

*Summer
at
Hope Meadows*

About the Author

Lucy Daniels is the collective name for the writing team that created the bestselling children's book series Animal Ark. Hope Meadows is a brand new Lucy Daniels series for adult readers, featuring the characters and locations that were so beloved in the original stories.

The first title in the series, Summer at Hope Meadows, has been written by a new author called Sarah McGurk, who has the twin advantages of being passionate about Animal Ark and a fully qualified vet!

Sarah was inspired by James Herriot to become a veterinary surgeon some thirty years ago. A few years after qualification, she realised she wanted to follow him further, into the world of veterinary writing. She began with short stories, then longer works of fiction, related to her work in general practice and in emergency and critical care. Her special interests include anaesthesia and pain relief, and low-stress techniques in small animal handling.

In her spare time, Sarah likes to cook and bake. She also enjoys walking and loves taking photographs of the countryside near where she lives. She is the proud owner of two guinea pigs and enjoys taking care of her friends' pets whenever they go away. Along with her husband, she likes exploring European cities. This also allows her to indulge her interest in international cuisine.

Sarah currently lives in Norway. She has worked for two years in a local veterinary practice and speaks Norwegian fluently.

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LUCY DANIELS

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HODDER

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

B Format ISBN 978 1 473 65387 0
Ebook ISBN 978 1 473 65388 7

Typeset in Plantin Light by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

*Special thanks to
Dr Sarah McGurk BVM&S, MRCVS*

To the staff at Heaven's Gate Animal Rescue Centre,
Langport, Somerset, with thanks for
everything you do

Chapter One



*H*ome. As the car swooped over the narrow bridge beside the woods, Mandy Hope had the feeling she was back where she belonged.

Beyond the leaf-heavy trees lining the road, she could see the smooth green curve of the beacon, high up on Norland Fell. A hawk hung in the air, riding an invisible current as it studied the ground for prey. Sheep dotted the fell, a scatter of cloudy white against the dark grass. Two walkers were hiking along the line of the dry-stone wall, and Mandy felt a stab of envy as she watched them climb over a stile and head up to the peak.

If only she could stop the car and go for a walk under the vast empty sky. Mandy took a sip of water from a plastic bottle, hoping to quell the butterflies in her stomach. She glanced across at the man beside her, his broad hands light on the steering wheel. Simon Webster, her boyfriend of just over twelve months, caught her eye and grinned. Mandy couldn't help returning his smile. Simon had only visited her home village of Welford twice before – the curse of their equally frantic schedules at the veterinary clinic in

Leeds – and she hoped he would learn to love it as much as she always had.

The giant oak tree that marked the boundary of the village flashed past.

‘Cock-a-doodle-do!’ Simon crowed.

Mandy raised her eyebrows, puzzled. ‘What?’

‘Isn’t that how you wake up sleepy villages?’ Simon teased.

Mandy groaned. ‘Seriously, dad jokes already?’

Simon laid his hand on Mandy’s thigh. His blue eyes were serious now. ‘I know today is going to be tricky for you. I was just trying to help.’

Mandy placed her hand on top of his. His palm felt warm and solid through the fabric of her skirt. ‘I know you were,’ she said. ‘And I appreciate it. Thank you.’ She leaned over to kiss his cheek.

Simon steered the car into a space close to the centre of the village. He pulled on the handbrake and turned towards her. ‘Ready?’

‘I think so,’ Mandy said. This was not just any normal homecoming. Today was far more important than that. James, wonderful James, the best friend anyone could have, was getting married and Mandy had agreed to be his best woman.

Simon was out of the car and had whisked round to help Mandy before she had a chance to gather her thoughts. The expression in his blue eyes warmed her as she pulled herself upright, and she was glad of his hand when she found herself teetering for a moment

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on the unfamiliar heels. Her jodhpur boots were so much more comfortable. The scent of newly cut silage greeted her and Mandy stood for a moment, transported back to the summers she and James had spent together all over Welford and the surrounding Dales.

In the distance, she could hear the burble of the river as they set off to walk up the lane that led to the village green. As they approached the crossroads, they passed the Fox and Goose.

Mandy nodded to the white-painted, slate-roofed pub. ‘That’s where the reception will be. There’s a lovely walled garden out the back. James and I held a charity dog wash there one year.’ That day had been almost as scorchingly perfect as this one. James and Mandy had finished soaked to the skin, but it had been worth it, knowing they had contributed to the *We Love Animals* campaign, one of the many wildlife charities they had raised funds for. Mandy couldn’t remember spending her pocket money on anything else; recalling how she had nearly poked her eye out with the mascara this morning, she wondered if she should have used some of the cash to start practising make-up at an earlier age than twenty-seven.

She pointed to a terrace of grey stone cottages that were squeezed into a lane behind the pub. ‘Up there is Ernie Bell’s old cottage. He used to have a grey squirrel as a pet.’ For a moment Mandy felt sad. Ernie and Sammy the squirrel were gone now, along with several of the villagers she had grown up with. Then she grinned

as happier memories replaced the thoughts of what she had lost.

‘That’s the village hall.’ She pointed to a low stone building on the far side of the road. ‘We had a Christmas Eve party there once, and pets were invited, too. Susan Collins turned up with her pony, Prince.’

‘Really?’ Simon said. His eyebrows almost reached his fringe. ‘Was there room in the hall for a pony?’

‘Of course not.’ Mandy laughed. ‘Prince stood outside and stuck his head in through the window.’ She could still remember how absurd the little bay pony had looked with his head through the narrow gap.

‘So many big memories,’ Simon mused, ‘for such a pocket-sized village.’

Mandy turned to check her reflection in the window of the post office. Her face was only partly visible through the patchwork of small ad postcards. Her eyes fell on a card advertising a two-year-old lawnmower, economical to run and 100% reliable. At the bottom, in bold lettering, it was revealed that the ‘lawnmower’ was actually a goat named Cyrus.

‘It’s going to be great,’ Mandy said. ‘Coming back. Helping Mum and Dad.’

Throughout her long training, Mandy had never planned to return to Welford to work with her parents in the Animal Ark clinic. She wanted to find new challenges, carve out her own place in the world of veterinary science. Since meeting Simon at the clinic in Leeds, her future had seemed further from Welford than ever. But

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the new assistant Adam and Emily had recruited only a few weeks ago had unexpectedly quit. When Mandy learned of the struggle they were having to find a locum willing to take on large animal work, and with her own contract in Leeds coming to an end, it had been an obvious step to help out until her parents found a permanent replacement.

‘They’re very lucky to have you,’ Simon commented.

Mandy frowned. ‘Shula Maclean really let them down,’ she said. ‘I know it’s tough in mixed practice, with large animal cases day and night and pet consultations as well, but she could at least have stayed until they’d had time to find someone else.’

Her boyfriend shrugged. ‘True,’ he said, ‘but I can understand the temptation of a city job. Better money as well as every night and weekend off.’

Mandy sighed. ‘I suppose so.’

‘And what about you?’ Simon prompted. ‘Won’t you miss living in Leeds? Exchanging the bright lights and twenty-four-hour shopping for Welford . . .’ he looked around, ‘. . . pretty as it is. At least it will only be for a few months.’

Mandy, who had been about to say she didn’t think she would miss the city at all, closed her mouth. They had reached the heart of Welford and the village green with its sombre grey war memorial and tranquil pond. A crowd of people stood chatting on the daisy-strewn grass. Beyond them, several rows of white seats were lined up in front of the oak tree in the centre of the green. A

white-painted archway woven with flowers stood under the branches of the tree. Mandy was suddenly aware of the tightness of the navy sheath dress that James had chosen for her, and of just how tall she was in heels. The fascinator in her hair was tugging and she lifted a hand, hoping to relieve the tension, but her fingers met the smoothly pinned chignon and she didn't dare touch it.

'You look stunning.' Simon seemed to sense that she was having a moment of self-doubt and she managed a weak smile, but at that instant there came a cry from a figure standing on the edge of the neatly mown grass.

'Mandy?' Trying to ignore the sensation that everyone was staring at her, Mandy studied the dark-haired young woman who had called her name.

'Susan?' she gasped. 'It's Susan Collins. The girl with the pony I was talking about,' she explained to Simon.

Susan was smiling. 'It's great to see you,' she said. 'I heard James had chosen you as his best woman.' Her face softened as a small boy with huge brown eyes trotted towards them across the grass, clutching a handful of purple Michaelmas daisies.

'What have you got there, sweetie?' Susan asked, bending to greet him and then looking up at Mandy. 'This is my son Jack.' There was pride in her gaze.

'Nice flowers for you, Mummy,' said Jack. 'From over there.'

Mandy looked where he was pointing and wanted to laugh. The other half of the bouquet remained on the plinth at the base of the cenotaph.

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Susan put her hand over her mouth, trying to hide a broad grin. 'They're very nice,' she said. 'But they don't belong to us. Shall we put them back?' She took Jack's hand and led him towards the monument.

'Mandy!' There was another exclamation.

'Gran!' Forgetting the dress and the hair and the heels, Mandy made a rush across the grass and hugged Dorothy Hope. 'You're looking wonderful,' she said, stepping back to admire her grandmother's clear skin and sparkling blue eyes. 'Where's Grandad?' Before Dorothy could reply, Tom Hope emerged from the group of guests that were gathered near the roadside and Mandy hugged him as well.

'It's so lovely to see you,' Dorothy said. Her blue eyes were a little more clouded than Mandy remembered, and she made a mental note to check whether her grandmother was due to see the cataract specialist again.

'What a splendid dress!' her grandfather exclaimed. 'You look so grown up!'

'And you're so elegant and tall,' her grandmother added.

Mandy wondered if Dorothy had genuinely forgotten that she was almost a head shorter than her granddaughter. She bent down and kissed her grandmother's smooth powdered cheek. 'You look stunning,' she told Dorothy. 'That shade of green really suits you.'

Dorothy smoothed her pistachio-coloured jacket. 'Your grandad told me I looked like a giant leaf.'

'But I like leaves!' Tom Hope protested.

‘You remember Simon?’ Mandy turned and pulled her boyfriend to her side.

‘Of course!’ said Dorothy. She shook Simon’s hand. ‘You look very smart, dear.’

Behind her grandparents, Mandy could see lots of faces she recognised. Brandon Gill was there. He had been in Mandy’s class at school, but now raised cattle as well as pigs on Greystones Farm where he had grown up. Brandon was looking uncomfortable; his suit seemed a little too tight. Sympathy coursed through Mandy as she saw him tug surreptitiously at his collar. She felt the same about her dress.

‘Hello, Brandon,’ she called and he flushed bright red.

‘Mandy,’ he said with a nod, meeting her eyes for a nanosecond.

Mandy could also see Jean Knox, Animal Ark’s former receptionist. On her retirement, Jean had moved away from Welford to be closer to her family. Mandy was delighted to see she had returned for the occasion. ‘Hello there, young lady!’ Jean reached up to kiss Mandy’s cheek. She was looking very elegant in a sapphire blue suit. Despite Mandy’s regular visits to Welford, she and Jean never seemed to be there at the same time.

‘Hello!’ Mandy grinned. ‘It’s great to see you. Are you just back for the day or will you be staying a bit longer?’

‘Just for today, I’m afraid,’ Jean said. ‘I’m baby-sitting tomorrow but I was so pleased when James invited me.’

‘How are the twins?’ Mandy knew that Jean looked after her grandchildren regularly now she lived nearer to them.

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‘They’re very well, thank goodness. A handful of trouble, but growing up so fast!’

Mandy caught sight of a thickset woman walking up the road towards the green, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and firmly clutching a fat Pekinese to her bosom. ‘Look who it is,’ she whispered to Jean.

‘You mean Mrs Ponsonby?’ Jean looked surprised. ‘Did James invite her to the wedding?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Mandy shook her head. ‘There wasn’t room at the reception to invite everyone from the village, or I suspect he would have done! I suppose she couldn’t resist coming to take a look at us all,’ she added. ‘But that can’t be . . .’

‘It’s not Pandora.’ Mandy turned to see that Susan had returned, carrying Jack, whose eyes were fixed on the dog. Mandy had already realised that it couldn’t be the same pampered Pekinese she remembered so well from her childhood, but the likeness was uncanny.

‘She’s called Fancy and she’s a distant relative of Pandora’s. Third cousin twice removed, I think,’ Susan continued. ‘Give Mrs P a few days and she could probably tell you their ancestry, right back to the time when their great-great-great-grandmother was panting her way around the Forbidden City.’

Mandy laughed, but smothered it quickly as Mrs Ponsonby approached.

‘Good morning, Amanda,’ she said as she walked past. Coming to a halt, she lowered her eyes to admire the raised flower bed that lay close to the pond, but Mandy

could see the older woman was unable to resist a series of long glances at the wedding guests. She felt a surge of affection for the timeless pillar of Welford's community. Life in the village would have been very different without Amelia Ponsonby.

Simon touched her elbow. 'Your parents are here,' he told her.

Mandy turned to see her mother and father coming up the lane.

'How beautiful you look.' Emily Hope put her arms around Mandy and kissed her cheek.

'Indeed you do,' said her father Adam, giving her a lopsided grin. 'I wasn't sure whether James would convince you to wear something different. I half expected to find you here with your jeans and boots on.'

Mandy regarded him affectionately. 'I could say the same to you,' she teased. 'Maybe you should have come in your waterproofs and wellies.' Instead her father was looking handsome in a charcoal grey suit. There were a few more lines on his brow these days, and his dark hair had faded, but his laughing brown eyes were just the same.

'And how lovely to see you again, Simon.' Mandy was pleased to hear the warmth in her mother's voice. After all, they had barely met the man who was already such a huge part of Mandy's life. But she felt a stir of concern as she studied Emily more closely. Unlike her father, who seemed full of life, her mum was looking tired than usual. Her skin, usually fair, seemed stretched

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around the eyes and there was precious little colour in her cheeks. Mandy knew better than to ask if everything was okay. Her adoptive mother had always prided herself on her stamina and, despite her compassion for others, tended to view illness in herself as a weakness. Simon had started telling Adam about the drive up from Leeds and impulsively, Mandy gave her mum's hand a squeeze.

'It's lovely to be back,' she said, with a rush of gratitude for her precious parents, who had always been so proud of everything she had done. No wonder her mother was looking tired. Without an assistant, they must be snowed under. In a couple of weeks, she would be able to help them properly, Mandy reminded herself. Thank goodness the locum contract in Leeds was finishing just at the right time. Her mum and dad might even be able to take a holiday. She was sure she could manage on her own for a few days.

The rumble of a vintage car engine broke through the chatter and everyone turned to look. It was James arriving in typical style, and Mandy found herself grinning as he pulled up on the edge of the grass and climbed out of the driver's seat. How dashing he looked in his pale blue suit. The old round glasses – the ones that had made him a dead-ringer for Harry Potter throughout their school days – had been replaced with a smart rimless pair, and he no longer wore them halfway down his nose. But his hair still flopped forwards onto his forehead, resistant to any hairbrush or styling gel.

James's face lit up when he saw Mandy waiting for

him. 'Hello,' he said and then pretended to wince as she threw herself at him and hugged him tight.

'I've missed you,' she said, 'but you're looking fantastic and it's a lovely day and . . . oh I can't believe the day has actually arrived and you're getting married.' She stopped, realising she was talking too much, but James laughed.

'It does seem a bit unreal,' he admitted and regarded her fondly. 'But what about you? You look amazing.'

Self-conscious again under his gaze, Mandy said, 'At least you had the sense to choose navy blue. Can you imagine me as a six-foot bridesmaid in lilac chiffon?'

'Not really.' James shook his head. 'But even if you were dressed in a doily, nobody has ever had a more wonderful best woman, I'm sure of it.'

Best woman. Even though Mandy had been overjoyed when James asked, the title sounded clumsy. 'I'll do everything I can to make it a good day,' Mandy said. Despite herself, she felt a sudden prickling behind her eyes. She lowered them, hoping James wouldn't notice, but he grasped her arms, suddenly fierce.

'You promised you wouldn't cry, remember?' Loosening his grip, he gazed at her. The pleading in his eyes made Mandy wince. Taking a deep breath and blinking away the unshed tears, she nodded.

'Mum! Dad!' James's parents arrived and to Mandy's relief, he turned his attention to his mother, who started to fuss over his suit, straightening the white flower pinned to his lapel and brushing invisible dust from his sleeve.

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Mrs Hunter looked amazing, Mandy thought. She was wearing a long cream coat with gold brocade over a linen dress in a subtle shade of bronze. Her hair, which had always been the same shade of brown as James's, had turned white, but it was tied back in an elegant bun, and her blue eyes were full of concern as she regarded her son.

'Look at your hair!' she exclaimed, tipping her head back to see him better. 'I said you should get it cut.'

'I had better things to think about, Mum.' James shook his head, but his voice was affectionate.

'Do you have a comb?' Mrs Hunter asked and when James shrugged, she turned to her husband. 'Gavin, do you have a comb? Just look at his hair.'

Mr Hunter was regarding his son quietly. 'He looks fine to me,' he said, 'and I think it's time for us to go and find our seats.' With an apologetic wave, he guided his wife towards the rapidly filling chairs.

'I hope Paul gets here soon. Lily and Seamus are coming with him.' James glanced at his watch. Lily and Seamus were James's much-loved dogs and Mandy knew they were going to play a very special part in the ceremony.

'Maybe they've got cold feet – or paws – about their big role?' she said, trying to distract him as he looked down at his wrist again.

James managed a smile. 'I couldn't leave them out of the ceremony, not with . . .' but his words tailed off as another classic car drew up alongside his Bentley. 'Here they are.'

Mandy heard the relief in his voice. There were two people in the car, but Mandy only had eyes for the passenger, a handsome man with a shaven head, who smiled and waved as the car drew up. He climbed out, opened the rear door, and unclipped the harnesses of the two wriggling animals in the back seat. One black, one brindle, both whippet thin, the two mixed-breed dogs bounded towards James and Mandy, their sleek coats gleaming. James bent briefly and hugged them both and a moment later, they were hurling themselves at Mandy. She laughingly fended them off as Lily, the smaller of the two, scrabbled at her bare legs and Seamus, slightly taller, threatened to plant both feet on the front of her dress.

‘They haven’t forgotten the rings,’ Mandy said, catching sight of the tiny leather boxes that James had attached to the dogs’ collars. She stood up as the passenger from the car approached.

‘Paul,’ she said and reached up to kiss him on the cheek. ‘You’re looking great.’

‘Thank you,’ he replied, but James stepped between them with a mock-frown.

‘Hey,’ he said to Mandy. ‘It’s my job to tell him that!’ Mandy moved aside as James smiled at Paul. ‘Was the journey okay?’ he asked.

‘Not bad,’ Paul said. He looked at James with appreciation. ‘You really are very handsome in those new glasses,’ he said with a grin. ‘Just as well your looks and personality match.’

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James shook his head. 'You've always been the good-looking one,' he said and he took Paul's hand. 'Ready?' he asked.

Paul nodded. 'More than ready,' he replied and, side by side, dogs at their heels, they began the solemn walk along the pathway towards the oak tree.

Mandy turned to Simon. James might be ready, but despite her determination to honour her promise, she was finding it hard to keep herself together.

'All right?' Simon whispered, taking her hand and squeezing it. She nodded and swallowed.

'Paul looks well,' Simon commented. Mandy nodded again.

'We should go,' he said, and Mandy was glad to have him beside her when they walked up the narrow aisle between the rows of chairs. Ahead of them, Paul and James stopped in front of the registrar, a kind-eyed woman in a neat navy suit, who stood waiting under the scented canopy. Simon joined Mandy's parents and she took her place beside James.

As James and his fiancé turned to face one another in the shade of the magnificent oak, the shadows around Paul's eyes that had been camouflaged in the sunshine were thrown into sharp relief. He stood square-shouldered and smiling as if everything in his life was perfect. Mandy pressed her lips together hard. That her best friend was in love, that he had found a partner for life, should have been a source of pure joy, and yet today was exquisitely painful. Paul, who was the dearest thing in the world to

James, who had brought him so much happiness, was in the final stages of osteosarcoma. Mandy knew too much about bone cancer to be under any illusion there would be a happy ending. Her friends had to steal what time they could.

In the distance, Mandy could hear the sweet chirruping of a skylark as the registrar read out the vows. ‘Paul William Franco, is it your will to have this man to be your spouse, to live together in the state of marriage? Is it your will to love him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, to be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?’

How serious Paul looked as he spoke. ‘I will.’

The registrar turned her gaze to James. ‘James Hunter,’ she said, her voice calm. ‘Is it your will to have this man to be your spouse, to live together in the state of marriage? Is it your will to love him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, to be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?’

‘I will.’

There was a moment of stillness, the silver song of the lark clear in the distance. ‘And now,’ the registrar smiled, ‘Reverend Hadcroft has been invited to say a few words.’ Stepping aside, she made way for the vicar who had presided for many years over the parish. His hair was still black, his blue eyes still twinkled as he faced the congregation. Although he had only recently met Paul, Mandy knew he had taken time to sit down with the couple and learn about their short history.

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‘Thank you, my friends,’ he said, ‘for joining us here today, to celebrate the marriage of these two wonderful young men. I was honoured when James asked me if I would be willing to say a few words at their wedding ceremony. I would also like to invite anyone who wishes to join us for a special prayer session for Paul and James at the end of tomorrow morning’s service in the church.’ He paused for a long moment, smiling at James and Paul, before looking out across the rows of seats. ‘It takes courage,’ he said, ‘to commit one’s life to someone, but there is a story that James has told me that I think illustrates the strength these two wonderful young men have found in one another. And,’ he smiled, casting his gaze over the crowd, ‘I think anyone who has lived in this village as long as I have will agree that this tale illustrates how well suited they are. I understand these two young men met in a very unusual way. They were walking in opposite directions down a street in York when they heard howling. Both of them felt unable to ignore such a sound and on investigation, they discovered a group of boys who had trapped something,’ he raised an eyebrow, ‘or indeed, two somethings in a plastic bag, which they were about to throw in the river. James and Paul, despite being outnumbered, chased off the boys and retrieved the bag. Inside, to their surprise, they found two young puppies, one black and one brindle.’

Mandy couldn’t take her eyes off the vicar, even though she had heard the story before. ‘I think all of you know where this is going,’ said the reverend, bending down to

pat Seamus's head and then Lily's. 'Rather than allowing the police to take the puppies to a rescue centre, Paul and James agreed to take one each, but to keep in touch so that the tiny brother and sister would not lose one another completely. And the rest, of course, is history.' He looked around, first at Paul, then at James and finally resting his eyes on Mandy. 'Many of us can recall that in James's younger days, he and Mandy Hope, who stands here beside her friend, had lots of similar adventures. I know that she will join me and everyone here in wishing you both,' he beamed at the couple, 'the great joy of sharing your love of animals with your love for one another.'

Mandy heard a single gasping sob from somewhere behind her. Half turning, she caught sight of Gran and Grandad Hope sitting beside her dad. Catching Mandy's eye, her grandfather sent her a reassuring smile. She held her breath for a moment and dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands. If her friends could be this brave, then she must be brave for them. By the time the couple had kissed and turned towards her, she was able to smile. Unsure that she could trust her voice, she reached out. Briefly she grasped their hands, one warm and dry, one cooler, with fingers too slim. A moment later she released them and the newly married couple turned to face the congregation. Joining hands, fingers tightly intertwined, they made their way back down the aisle, the two dogs with them, one on either side.