

Prologue

March 1944

Cadi woke with a start as the air raid siren blasted its mournful wail across the base. Swinging her legs out of bed, she reached for her greatcoat and threw it over her shoulders, then headed for the Anderson shelter.

‘They should build decent shelters *before* setting up these new bases,’ mumbled Ethel, one of the recent arrivals, as she settled on the bench next to Cadi.

‘With the Luftwaffe destroying airfields faster than we can build them, we have to make do with what we’ve got,’ said Cadi. She smiled kindly at the other girl. ‘Helping to build new airfields does come with one advantage.’

Ethel eyed her doubtfully. ‘Oh?’

‘We aren’t on any maps, so the Krauts don’t know we’re here,’ said Cadi.

‘I hadn’t thought of it like that,’ replied Ethel, glancing at the wedding ring that adorned Cadi’s finger. ‘Is your husband in the services?’

‘Jez is a mechanic in the RAF, so he has both feet firmly on the ground – something for which I shall be for ever grateful.’

Ethel swallowed hard as a series of sickening thuds sounded in the distance. ‘How close are they, do you think?’

Cadi tilted her head to one side as she considered the new girl. ‘I take it this is your first posting?’

Ethel nodded nervously. ‘First air raid too.’ She continued before Cadi had a chance to express her surprise. ‘I come from Llangollen, a village not far from—’

‘Wrexham!’ Cadi beamed, interrupting Ethel mid-sentence.

Astonished that Cadi had heard of Llangollen, Ethel’s lips rose into a small smile. ‘You know it?’

Cadi nodded fervently. ‘I was born in Rhos.’

Delighted to be in the company of someone local to her own area, Ethel’s smile widened. ‘Talk about a small world.’ Her eyes fell to the corporal’s stripe that adorned Cadi’s arm. ‘You’ve done ever so well for a woman from a small mining village.’

Cadi glanced at the stripe with pride. ‘I love my life in the WAAF, although it’s a far cry from what I’m used to.’ As she spoke, Cadi realised that Ethel was no longer paying attention to the bombs that continued to fall. Not wanting her to turn her attention back to the Luftwaffe, Cadi continued to talk, telling Ethel how she and her best friend Poppy had left Rhos for Liverpool when they were just sixteen.

‘We hadn’t been in Liverpool for more than a few days when we got attacked by a man called Eric

Taylor,' she said. 'He was a real brute – someone who liked his drink.'

The Waaf's eyes rounded. 'What happened?'

Cadi went on to explain how Jez – the man who was now her husband – had come to their rescue. 'He fought Eric off with one punch before escorting us to his friend Maria's pub, where I could clean my bloodied head before catching the train back to Rhos.' Cadi sighed happily. 'Maria was the answer to all our prayers. Not only did she see to my wounds, but she gave Poppy and me jobs at the Greyhound, running the upstairs as a B&B.'

'Every cloud,' said Ethel

'Or fate?' suggested Cadi. 'After all, if we hadn't stayed in Liverpool, we'd never have rescued Eric's daughter Izzy from him.'

Ethel's jaw dropped. 'The man who attacked you?'

Cadi nodded. 'It seemed we weren't the only women Eric had raised a hand to – only in Izzy's case he used his belt, leaving her scarred below her eye.'

Ethel tutted disapprovingly. 'Where is she now?'

'In the WAAF, same as Poppy.' Cadi paused before continuing, 'She's gone from being frightened of her own shadow to giving orders. She's a sergeant.'

Enthralled by Cadi's tale, Ethel shuffled eagerly in her seat. 'Is that why you joined, or were you conscripted?'

Cadi grimaced. 'The Luftwaffe destroyed the Greyhound whilst we were sheltering in the cellar.'

Ethel held a hand to her mouth as her eyes grew ever rounder. 'Was anyone killed?'

Cadi nodded sadly. 'Jez's adoptive grandmother, Carrie.'

Ethel pulled a sympathetic face. 'To lose someone you love is bad enough, but to lose your home and job on top of that?' She shook her head. 'It must've been dreadful.'

'It was,' agreed Cadi, 'but sometimes you just have to pick yourself up and get on with things, and that's why I joined the WAAF.'

Ethel stared at Cadi in awe. 'I think you're marvellous. It's no wonder you made corporal.'

Cadi blushed as a smile tweaked her lips. 'I'm sure most people would've done the same in my position...' She was interrupted by the siren sounding the all-clear, and got to her feet. 'That was mercifully short.'

Ethel rose from the hard wooden bench. 'Thanks for taking my mind off things. I thought I was going to go to pieces for a minute back there.'

Cadi led the way out of the shelter. 'I think we all feel that way at first, but don't worry, you'll get used to them in time. And keep it in mind that we're not the target.' She flagged down an airman who was jogging past. 'Any news?'

He nodded grimly. 'They've destroyed the runway at RAF Connington.'

Cadi cursed softly beneath her breath. 'Good job our runway's operational; at least they'll have somewhere to use in the meantime.'

Bidding the airman goodnight, she entered the billet ahead of Ethel, taking off her greatcoat and hanging it up before sliding between the sheets. When all the

Waafs were back in their beds, there was a general murmur of goodnights before Cadi pulled the light cord above her bed. As she settled down to sleep, her thoughts turned to her forthcoming trip to Lincoln, where she would meet up with Poppy and Izzy for the first time since her wedding the previous December.

Having always believed that wartime weddings were a bad omen, Cadi had only agreed to marry Jez after talking to Izzy's estranged mother Raquel. They had traced the missing woman just over a year back, and Cadi still found it hard to comprehend everything that had transpired as a result. Not only had it turned out that Izzy's mother was alive and well, but to their horror they learned that she had been pushed into working as a prostitute. The girls had marched into the brothel determined to take Raquel back to Liverpool, but during the altercation that followed Cadi's friend Kitty had thrown the nearest object to hand, which turned out to be an oil lamp. Fortunately everyone got out in the nick of time, and Cadi had believed there was nothing left to discover until Raquel had revealed that not only was she Izzy's mother, but she was Jez's as well. There had been many tears, some of sorrow, some of joy, but for the first time in a long while it looked as though everything had come up trumps.

Chapter One

Seeing the outskirts of the city looming into view, Cadi removed a compact mirror from her handbag and checked her appearance. Her fair curls were still neatly nestled in place, and the merest dab of lipstick was just visible on her lips. Informing the clippie that she wanted the next stop, she placed the mirror back in her handbag and readied herself to get off as the bus drew to a halt.

The mirror had been a wedding present from Jez, who'd had the outer lid inscribed with the date of their wedding. In return Cadi had given him a wallet with a picture of the two of them inside. Jez had treasured it, saying that it was the perfect fit for his breast pocket, and as such would mean he would be keeping her close to his heart. A reminiscent smile crossed her cheeks. Her husband could charm the birds out of the trees, and she loved him for it.

Thanking the clippie, she stepped down on to the pavement. She was very much looking forward to seeing her friends, and with the pub being only a short walk from the bus stop it wasn't long before she ducked through the small doorway of the Horse and Groom.

Casting her eyes around the bar, a broad grin spread across her face as she spied Poppy and ... 'Ronnie!' she cried.

Turning in her seat, Ronnie beamed. 'We thought it would be nice to surprise you.'

'And what a nice surprise it is too,' said Cadi. She walked over to the bar and spoke directly to the landlord. 'Hello, Alfie. The usual for me, please.'

Alfie took the bottle of R. White's lemonade and unscrewed the lid. 'Another fleeting visit, I assume?'

Cadi nodded. 'You know me, here one minute, gone the next.' She turned to face her friends. 'Where's Izzy?'

'Call of nature,' said Poppy, glancing in the direction of the Ladies. 'We've already ordered our meals, but Alfie's waiting for you before serving up.'

Taking the hint, Cadi thanked Alfie for the drink, then ordered a plate of fish and chips before handing him the money and joining her friends at their table. 'It's wonderful to be back in Lincoln.' She turned to Ronnie. 'Are you here for a visit, same as me?'

Ronnie shook her head. 'If you remember, I was supposed to be posted to Waddington not long after we found Raquel, but with one thing and another it got put on the back burner, and I've only just moved.'

'That's the WAAF for you,' said Cadi, 'tell you one thing, then do something else. How long have you been there?'

'I arrived the day before yesterday,' Ronnie told her. 'First person I bumped into was Mike.' She quickly corrected herself. 'I mean Flying Officer Grainger.'

Cadi waved a dismissive hand. 'He's always insisted we call him Mike when off base. He hates formalities.'

'I remember the first time we met him in Innsworth,' Ronnie went on. 'I thought he was a corker then, and I still do. Izzy's a very lucky girl.'

'She certainly is,' agreed Cadi, and grinned at Poppy. 'Remember the first time Izzy met Mike? What a night that was!'

Poppy raised her eyebrows. 'That was when we found out that Eric had been murdered.'

'It was quite an adventure,' Cadi recalled, 'rushing off to Liverpool in the middle of the night.'

Exiting the Ladies, Izzy walked towards them, smiling. 'And finding out that my mam was alive.'

Remembering how painfully thin Izzy had been when they first met her, Cadi welcomed her friend with open arms. 'I swear you look better every time I see you.'

'I feel it too,' Izzy beamed. 'Mam's been in touch; she said to say hello.'

Cadi smiled. 'I love hearing you talk about your mam.'

Izzy sank down on to a chair next to Cadi's. 'And I love talking about her.'

Alfie approached the table and placed Cadi's meal down, along with two plates of sausage and mashed potato and a fourth containing liver and onions.

'Best fish and chips in Lincoln,' said Cadi as she sprinkled salt over the chips. She grimaced at the plate in front of Ronnie. 'Urgh! I don't know how you can eat that stuff.'

Ronnie paused, a forkful of liver before her lips. 'It's good for you,' she said, before popping the fork into her mouth.

'Full of iron,' said Alfie approvingly. 'A plate of that is all you need to give you the energy to keep you goin' whilst you're running round like a headless chicken.'

Cadi pulled a face. 'I'll stick with fish and chips, thanks all the same.'

Chuckling, Alfie left the girls to eat their meals in peace.

'Has anyone heard from Kitty?' asked Cadi, slicing her knife through the gold and crunchy batter.

Ronnie nodded. 'She's still in RAF Little Snoring, although she wishes she was closer to the rest of us.'

'Same here,' Cadi affirmed. 'I'll not deny that I really enjoy setting up the new bases, but there's nowt like having your pals around you to help brighten up your day.'

Poppy smiled before swallowing her mouthful. 'We miss you too! As for Kitty, I can't see that the officers at Little Snoring are going to let one of their best cooks leave in favour of pastures new, nor would I blame them ...' She clapped a hand to her forehead. 'I've got a head like a sieve at times.' She stared at Cadi. 'I forgot to tell you that I saw Marnie the other day.'

'Aled's girlfriend?'

Nodding, Poppy continued, 'I didn't know it was her at first, but after we got chatting she asked where I was from, and when I said Rhos, she asked whether I knew Aled. Of course I said yes, and that's when she asked if I knew about his new posting.'

'Oh?' said Cadi. 'What new posting is this?'

Poppy eyed her in a speculative manner. 'RAF Finningley.'

'The same base as Jez.'

'Indeed. I know you said they were on friendly terms now, but I'm not sure how Jez will welcome the news.'

Cadi shrugged. 'Only one way to find out; I'll call him when I get back to my base later this evening.'

'I can't see him objecting,' said Ronnie, 'not after everything they've been through.'

'Neither can I,' said Cadi, 'but I don't want Jez thinking I'm holding anything back from him, not after the last time.'

'That bloomin' Daphne's got a lot to answer for,' said Izzy bitterly. She began counting Daphne's misdemeanours off on the tips of her fingers. 'First she fixes Aled's pilot's exam papers, then she sends Jez a rotten letter full of hogwash ...'

Cadi interrupted her friend mid-flow. 'I agree Daphne shouldn't have fiddled with Aled's papers, but she only did it to stop him gaining his wings.'

'Not because she was in love with him, though,' interjected Izzy. 'She did it because she wanted a farmer for a husband, and Aled fitted the bill.'

'Granted,' Cadi conceded, 'but the letter wasn't entirely hogwash. I did give Aled a peck on the cheek, as well as agreeing to let him show me around Lincoln ...'

'So? That's still no excuse for her to behave the way she did,' said Poppy.

'Maybe not, but I shouldn't have let her get under my skin, because that's what gave her the ammunition to tell Jez that I was chasing Aled in the first place.'

Ronnie frowned. 'Why are you defending her?'

'I'm not!' insisted Cadi. 'But I do believe that she thoroughly regretted fixing his papers, and had I not deliberately set out to rile her, she might never have sent that letter to Jez.'

'And what about when she met Jez on the docks?' Poppy went on doggedly. 'Telling him how you and

Aled had been whispering in corners and keeping secrets behind his back?’

Cadi shrugged. ‘We had.’

‘Because he was going to Africa, and you didn’t want him to worry needlessly,’ Izzy put in, her tone rising with exasperation. ‘You were doing the right thing by Aled *and* Jez!’

‘I know, but if I’d’ve said something sooner ...’

‘Could’ve, should’ve, would’ve,’ said Poppy simply. ‘Nobody knows what effect it would’ve had on Jez if you *had* said something sooner, so lay blame at blame’s door. Daphne caused all this.’

Izzy nodded wisely. ‘And let’s not forget that her meddling put Aled in the worst position of all; rear gunner on a Lancaster Avro.’ She paused before adding, ‘Plus had it not been for Daphne, Aled and Jez would never have been in that dreadful car crash.’

‘And if Jez hadn’t acted as quickly as he did, things could’ve turned out very differently,’ said Poppy.

Cadi nodded slowly, deep in thought. ‘I suppose there’s always been a small part of me that felt sorry for Daphne, even though I know she brought everything on herself.’

‘You’ve got a big heart, as well as a forgiving nature,’ said Ronnie, before hesitating as a sudden thought entered her mind. ‘Hang on a mo – isn’t Daphne on the same base as Jez? If she is, I think someone should warn Aled.’

Cadi shook her head fervently. ‘She was, but she put in for an immediate transfer after accosting Jez down the docks.’

Poppy spoke through pursed lips. ‘Not surprising. She was probably worried that Jez might get his own back by telling everyone what she’d done.’

'People in glass houses, and all that,' Cadi agreed.

Poppy continued, still annoyed at the thought of Daphne's behaviour. 'What sort of person lights the flame then scarpers before the fireworks?' she snapped, before answering her own question. 'A coward, that's who.'

'I still think Aled was a fool for letting sleeping dogs lie,' said Izzy. 'I'd have shouted it from the rooftops if it were me.'

'I think he was just glad to get shot of her,' said Cadi simply, 'and what's more, I don't blame him. If I never see that woman again, it'll be a day too soon.'

Izzy pulled a face. 'If she's any sense, she'll have asked to remuster from the WAAF to one of the other services.'

'They say you reap what you sow,' concluded Ronnie, 'and boy oh boy did she ever plant some seeds!'

As soon as Cadi returned to her base, she headed straight for the NAAFI to telephone Jez.

Lifting the receiver, she waited patiently for the operator to put her through to RAF Finningley. Hearing Jez's voice come down the line, a smile flashed on her lips.

'Mrs Thomas! To what do I owe the pleasure?'

Cadi giggled. 'I don't think I'll ever tire of hearing you call me that.'

Jez grinned. 'I think it rolls off the tongue nicely. How did your lunch go with the girls?'

'Lovely. Ronnie's finally moved to Waddington, so she joined us, which was a nice surprise.'

'I'm glad she's moved further inland. Those coastal bases don't half take a battering.'

‘The bullseye of Jerry’s target, that’s what Ronnie used to call them,’ said Cadi. She paused briefly. ‘Talking about people getting new postings, have you heard about Aled?’

‘No ...?’

Cadi went on to recount how Poppy had bumped into Marnie, and the subsequent conversation.

‘I knew we had a new bombing crew coming in, but I didn’t think much of it, save to say I hoped they’d have better luck than the last lot.’

Cadi nodded silently. The RAF were forever replacing aircraft as well as the crew who hadn’t made it back to Blighty. ‘That’s why I’ve always been grateful that you have both feet firmly on the ground,’ she said, ‘and why I wanted you to know about Aled, not because I thought there’d be a problem ...’

Jez intervened. ‘I know, queen, and I appreciate you keeping me in the loop, but there really isn’t any need, not after everything Aled and I have been through.’

‘That’s a thought. You’ll be able to show your pals the man whose life you saved.’

Jez laughed. ‘Blow my own trumpet, you mean?’

‘I don’t see why not. You should be proud of what you did. I know *I’m* proud of you.’

‘I pulled an unconscious man from a car that was about to burst into flames,’ said Jez. ‘If I’d left him to perish what would that have made me?’

Cadi tutted. ‘I know what you’re saying, but not everyone would’ve rushed to his rescue. Some people would’ve put their own safety first.’

Jez felt his chest begin to swell with pride, but he was far too modest to allow Cadi to continue. ‘I wonder

how he is?' he mused. 'I've not seen him since the crash, and I know he took a fair old crack to the head.'

'He was lucky to get away with a few scrapes and bruises – you both were – and you heard what his father said: Aled was soon up and at 'em, which was why he couldn't make our wedding.'

'Doesn't say much; you know what these fellers are like. Take that Douglas Bader chap: lost both his legs, and yet he still gives the Luftwaffe a run for their money!' He hesitated as a thought entered his mind. 'Here, I wonder if I'll be working on Aled's plane? I worked on the one it's replacing.'

Cadi grimaced. 'Do you know what happened to that one – the plane, I mean?'

'Gunned down over the Channel,' said Jez briefly.

The operator cut across their conversation, letting them know that their three minutes was up. Aware that she could see fit to end their call at any moment, Jez went on hastily. 'I'm due some leave next month. If I let you know when, maybe we could spend a bit of time together?'

'I'll see what I can arrange—' were the only words Cadi managed to get out before hearing the click as the operator terminated the call.

'Honestly! You could've waited,' huffed Cadi, but it was no use; she was talking to empty air.

Tutting at the unfairness of it, Cadi headed for the house she was sharing with five other Waafs. She had only been sent to help get the base up and running, and she supposed it wouldn't be more than a couple of weeks before she would be moving on to yet another satellite station, not that that bothered

her. She thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of starting from scratch. It meant she was always meeting new people, and seeing the bases go from derelict pieces of land to working airfields gave her a sense of achievement.

She entered the house and checked the kitchen to see who was about, but it seemed the girls were either out or in their rooms. Taking the kettle, she filled it with water before putting it on the range. She had stayed in many places over the past year, some of which had been rat-infested and derelict, the worst one being served by a well which instead of a pump had a bucket on a length of rope. She had thought fishing newts out of the bucket was bad enough until she came across an unfortunate rat, and now she pulled a face as she recalled watching the bucket plummet back into the well, rat and all. But, just as she had with the others, she had soon got things shipshape, arranging for a proper water supply as well as freeing the site of vermin. By the time she left, the airfield was one of the best she'd ever organised.

Now, as she waited for the kettle to boil, she gazed out over the open fields. The view reminded her of Rhos, with its rolling countryside, and meadows bursting with wild flowers, but here she wasn't having to share a bedroom with her three older brothers. Cadi had no idea how her mother managed to keep everything clean with four miners living in a two up, two down.

She glanced around the quaint kitchen with its beamed ceiling and thick walls. She had never envisaged herself wanting to move back to the country, but

she quite fancied the idea of herself and Jez in a house much like this one, with her making the Sunday roast whilst Jez read his paper in one of the chairs that flanked the fireplace.

Seeing wisps of steam rising from the kettle's spout, she took a tea towel and poured the hot water into the pot. Absentmindedly scooping the tea leaves in, she stirred the contents and left them to brew.

Cadi was a great believer in fate, and so far every cloud had had a silver lining. Maybe Aled was being sent to Finningley for a purpose which hadn't presented itself to her yet, but if past events were anything to go by, she was sure it wouldn't be long before the reason behind his posting was revealed.

It was over a year since Aled had last been home, and with his new posting being even further away than the previous one, he was currently sitting beside the fire in the kitchen of his parents' farmhouse.

'It's a shame Marnie couldn't join you,' remarked Aled's mother, Gwen, looking up from her knitting. 'Such a nice girl, and she's a real help around the house.'

Aled stretched his legs out. 'She's not long been posted herself, so she can't take any more leave just yet.'

John Davies looked at his son over the top of his newspaper. 'Am I right in thinking that Fiskerton's not too far away from Finningley?'

'You are indeed.'

Gwen moved her hands to release more yarn from the ball of wool. 'That's nice. You'll get to see a lot more of each other now that you're being posted nearby.'

‘Have you given any more thought to your plans for when all this is over?’ John asked, before glancing down at his newspaper again.

‘What is there to think about? I certainly don’t want to stay on in the RAF as tail-end Charlie.’

The news that his son planned to return home was music to John’s ears. ‘It’ll be good to have you back.’

Arching a single eyebrow, Gwen continued to knit whilst eyeing her son over her needles. ‘And are we to take it that you’ll be returning with Marnie as your wife?’

Leaning forward in his seat, Aled used the poker to stir the coals in the fire. ‘I shan’t be asking Marnie to marry me until all this is over.’ He held up a hand to quell his mother’s objections. ‘We won’t be living here in sin, if that’s what worries you.’

‘Then what?’ asked Gwen testily. ‘A long-distance relationship? How’s that going to work when you’re busy on the farm?’

Aled leaned back in his seat. ‘As soon as peace is declared, I shall ask her to marry me, and not a moment before.’

His mother gave a snort of contempt. ‘I hope you’re not holding out in the hope that Cadi will leave Jez? Because—’

Aled tutted irritably. ‘What sort of fool do you take me for? That ship has long sailed, and I’m pleased for Cadi. If you must know, I’m waiting until the war is over because there are too many young widows ...’ He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. Hurriedly placing her knitting needles down, Gwen left the room before her son could see her tears.

Aled had half risen out of his seat when his father waved him back down. 'You wait here. I'll see to her.'

Gwen was standing at the foot of the staircase, drying her eyes. 'I can't help it, John,' she murmured through trembling lips. 'The thought of our boy ...'

John put his arms round his wife. 'I know, cariad.'

Aled arrived in the hallway. 'I'm sorry if I upset you. I'm just trying to do the right thing by Marnie.'

Gwen left her husband's arms for Aled's. 'I know you are, cariad. I shouldn't have poked my nose in.'

Aled winked at his mother. 'Isn't that a woman's job?'

Laughing raucously, John clapped a hand on his son's shoulder. 'You've hit the nail on the head there, son.'

With the atmosphere lightened, Gwen smiled. 'I'll have you know I don't gossip, but I do take an interest, and the good news here is that our son will be returning home, and in time he will marry Marnie, and they will continue running the farm, just as we have.'

'Aren't we jumping the gun rather?' said Aled. 'After all, we don't know for certain that she'll say yes.'

Gwen gave him a playful pat on the chest. 'As if she'd say no to you.'

Aled roared with laughter. 'You're biased!'

Gwen shook her head. 'I saw how she looked at you when you brought her back home the Christmas before last, and she was smitten.'

John pushed his hands into his pockets as he rocked on his heels. 'I'm just glad to hear you're coming home.'

'Wild horses couldn't keep me away,' replied Aled, and he meant every word. Having completed countless operations, he knew that he and the crew of the *Ulysses*

had had more than their fair share of luck. He would just have to hope that it would hold out until the end of the war.

Cadi waved goodbye to her housemates as she set off on the long trip to Northumberland. The officer in charge of her next posting had assured Cadi that she would only be there for a couple of weeks, but Cadi knew from past experiences that the WAAF could turn weeks into months at the drop of a hat. The station she was bound for had been used as a dummy airfield, but the powers that be wanted to turn it into a training base, and they needed someone like Cadi to make sure that everything ran smoothly. She glanced at the brand new sergeant's stripes that now graced her arm. She had only ever hoped to reach the rank of corporal, so to be promoted to sergeant was a real feather in her cap. Up until now, she'd told no one of her promotion, wanting Jez to be the first to hear the news. As her route would take her in the direction of Finningley, she had informed him that she would be popping in on her way past, but she had mentioned nothing about her stripes. She smiled. Northumberland was a world away from Lincoln, but if it meant she got to see her husband en route, then it would be worth the journey.

With Cadi due to arrive within the next couple of hours, Jez had swapped shifts with one of his friends. It would be the first time he had seen his wife since their wedding, and he intended to make the most of every minute.

'Blimey, will you look at the smile on your face!' remarked Craig, one of Jez's fellow engineers. 'Doesn't take a genius to work out who you're seeing today.'

Jez held his hands up. 'What can I say, apart from guilty as charged.'

Craig chuckled softly. 'Married bliss, eh? You can tell the two of you are newly-weds.'

Jez winked at his fellow airman. 'You're nowt but an old cynic. I love my Cadi more and more with each day that passes.'

Craig, who was considerably older than Jez, laughed. 'That's cos you ain't been married long enough.' He pointed to the ring on his wedding finger. 'You'll change your tune after you've had ten years of earache.'

Jez wagged a reproving finger. 'Don't give me that. We all know you dote on your Maisie.'

'Only because she'd swing for me if I didn't.' Craig tapped the side of his nose. 'Do you want to know the secret to a good marriage?'

Jez stretched his legs out in front of him. 'Enlighten me.'

'Two words,' said Craig, holding up two fingers. 'Yes dear.' He grinned. 'If you can remember them two words, you'll not go far wrong.'

Jez laughed. 'So the secret to a long marriage is to agree with whatever your wife says?'

Craig gave him the thumbs up before adding, 'Take it from one who's had years of practice. And besides, just because you say yes it doesn't mean that you agree with her, but it will make for a peaceful life.'

'Cadi's not like that,' said Jez loyally. 'In fact, we never really argue.'

Craig coughed on a chuckle. 'Never really argue? I seem to remember you havin' a right old barney over that bird.'

Jez rolled his eyes. 'I take it you're referring to Daphne, but that was different.'

'Still an argument though,' said Craig evenly, adding, 'and a humdinger it was too, as I recall.'

'But only because of that interfering ...' Jez bit back the words without finishing his sentence. 'Now I come to think of it, we've only ever argued over summat that woman said or did.'

'Nasty piece of work by all accounts,' Craig agreed. 'At least she had the decency to skedaddle before you come back here. I take it she's well and truly out of the picture?'

'Long gone,' said Jez.

Craig clapped a hand on his shoulder. 'Good rid-dance to bad rubbish. And when it comes to Cadi, I'm only teasin'. I may've only met her a couple of times, but she seems like a grand lass to me.'

'She certainly is,' said Jez, before adding, 'She'd have to be, to put up with all the nonsense Daphne threw our way.'

'A woman that stands by her man is like a gift from God,' said Craig. 'I might make light of my Maisie, but I know she'll always stand by me.'

'Cadi's the same,' said Jez. 'I just wish I'd learned that sooner, as it would've saved a lot of heartache.'

Craig popped a peppermint into his mouth before proffering the bag to Jez. 'Marriage isn't a bed of roses; you have to work at it, and that doesn't stop just because you get older.'

‘That’s what my nan used to say,’ said Jez, ‘but I honestly think Cadi and I have seen the back of our troubles.’

Craig pushed the small bag of sweets back into his pocket. ‘I must admit, I certainly think you’ve had your fair share!’

Cadi cursed beneath her breath. Road closures were the bane of her existence. Not only did she have to plot an alternative route, but a blocked road could add hours on to a journey. Getting out of her car, she walked over to the fallen tree to see if there was any possibility of getting past, but with the main bulk of the trunk lying across the road she realised she would have to look for another way.

Climbing back into the car, she opened the map and began tracing her finger along the different options. Concluding that there were only two, she chose the shorter one, turned the car round, and headed back on to the main road. Keeping her eyes peeled for the new turning, she slowed down as it came into view, and pulled a disgruntled face as she reached it. *Hardly a road*, Cadi thought to herself. *I’ve seen bigger tracks*. She glanced in the rear-view mirror. If she were to take the longer route, she reckoned she could be looking at adding another hour on to her journey, but if she did turn here she might discover the road to be unfit for anything other than a horse and cart. Torn between the two decisions, Cadi decided to do something she hadn’t done in years.

‘Eeny meeny miny moe...’

Finishing the rhyme, she smiled at the track ahead of her. After all, what was life without a bit of adventure?

Whether the new route was any quicker than the original one Cadi couldn't say, but it was a lot more windy than it had appeared on the map, and some of the blind bends were slowing her progress considerably. As for the state of the car, she dreaded to think what it looked like on the outside, but since she'd had to use the wipers to clear thick mud from the windscreen she could only imagine that it must be caked in all manner of detritus. Seeing a fork in the road ahead of her, she pulled into the car park of a pub so that she might take another look at the map. Locating the pub on the road she was currently on, she confirmed that she should turn left at the fork, then folded the map and put it back into the glove compartment. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, she began to reverse, and felt the car hit something.

Yanking the handbrake up, she got out quickly and ran round to the back of the car, but to her surprise there was no evidence of an accident. She was dumbfounded for a moment, but then her heart fell as she saw a large drop of blood on the ground not too far away. Feeling sick to her stomach, she spotted another drop a little further off. Whatever she had hit, it appeared to be heading in the direction of the pub. Fearing that she might have injured a child, Cadi followed the trail of blood to the door at the back of the pub, and it was here that she saw a beautiful Irish setter with a glossy red coat. Bending down, she looked into the animal's soulful eyes, and the tip of its tail wagged a timid greeting. Reaching out, she gently stroked the dog's head to let it know that she meant it no harm.

‘You poor thing, I’m so sorry,’ she said softly. Looking to see where the blood was coming from, she saw that it was oozing from a gash on the dog’s hind leg. Standing up, she knocked firmly on the back door of the pub. ‘Hello? Is there anyone home?’ She waited for a reply, but with none coming she tried turning the handle. It was no use – the door was locked. She decided to try the front, but when she began to walk that way she heard a noise behind her. Turning, she saw that the dog had got up to follow her. ‘Stay here whilst I go for help.’ Cadi instructed, but the dog took no notice, and limped after her as she hurried round to the front door. She tried the handle, but it seemed that the pub was closed. Tutting beneath her breath, she knocked loudly to see if she could gain anyone’s attention, but there was no response. Frustrated, she peered through the square pane of glass in the middle of the door, and her heart skipped a beat. There was someone home, but he was sprawled on the floor, and it looked to Cadi very much as if he’d collapsed. Banging her fist against the glass, she did her best to rouse the recumbent figure, but he was dead to the world. Not wanting to waste another second, she picked up a rock and hurled it through the small pane, then grabbed another stone and knocked out the remaining fragments of glass so that she could fit her hand through. Turning the knob of the Yale lock, she pushed the door open and ran over to the man she had seen. When she knelt down she could see that he was in his late sixties, and he was still conscious, but only just. His face was beaded with sweat, and seeing the way

he was clutching his chest Cadi felt certain that he must be having a heart attack.

She smoothed his matted hair back, speaking in what she hoped were reassuring tones. 'I'm going to ring for an ambulance. Is the phone behind the bar?'

The man managed a small nod before closing his eyes.

Cadi ran round to the far end of the bar and located the phone. She dialled 999 and was thankful to hear the operator's voice after the first ring. She explained the situation, and was assured that help would be on its way very shortly. Relieved, she replaced the receiver and fetched the man a glass of water, which she held to his lips.

'Try not to worry,' she said soothingly as the man managed a few small sips, 'the ambulance is on its way.' She looked at the dog, which was wagging its tail fervently as it settled next to him. 'Is this your dog?'

The man gave a small nod. 'Annie.'

Cadi smiled. 'Because of the red hair?'

His lips tried to twitch into a smile. "'S right.'

Holding the man's hand in hers, Cadi admired the dog. 'She's a beauty.'

The man looked earnestly into Cadi's eyes, and spoke clearly for the first time. 'Look after her for me.'

Cadi's eyes rounded. 'I'm sorry, but I can't,' she said, before adding, 'Besides, you'll be able to look after her—' She broke off as he clutched his hand to his left breast, his face contorted with pain, and to spare him any more stress or anxiety Cadi made a promise she knew she couldn't keep. 'I'll look after her, I swear it.'

She felt his fingers go limp in hers. Panic rising in her chest, she repeatedly tapped the back of his hand, begging, 'Please wake up, the ambulance will be here any minute now,' and fighting back tears as she prayed for the ambulance to arrive. Annie shuffled towards her owner and licked the side of his face, as if she too were encouraging him to stay with them.

Hearing the crunch of stones as a vehicle pulled into the car park, Cadi called out to the ambulance crew to let them know where she was, and when they entered the building she felt an enormous sense of relief sweep over her. Swiftly getting to her feet so that they might see to the man, she told them how she had found him.

Nodding her understanding, one of the ARPs spoke to her patient as they transferred him on to a stretcher. 'Phil? It's Gail. We're goin' to take you to hospital.' She glanced up at Cadi. 'He's lucky you came along when you did. How on earth did you know what had happened?'

Cadi grimaced. 'I didn't. I was on my way to RAF Finningley when I accidentally hit Annie.'

The ambulance driver tutted irritably. 'I always said that dog would be the death of him.'

Cadi wrinkled her brow. 'It's not Annie's fault, surely?'

Gail indicated the lead which had fallen out of Phil's hand. 'Annie's frightened of her own shadow. I'd wager Phil was in the process of putting her lead on when summat spooked her, and she hared off before he had a chance to secure it.'

Cadi pulled a doubtful face. 'But she was outside, and the door was locked ...?'

Gail counted to three before she and the driver lifted the stretcher. Walking out of the pub, she spoke to Cadi over her shoulder. 'It probably swung shut behind her. That's the trouble with Yale locks.'

Cadi followed them out to what she had assumed was an ambulance, but was in fact a hearse. 'Isn't that a bit inappropriate?'

The driver shrugged. 'Beggars can't be choosers, and as you know ...'

Cadi nodded, finishing his sentence for him. 'There's a war on.' She looked at Annie, who was sitting beside the hearse, whining. Breathing a resigned sigh, she opened the back door of her own car. 'Come on, Annie, you'd better come with me.' She had half expected the dog to ignore her, but to her surprise she happily leapt on to the seat.

With their patient secure in the back of the hearse, the driver turned to Cadi. 'Where will you take her?'

'RAF Finningley for now. I'm hoping someone there will look after her until Phil gets better.'

Wishing her luck, he took his place behind the wheel, and pulled out of the car park.

Cadi started the engine of her car before getting in behind the steering wheel. Annie promptly jumped from the back to the front, and began licking the side of her face. Laughing softly, Cadi gently pushed her away. 'I said I liked a bit of adventure, and boy did I ever find one! C'mon, Annie, let's get you to Finningley.'

Cadi turned in to the parking area reserved for visitors and pulled an exhausted face as she opened the car

door, but her expression lightened when she saw Jez hurrying towards her. 'Sorry I'm late, but I've had rather an eventful journey.'

Jez appeared intrigued. 'Sounds interesting.' He held out his hand to help her from the car, and noticed the extra stripe on her arm. 'Why didn't you tell me you'd made sergeant?' he cried.

With all that had gone on, Cadi had completely forgotten her husband was yet to learn of her promotion. 'I wanted it to be a surprise.'

'So why do you look so glum?' Then his eyes fell on Annie, and with a broad grin etching his cheeks he jerked his head towards the dog. 'You didn't tell me you had company.'

Cadi rolled her eyes. 'She's the reason why I'm late.' Explaining the circumstances in which she'd acquired Annie, she finished, 'I completely forgot she'd be needing her lead. I don't suppose you've got anything we could use? Only apparently she's easily spooked and we can't have her running around the base like a headless chicken.'

Jez scratched the top of his head. 'I can easily come up with something, even if it's just a belt ...' He hesitated. 'The pub you found her at, was it the Bull and Heifer by any chance?'

Cadi nodded. 'I take it you know it?'

'I certainly do; it's our local watering hole.' He turned his attention to Annie, who was wagging her tail at him from the front passenger seat. 'Poor old Phil, he'll be lost without her.' He turned on his heel. 'Wait here, and I'll see what I can fashion into a lead.'

Whilst he was gone, Cadi stroked Annie's silky head, and took a quick peek at her leg. She was thankful to see that it was no longer bleeding, but it would still need a good clean. Jez was hurrying back with the cord of his dressing gown, and Cadi watched as he fashioned a loop and placed it over the top of Annie's head. 'C'mon, old girl, let's see if we can't get you some food and water.' As he spoke, his gaze fell to the gash on the dog's leg. 'And we'll take a look at that wound of yours whilst we're about it.'

'It's stopped bleeding, so I'm rather hoping she won't need stitches,' said Cadi as they led the setter round to the back of the cookhouse.

Jez took Cadi's hand in his. 'She can walk, so at least nothing's broken.' He knocked a brief tattoo on the cookhouse door, and within moments one of the cooks appeared in the doorway, her welcoming smile fading as she noticed Annie's leg.

'Oh, you poor thing,' she cried. 'What have you done to yourself?'

'Beryl, this is Cadi,' Jez said quickly. 'She can tell you what happened.'

Her cheeks turning crimson, Cadi relayed the incident to Beryl, who smiled sympathetically. 'If it's any consolation, I very much doubt you caused that wound. It probably happened when she legged it out of the pub.'

'But I hit her,' said Cadi, a puzzled frown crossing her brow, 'I know I did.'

'I'm not doubting that,' said Beryl, 'but I should imagine you can't have been going very fast, or she'd not be here to tell the tale.'