paper, but her mind was as sharp and focused as it always had been. The years had taken much, but they had not taken that. Marigold gave Nan the crossword from the newspaper, then went to the sideboard to put two slices of bread in the toaster. Nan had moved in with Marigold and Dennis only the week before after months of gentle persuasion and encouragement. She had been reluctant to leave the home she had lived in throughout her marriage and where she had raised her two children, Patrick and Marigold, even though she was only moving a few minutes up the road. She had insisted that she was perfectly capable of looking after herself and complained that she felt as if she was being shuffled into Heaven's waiting room when she wasn't in the least ready to go. However, in spite of her grumbling, she had sold the house for a tidy sum and moved in with her daughter, making herself comfortable in her new room. She had demanded that Dennis replace the pictures on the wall with her own and Dennis had obliged in his good-natured way while Marigold had helped unpack her things and arrange them to her satisfaction. In fact, mother and daughter had rapidly slipped into an easy routine. Nan discovered that she rather enjoyed having someone at her beck and call after all and Marigold relished having another person to look after,

because she enjoyed being useful. She ran the village shop and the post office, as she had done for over thirty years. She also sat on various committees, for the village hall and the local church and the odd charity, because she liked to keep busy. At sixty-six Marigold had no intention of slowing down. Having Nan at home gave her a warm feeling of being needed.

‘Well, I adore snow,’ she said, cracking eggs into a pan.

Nan studied the crossword through her spectacles. ‘The whole country will grind to a standstill, mark my words,’ she repeated, shaking her head. ‘I remember the winter of ’63. Livestock died, people froze to death, nothing worked. It was death and destruction everywhere.’

‘Well, I remember the winter of 2010 and we all managed,’ said Suze, still gazing into her phone.

‘What are you doing on that thing anyway?’ asked Nan, peering at it from across the table. ‘You haven’t taken your eyes off it all morning.’

‘It’s my job,’ Suze mumbled, raking the fringe off her face with a manicured hand.

‘She’s an “influencer”,’ Marigold interrupted, giving Suze a nod, although Suze didn’t see it. Nor did she see the proud though slightly baffled look on her mother’s face.

‘What’s an “influencer”?’ Nan asked.

‘It means everyone wants to be me,’ Suze informed her dully and without irony.

‘She writes about fashion and food and, well, lifestyle, don’t you, love?’ Marigold added. ‘A bit of everything and she posts it all on her Instagram account. You should see it, the photographs are lovely.’

‘Do you make any money doing a bit of everything?’ Nan asked, sounding unconvinced that being an “influencer” was a worthwhile form of employment.

‘She’s going to make lots.’ Dennis answered for his daughter because making money was a sore subject. Suze had turned twenty-five in the summer, but had no plans to move out and get a place of her own, or get what they considered a “proper” job. Why would she want to leave home when her mother made it so comfortable, when her parents paid for everything? The little she earned as a freelance journalist went on clothes and make-up, fuelling her social media platforms, but neither parent was prepared to confront her about it. Suze had a temper, aggravated by a deep frustration at the slow progress of her ambitions. While her older sister Daisy had gone to university and now lived a sophisticated life in Milan with her Italian boyfriend, spending weekends in Paris and Rome and working in a world-famous museum, *she* was stuck in the small village where she had grown up, living at home and dreaming of fame and fortune that never materialized.

‘I make money writing for newspapers and magazines, things like that. I’m building a profile, gathering a following. It takes time.’ Suze sighed, lamenting the fact that old people didn’t understand social media.

‘You modern people!’ said Dennis with a grin, hoping to appease his daughter. ‘Baffles us oldies.’

‘I’ve got nearly thirty thousand followers on Instagram,’ she said, brightening a little.

‘Have you, dear?’ said Marigold, not knowing quite what that meant but assuming it was a lot. Suze had set her mother up with an Instagram account so that she could keep in touch with her daughters. And it did keep her in touch, although she didn’t post things herself. She didn’t much like the mobile telephone. She’d rather talk to someone’s face.

Dennis opened the newspaper and sipped his tea. Marigold was making him his Sunday Special: two fried eggs, crispy

bacon, a sausage, a piece of wholemeal toast and a spoonful of baked beans, just the way he liked it. As she put it in front of him he smiled up at her, his eyes sparkling with affection. Dennis and Marigold still looked at each other in that gentle, tender way that people do whose love has grown deeper with the years.

‘Suze, do you fancy anything?’ Marigold asked. Suze didn’t answer. The curtain of blonde hair formed an impenetrable barrier. ‘I’ll go and feed my birds then,’ she said.

‘They’re not *your* birds, Mum,’ said Suze from behind her hair. ‘Why do you always call them *your* birds? They’re just birds.’

‘Because she feeds them, just like she feeds you,’ said Dennis, chewing on the sausage, and the rest of the sentence *and while she feeds you and looks after you, you can show her some gratitude and kindness* was left unspoken. ‘This is very good, Goldie. Delicious!’

‘They’ll die anyway in this cold,’ said Nan, thinking about the birds and seeing, in her mind’s eye, dead ones all over the garden.

‘Oh, you’d be surprised how resilient they are, Mum.’

Nan shook her head. ‘Well, if you go out like that, you’ll catch your death of cold and you won’t make it to spring either.’

‘I’ll only be gone for a minute.’ Marigold slipped her bare feet into boots, picked up the bag of birdseed which was on the shelf by the back door and went out into the garden. She ignored her mother shouting at her to put on a coat. She was well over sixty, she didn’t need her mother telling her what to do. She hoped she wouldn’t regret having suggested she move in.

Marigold sighed with real pleasure as she put the first footprints in the snow. Everything was white and soft and silent. She wondered at the magical hush that came over the world

when it snowed. It was a different kind of hush to any other. As if someone had cast a spell and stopped everything, suspending the world in a state of enchantment. She trudged through the stillness and lifted the feeder off the tree. Carefully, she filled it up with seed and then put it back, hooking it over a twig. She noticed the resident robin on the roof of Dennis's shed. It was watching her with beady black eyes and hopping about, leaving clawprints in the snow. 'You're hungry, aren't you?' she said, smiling at the plucky little bird who often came close when she was on her knees in the border, planting or weeding. In the spring the garden was full of birds, but it was late November and the wise ones had left for warmer climes. Only this robin remained, with its fluffy red breast, along with various blackbirds and thrushes, and the pesky pigeons and seagulls of course, because the village was a couple of miles inland from the sea. 'Don't listen to Nan. You're not going to die,' she added. 'As long as I feed you, you'll see out the winter and soon it will be spring again.'

Marigold walked away and the robin flew onto the feeder. It warmed her heart to see it eating. Soon others would join in. It was amazing how quickly word got around – a bit like the village grapevine, she thought with amusement. As she pulled open the back door, her mind turned to church. She'd have to go upstairs and change. She'd clear the breakfast away once she was dressed. Dennis liked to get there a little early to chat to people. She did not like to keep him waiting. He worked hard during the week, toiling in his shed, making exquisite things out of wood as his father had done before him; it was nice for him to have a rest on a Sunday and spend time with his friends. For Marigold and Dennis church wasn't just about God, it was a social event too, with tea and biscuits afterwards in the church hall. They always looked forward to that.

In the old days Dennis would go to the pub every evening, play darts, drink a couple of pints of bitter and catch up with friends that way. Now he preferred to stay at home and indulge in his hobby of making figurines, which he created himself with his big but steady hands, and displayed on shelves he'd put up all around the house. There were knights of old, soldiers from the Great War and fantasy characters he fished out of his imagination. His latest project was a church – well, it had started as a church but was fast becoming a cathedral and Marigold thought it might very well develop into an entire village with all the people to go in it. It kept him quiet for hours while he carefully cut the plastic and moulded the putty and painted with the flair of a natural artist. It reminded her of the doll's house he had made for the girls when they were little. That was a labour of love, complete with furniture, oak floorboards, fireplaces and wallpaper. A beautifully crafted miniature more exquisite than anything one could buy in a toy shop.

Suze was on her phone talking to her boyfriend Batty when Marigold went upstairs to get ready. The difference in her daughter's tone was remarkable. It was as if she were two people. One sulky and silent, the other animated and chatty. Atticus Buckley, known as Batty, and Suze had been going out for three years. Marigold wondered whether they'd ever get married. People seemed in no rush to marry these days. When she and Dennis had met, they'd walked down the aisle in less than six months. Batty was a good boy, she thought, despite his silly nickname. His parents were both teachers and he still lived with them, in their large house in town. Marigold wondered why he didn't move out and rent a place of his own; after all, his garden-design business seemed to be doing well from what Suze told them. *Young people*, she thought with a

shake of the head. Perhaps they were on to something, she mused. After all, why spend hard-earned cash on rent when they could live with their parents for free?

Just as Marigold was about to go downstairs to clear away breakfast, the telephone by the bed rang. She frowned, wondering with a spike of irritation who would bother them on a Sunday morning. She picked it up.

‘Mum?’

Her irritation evaporated at the distressed sound of her elder daughter’s voice. ‘Daisy, are you all right, dear?’

‘I’m coming home.’

Marigold realized she did not mean just for Christmas. Her heart stopped. ‘What’s happened?’

‘It’s over.’ Daisy’s voice sounded strained, as if she was trying very hard not to cry. ‘I’m leaving as soon as I can get a flight.’ There was a moment’s silence as Marigold sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to digest what her daughter was telling her. Marigold liked Luca. She liked him a lot. He was eleven years older than Daisy, which had concerned Marigold at the beginning, but then his charm had won her over, and the tender way he had looked at her daughter. He was a photographer, which was romantic. Marigold liked creative people, after all, she’d married one herself, and Luca had the colourful, passionate character of an artist. She had thought that their relationship would last. She had never doubted it. Six years was a long time and she’d taken it for granted that they’d eventually marry and start a family. ‘I just want to be at home, Mum,’ said Daisy. ‘With you and Dad.’

‘We can talk about it over a cup of tea,’ said Marigold in a reassuring voice. ‘There’s nothing like a cup of tea to make everything feel better.’

Sensing her mother’s assumption that the split would be a

temporary one, Daisy added firmly, 'It's over for good, Mum. I won't be coming back. Luca and I want different things.' Her disappointment was palpable. 'We just want different things,' she repeated quietly.

When Marigold hung up she remained on the bed, worrying. Daisy was thirty-two. Time was running out. She had met Luca when she had gone to work in Italy after reading Italian and art history at university, then moved in with him shortly after. Marigold wondered what kind of 'different things' Daisy referred to; one of them was likely to be marriage. What else could it be? Had she wasted six years of her life hoping he would be The One? As modern as young women were these days, Marigold still believed that a woman's nesting instincts were very strong. Would Daisy have time to find someone else before it was too late?

Unable to cope with the uncomfortable feeling those thoughts induced, she searched for something positive, for a silver lining to the black cloud. With a sudden burst of happiness she found it: Daisy was coming home.

She hurried downstairs to find Dennis. He was in the kitchen working on his miniature church. Nan had gone to her room to get ready for the Sunday service, Suze was in the sitting room, still on the phone to Batty – she had given up going to church years ago. 'That was Daisy,' Marigold told him breathlessly. 'She's coming home.'

Dennis put down his paintbrush and took off his glasses.

'She and Luca have split up. She says they want different things.'

'Oh.' He looked baffled. 'And it took them six years to find that out, did it?'

Marigold began to clear the table. She was so used to clearing up after her family that she did it without thinking, and

without annoyance that no one ever helped her. 'It'll be nice to have her home again,' she said.

Dennis arched an eyebrow. 'I know one person, who's not a million miles from here, who's going to be none too happy about this!'

'Well, Nan is in Daisy's old room so Suze will have to let Daisy share with her. She's got twin beds, after all.'

'But Suze is used to having all that space, isn't she?' He grinned. 'Perhaps it'll encourage her to get a proper job and a place of her own.'

'Children don't move out these days. I read about it. I can't remember where. They live with their parents for ever, I think, because they can't afford to get on the property ladder.'

'You can't get on the property ladder if you don't get a job.' Dennis sighed and shook his head. 'You spoil her,' he added. 'We both do.'

'She'll get a proper job one day and move out and then we'll miss her.' Marigold put the frying pan into the sink and sighed. 'Lovely that Daisy's coming home.'

'I'd keep it to yourself, if you don't want your Sunday ruined,' said Dennis, getting up and moving the miniature church onto the side table.

Marigold chuckled. 'Yes, I agree. Mum will say it was never going to last and Suze will have a meltdown. Let's keep it to ourselves for the moment.'



Wrapped in coats and hats, Dennis, Marigold and Nan made their way through the snow to the church, which was a five-minute walk up the lane. Nan held on to Dennis as if her life depended on it, while Marigold walked on his other side with her hands in her coat pockets. They passed the primary school

that Daisy and Suze had attended, and the village hall where they had been Brownies. But some things had changed: the village had once boasted a small petrol station where Reg Tucker, in his ubiquitous blue boiler suit and cap, had filled the cars himself, invoicing the locals with a monthly bill, but that had been converted in the 1990s into a posh house with a thatched roof, which was covered in snow. Reg had died years ago, buried in the churchyard, which now came into view beyond the fork where the lane divided. A blackbird sang from the top of the war memorial, built in the triangle of grass in front of the gate. At its foot a wreath of crimson poppies seemed to seep into the blanket of white like the blood of the fallen.

Nan complained all the way. 'It only looks pretty for the first few hours, then it turns to brown slush and people slip and slide all over the place. I'll probably slip and break my neck. It would be just my luck, wouldn't it, to slip in the snow and break my neck? They should have known it was coming and put salt down. But no, it'll turn to ice overnight and I'll slip on it and break my neck tomorrow.'

Marigold didn't try to change her mother's mind. She was used to Nan's complaints and they fell off her like rain off a tin roof. Instead, she enjoyed the sight of the village, swathed in snow. 'Pretty, isn't it, Dennis,' she said, linking her arm in her husband's free one.

'Very pretty,' Dennis agreed, taking pleasure from being outside in the crisp morning air, on his way to seeing his friends. 'Isn't this grand, girls?' he exclaimed jovially. 'The three of us walking in the snow together.'

'Speak for yourself, Dennis,' grumbled Nan. 'You'd better hold on to me tightly or I'll slip.'

'I thought you were going to slip and break your neck *tomorrow*,' said Dennis with a grin.

Nan didn't hear him. She was already distracted by people filing through the gate and onto the path that led up to the church doors. 'They've cleared the path, I see,' she said, squinting. 'But they haven't done a very good job of it. You'd better hold on to me all the way into the church, Dennis,' she said. 'We should have stayed at home instead of coming out in this dreadful weather.'

Dennis did as he was told and escorted his mother-in-law up the path, greeting friends as he went. 'Isn't it lovely!' they all gushed, for commenting on the weather is the British people's favourite topic of conversation.

'I've had to get my snow boots out of the cupboard,' said one.

'We had to clear the front drive with a spade,' said another.

Nan gave a disapproving sniff. 'My husband, God rest his soul, did his back in digging us out with a spade,' she said. 'I'd be very careful if I were you.'

The church smelt pleasantly of wax and flowers. Nan let go of Dennis's arm. She didn't like talking to cheerful people and went on ahead to find a seat. Dutifully, Marigold followed.

Like his father before him, Dennis was the local carpenter. There was barely a house in the village where he hadn't worked. A dresser here, a table there, a set of bookshelves or kitchen cabinets, a Wendy house for the children or a garden shed for Grandad. He knew everyone and loved shooting the breeze. He was considered by many to be a local treasure, an honorary member of the family, for as much time was spent chatting as putting up the pieces he made, and often, once on site, he'd replace the odd doorknob that had come off or re-grout the bathroom for no extra charge. He was like that, Dennis; a good man.

However, his trade had taken its toll on his body. He had bad knees and chronic back pain from carrying heavy things,

and his left thumb bore the scars from the sharp tools he used, but he never complained. Dennis had always considered himself lucky that he was able to do what he loved. The duty on his health was a small price to pay.

Marigold was proud of her husband. He was a master of his trade. 'Just give him a piece of wood and he'll be as happy as a beaver,' she'd say when someone else put in a request, and it was true, Dennis was never more content than when he was working in his shed, listening to Planet Rock on the radio while Mac the cat observed him silently from the windowsill.

But nothing satisfied Dennis more than making Marigold's Christmas present.

Every year he made her a jigsaw puzzle. It was no surprise, she knew what she'd be getting, but not what it would look like. There was always a surprise in that. He'd choose a theme first and then find pictures which he'd stick onto a six millimetre sheet of plywood before cutting it with a scroll saw. It was a fiddly job, but Dennis was good at fiddly things. Last year's had been flowers, Marigold loved flowers. The year before had been birds. This year he had chosen an old-fashioned scene of an ice rink with grown-ups and children skating in the falling snow. He'd found the picture in the charity shop and thought she'd like it. As he sat in the pew his mind turned to her puzzle and his excitement warmed him on the inside like the baked potato his mother used to put in his coat pocket when he walked to school in the wintertime. Marigold had always loved jigsaw puzzles and Dennis was very good at making them. Every year he tried to make it a little more complicated or a little bigger, to give her a greater challenge. This year he knew he had outdone all the others. It was made up of over a hundred small pieces and would take her a long time to put together because he hadn't taken a photograph of

the original picture for her to copy. He glanced at her, sitting beside him with her cheeks rosy from the walk and her hazel eyes sparkling from the pleasure it had given her. He took her hand and squeezed it. She squeezed it back and smiled. Nan noticed, tutted and shook her head. They were much too old for that, she thought sourly.

After the service the congregants gathered in the hall for tea and biscuits. This was the bit Marigold and Dennis liked the best. Nan liked it the least. She had lived in the village all her married life and had suffered the socializing her husband had enjoyed, but after she had been widowed she'd always taken herself home as soon as the vicar had said the Blessing. Now she had no choice but to mingle because she was dependent on Marigold and Dennis, and she needed Dennis's arm to help her back to the house.

Marigold and Dennis were talking to their neighbours, John and Susan Glenn, when Marigold felt a light tapping on her shoulder. She turned to see the round, eager face of Eileen Utley, who was in her nineties and still played the organ at every Sunday service without making a single mistake. She was holding Marigold's handbag. 'You left this in the pew,' she said.

Marigold looked at the handbag and frowned. Then she looked at her right arm, expecting the bag to be hooked over it, as usual. To her astonishment, it wasn't. 'How strange,' she said to Eileen. 'I must have been thinking about something else.' *Daisy coming home, perhaps?* 'Thank you.'

She sighed. 'I've been getting a bit forgetful lately. This isn't the first time I've left something behind. But look at you, Eileen. As sharp as a tack. Nothing forgetful about you!'

'I'm ninety-two!' said Eileen proudly. 'I've still got all my marbles. The secret is crosswords and Sudoku. They keep

your mind working. It's like a muscle, you see. You have to exercise it.'

'Mum does the crossword every day.'

'And look at her.' They both turned their eyes to Nan, who was holding a cup of tea and complaining to the vicar about the lack of salt on the road. He was listening with the patience God had given him for these very moments. 'She's still got all her marbles too, hasn't she?'

'Oh, she has.'

'How is it, having her at home?'

'I think she's happier living with us. Dad's been gone over fifteen years now and it's lonely on your own. She doesn't like animals, so she was never going to have a dog or a cat for company. She tolerates Mac and he gives her a wide berth. He only has eyes for Dennis anyway. It seemed logical as we had Daisy's old room with no one in it. And it's the least I can do. After all, she looked after me for eighteen years, didn't she?'

'You're a good girl, Marigold,' said Eileen, patting her on the arm. 'I'll see you tomorrow,' she added, because Eileen popped into the village shop at nine every morning, not because she really needed anything, but because she didn't have anything else to do.

Marigold hooked her handbag over her arm and wondered how she hadn't noticed it was missing. She hadn't, until recently, been the sort of person who left things behind. *I suppose I am getting old*, she thought, a little dispirited. Her mind searched for something positive. Then she found it: *Daisy's coming home . . .*

Chapter 2

The next day Daisy telephoned at dawn to tell them that she had managed to get a flight out of Milan late that morning and would be home by nightfall, sending Suze into a spin. ‘She’s not sharing my bedroom!’ she declared, only to be told by her mother that she’d have to because there were no spare rooms in the house now that Nan had come to live with them. ‘It’s not fair!’ Suze had cried, tossing her mane and flashing her blue eyes. ‘Where am I going to put all my clothes? Can’t she sleep on the sofa? I mean, it’s temporary, isn’t it? She’ll be back with Luca by the end of the week. It’s ridiculous me having to move all my stuff, just because she decides to come home. It’s perfectly comfortable on the sofa. Can’t she sleep there!’ She had stormed up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door.

Marigold had gone out to feed the birds. It had stopped snowing during the night and now the sky was flat and white, the snow flat and white below it, waiting for the sun to rise and turn it into diamonds. Marigold unhooked the feeder from the tree and looked for the robin to appear, which it did, on the roof of Dennis’s shed. ‘Suze has always been selfish,’ she told it as she carefully poured the seed. ‘I suppose I’m to blame. I’ve worked hard all my life, as has Dennis, so that we can provide for our children and give them an easier time than

we had. But in so doing we've made it too easy for her.' The robin's little head jerked from side to side as if it was trying to understand her. 'Life is complicated for us humans. I think it's easier being a bird.' She hooked the feeder back on the branch. 'At least Daisy is coming back. I can't help being excited about that, although I'm sad she's broken up with Luca. I've hated her living abroad. I can only admit that to you. I've hated her living so far from home.'

When Marigold returned to the kitchen Nan was sitting in her usual place at the kitchen table. 'Daisy's going to set the cat among the pigeons,' she predicted, pursing her lips. 'This house is too small for all of us.'

'It's too small for Suze. It's fine for the rest of us,' Marigold corrected her.

'Are you going to let her live with you for ever? She's twenty-five years old. Time to move out and make her own way in life, I would have thought. When I was her age—'

'You were married with two teenage children, well, almost,' Marigold interrupted. 'It's different nowadays. Life is harder.'

'Life has always been hard and it always will be. Life is what you make of it, that's what your father always said and he knew a thing or two about that.'

'I must open the shop,' said Marigold, edging towards the door.

'Suze should help you out in there, instead of doing all that silly stuff she does on her telephone. It would do her good to do some proper work.'

'I don't need an extra pair of hands,' said Marigold. 'I have Tasha.'

'Tasha.' Nan sniffed. 'I don't call that an extra pair of hands. I call that a headache.'

‘She works hard.’

‘When she’s here.’

‘She’s here most of the time.’

‘Most is not the word I would use, but then you’re a people-pleaser, Marigold, you always have been. Well, off you go then. I’ll hold the fort in here, cheer Suze up with a few tales of the deprivation I suffered as a child.’

Marigold laughed. ‘Oh, she’ll love you for that.’

Nan smiled back. ‘The young don’t know how lucky they are.’ Then when Marigold was halfway out the door, she called after her, ‘Be a dear and bring me some digestive biscuits when you have a moment, the chocolate ones. I like to dip them in my tea.’



Marigold had owned the village shop for over thirty years. It had been convenient for her when the children were little because the house was separated from the shop by a small, cobbled courtyard, so it was easy to dash back and forth. The buildings were pretty white cottages with small windows and grey slate roofs, and the gardens at the back, although not very large, gave onto rolling fields. Fields that belonged to the wealthy landowner Sir Owen Sherwood, so there was no danger of them being developed to expand the village. There was always talk of the need for more houses, but that land prevented them from being built there, in Dennis and Marigold’s view. The farm was so big, with woodland and fields, that the whole eastern side of the village was protected from developers, while the western side was protected by the sea. It was an idyllic place to live. The only complaint, if Marigold had one, which she didn’t like to admit to because it went against her nature to moan, was that the big supermarket,

built in the 1980s a few miles outside the village, had stolen much of her business. Still, she took care to stock essential items as well as gifts, and the post office, of course, was useful to the locals. She made a decent living. So did Dennis. They were comfortable and happy.

Tasha was already in the shop when Marigold appeared. A single mother with two children under ten and the unfortunate disposition of being a little delicate, Tasha was not someone who could be relied upon. Her children were often sick, too, or she needed to stay home for an electrician or a delivery, or she was overtired and run-down and required the odd day at home to rest. Marigold was indulgent. She didn't like confrontation and she didn't like hard feelings. And she reasoned that, although Tasha wasn't very dependable, she was a nice, smiley presence to have around the shop, and that counted for a lot. The customers liked her because she was polite and charming, and when she was there, she did the job well. The devil you know is better than the devil you don't, Marigold figured.

'Good morning.' Tasha's cheerful voice lifted Marigold's spirits.

'You're here,' said Marigold, pleasantly surprised.

'Well, I was wondering if I could leave a little early today. Milly's in a play and I promised I'd help with the make-up.'

Marigold could hardly deny her that. 'Of course you can. What play is it?' And Tasha told her about it as she began a stocktake of the shelves. 'Did you remember to order baked beans, Marigold?' she asked. 'We're totally out of them and they're very popular.'

'Baked beans? Are you sure?'

'Yes, I asked you last week. Remember?'

Marigold didn't remember. She couldn't even recall having had the conversation. 'How odd. I'll do it right away.'

At nine Eileen Utley came in. She bought some milk, then spent the next hour chatting to the locals, who filed in one after the other to buy a newspaper, a pint of milk or to post a parcel. Eileen enjoyed watching the bustle of village life. It made her feel part of the place, rather than on the periphery, which was what staying at home with the telly did.

The shop was quite busy when Lady Sherwood came in. Elegant in a loden coat and matching green hat, she smiled at Marigold. Although the two women were of similar age, Lady Sherwood looked a decade younger. Her skin was smooth, her make-up carefully applied and her shoulder-length blonde hair had no sign of grey. It was obvious to Marigold that she had it dyed, but it appeared natural nonetheless. Marigold wondered whether her effortless glamour was due to her being Canadian. She imagined women from that part of the world were naturally glamorous, like film stars. Marigold had never crossed the Atlantic and Lady Sherwood's Canadian accent gave her a thrilling sense of the exotic.

'Good morning, Marigold,' said Lady Sherwood agreeably. However, as friendly as her manner was she still succeeded in maintaining a certain distance, due to their very different stations in life, she the wife of a squire and Marigold the wife of a carpenter. Though, as Nan liked to point out, 'There was once a simple carpenter ...'

'Good morning, Lady Sherwood,' said Marigold from behind the counter. 'What can I get you?'

'Are you making Christmas puddings again this year?'

'Yes, I am. Would you like one?'

'Yes, I'd like two, please. My son's coming over from Toronto and we're going to be a lot of people. They went down very well last year.'

'Oh good. I'm happy to hear that.' Marigold pictured the

Sherwoods' grand dining room filled with elegant people eating her Christmas puddings and felt a rush of pride.

'And I'd like a couple of books of first-class stamps while I'm here. Thank you.'

Marigold gave her the stamps and carefully wrote the Christmas pudding order in her red notebook. She noticed Lady Sherwood's fine leather gloves and the gracious way she moved her hands and thought her the most stylish woman she'd ever met. When Lady Sherwood departed, leaving a lingering smell of expensive perfume, Eileen leaned on the counter and lowered her voice. 'As you know, I'm not one to gossip, but I've heard that father and son don't get along at all,' she said. 'That's why the lad went to live in Canada.'

Marigold put the red book beneath the counter. 'Oh dear, that's sad. There's nothing as important as family,' she said, her heart warming once more at the thought of seeing Daisy. She'd be on her way to the airport, she suspected.

'I don't know what will happen to the estate when Sir Owen pops off,' Eileen continued. 'I gather Taran makes a lot of money in Canada.'

'If Sir Owen lives as long as you, Eileen, Taran won't inherit for another fifty years!'

'He's the only child. It will be his duty to come back and run the estate. Sir Owen's a man who understands the countryside, like his father, Hector, did. Now *he* was a good and decent person and let my father live in one of his cottages rent free when he lost his job and took months to find a new one. I don't think Taran is like them. I think he's one of those banking people who only think about making money.'

'How do you come to that conclusion, Eileen?'

'Sylvia's not a gossip, but she lets the odd thing slip out,' said Eileen, referring to the Sherwoods' housekeeper, a

good-natured, slow-moving 50-year-old who had worked for the family for over a decade. 'When Sir Owen pops off there'll be trouble.' And she licked her bottom lip at the thought of such excitement.

Marigold tried to get on with serving people while Eileen shared the village gossip. She had something to say about everyone who came into the shop. John Porter was squabbling with his neighbour Pete Dickens over a magnolia tree which had grown too big, and Mary Hanson's St Bernard had killed Dolly Nesbit's cat, causing Dolly to drop into a dead faint in the middle of the green. 'She's still in bed recovering,' said Eileen. 'Mary has offered to find her a new cat but Dolly says her Precious is irreplaceable. If you ask me that dog should be put down. No one should have a dog the size of a horse running loose about the village.' Jean Miller, who had recently been widowed, was struggling to cope with living on her own. 'Poor dear. I can tell her that you get used to it after a while and there's always the TV for company. I love *Bake Off*, especially, and *Strictly Come Dancing*, but there are all sorts of things to watch these days. That nice Cedric Weatherby, you know, the one who's just moved into Gloria's old house, made her a cake and took it round. It had enough brandy in it to put her out for a week!' Then there was the Commodore, who lived in a much-admired Georgian house with his wife Phyllida, and had resorted to shooting moles from his bedroom window. 'He tried gassing them with a pipe attached to his car exhaust but that backfired and he nearly gassed himself,' said Eileen gleefully. 'He says they're a plague, putting mud hills all over his lawn, but since reading Beatrix Potter as a child I've always been rather partial to the furry little friends.'

At midday Nan wandered in, complaining of the cold. 'It's Siberian!' she said as she hurried through the door, bringing

snow in on her shoes. 'Ah, lovely and warm in here.' She waited for Marigold to finish serving and then reminded her about the digestive biscuits.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Mum. I forgot. Eileen's been distracting me,' she said.

'Our Daisy's coming home today,' said Nan with a smile. 'Suze is none too happy about it. They're going to have to share a room.'

'She's home a bit early for Christmas, isn't she?' said Eileen.

Before Marigold could make something up, Nan had told the biggest gossip in the village about Daisy and Luca's split.

'I'm sure they'll kiss and make up,' said Marigold, struggling to do some damage control.

But Nan shook her head. 'I think over means over, Marigold,' she said. 'You don't break up after six years and then get back together. Mark my words, it's done.'

Suze came into the shop in the early afternoon with a bag of parcels to post. In order to keep buying clothes and make-up she had to sell things she no longer wanted. She had a site online for selling second-hand things and was making a small business out of it, although not one that would ever be in profit. She was still furious about her sister coming home and hadn't moved anything out of her bedroom to accommodate her. 'Like I said, she can sleep on the sofa,' she repeated. Marigold was relieved that Eileen had eventually gone home so she didn't pick up on the impending feud.

'It's between you and Daisy. I'm not getting involved,' said Marigold. 'Although I think a little kindness would not go amiss, considering.'

'Who chucked who?' asked Suze.

'I don't know. She didn't say. She just said they want different things.'

Suze grinned. ‘Luca doesn’t want to get married and Daisy does.’ Then she added provocatively, ‘Marriage is so old-fashioned.’

‘I’m glad your grandmother isn’t around to hear that,’ said Marigold.

‘Oh, I’ll happily tell her to her face. Times are different now.’ With that, she flicked her hair and skipped out of the shop, leaving her mother to weigh and pay the postage for all her packages.

Tasha had left. The place was quiet. Marigold looked outside. Night came early now. She sat on the stool behind the counter and took a deep breath. She felt tired. It must be the weather, she thought, those dark mornings and dark evenings sap one’s energy. The sun hadn’t come out at all today, so although the snow remained there were no diamonds to sparkle and glitter. The roads were icy. She thought of her mother declaring that she’d slip and break her neck today and hoped she had done the sensible thing and spent most of the day indoors.

When she locked up at closing time she saw Suze’s parcels still waiting to be posted. She frowned and stared at them as if seeing them for the first time. She was sure she had sent them off. But no, there they were, and they hadn’t even been stamped. Marigold felt a strange prickling sensation creep across her skin. It took a while for her to recognize what it was, but when she did, the realization that she was afraid made the prickling sensation even more intense. She felt fear, deep and cold and unmistakable: something was wrong. She’d left her handbag in church the day before and now she had forgotten to post Suze’s parcels. Marigold was not a vague person. Quite the opposite. She was someone who could be relied upon to organize things efficiently. Her entire life she had defined herself by her sharp and lucid memory. Manning

the shop and the post office, with all the demands that that entailed, required her mind to be quick and her powers of recollection razor-sharp. They hadn't, until now, let her down.

Marigold stepped out into the dark and locked the door behind her. Then she walked carefully across the icy courtyard towards the house, feeling strangely unsteady. The lights inside were golden and she could see her mother and Suze through the window, sitting at the kitchen table. The packet of digestive biscuits was open beside her mother. Her spirits sank as she remembered she had forgotten those too. *I really am losing my marbles*, she thought to herself despondently. She resolved to exercise her mind as Eileen had suggested.

When she went through the back door, Nan was halfway through a story and Suze was hovering in the doorway, trying to escape. Marigold glanced out of the window. The lights in Dennis's shed were still on, blazing through the darkness. He'd been in there all day. She knew he was making her Christmas present and wondered what the picture would be. The thought of it made her smile and she began to feel brighter. She was tired and, as much as she didn't want to admit it, she was getting older. It was perfectly normal to forget things at her age. She'd just have to make more of an effort to remember.



At seven the front door burst open and Daisy fell into the hallway, all tousled brown hair and big puffy coat, dragging a large suitcase behind her. Marigold dropped the wooden spoon she was using to stir the sauce and rushed to embrace her.

'Darling, what a surprise! You should have called. Dad would have picked you up at the station.'

'I got a cab,' said Daisy.

‘You look exhausted!’ Marigold exclaimed, maternal instincts kicking in fiercely at the sight of her daughter’s waxen face. ‘Come in out of the cold at once.’

Dennis, who had just shut up his shed, smiled broadly. ‘Let me take that,’ he said, relieving Daisy of her suitcase. ‘What have you got in here? The Crown jewels?’

‘My life,’ Daisy replied, smiling weakly. She wrapped her arms around her father and began to cry.

‘You’re home now, pet,’ he said, patting her back. ‘Where you belong.’

‘We’ll look after you, love,’ rejoined her mother, taking in her daughter’s unkempt hair and the purple shadows beneath her eyes that were bloodshot and full of pain. She longed to run her a hot bath and give her a good meal to restore her back to health.

Suze appeared at the bottom of the stairs with a sheepish look. ‘Hi,’ she said, without making a move to approach her. ‘Sorry about Luca.’

‘Thanks,’ Daisy replied, but her attention was diverted by Nan, making her way down the hall towards her.

‘You’re too good for him,’ she said, hugging her granddaughter. ‘Italian men can’t be trusted. We need to find you a nice Englishman.’

Daisy laughed in spite of her heavy heart. ‘I don’t think I want anyone right now, Nan.’

‘Of course you don’t,’ said Dennis.

‘What you need is a nice cup of tea,’ said Marigold.

‘You’ll be back together by the end of the week,’ said Suze, fervently hoping that they would.

Daisy lifted her chin. ‘I don’t want him back,’ she replied crisply. ‘It’s over. I’m home.’ She looked at her mother and smiled wanly. ‘Now, where’s that tea?’