

Chapter 1

Holly couldn't help but smile as she stepped out into the glorious sunshine and saw the Market Place of Larkford humming with activity. There was an excitable holiday atmosphere in the valley today and she knew exactly who to blame. Taffy Jones and Dan Carter, her partners at The Practice, stood beside her, blinking in the brightness and running their hands tentatively over their newly shaven heads.

'You look fine,' she reassured them, putting aside her own misgivings that their fund-raising efforts were in grave danger of going too far.

Her young twins were not so tactful.

'You look silly now,' Ben said very seriously.

'I can actually see your brain,' said Tom, wrinkling up his freckled nose in mock disgust.

Taffy just smiled indulgently, taking Holly by the hand and holding her gaze, 'It'll grow back,' he said, leaning in for a kiss. 'If you hate it, I mean.' A rare flash of vulnerability showed in his eyes, as though his confidence might have disappeared, along with his chaotic, tousled mop of chestnut hair.

Lucy, their perky, yet deceptively ferocious receptionist, wandered over to join them, shaking a large plastic bucket

with the legend Health in the Community emblazoned on the side. ‘They *really* weren’t joking about the size of your head, were they, Dr Carter?’ she joked. ‘Shall we maybe fashion you a hat to make it look bigger? More, you know, normal-sized?’

Dan just laughed, well accustomed to their teasing. ‘Or you could get people to pledge even more cash, to make up for my emotional angst?’

‘Leave it with me,’ she said in a determined voice that made Holly fear for the contents of the residents’ wallets, as Lucy’s bobbing ponytail disappeared into the thick of the crowd.

It had not been your average afternoon at The Kingsley Arms, but there was no denying that it had all been in a good cause. The four partners at The Practice had been working their socks off to re-launch their Health in the Community programme, with each fund-raising idea becoming more and more extreme. There had simply been too many youngsters through their doors of late with totally avoidable health problems – it really seemed as though the very least they could do was to put aside their personal pride and, in Taffy’s words, ‘take one for the team’.

Only last month, Holly had screamed the whole way down Larkford church tower, having committed to a sponsored abseil in a brief moment of madness. The photos of her bottom in fluorescent leggings, outlined against the beautiful Cotswold stone backdrop, had been worthy of their own full-colour photo spread in the local paper and Holly still got wolf-whistles whenever she donned those self-same leggings to go jogging. It was rather a dent in her professional pride that her bum was now seemingly more recognisable than her face, no matter how much Taffy and Dan reassured her it was for all the right reasons.

As Holly looked around the vibrant town of Larkford, at the huddles of friends and neighbours, even she could see their point (although she still had plans to buy new leggings at the very next opportunity). There were truly very few places on earth that Holly would rather be and, as the afternoon sunshine illuminated the swathes of woodland sweeping down the hillside around them, she felt instantly calm and at home, even as the boys pulled on her hands excitedly.

Today, the entire Market Place was crammed with beautiful stalls, artfully stacked wooden crates and more bunting than was probably healthy. The pastel buildings that lined the streets were almost friendly with their open frontage, sash windows and sweeping rooftops. It was a picture-postcard scene and Holly wished she had remembered to bring her camera.

The new initiative by the Parish Council to give local producers their own dedicated venue each week was clearly paying off, as half the town and just as many tourists had turned out to stock up on gourmet salamis, seasonal veg and the odd jar of saucy pickle.

‘We should have realised sooner that Lucy would be the perfect fund-raiser,’ Taffy said, watching as she charmed a donation out of a notoriously tight-fisted farmer.

‘Maybe it’s the ponytail,’ wondered Holly, rather in awe of Lucy’s skills in raising money without risking life and limb. Taking no for an answer was apparently not an option, as the petite blonde worked her way through the queue at the bakery stall, gathering donations at every step.

‘Or the steely determination,’ said Dan. ‘Have you ever actually *tried* saying no to her?’

Holly and Taffy briefly caught each other's gaze – Dan was gaining a reputation as a bit of a softie at work, utterly worn out from all the emotional wrangling at home with his girlfriend Julia Channing, the fourth partner at The Practice. Her ambition of late seemed to have eclipsed all other considerations and poor Dan was bearing the brunt of it.

Holly looked around, trying to spot her amongst the crowd. These days it wasn't all that difficult, because wherever Julia went, a small huddle of men followed her, weighed down with television cameras, microphones and, more often than not, a clipboard bearing release slips for signature. It was fair to say that Julia's role in the reality health show *Doctor In The House* had placed them all under a lot of strain.

True to form, Julia was at the quieter end of the Market Place doing a piece to camera and Holly was in no doubt that Taffy and Dan's hairy heroics would have been captured on B-roll for use in the programme – whether they liked it or not.

As Taffy and the boys tried out their usual routine of trying to inveigle as many different samples as possible from each of the stalls, she stopped to buy a few crusty rolls for their traditional weekend bacon butties.

Pru Hartley from the baker's began plying the twins with biscuits and Holly didn't even have to ask to know that Pru would have remembered that Ben was on a strict dairy-free diet. The residents of Larkford had simply absorbed Holly and her boys into their midst and were more nurturing and supportive than any family that Holly had ever known.

She gave Pru a hug in greeting and looked her up and down. 'You're seeming a bit more sprightly there, Madam.'

Pru took a stiff little bow, her recent hip-replacement having put her out of action for longer than she'd anticipated. 'I think we're actually making progress now. The stairs are still a complete pain in the arse, but thank God we've had my niece down to help, or we wouldn't have coped at the bakery. Feisty little madam she is, but she's got us all organised. Shame she's off to Bristol really ...'

Holly couldn't help but agree. Although she'd yet to meet Pru's niece, Alice, it was clear that she'd worked wonders getting Pru's recovery back on track after a shaky start. Young, dynamic and newly qualified, she was heading down to Bristol to join a GP practice in one of the trickier parts of the city. It was just a shame they didn't have a vacancy here – Alice Walker sounded as though she might be the answer to all Holly's prayers.

In a flash of 'use it or lose it' mentality, their patient roster had almost doubled overnight after their successful Save The Practice campaign last year. If only they had the staffing to keep up with the increased demand, it might almost be considered a triumph.

Pocketing her change and swinging an aromatic bagful of freshly baked rolls over her arm, Holly quickly found herself pulled into conversation.

Holly seemed to bump into so many of her patients at the Farmers' Market, that she'd often wondered whether to simply admit defeat and hang up her shingle amongst the aubergines and goat's cheese. She'd advised on cough mixture dosage, nappy rash and a sore throat by the time she made it to the coffee wagon. It was partly her own fault, she conceded. It felt mean-spirited to deny support to her friends and neighbours just because it was her day off, but sometimes ...

Her face broke into a smile as one of the worst offenders hove into view. A car park consultation was the closest the Major had ever got to visiting any of the doctors at The Practice, since he'd taken on a bet with an old friend over a rare bottle of whisky. In the entire time since Holly had joined the team, the Major had never once made an appearance in their consulting rooms and defiantly refused to do so before his old friend had surrendered and consulted a physician first. With a bottle of the legendary *Black Bowmore* whisky up for grabs, they were both taking this bet ridiculously seriously.

Still, Holly actually had rather a soft spot for the old boy and she willingly accepted a whiskery kiss on each cheek from the Major and complimented him on his suntan. 'So,' she asked, 'how was the honeymoon?'

The Major's weathered face creased into a grin, 'It was top notch, thank you, Dr Graham. Marion even caught her first salmon and there's no way you could top that. Over the moon, she was. Few more lessons from me and she'll be just grand.'

Holly smiled at the mental picture of the blousy Marion up to her thighs in a Scottish river, rather than lying on the sun-drenched beach she'd been hoping for. Still, it sounded like they'd had a lovely time. The Major and Marion had enjoyed a twilight, whirlwind romance – falling in love whilst falling out over a sausage roll. It may not have been the most auspicious of beginnings for some, but the Major had been pining away for a sparring partner and Marion Gains from the local supermarket had been the unlikely candidate that surprised them all.

'No Marion this afternoon?' Holly asked, looking around.

The Major shrugged. 'Not today. She's back on the

checkout already. Can't stop her,' he said affectionately. 'Had no idea I'd married a career woman.'

Holly silently applauded Marion's decision to maintain a little independence – where would Larkford be without their local store and Marion's encyclopaedic knowledge of everyone's comings and goings?

The Major blew his nose noisily into an enormous spotty handkerchief, making his little terrier, Grover, jump. 'Think I may have caught a chill on the river bank, you know. Best pop to The Kingsley Arms for a hot toddy, just to be on the safe side, don't you think.'

Holly waved, as he adroitly made his way between the stalls, making a beeline towards Teddy Kingsley's pub and the remnants of the fund-raising party that was now spreading out into the pub gardens.

Taffy and the boys reappeared at her side, each clutching a bag of delicacies from the sweetie stall. She couldn't help noticing that Taffy's bag of sweets was considerably bigger. He really did eat like a teenager, but it seemed to make no dent in his otherwise impressive physique.

'Thought we might have a movie-night, Holls. I've got supplies and big plans for exhausting the nippers with a quick game of rugby. What do you say?'

Cassie Holland, local busybody and self-nominated arbiter of parenting lore, tutted loudly as she sailed past. Whereas Holly had learned to ignore her jibes, Taffy was still new to her judgemental ways. 'Was there something you wanted to say there, Cassie?' he said, his voice dangerously sweet.

She stopped in her tracks, unaccustomed to being challenged and clearly rather thrown. She spluttered for a moment or two, while Taffy stood patiently, one eyebrow raised

and clearly awaiting a response. She nervously adjusted her poncho, before giving in to the urge to have her say. She nodded toward the bags of sweets and sighed, 'It's just hardly setting a good example is it, Dr Jones? All that refined sugar?' She gave a mock shudder and, seemingly oblivious to her own son's efforts to demolish the cake stall behind her, carried on, 'Since you're not a father yourself, you probably don't even realise how much processed sugar can affect a child's development.'

Taffy nodded, clearly riled, but trying hard not to laugh, as Cassie lectured on and her darling Tarquin – deprived as he was of anything that didn't seem to involve agave nectar and honey at home – spun in circles and grabbed handfuls of flapjacks from the stall and stuffed them into his mouth, much to the stallholder's disgust and everyone else's amusement.

Cassie however was on a roll. 'It's quite a different thing, Dr Jones, being a role model to a child, rather than just *playing* at being dad, you know.'

It was a step too far and they all knew it. Holly remained silent, not trusting herself to speak but confident that Taffy was more than capable of handling himself. The bloody cheek of the woman!

It was par for the course in such a tight-knit community that there would be occasional disagreements and scuffles, but to be fair, Cassie did seem to cause a disproportionate amount of upset. Holly had learned the hard way to pick her battles with care. It was quite a skill to take the rough with the smooth in Larkford, but one that was infinitely worth fostering and Taffy, to give him his due, could use sympathy to better effect than anyone Holly had ever met.

'Oh Cassie,' he said, tilting his head to one side, an edge

of steel creeping into his voice, 'are you having trouble at home again? You don't need to deflect, you know. You can just say ...'

She scowled at him in frustration and, abruptly yanking Tarquin's sticky hand away from yet another flapjack, she flounced away between the market stalls, clearly offended.

'Seriously? What *is* her problem?' Taffy muttered furiously, his brow furrowing in unfamiliar irritation.

Her jibe had obviously hit home with him far more than Holly had realised, but then that was Cassie's unique skill. She had an innate ability to find your Achilles heel and hone in like an Exocet missile – never one to miss an opportunity to guilt Holly over the prevalence of un-organic, alcoholic or just plain naughty-but-nice treats in her supermarket shop, or indeed to pinpoint Holly and Taffy's concerns about how to best integrate him into the twins' lives.

Holly took Taffy's hand and they walked home together, the boys weaving around their legs like excitable spaniels, alert to the promise of a throw-about with a rugby ball and already practically fizzing after a handful of sweets. Holly chose not to point out that Cassie may have a point about the sweets' effect on her normally manageable children, but then they'd be running around the garden soon enough, so what did it really matter?

'I don't know how you women put up with Cassie Holland,' Taffy was still grumbling. 'Interfering old ...'

Holly stopped him with a kiss. 'Don't let her ruin your afternoon. Anyone who's that judgemental probably has issues of her own to deal with. Besides, it comes with the territory: from the minute you get pregnant, everybody starts having their say about how you should be raising your children. You just learn to tune it out.'

He sighed. ‘Well, you’re ahead of me on that one, Holls. Everybody keeps telling me how to behave around the twins and it’s starting to really piss me off.’

Holly pulled back a little, the ever-present protective part of her brain flinching at his tone and slipping, by default, into siege mentality – an unfortunate legacy of her failed marriage to Milo.

Taffy, however, was quick to qualify his statement, ‘I mean, I want to build my own relationship with them gradually – on our terms. They’ve had enough change this past year, haven’t they? The last thing they need is me marching in saying, “Just call me Dad” – don’t you think?’ he added in a voice that was tentative and heart-felt.

Holly smiled, hiding the relief that surged through her and loving that he’d given their feelings so much thought. ‘I think, just keep doing what you’re doing. The boys still can’t quite believe their luck that you’ll go outside and throw a ball about with them.’

He shrugged. ‘I think that says more about you-know-who’s shortcomings on the parenting front than it does about any prowess on my part though, Holly.’

She had to concede he made a valid point – the twins were just in Seventh Heaven having a man in the house who was prepared to put down his newspaper and engage with them, let alone the den-building, ball-throwing, river-swimming, finger-painting gamut that was a weekend with Taffy Jones at the helm.

As they strolled out of the Market Place and into the network of small residential streets that spread out like a cobweb into the valley, they passed Lizzie’s Georgian townhouse and stopped on autopilot, as the twins clamoured to collect Eric,

the barmy Labradoodle that Holly had on a 'puppy time-share' agreement with her best friend.

Holly paused, undecided.

'Do you think it's safe to go in?' Taffy asked, looking uncertain.

Only this morning, Lizzie had bowed out of attending the Charity Head Shaving on the basis that her house currently resembled a scene from a Ridley Scott movie: Archie had nits, Jack had the trots and little Lily was under close observation for a possible parasite infestation. And of course her husband Will had chosen – chosen, Lizzie had stressed– this particular weekend to be away on business. Holly had already swung by earlier with supplies from the Pharmacy but had chickened out and left them on the doorstep. Anything that wriggled, bit or hatched was way outside her comfort zone, even as a doctor.

As the boys took matters into their own hands and hammered on the door, Taffy and Holly looked at each other aghast, before each grabbing the nearest twin. 'Do *not* go in,' Holly admonished, taking a few steps back.

The glossy front door creaked open an inch and Lizzie's voice echoed through from the hallway, 'Are you mental, woman? Save yourself and run . . . Words cannot begin to describe what I've been . . . What?' She disappeared from view as she shouted back through to the kitchen, 'Well aim for the bowl then!' Her small, harassed face appeared at the crack of the door again, just as Eric decided that enough was enough and pushed his way out, leather lead dangling in his mouth and a hopeful expression on his tufty blonde face.

'Shall we take him back with us? You look like you've got your hands full,' Holly said, carefully making sure to keep Ben clamped to her legs.

‘Could you,’ replied Lizzie, ‘and if I haven’t emerged in a day or two, send in some gin. Sod mother’s ruin – at this point it might be the last known means of survival. You did say it had medicinal properties, didn’t you, Holls?’

Taffy chuckled. ‘Splash of tonic and you’ll be sorted on the malaria front anyway ... Besides, gin’s practically an antibiotic.’

Lizzie just shook her head and went to close the door. ‘Just keep an eye on Eric, won’t you? He appears to be going through ... well ... a bit of a phase.’ The door clicked shut and Holly was left none the wiser. Eric just sat there, lead now dropped at Holly’s feet, doing his best love-me-love-me-love-me face.

‘Come on, Tiger,’ Taffy said as he bent down to attach the lead. ‘You can come and help me wear out these little tykes.’

To be fair to Taffy and Eric, it had taken a lot longer to wear out the twins than either of them had foreseen. Even Holly was struggling to keep her eyes open for the end of the movie and Taffy was dozing beside her, with Eric firmly wedged under his feet.

Even as she felt her eyes drifting closed, the sense of utter contentment only increased as she felt the weight of Taffy’s arm settle around her shoulders and pull her in to his side.

‘You snore,’ Taffy murmured drowsily, affection laced throughout his words as he kissed the top of her head.

‘So do you,’ Holly retorted lightly, pulling him in closer and snuggling down. At that moment, she didn’t care that it was late and there were jobs to be done, she just wanted to stay here, in Taffy’s arms feeling loved and appreciated and desirable.

As Taffy’s hand circled on her waist with gentle insistence

and his arm tightened around her, she couldn't help but be amazed by her own physical response and how he made her feel. She almost laughed now to think that all her qualms about what gorgeous, athletic Taffy might make of her stretch-marks and C-section scar had almost sabotaged their relationship before it had even begun.

It was fair to say that she needn't have been concerned. Over the last year, Holly and Taffy had managed to forge the kind of loving partnership that some couples spent years of marriage trying to create or emulate. But still, Holly was aware that Taffy sometimes struggled with the constant chaos that was part of the package when four-year-old twins were involved (having conveniently forgotten that she, their loving mother, sometimes did too).

Right now though, his mind was clearly focused on something a little less PG. His hand slid up under her t-shirt and she batted away all other thoughts, letting herself just enjoy the moment. He leaned in and kissed his way along her collarbone and, as she realised just exactly how much she wanted this, her breath became fast and shallow.

She stroked Taffy's head as they kissed, the new soft peach fuzz nestling intimately under her touch.

'I've been wanting to do this all afternoon,' she whispered, as she slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

He smiled wickedly and was on his feet in moments, scooping her up off the sofa. 'Allow me?'

The romantic gesture was a little undermined by tripping over Eric, some Fireman Sam paraphernalia and then clipping Holly's head on the doorframe as they made their way upstairs. By the time they reached the bedroom doorway, all talk of domesticity was forgotten and their kisses had grown increasingly urgent.

Finding two small boys sprawled out on their bed was not really the sight they'd been hoping for. Eric bounding noisily up the stairs behind them with Holly's bra in his mouth was hardly ideal either. But whatever else they'd had in mind, Holly thought, at least they were able to laugh about it together.