

Chapter 1

‘Behind the bike shed.’

‘Hardly counts, it’s so predictable. In an Astra... a Cortina... a Renault...’

‘OK, OK, cars... I get the idea. In a rowing boat on the Loughor.’

She thought for a minute. ‘On a pine needle bed in a squirrel-filled wood.’

He regarded her narrowly. ‘Squirrels don’t live in coniferous forest.’

‘Well, obviously, it was a mixed forest. I didn’t say all the trees were pines, did I?’

‘And it was *full* of squirrels, which presumably made themselves known to you at your moment of passion.’

‘Stop quibbling. You’re just playing for time.’

‘In a changing room at the swimming pool.’

‘Very romantic.’ Another pause for thought. One of the prints on the wall caught her eye.

‘In a mountain stream where the currents mixed the coldness of snow with the warmth of summer.’

‘No doubt the stream was full of fish. Was there a camera team filming a cigarette advert at the time?’

She smirked. ‘We all have our treasured memories.’

He rolled on his back and put his hands behind his head, relaxed. ‘On the top bunk of a sleeper car on the Orient Express, just as it was entering Venice. Symbolic, don’t you think?’

‘You and your films. Cary Grant, *North by Northwest*, with more than a little of Dai’s imagination.’

‘Perhaps it was the Flying Scotsman then. So easy to lose track of place and time at such moments, don’t you find?’

But she’d turned serious and he could see from the frown of concentration that an idea was arriving. This was a pity, as he enjoyed the suspended time when they lay together, with no urgency to the circling caresses. She was lying upside down, head against his feet, and to look at her expression he had to raise up from the pillow, straining his neck muscles. He gave up and waited with resignation. Ideas could be very uncomfortable and - worse still - a response was expected. He had given up aiming to please with his response and was less often treated to a silence of affectionate contempt.

‘It’s probably different for men,’ (one of her least attractive opening gambits); ‘I’ve found that crazy places were exciting but not that satisfying. With the possible exception of the squirrels.’ She threw him what would have been a sideways glance had she been the right way up, but his eyes were closed as he listened. If he was listening. ‘And the same is true about a new man. You know, it’s exciting, but not the best.’

‘No doubt there was an exception to that too...’

‘Yes actually, now you come to mention it... So where is it best for you?’

He knew the answer to that one. ‘Here. In your bed. With you.’

She felt the disappointment of having forced him, but also the warmth of knowing it was true.

‘*Il a fait tout l’amour de la terre, Il n’a pas trouvé mieux.*’

‘I love it when you talk dirty.’

‘It means “he travelled all around the world to find out home is best,” but it sounds better in French.’

They lay back in contented silence, but time was ticking back into the evening.

‘Dance with me,’ she demanded suddenly. ‘No,’ she stopped him reaching for his clothes, ‘as we are.’ He laughed and shook his head but conceded, watching as she put one of her shameful secrets on the CD player. Every now and then she confessed a ‘shameful secret’ to him, making him promise not to tell. No one was to know that she licked the cream out of

custard cream biscuits before eating the outside; no one was to know she slept with a one-eyed toy dog called Heathcliff; no one was to know she had a compilation album of popular love songs.

As the lugubrious notes of the CD oozed into the room she took his hand. He shambled to his feet and held her, shifting to the rhythm with as much grace and dignity as he could muster with a rash of goose pimples and a horribly new awareness of the way his body was assembled. For a few seconds he lost the self-consciousness, held her eyes, and this time his murmured 'love you' was unforced. Then the laughter took over, as both of them complained about bits bobbling.

There was a slight awkwardness in the air as they dressed, and she knew it was time.

'Helen.'

She just looked at him, poised, waiting.

'It's time to go...'

The end of his sentence hung in the air... 'home.'

She kissed him, and though he looked for signs that she minded, he saw none bar a hint of coolness. But then that's how she was.

'À bientôt.' She smiled at him as she closed the door, trying to shut out the echoes in her mind,

'Il n'a pas trouvé mieux.'

She muttered her personal litany, 'Liberty, autonomy and space for me.' She had plenty of space to be herself, and it was only at moments like this that the word 'empty' emerged from the silence.

When she woke, she glimpsed through the curtains that particular shade of grey which indicated a dull summer day. She found it impossible to enthuse about Llanelli's mild climate and retained her immigrant's awe at the varieties of rain possible. She had once started a rain lexicon, inspired by the knowledge that there were forty? sixty? one hundred Inuit words for snow, and was disappointed that this was not the case in Welsh. Her attempt to fill the gap in English, at least, had reached twenty categories before the project was abandoned, defeated by the apathy which watching rain induced in her. Sheet rain, drizzle, the torrent, the downpour and picking rain were among the more obvious; she was best pleased by 'the kettle spout' (the type of rain which drenches one specific location - usually you - and steams upwards from the pavement), 'the devil's miracle' (which falls steadily from a cloudless blue sky) and 'gloop' (the drops having a gelatinous quality). The project had not been encouraged by friends, who explained carefully to her that she must work to the key phrase 'Look at that "___"!' While 'gloop' met this requirement, the fact that no one else understood the word did inhibit conversation, which could usually continue comfortably for several minutes on the subject of the weather.

However, the weather had not really been a consideration five years ago when Helen had moved to Llanelli. She had wanted somewhere rural by the sea, with cheap rents for business and accommodation, and as far away from Leeds as possible. No one had objected to the last point; not that she had discussed the decision with anyone else. While browsing through a daily paper, the headline *Pembrey flagged as Britain's best beach* caught her eye. The description of miles of milky white sands had captured her imagination. When she looked out of the bus window and saw one lad puking, another peeing against someone's garden wall and a third kicking a plastic bottle in drifts of old newspaper, her mind was made up. The magic word *Llanelli* was her one-way ticket out of this. Although there had been some readjustment to the reality of Llanelli as a large town with more than its fair share of rough lads and unemployment, there was also the magic. The sea itself, even from Llanelli's warehouse-ridden grey beach, was a source of wonder to her. Local stories told of youngsters and visitors cut off on sandbanks by the deceptive speed of the estuary tides. Even the much-

touted Pembrey Beach (for which she preferred the tidal flow of the Welsh name Cefn Sidan) was famous among the old 'uns for its lethal currents.

Her first visit to Cefn Sidan had inevitably been a disappointment. In her innocence she had not checked bus times or tides and had suffered a long wait to catch the former and a long walk to catch the latter. Her entry point to the beach, trying to avoid people, gave her a trek across sand dunes on a wooden path. Convinced that she would see the sea after rounding the last hillock, she was daunted by the vast stretch of sand which met her view. Clean white sand, certainly, but where was the sea? Adjusting to another walk, she aimed for the horizon, which really wasn't that far away. Or so she thought. After ten minutes walking, the sea looked no nearer and she continued with gritted teeth. When she finally reached the sea, she kicked it repeatedly with her bare feet and vented her feelings verbally. Thoroughly drenched and pausing for breath she heard it, that silence which is full of nature's sounds; the distinctive two-tone note of the curlew and the food squabbles of gulls. She looked across the sea to the Gower Peninsula, its muted shades of green, and the long, low outline of Worm's Head blurry at the edges. Fired up by a sudden determination, she had told the Worm's Head that she was here to stay and that there were dragons in the north of England too.

On this particular grey summer day, Helen kept to her working routine. A short walk from her rented house on the Pembrey Road took her to the centre of town, where she opened up shop. The window display, with its summer sale prices on nubbly cotton tops would soon have to be changed for the Christmas hard sell, even though it was only August. She hated the way that working in a shop made the year disappear, and yet she could only meet orders if she did work well in advance. There were always customers who thought she could design and handknit a garment by someone's birthday 'tomorrow' and who took it as a personal affront when she explained that it would take longer. Luckily, she had a growing number of regular customers, as well as some passing tourist trade.

Tuesday was generally quiet, with smaller shops still closing for the traditional half-day, so she settled to some design work after a quick and moderately depressing updating of the accounts. Takings were just high enough to keep her life ticking over, but there was no margin for safety or luxury. Once a year, in January when trade was slack, she treated herself to one of her own designer jumpers, but generally she couldn't afford time off from the day-to-day work of meeting orders and adding to stock. Each item was unique and she'd lost count of the number of times she'd patiently rejected customers' insistence that they wanted 'one exactly like that one'. Her high standards were beginning to pay off, though, and she was risking more imaginative designs and mixed textures, with some success.

Sucking her pencil and plotting the stitches on graph paper, Helen sketched a batwing jumper, fashionably cropped, with variants of traditional fair-isle motifs in two vertical bands. She looked through her samples box with a miser's greed, savouring colours and textures, imagining different combinations. Rejecting the impracticality of pure mohair, she chose an olive mohair/acrylic mix with a tawny twisted silk yarn for the motifs. She'd have to be careful with the stranding on the inside, but she was sure that the design would work. This was a design that would glow, would beg to be bought, and would attract the interest of visiting royalty. She would be the Norman Hartnell of woolly couture. She would out-Fasset Kaffe. Better still, a visiting foreign delegate would see The Jumper and realise that the interests of international trade would be best served by a joint trading venture that would make M&S look like a penny bazaar again. Lost in these visions, she was disturbed by the alarm clock, which told her it was lunch and Tuesday closing time.

Not one customer all morning and yet she was satisfied with her half-day's work. The latest creation was on its way, with some intricate cable in the ribbing and the pattern set. She knew perfectly well that this design was meant for her, the colours to suit the dark red of her long, unruly hair and the freckled cream of her skin. She also knew that she would sell the jumper

to someone else, hopefully after a long enough spell in the shop window to attract orders. It was difficult to balance immediate sales against orders and she was grateful when customers allowed her to display sold items for an extra week or two. Even with the piece-work provided by Sian and Glenys, Christmas was crazy, and she really could not afford to take on more workers. If only she could have a year off to build up stock, then she could cope with the Christmas rush.

It had been two weeks before Christmas that she had met Dai. He had waited patiently behind three other customers, who all wanted to agonize in turn over which character from *The Lion King* or *Pocohontas* should be in what pose, on a jumper of which colour and size, for little Bethan or Ian or Emma. Noticing that it was quarter to six - well after closing time - she flipped the sign in the door to CLOSED / AR GAU and turned the key in the lock as a further precaution, excusing herself to her last customer. Finally, she turned her attention to the stocky man in jeans and shabby weatherproof jacket.

Her smile was still bright but a little weary as she asked, 'Is it *The Lion King* or *Pocohontas*?'

'Neither, I'm afraid. If people weren't encouraged to see animals as cute entertainment, my job would be a lot easier.' He smiled ruefully, softening the bitterness of the remark. 'I'm sorry. It's been a hard day and vets don't look forward to Christmas.'

'I hate Christmas too,' came spontaneously from her, to her chagrin as she would have to give some reason why, and the truth was something she didn't even tell herself any more, never mind a total stranger. She rushed to pre-empt the question. 'It's so commercialised,' and she kicked herself for the cliché. He must think her boring. Then she kicked herself for even considering what he might think of her.

'I'd like some kind of fluffy jumper in tasteful colours for my wife's Christmas present. She's about your size.'

She pulled her professional self together, showed a selection of jumpers, using rather more exact descriptions of yarn than 'fluffy' but he seemed to lose interest, told her to choose for him and said, 'Yes that will do fine,' as he crumpled up a cream Angora tunic with seed pearls sewn into the shoulder cabling detail.

Helen packed the jumper with exaggerated care but the point seemed to be lost as he was quite openly scrutinizing her face.

'I don't usually find redheads attractive, but you look like a Botticelli angel,' he announced, as if this were a mere statement of fact.

'That's me, fat and virtuous. I don't usually find married men attractive, especially arrogant ones, and you're no exception,' she retorted, with the colour in her cheeks fuelling the spark of her temper.

He seemed unmoved and merely asked her politely for his credit card back. She realised that his Visacard was clutched tightly in her hand and had been waved in the air to illustrate her feelings. Both card and package containing the jumper were dumped gracelessly on the counter, retrieved by the man, who thanked her and would have left if the door had not been locked. She had recovered her poise, enjoyed watching him re-arranging his bags to turn the key, and timed her intervention so as to help him as little as possible, while being the one who actually unlocked the door. They had wished each other a Merry Christmas and she had not expected to see him again, although he had made enough of an impression for her to notice from his credit receipt that he was D. R. Evans.

His name always seemed a mystery to her, even when she knew him well. David Richard Evans, known as Dai. The essential Welshness of 'Dai Evans, the vet' worried at her prejudices. The ones she'd been sure she didn't have. Why was it impossible to take someone called Dai seriously? Why was it so difficult to accept that a 'Dai' was more than a match for her intelligence? Why did Evans sound like a pseudonym for an illicit weekend? It was

characteristic of him that he accepted himself as Dai, although he joked that his parents had named him D. R. in the hope that he would rise to the level of medical doctor. Her favourite, special name for him was Dafydd; she loved the Celtic sound of it and the way it suggested all the strangeness of him.

She had survived Christmas, using all the defensive rituals she had developed, automatically destroying unopened Christmas mail from the few people from pre-Llanelli days who still made a token gesture at contact.

Friends made more recently knew that she didn't celebrate Christmas, and if anyone pestered her on the subject, she ended any discussion by saying that her dead parents had been Jehovah's Witnesses and that this was the only article of faith she observed out of respect for them. Her parents, in their three-bedroomed suburban Leeds semi, would have been distressed but not surprised by her story of their demise. There was one of the cards destroyed each Christmas, despite the plea on the back of the envelope 'Helen, please get in touch. We love you.'

On a slack day in January, he had appeared again, lugging a bag of medicine, syringes and plastic gloves, all jammed in and bulging over the top.

'I don't suppose there's any chance of a coffee? The police called me to a road victim and then I did my town visits. There's a Persian next door to you, the flat above the shop, horrific eczema and stupid owners. Half the problem is diet and it's an indoor cat so there's no chance of it foraging to add roughage to its *haute cuisine*. They're more likely to give caviar to the cat than coffee to the vet so I remembered there was a friendly face close by and I wondered...'

She had continued knitting, without looking up, although she was perfectly capable of following a complex design and watching television at the same time, so this was from choice not necessity. There was silence until she reached the end of the row, pushed the needles through the three balls of wool she was working with, stretched and stood up.

'How did your wife like her Christmas present?' Helen asked.

'She loved it,' he replied, holding her gaze steadily. And then they had coffee. And talked. And it became something to look forward to, long after the Persian had recovered from its eczema if not from its owners.

One wet Monday in March, he had called just before closing time, and she had asked him, 'What does your wife think of you calling here for coffee?'

Again, the steady gaze, no ducking of the question on or below the surface. 'There is no reason for me to talk to her about it.'

And so the coffees continued. And for a while it was just coffees.