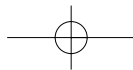
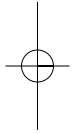
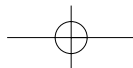
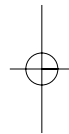
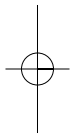


COLD ENOUGH TO FREEZE COWS



Also by Lorraine Jenkin

CHOCOLATE MOUSSE AND TWO SPOONS
EATING BLACKBIRDS



COLD ENOUGH TO FREEZE COWS

by
Lorraine Jenkin

HONNO MODERN FICTION

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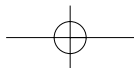
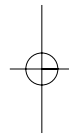
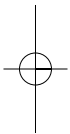
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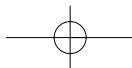
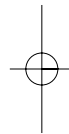
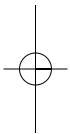
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For Huw, for Charlotte, for Maude...
and now for baby Billi, too.



With many thanks to all those that helped with the making of
Cold Enough to Freeze Cows



CHAPTER 1

Fel bol buwch ddu – like a black cow’s belly

Iestyn Bevan got up from the table and walked towards the back door. He pulled on the jumper and overshirt that were one inside the other on the hook, and ground his feet into the enormous wellies that stood in a puddle of water on the tiles.

He didn’t want to go back out into the weather. His bones had been getting warm, finally, and the aching was subsiding. However, he knew by now that it was like needing the toilet in the night: no matter how much you didn’t want to get up and go, you were far better to just get on with it. The need was never going to go away and ignoring it just prolonged the agony.

“Out to check the barn, boy?” asked his dad from his usual spot in the chair by the Rayburn.

“Yeah,” grunted Iestyn, “just a last look round.” Somehow his dad’s unbelievably flexible neck permitted his eyes to follow Iestyn across the kitchen as he fetched his beanie hat, which sat in a puddle on the work surface.

“Check that old girl in the pen, eh, Iest? She wasn’t looking too good earlier.” Iestyn’s father, Tomos, had a knack of allowing his body to sit perfectly still in the chair with just his head moving, revolving from side to side.

“Yep, no probs.” He would have checked her anyway, having spotted earlier that she was looking none too bright.

“Good boy,” said Tomos and his head returned to look at the small television perched on top of the dresser, once more meeting up with the alignment of his exhausted body and allowing every osteopath in the land to breathe a sigh of relief. Iestyn knew what it was like: when you spent your whole day slogging in the cold, after you’d finally sat down you moved as little of your body as possible.

Iestyn’s mother, Isla, smiled at him and got to her feet, “I’ll have a brew ready for when you get back.” Iestyn smiled in return as she filled the kettle that had nearly steamed away all its contents and returned it to the hotplate of the Rayburn.

Isla sat back down and picked up her knitting. Her chair faced away from the television, so instead of watching it she assumed her usual concentrated frown as she listened to what was happening, knitting for her niece’s children, for Iestyn, for her husband, Tomos, and finally for herself.

Iestyn reached for his coat on the peg in the porch and slung it, still wet, onto his back. The cold damp collar and cuffs touched his skin and he shuddered. Cursing for the thousandth time that no one had replaced that outdoor light, he grabbed the torch from the shelf and followed its feeble beam into the night.

He slopped along the path round the side of the house, the rain driving down his neck. He instinctively knew where the gutters were spilling out, but the duck shit he skidded on was unexpected. He cursed as he grabbed for a handhold and scraped his knuckles on the rusty corrugated iron cladding that protected the farmhouse from the worst of the easterly weather.

He trudged up the steps, knowing exactly where to step, which treads were loose, which were uneven and which were missing and had been for the last few years.

At the top of the slope, Iestyn wrenched open the barn door and felt for the lights. The sweet smell of the hay and the warmth from the sheep soothed him. He hung his wet coat on a nail and threw the torch down into a pile of old feed sacks.

As he moved amongst the pens, he looked over the sheep which were divided into groups or singles by hurdles and other more makeshift barriers. Some jumped to their feet as he approached, darting to the back of their pens, others eyed him warily, but stayed

crouched in the warm hay. His father had been moaning about the severity of the winter and had predicted that because the weather had been so bad, the lambs would be born with stunted legs as their mothers had spent so much time crouched low to the ground. However, Iestyn knew that his father predicted such a thing most winters, so he felt a little more optimistic.

Iestyn made his way over to the ewe that Tomos had mentioned. Although to the layman most of the sheep looked the same, Iestyn knew exactly which one his father had meant when he had mentioned the "scraggy old" ewe. She tried to stand up as he approached and then hobbled off to the corner of the pen. He grabbed the rickety hurdle and stepped over it, his six-foot-two frame clearing the top rail easily.

He darted at the sheep and caught her. Her eyes were a little dull and her hooves were a bit smelly but she seemed OK. Certainly not worth doing anything about it anyway – father would rather eat her than get the vet out. Despite the Ministry and its paperwork, plenty of hobbling, crouching, or infertile sheep ended up lying with a handful of herbs shoved up their arse on the Bevans' table of a Sunday.

Kneeling down with the sheep, Iestyn felt the breeze racing under the wall of the barn. His grandfather had patched an old door opening with a tin sheet as a temporary measure about twenty-five years ago and it still rattled under the slightest breeze. He shivered: he'd been soaked through three times already and by the evening he'd been struggling to get warm. He pulled the collar of his shirt up and shuddered as that was wet too, a puddle of rainwater trickling down his neck.

He checked his watch – he'd been in here for forty minutes: that tea would be stewed to buggery by now. He made his way back to the door and shrugged his coat back on. He flicked the light switch off and the place plunged back into pitch darkness, not a streetlight for three miles. Iestyn cursed that he had not picked up his torch first as he fumbled round amongst the feed sacks and flicked away a mouse as it ran over his hand.

He slipped and slid down the path back to the house, no longer trying to avoid the puddles or the mud, vowing as he did every night to put a bulb in that bloody porch light first thing in the morning...

His mother and father were in exactly the same position as they had been when he left them earlier, his mother just being another couple of inches further on in her knitting. She looked up and his father craned his neck around and peeped over the chair.

"All right, love?"

"All right, boy?"

"Yeah."

"How was that ewe?"

"Oh, she'll be OK, bit ropey, but all right I think. I've stuck some more straw in her pen, cosy her up a bit."

Iestyn shook off his wellies and padded across the tiles, his long cream socks flopping out in front of him. He eased himself into his chair and accepted the cup of stewed tea from his mother with a smile. She waited beside him as he drained it and it was refilled without a comment. A thickly buttered scone was put beside his refilled cup.

"Thanks," he muttered, and picked up his scone. "Blimey, Mam, I think I've stopped growing now, you know!"

She smiled back. It was their little joke. Scones had filled him, his father and his brother, Joe, for as long as he could remember and there were always piles of them for when they had come in from outside. The scones had grown larger and larger as the years had gone by and Iestyn and Joe had grown into two large men. But this one was possibly the biggest ever.

"Well," laughed his mum, "I suppose I wasn't concentrating."

"Watching bloody *Pobl y Cwm*," quipped a voice from behind the chair wings, "that's why my sandwich didn't have any butter in and the chickens didn't get fed and..." Tomos peered around and winked at Iestyn and Isla laughed.

"Well, maybe one day he'll learn how to make his own sandwiches?"

"Hey, now, let's not get silly," said Tomos, "no need to go that far. Oh, and Iestyn, Joe phoned. He and Sima are coming down Christmas Eve – having Christmas day here and then heading off skiing for New Year. Off for a winter break, flying out with some old friends from Cardiff and then they'll call back through again on their way back to London."

"Another winter break? That bloke has so many winter breaks I'm

surprised that he has time for a normal week to actually do any work!"

"He's had another bonus," said Isla proudly, "so he's going to treat Sima."

Joe was the son that was always boasted about in the local shop, the one who topped the Christmas card news and the one whose homecoming was more of an occasion. He would always turn up in a new car, usually one that was so low slung that it could be heard scraping its way up the mile-long track. He would nearly always have a gorgeous woman in the passenger seat and often a different one to the time before – although in fairness, the beautiful Sima would be on her third visit now. Iestyn remembered the first time that the tall, willowy Sima came to the farm. Her exotic looks had taken his father by surprise and Iestyn had chuckled at his slow deliberate English and then shrivelled with embarrassment as she replied, "Is-it-because-you-are-first-language-Welsh-that-you-talk-so-slowly?" in a broad Cockney accent. She'd winked at Iestyn as he giggled, then she'd laughed and patted Tomos on the arm, "I'm only joking," she laughed. "I know that sometimes people are not quite sure what to do with me! Let's start again: Sima Arshad born in England to Pakistani parents, I'm very pleased to meet you!"

"Tomos!" Isla had clucked, "Silly arse! Sima, love, pleased to meet you *wherever* you're from! Take no notice of Tomos, he's never been further than Cardiff in his life..." Joe had laughed again when he got a nudge from his mother, "Joe, m'n, you could have *told* us..."

Iestyn loved Joe. He was good fun and always full of tales of a life that was very different to Iestyn's. He told stories about the City, the bars, his fifth floor flat – sorry, luxury condominium – the clubs and the women. Iestyn had never sought to follow Joe; he'd always wanted to work on the farm, and that is what he had done, but he sometimes envied Joe his escapades and opportunities. He loved Pencwmhir, but wouldn't it be nice to sit on a balcony overlooking the Thames with a glass of champagne and someone as beautiful as Sima at his side just occasionally?

Instead, he supped his *paned* with his mother and father, chatting as they always did about the farm, the animals, any work that had to be done and the latest gossip from the local village, Bwlch y Garreg. Occasionally he would nudge the dog, snoring at his feet, with his toe.

Although he presumed that even Sima would fart and twitch in her sleep now and then, lying beside her would surely be a far more pleasant experience than having that Jack Russell snoozing beside his chair.

"That bloody dog," said Tomos, frowning. "Has he been eating chicken shit again?"

Louisa Harrison settled at her desk and switched on her lamp. She pressed the button on her computer and felt the usual surge of expectation as it whirred into being. As it sorted itself out, she busied herself in her bedroom, shutting her curtains against the foul December weather and removing her work clothes in favour of her pyjamas and dressing gown. As she sorted her outfit into those things that were destined for the wash basket and those that would be acceptable for another day, the door tapped and her mum's grey bob peeped round.

"Brought your tea up, love."

"Thanks, Mum," said Louisa without really looking at her, and she went back to wriggling the mouse in the attempt to get her system to boot up quicker. Her mother put the cup onto the mouse mat and Louisa frowned and picked it up and put it very deliberately onto the coaster.

"Sorry, love," dithered her mum, "I didn't realise it was your computer mat."

"Mouse mat," stated Louisa, as she stared at her screen.

"Sorry, *mouse* mat," said her mother and without thinking took a damp cloth from a loop on the back of her jeans and deftly wiped the surface of the desk, whipping round the keyboard and collecting the three specks of dust that had dared to gather there since she'd dusted earlier.

"Mum! For goodness sake!" snapped Louisa. "Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"Yes, yes, of course it can. Sorry, love, wasn't thinking."

Louisa nodded and carried on staring at the screen. She hated waiting for so long. She could feel her mother standing behind her looking over her shoulder. Eventually she had to turn and look at her and raise her eyebrows and at last her mother took the hint. Wiping

the shelf as she went, Esther walked slowly from the room and left her daughter in peace.

Louisa shook her head and returned to the screen and sighed. *Right. Let's get down to it.* There was another knock at the door.

"Sorry, love, I forgot to ask about your sandwiches for tomorrow."

Louisa rolled her eyes and groaned. "Oh, anything. Whatever."

"Cheese and tomato?"

"No, um, tuna, mayo and spring onion will be fine. Bit less pepper this time though, please."

"OK, love." And Esther clicked the door shut once more.

Louisa was feeling quite excited. As part of the Advanced Computer Studies course she was taking through her workplace personal advancement programme, the tutor, Herbie, had set the class the task of writing a blog for their Christmas homework.

"I want you to not just *use* the computer. I want you to *get involved* with it. *Interact* with it, yeah?"

Herbie got on her nerves. He was a bit of a hippy turned techno-head and it was as if the two didn't sit well together. Occasionally he would flick the flimsy ponytail that had managed to grow out the back of his neck and say, "Yeah?" as if that might mean that he wasn't betraying his roots. However, despite this, she was enjoying the course and had received positive feedback about her assignments.

To Louisa's annoyance, however, her mother had recently started attending a Computers For Beginners evening class, so that they could "help each other". Louisa knew that she would now no doubt spend much of her free time messing about with paper-jams, showing Esther how to save files, delete files, click on a mouse etcetera, etcetera, etcetera...

At last the Internet was up and ready to go. Louisa typed in the URL of her own blog, which she had set up in class, and then sat back as it flicked to the screen. *Bingo! It had worked!* The pastel shades made her nod – yes, they looked good. All she now needed to do was write something.

"It doesn't have to be much, and it doesn't have to be a literary masterpiece," Herbie had said. "Just a diary about your day, or something like that. I want to feel like I am getting to *know* you:

getting to know what makes you tick, yeah? I want you to use the tag lines, use the titles – you know the score? Let's get to it!"

Louisa had sat in the chair in the side of the class and wracked her brains as to how she could draw him in (yeah?). By the time she was ready to start typing, Herbie had checked the clock and seeing that they could legitimately "rap", as he called it, he leapt away to mingle with Rachel and Rosie, the two young women who sat next to each other at the front of the class and giggled together as if they were still at school. Louisa had spotted Herbie trying to arrange himself so that he could take quick glimpses down Rosie's top as he helped her with one of her many technical problems. Pretty pathetic really – shame that he didn't involve the rest of the class in his "rap" – everyone else had to chat amongst themselves.

"I'm going to write about what I am reading," said Moira, the woman who had sat next to Louisa.

Louisa had nodded, bored. Why had she ended up sat next to Moira? Rachel and Rosie were now laughing with Tom, the funny guy sat on the row behind them. How come she, Louisa, had Moira, with Barry and Robin behind her? They never really did any more than smile at her. It wasn't fair really; she'd have a lot more interesting things to say to Tom than Rachel or Rosie would – and she didn't have such an obvious fake tan. From where she had sat, she could see a tide-line behind Rosie's ear.

As she sat in her bedroom contemplating her text, Louisa shuffled the items on her desk. Her pen caddy, a photo of dear old Tibby in a frame, a clean pad of paper and a calculator. What on earth was there to write about?

She was twenty-six and worked in the bank in the neighbouring town of Tan-y-Bryn. She had worked there since leaving school and had been promoted twice and was now Chief Cashier with one girl beneath her. She lived at home with her parents in the Welsh hamlet of Anweledig and had been saving for her own house since she'd started her job. The plan had been that she would probably be buying it with a husband and therefore she hadn't actually started looking for something to spend her deposit on yet. She played badminton (very occasionally) on a Tuesday night, had her computer class on the

Thursday and usually accompanied her parents to the golf club on Saturday night for a meal, after her dad had played a round of golf. There really wasn't a great deal more.

She drummed her fingers, made a start, deleted it, wrote a bit more and sat back in her chair to contemplate. There was another tap at the door. *What was it now?*

"Yes," she barked. If her mother was disturbing her again to ask what flavour crisps she wanted with her sandwiches, she would be really cross.

Instead a dark curly head peeped round the door.

"Dad!" She smiled.

"All right, love? Still working?"

"Well, an assignment to do, but I'm at a bit of a loss of how to start."

"*Silent Witness* is on!" he goaded. "I'll get your mother to put the kettle on again, shall I? Go on, leave the assignment – you can finish it another time when you haven't had such a long day: you must be exhausted."

Louisa deliberated, looking at the single sentence on the screen in front of her. *My name is Louisa Harrison and I live with my parents in Anweledig and I work in the local bank.* Then she looked at the face at the door, smiling down at her.

"Actually, looking at it, I think I've finished already!" she said, retied her dressing gown, pulled on her slippers and followed him downstairs to the lounge.

The porch door of Cwmtwrch Farm banged open and a figure wrapped in an oilskin crashed in. An elderly lady grabbed at the door as it buffeted against the wind. "Come on in, bach," she cried and helped the bundle of layers into the warm.

"Oh, thanks, Nain," puffed the bundle to his grandmother. "Phew, it's cold out there!" The little lady reached up to help him off with his coat and scurried it away to its peg. The hats and scarf were taken from his hand and slung onto the airer above the Rayburn. By the time the young man had propped his wellies on the rack in the corner, a mop had sucked all the rain and sleet from the tiled floor and a brush had swept away the clumps of mud. A fresh mug of tea was poured and reached the old chair by the Rayburn just as Johnny Brechdan himself did.

"There you are, bach," smiled his grandmother with a look of complete love in her eyes.

"Oh, thank you, that's wonderful! Just what I needed," Johnny grinned in return as he stretched out his legs and rested his socked feet on the front of the Rayburn.

"Oi, socks off that!" clipped Nain, "you burn through any more pairs and I'll stop repairing them!"

"No, you won't," he laughed and winked at her.

"You!" she chided. "You've got the cheek of your father, God rest his soul. How were the barns? Any problems?"

"No, no, all fine. That draught seems to have worked on the two ewes that were a bit rough yesterday, so that's good news. So, yes, all fine." Johnny took a long sip of his tea and leant back into his armchair even further, as if it might be possible to get even more comfortable than he already was. "You go on up if you want to – Taid already in bed?"

"Yes, twenty minutes since – told him to get himself ready for me and I would be up as soon as you were safely back indoors."

"Best not keep him waiting then! *Nos da*, Nain, good night."

"Good night, bach, *nos da*," she smiled and walked to the heavy door leading to the stairs, collecting a pile of ironed clothes to take upstairs with her. "Cake in the tin," he heard as the door latch clicked shut.

Johnny stretched again, and then opened the door to the Rayburn's fire. He poked and prodded it about, raddling out the ashes in a way that would have Nain tutting, "*Gently, boy, gently!*" A few logs from the broken-down wicker basket were slung in and he leant back into the chair, watching the flames curl around their new prey.

He loved this time of night. He was physically tired, but, barring emergencies, he'd done all he needed to for the day. His grandparents, Nain and Taid, were early to bed and he would be left with the house to himself. Sometimes he would scoot off down the local, or maybe watch a bit of television or go on his computer. Other times he'd just sit in front of the fire, maybe doze or maybe just sit: there was always plenty enough to think about on a farm and far too little time to simply rest.

As he sat and wondered whether he could be bothered to go and get a piece of that cake that his Nain had mentioned, his phone burst into song. Johnny sighed, then rummaged in his back pocket and pulled it out. *Ah, Gina!* Johnny smiled. *What did she want at this time of night? Probably what she usually wanted at this time of night...*

Chapter 2

Cyn flined â draenog – as cross as a hedgehog

It was Thursday evening and Louisa was driving home in a bad mood. She knew that she shouldn't have looked at it at lunchtime, but she had, and her whole afternoon had been foul as a result. She could still see the words in her mind's eye, chatty, welcoming and witty and there for anyone who might come across it. Rachel Dowling's blog. Miss Goody Two-shoes had not only done her homework, but she had made it interesting and fun to read. Whilst she, Louisa, had been wrapped in a blanket on the sofa watching telly, Rachel had been writing up the fun she'd had over the weekend. Louisa wasn't *really* jealous, but Rachel did have a little more than her to write about.

"Hi Everyone! My name is Rachel and welcome to my blog!" it had said. Louisa had tutted at its triteness, but she hadn't been able to help reading on. "I'm 26 years old," and Louisa had frowned at the knowledge – she had assumed that Rachel was much younger than she was, "and I live in a flat with my two great friends Rosie and Samuel." Louisa had been annoyed – of *course* it was easier to have an interesting life if you lived with your two great friends. *She* would probably live with two great friends if she weren't living with her mum and dad. Rachel needn't be so smug about it.

"We're all just recovering from a fantastic weekend in North Wales where we were supposed to go hill walking, but actually didn't manage to leave the pub!" Her immature ramblings had gone on to include a snowball fight with some locals that had resulted in an invite back to their house for an impromptu party. A few of the group were in a band, so they had all ended up jamming and singing the night away.

So, Louisa had fumed all afternoon, crashing about the bank, glaring at her customers and making stupid errors. If *she'd* gone to North Wales for a weekend, the same thing would probably have happened to her. Instead, however, she'd trailed around a round of golf with her father and three of her father's friends, followed by a meal at the golfie, followed by a night on the sofa in front of the television. Pretty much the same as every other Saturday night this year – and last.

As her Corsa sped over the common, she beeped her horn angrily at the sheep that had settled in the road, reluctant to leave the warmth of the dark tarmac. Damn sheep; the sooner they fenced the blessed common, the better, she cursed. Those sheep had already caused Mrs Jeffers to end up in the ditch, and she was sure that someone else would follow before winter was out.

As she neared the turning to Anweledig, she thought again about Rachel, Rosie and Samuel all coming home after work. Rachel was a nurse in the local Accident and Emergency Department and Rosie was a speech therapist. She didn't know what Samuel did yet – perhaps tomorrow's blog would enlighten her. He was bound to be a – a stuntman, or an astronaut, she thought, batting the small teddy that hung from her rear view mirror out of the way. They would all settle in the lounge, Rosie would be sat cross-legged on the sofa, Rachel would probably be sat on the floor. All would be chatting and laughing about their day.

What awaited her? Her mum toiling in the kitchen, worrying about what she was cooking and her father trying to get her to sit and watch television with him all evening. No wonder she never did anything. No wonder she never got round to buying her own place or renting a flat with great friends – her father always got her to put things off, so that they could spend time together, sitting on the sofa like an elderly couple whilst her mum was bullied into waiting on them hand and foot.

Mind, it had always been the same really, even when it had been different. In hindsight, it was her moaning one afternoon that she was bored and how she wished they could be more like the Ingalls family that had sparked off the big countryside adventure. Inspired by Laura Ingalls's antics running about the prairies barefoot, Louisa had sulked

to her dad that her life would be so much more fun if they lived on the prairies, rather than on their boring housing estate. She guiltily remembered saying to him, "I would love to catch wild animals and weave baskets with grasses, but how can I when we live on Mount Pleasant?"

Looking back it was amazing that he gave it any more credence than simply saying, "Well, take your shoes off and go and collect some grass then. Mind out for dog poo and see you at tea time." Instead, he'd taken it to heart and formulated a plan. Six months later, they were living in Anweledig...

Somehow it had been decided that Esther, then in her early forties, would give up her part-time job in the local bank and spend her days tending a vegetable garden and attending weaving and other countryside classes, so that she could pass on her skills to their daughter. The money that they lost in wages would more than be recouped by cheap veg and giving woven mats away for Christmas presents. However, Esther hadn't approached the role of Ma Ingalls with much enthusiasm.

Louisa remembered the day they had waved goodbye to their friends and neighbours, many of whom she had never seen again, despite only moving seven miles away. They had been plucky adventurers, brave enough to grasp their dreams with both hands. Louisa would become a wild-child, running with foxes and communicating with nature through a series of whistles and clicks. Their neighbours had wished them well and Louisa had sat in the car thinking that her whole life was about to change. Change it did, but not in the way that had been expected...

In some ways it had been lucky that Esther had had her stroke three days after they had moved: it meant that they never had to come to terms with the fact that they might not have lived out their dreams thanks to disinterest alone.

Louisa remembered it as a time of turmoil, being shipped to Grandma's house in the middle of the night and then returning to their new home to find a different mother inhabiting the body of her old one – one with a scrunched up hand, a flailing leg and a dribbling, drooping face. Over time, her speech had improved, but Esther's

mobility and dexterity was never fully recovered, although she managed daily chores with a stubborn slowness.

David tried to push Louisa out into the wilds to play, but there was no one else for miles around to play with and she was not used to playing on her own. The guy across the yard became Uncle Bob, but he was in his late fifties and although he told her things about foxes, he never offered to take her to their dens.

Louisa secretly never minded that she was unable to become a fox-child; by now she far preferred watching *The Railway Children* on video in front of a fire on a Saturday afternoon, to tending her own section of the vegetable garden, as had been the initial plan. David sat with her, keeping busy by attending to her needs and Esther potted around in the background, muttering under her breath as she went. Somehow, even despite the massive change that had occurred within Esther, the life of Louisa and David wasn't really that different to what it had been in Mount Pleasant. None of them seemed to notice that the family wasn't living the dream; it was simply suburbia with a better view.

Louisa had grown up a diligent child and she did well at school with the brains she had been born with, neither stretching nor addling them. When her mother's old job in the bank came up, only now full-time, it seemed fate that she got it, the manager perhaps still feeling guilty that Esther had received no real help after her stroke, despite having left her post of twenty-two years just a week before.

And that had been it: life. Up in the morning, tea brought to her by a muttering – but not complaining, mark you – Esther. Ironed blouses, MOT'd cars, packed lunches, straight back home to help her mother at the end of the day. Supper, sofa, bed. She'd never really questioned it – until now...

Louisa flicked her indicator on and turned towards Anweledig. The turn was down a steep little lane that led into a hamlet of five old cottages clustered around a yard with the Harrison's large modern brick house stuck on the end. It was the council planning department's concession to allowing modernisation in Anweledig and was such an aesthetic disaster, that they would never have to allow such a thing again.

The hamlet of Anweledig had been built to house workers from the big house nearby. The owner at the time, a dusty old lady who was only really thirty, ruled her household with a rod of unpleasantness. She had insisted that her domestic staff lived near enough so as not to be late, yet out of her line of vision so that she didn't have to stare at their miserable little houses and hear their nasty little quarrels: she'd had plenty of her own quarrels to listen to. Anweledig had been the perfect solution. Tucked in a sunken bit of a north-facing hill, it was a quaint little cluster of houses built around a large yard that had a well in the middle.

It was now a sought after location for "drop outs" as Louisa's father called them. People who worked away and came to their houses every six weeks or so to spend the weekend frantically trying to get their second homes warm and aired. One house was awaiting its owners' retirement, another was the dumping ground for stuff that was too bulky to have moved with its owner to her new lover's house and was instead sat getting damp waiting for *that* relationship to finish.

The Dingle was the only house in the hamlet that had a drive, a gate, a well-kempt garden and a security light that kept flickering on and highlighting surreptitious men with torches strolling in the shadows down by the river...

Louisa turned into the gate that her mother would have popped out to open for her ten minutes before and her father would close behind her. Good, her dad wasn't back yet, so there was room for Louisa's car in front of the security light: hers was a newer model, so it made sense that it was the one nearest the house. The light clicked on making the hamlet as bright as day and Louisa frowned when she saw that the old grey snow was still piled at the side of the drive: surely her father could have moved that by now?

What she *should* do tonight should be to go straight upstairs and make a start on that blessed blog. At least it would be done, and then she could start thinking about how to make it a bit more interesting for the next session. With her homework on her mind all the time, it was no wonder she couldn't get stuck in to getting out and about a bit more, finding a few great friends somewhere, starting a couple of clubs or hobbies somewhere else. Yes, she thought, get stuck in to that, then she could begin on the rest of her life...

"Hello," called her mum as she opened the front door, "how was your day?" Louisa grunted: she wasn't in the mood for small talk. "Your dad's just left the office; he'll be home in ten. Cup of tea while you're waiting?"

"Yeah, all right," Louisa muttered, kicking off her shoes. She looked at the stairs with her bedroom door across the landing at the top of them. It was a bit dark and the stairs were quite steep. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to have a bit more of a chat with her mum for a while and then do the blog thing later. She could always look on the Internet for a club – perhaps get to contact a few people from it online before she actually went; that would save her turning up and not knowing anyone.

Therefore, she chucked her keys onto the hall table and watched as they slid across the polished surface to drop quietly onto the carpeted floor: I'll remember that they're there tomorrow morning she thought, and headed for the sofa. The television clicked on all too easily and Louisa found a game show. Slightly different people to yesterday – but only slightly different. A cup appeared on the table next to her end of the sofa and Louisa reached out for it without a response. It looked like she was going to have to put off getting a life for another day...

Louisa sat in the white leather sofa and her dad fetched the pouffe for her feet. He tossed over a chenille blanket and turned up the real-effect fire.

"OK, love?"

"Yeah, thanks, Dad," replied Louisa as she snuggled down into the warmth.

"Did you manage to start your assignment?" called Esther from the computer desk in the corner.

"Aw, leave her be," smiled David, winking at his daughter, "she's been at work all day; let the girl have a break."

"Well, I just thought she said she had to get it started tonight."

"Leave it, Esther. All right?" growled David, the tone in his voice hardening. Esther shuffled in her chair as if a shuffle was somehow the only rebuke she was allowed. David winked again at Louisa and Louisa mouthed her thanks back. She knew her mum meant well, but she didn't half go on.

Silent Witness came on and David passed over the remote control for Louisa to adjust the settings.

"Any chance of another cuppa?" he called over to Esther, sharing a cheeky giggle with Louisa as he did. Esther muttered under her breath but Louisa pretended that she hadn't heard: her mother always muttered. One turned off to it eventually.

Just as the first autopsy was being carried out in all-surround-sound, another cup of tea was plonked on the table at Louisa's side.

"Thanks, Mum," she muttered. David muttered the same and Esther went back to her computer.

The tuttings and the mutterings and the sound of pages of a manual turning back and fore rattled away from the corner as Louisa and David exchanged frowns. "File – save as – let's call it, um, *test page – save!* There – done! Well, that was easy enough!"

Louisa turned the volume up and slammed the remote control down on the table. The sofa pair tittered and settled down once more.

After a bit more muttering there was the sound of a printer whirring into being and an exclamation of triumph from Esther. "At last! I knew it couldn't be that difficult!" and she bumped her head on the computer desk as she reached down to check her printed masterpiece.

"Mu-um, I hope that we're not going to have this every night now, are we?"

"No, it's OK, love, I've finished now. I'll come and join you." Esther perched on the armchair perpendicular to the sofa. "Now, what's been happening here then?"

CHAPTER 3

Fel cachu ceffyl mewn dŵr – like horse-dung in water (to peter out, make no impact)

It was a miserable morning as Iestyn rattled along in the ancient Land Rover, grinding up the track that zigzagged its way up the rugged hillside. The feeble wipers smeared the sleet across the windscreen and more piled in through the side window onto his face as a gust of wind managed to sneak its way through the two-inch crack: he'd told