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Opening extract from

Flightsend

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FLIGHTSEND

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Flightsend

Flightsend arrived on their doormat, in an envelope from the estate agent.

'This looks interesting,' said Kathy, opening her letters by the toaster. 'Here, see what you think.'

She passed one of the printed sheets to Charlie. These arrived so often now that Charlie had stopped taking much notice. At first, she and her mother had read them all carefully, making comparisons, highlighting important points; they'd visited countless unsuitable houses and had learned to read through estate-agent jargon. Even now, with the *Sold* notice in their front garden and the buyers waiting to move in, most of the printed sheets went straight into the recycling bin: too expensive, not enough garden, too big, too small. If a house looked promising enough for a visit, Kathy went on her own, always – so far – returning disappointed.

With each reject, each sheaf of papers to hit the bin, Charlie's hopes rose. Perhaps Mum would give up the idea of moving. They'd take down the

Sold board and stay here, close to the town centre, close to her friends. Close to the life she knew.

But the life they knew was the one Kathy wanted to get away from.

On Thursday, while Charlie was at school, Kathy went to see Flightsend.

'It's perfect!' she reported. 'There'll be a lot of work, but it's just what I've been waiting for. You'll love it, Charlie. Just wait till you see.'

They went together on Saturday, a raw autumn day that was more like winter, stirring memories of foggy mornings and afternoons dark by four-thirty.

'You'll have to navigate. These country lanes are a maze.' Kathy put the road atlas on Charlie's lap. 'Here.' She pointed at a tiny black cluster around a road junction. Lower Radbourne.

'It's a long way from town,' Charlie said doubtfully. 'A long way from anywhere.'

Kathy craned her neck to reverse out of the driveway. 'Yes! A real village. Pub, village shop, church.'

And what am I supposed to do for a social life? Charlie wondered.

She didn't ask. Mum would only remind her – as if she needed reminding – that GCSEs were looming, mocks and then the real thing. As they left the town and took a country lane between hedges, Kathy sat forward, her eyes scanning the road as if her perfect house, her dream cottage, might have moved itself closer to surprise her. Dried leaves clung to the beech

hedges on either side; an open gate showed a muddy field entrance, rutted and puddled. Charlie saw horses sheltering in an open-sided barn and sheep huddled against a hedge. Ahead, a ploughed field rose to a line of tousled trees and an unpromising grey sky. Nothing looked very cheerful today, but Kathy was humming to herself as she slowed down and pulled over to the verge for a Land Rover coming the other way. The driver raised a hand in acknowledgement; Charlie glimpsed a peaked tweed cap.

'These roads are so narrow,' Kathy said. 'It must be difficult getting a coach round the bends.'

'Coach?'

'Coach. Bus. School transport,' Kathy said.

She's made up her mind, Charlie thought, before I've even seen the place. Well, I'd better decide to like it, then.

There was no one about in the village. The main street kinked at odd, awkward angles: a dog-leg by the pub, two sides of a triangle round a village green. Lower Radbourne consisted of one substantial Georgian house behind a gated wall; a pub, *The Bull and Horseshoes*; a tiny shop and Post Office with an OPEN sign on the door, and a scattering of cottages and small houses.

'Here's the church,' Kathy said. 'Norman, I should think.'

Charlie saw a lych-gate set in a hedge; farther back, gravestones and a sturdy building with a tower and an arched porch. Kathy turned sharp right down

a track beside the churchyard wall, then pulled up.

'This is it!'

They got out of the car. Charlie turned up her coat collar against the wind. The cottage, uninhabited for six months and wearing an air of abandonment, stood alone, sheltered by the churchyard yews. There was a tangled front garden, with a gate that hung lopsidedly from one hinge. Flightsend had blank, staring windows, and a porch that would probably collapse if no one did anything about it. *In need of renovation*, Charlie thought. And soon.

'What does it mean, Flightsend?' she asked.

'I don't know. Flightsend. Flight's End. Well, that's what it is, isn't it? An end to – well, to everything that's gone wrong.'

Charlie thought: I don't want ends. I want beginnings. The gloom of the place settled round her like fog. She thought of long winter evenings marooned here, miles from her friends. We'll be castaways, she thought, me and Mum. Flight's End was making her think not of settled contentment but of clipped wings, of pinioned birds.

'Perhaps it's to do with the old airfield,' Kathy said, shoving the wonky gate aside.

'But the house is much older than the airfield,' Charlie pointed out. 'A hundred and fifty years old, the blurb says. Aeroplanes hadn't been invented then, had they? Not even those ancient ones with wings that people flapped with their arms. How old's the airfield?'

'Wartime, I should think. Someone renamed the house later, perhaps. It's a nice name, anyway. I like it.'

But as for the cottage itself – Charlie couldn't imagine it as anyone's home, let alone *her* home. She saw only dilapidation and neglect. The house was perfectly symmetrical, like a child's drawing: the front door and porch, windows either side, two bedroom windows above; chimney-stacks each side of a tiled roof crusted with lichens. A weedy gravelled path led to the open-fronted porch and a door that had curls of paint peeling off; the nearest window showed a bare, gloomy main room that was probably full of cobwebs. Kathy stood smiling in the rain, not bothered about her wet hair. Her love-at-first-sight optimism was undiminished by cold wind and spattering rain. Charlie guessed that she saw climbing roses and honeysuckle, not dereliction and decay.

'It's perfect, isn't it?' Kathy said, turning to Charlie for agreement. 'I just knew! As soon as I saw it. And the name. It's just right.'

'But what about the inside? It looks like a ruin.'

'Of course it isn't. People were living here till six months ago.' Kathy led the way past the frontage to a yard at the side. 'Plenty of space, that's the really good thing. Just imagine, Charlie, when I've got it organized, with a little sales office, and signs up in the village and at all the road junctions. I can even do mail-order plants once I'm fully-stocked. Exhibit at shows, build up a reputation . . .'

Charlie saw ramshackle outbuildings that looked as

if they'd better be pulled down before they collapsed. An open-sided barn was full of junk – plastic sacks and what looked like rusty, outdated farm equipment.

'It'll cost a lot, won't it?' she said cautiously. 'Doing this place up.'

'Oh, well.' Kathy shrugged off the question as if money were totally irrelevant. She pushed through shrubs and wet leaves to the front door and opened it with the estate agent's key.

Inside wasn't much more inspiring. Dust, bare floors, an ancient strip of carpet that ran up the stairs.

'But look at the thickness of these walls,' Kathy said undaunted, slapping one. 'And there's nothing wrong with the plastering. Which bedroom would you like?'

The two upstairs rooms were almost identical, one each side of the central staircase, with a bathroom between – 'Look at the bath! Real claw feet. You'd pay a fortune to *buy* one like that' – and windows front and back. Each room had a fireplace with a mantelpiece, and the back windows, though small, looked over the garden, with meadows, beyond, sloping down to a tree-flanked stream.

'Oh, this is nice!' Charlie said, in the left-hand room that had an extra window at the side, imagining it curtained and carpeted, with her own things installed. The three windows gave the room an airy lightness, even on this dismal day. Bookshelves stretched each side of the fireplace.

'Good! You have this one, then,' Kathy said. 'It's the

first time you've sounded at all keen. I do want you to like it! It's just what I want, Charlie. More than that. It's what I *need*.'

Charlie hesitated. Would it be best to go along with Mum's new mood of sparky optimism? Or to deflate her by asking all the questions that came to mind? (Like: How are you going to make any money, out here in the sticks? What will we live on?) It was the first time in months – no, almost a year – that Charlie had seen her mother so positive, even excited; it would be mean to turn cynical. She tried not to think that this cheerfulness might be temporary, brought on by the new anti-depressant pills her mother was taking. They couldn't rebuild their lives on pills.

All the same, there were practical considerations that needed mentioning. She waited until they were in the car, heading back along the lanes, before saying, 'Mum, aren't we going to be a bit stranded, out there? I mean, you've got the car, but how am *I* going to get about?'

'There's the school bus. It stops at the village hall. I checked.'

'I don't mean just for *school*,' Charlie said. 'I mean – what about my social life? Unless you want me to join the Young Farmers, or learn maypole dancing?'

Kathy slowed to pass a horse-rider, who raised a hand in thanks. 'It's not that much of a problem, is it? You've got your bike, and I can always give you lifts to parties or whatever. Anyway, it's only another year before you'll be seventeen, and then you're bound to

want driving lessons. Your own car, eventually.'

'Yes, but how can we pay for all that? Driving lessons aren't cheap.'

'Oh, I don't know. We'll wait and see. Things will sort themselves out,' Kathy said.

Charlie gave up. It was no good trying to reason with Mum, in this new mood of optimistic vagueness. She thought: this means so much to her. Too much. If it fails . . .

If *this* fails, too – then what?

She didn't want to know the answer.