



# Chapter One



'Er, hello!'

Sian put down her fork and looked over the garden wall. A woman was smiling at her, holding a bottle of wine in one hand and a jam jar full of flowers in the other.

'Hello!' said Sian.

'I hope you don't think I'm appallingly nosy but I noticed the furniture van drive away yesterday and thought I'd pop round and welcome you to the village. I'm Fiona Matcham. I live in the house up the end.' She swung the wine bottle vaguely in the direction of the lane.

'Oh,' said Sian. 'Would you like to come in?' She suspected that her visitor meant the Big House, a beautiful building that her mother had raved about when she'd come down to help Sian move in.

'I don't want to stop you working, but I could come and watch you.'

Sian laughed and wiped her hands on her shorts. She'd managed to get all the strawberry plants in that her mother had given her. 'No, no, I'm quite happy to stop. I'm Sian Bishop.'

'Hello again, Sian.' Fiona waved the jam jar at her. 'Here, take these.' Fiona Matcham handed Sian the bottle and the flowers over the wall and then walked up to the gate and let herself in. 'Oh! You've got a boy! How lovely! I love boys!'

Rory, who was digging with his little spade in the soil

his mother had loosened for him first, looked up and stared quizzically at Fiona from under his blond fringe.

'You're doing good work there, aren't you? Are you going to grow something?' Fiona Matcham addressed Rory while producing a jar of jam from the pocket of her loose linen jacket.

'Yes,' said Rory seriously.

'We're hoping to grow our own vegetables now we're in the country,' said Sian. 'Rory's got that patch, and I'm going to have a bigger patch in the back garden. We've planted strawberries. Salad we'll do later. Rory, would you like to stop for a drink now? Or carry on while I make tea?'

'Carry on while you make tea,' said Rory, turning back to his digging and ignoring them both.

Sian knew her son felt shy and would probably join them when he realised the tin of chocolate biscuits his grandmother had left had been produced. 'You would like a cup of tea?' Sian asked her guest. 'I've kind of assumed . . .'

'Oh yes, tea would be lovely. If you don't mind.'

Sian had already decided that this woman, who seemed to be in her mid-fifties, wasn't the sort who would be critical of a house not in perfect order, or why had she brought the wine? The flowers, too, were artistic and original – and no doubt from her own garden, not a conventional bouquet. Sian was inclined to like her already.

Sian led the way into the cottage. It seemed dark after the bright June sunshine outside and smelt of damp. But, as her mother had pointed out, it was very cheap to rent, had a big garden and the landlady, who lived in France, had expressed herself happy for Sian to make necessary improvements provided they weren't extravagant. She found space for the flowers on the table and instantly everything looked better.

'Excuse the mess,' said Sian, removing a half-unpacked

box of crockery off a chair. 'I couldn't bear to be inside when the weather is so lovely. Do sit down. And thank you for the flowers. They make the place look so much more homely, somehow.'

Her guest popped the jar of jam on the side with a 'For you', pulled out an unoccupied chair and sat at the table. 'Well, as this might be our entire summer it would be a shame to waste the sunshine unpacking.' She paused. 'I brought the flowers in a jar so you wouldn't need to hunt round for something to put them in. Nothing is more irritating when people turn up for dinner with flowers that mean you have to abandon your guests, the dinner and the drinks to find a vase. I no longer have a husband,' she added. 'Single-handed entertaining.'

'I'm a single parent, so ditto.' It wasn't really a test but Sian had discovered, in the four years since she'd had Rory, that people who were unlikely to become friends would flinch a bit when she said this.

'I've been that, too. The boys' father died when they were quite young. It's tough.'

Sian smiled at Fiona across the half-light of the gloomy hallway-cum-dining room. She had a feeling she'd made a new friend already.

'I'll put the kettle on. What kind of tea would you like?'

'I can't believe you're so organised as to have a choice already,' Fiona replied, perched on the chair as if ready to leap up and help at a moment's notice.

Sian smiled. 'My mother stayed with me for a few days. I drink builder's, she drinks Earl Grey. Those are the choices unless you want herbal tea.'

'Builder's is fine.'

'I've got some biscuits. My mother brought a huge tin of them. I'll be back in a moment,' Sian said as she disappeared off to the kitchen.

'I do think Luella ought to take that wall down and make this room into a big kitchen diner!' called Fiona. 'Why don't you suggest it?'

'Do you mean Mrs Halpern? She's been very co-operative and said as long as I don't go mad I can make changes. But I think she might consider taking down a supporting wall as going mad,' Sian called back.

She was no longer alone in the galley kitchen. Her guest, apparently not one to sit around and be waited on, had joined her.

'Look at the damp on the floor!' exclaimed Fiona. 'It's appalling. Mind you, it might only be the gutter that needs clearing. Would you like me to send someone round to look at it?'

'If it's only the gutter I can probably manage it myself,' said Sian. 'If I can't, I'd be grateful for the name of someone reliable.' Sian liked to be as self-sufficient as possible but she knew there would be things she couldn't deal with. Since she'd moved her dad was no longer round the corner to do those things for her.

'Well, just say. I've lived here so long – since Noah and Mrs Noah were courting – I know more or less everyone. Oh, hello, Rory,' she said as he appeared in the doorway.

'Can you take the biscuits?' Sian handed her son the tin. 'Why don't you take them out into the back garden?' She turned to Fiona. 'There's a table and chairs there. I'll make the tea.'

'Good idea. Rory and I can go and get settled and have a chat. My name is Fiona,' she said to the boy.

'Wouldn't you rather be Mrs Matcham?' asked Sian.

'Oh no,' she said firmly. 'Fiona is much better.' She smiled, possibly to offset the firmness.

'Would you mind taking the milk out?' asked Sian.

'Oh, just put it in the mugs in here, why don't you?'

Then when you and Rory come over to visit me, I can be my usual slutty self.'

Sian smiled and put tea bags in mugs. She could just imagine her mother's delighted reaction when she told her about Fiona. She would see her as a wise older friend and a potential babysitter, not to mention someone who lived in a lovely house and so might perhaps be a customer for her daughter as well. Richard would be pleased too. Although it was because of him that she had moved to this particular village, and he had taken her and Rory under his wing, he'd be glad that the neighbours were being friendly.

Fiona Matcham and Rory were up the far end of the garden when Sian brought out the mugs of tea. Sian sat down on one of the chairs and sipped hers, watching them together. She was pleased that Rory had forgotten to be shy and was making friends. She had been a bit worried about taking him away from everything he knew in a busy city out into the country, although, as Richard had pointed out, it was in a village, not a remote location miles from anywhere. There was a school, a pub, a church and two shops, one of which was also a post office. 'Which makes it a heaving metropolis,' Sian's father had said dryly. He was less sanguine than his wife about his daughter moving away with his only grandchild, although both her parents accepted she was moving for very good reasons. 'Tea's up!' she called. 'And biscuits!'

Rory turned and ran back down what would be a lawn one day – if Sian was able to stay that long of course, she thought wistfully, and her landlady didn't object – followed by Fiona.

'I don't suppose you could spare me some of that wonderful cow parsley?' Fiona said as she reached the table. 'I've got to do church flowers tomorrow and a huge display of just that could look stunning!'

'Oh yes, of course. Take anything you want.'

'Thank you. You could come and help me do them if you want. My opposite number is away so I'll be on my own. Rory can help.' She paused. 'Although not if you're busy, or morally opposed to church flowers.'

Sian laughed. 'No, I'd like to help. I don't actually go to church . . .'

'That's all right, just help me do the flowers.' Fiona picked up her mug and sipped. 'Your reward will be an introduction to the Yummy Mummies. There are at least three I know moderately well. Will Rory be going to the school later?'

Sian nodded. 'In September. He actually started last year in London but it was a disaster. Having a summer birthday he was only just four and it was such a big school. His teacher wasn't very nice either.'

'How awful! I can't imagine anything worse. Poor Rory. Poor you.'

Sian smiled. 'I'm glad you don't think I'm a dreadfully over-protective mother. One of the reasons I wanted us to move away from London was the schools. I home-educated him when I finally gave up trying to get him to go to school, but we're going to start again here.'

'Our local school is brilliant. I was a governor for years. I'm sure he'll be fine there.'

'I am too. And when you get to the secondary stage, London schools are even more frightening.'

Fiona nodded. 'And you probably didn't want to send him away to school. Don't. I did – it was expected – and it broke my heart, nearly.' She frowned. 'Although maybe I wouldn't have minded so much if my first husband hadn't just died.' She drank some more of her tea. 'So what were the other reasons for moving?'

Sian made a gesture. Usually she was quite a private

person but something about Fiona made her feel comfortable about elaborating. 'There are lots. The country life, wanting to grow vegetables, be more self-sufficient. A friend suggested we came down here and found me this house. His sister – whom Rory knows well and loves – is starting up a nursery and play scheme here which means I can work through the summer holidays, which I really need to be able to do.' She paused. 'And I couldn't go on more or less living right next door to my parents for ever, even though they did do quite a lot of childcare.'

'No?' Fiona looked thoughtful. 'One of my sons is going to be living with me quite soon.'

'Oh no, it'll be fine!' Sian hurried to reassure her, although she had no idea what sort of relationship Fiona had with her son. 'What I meant was, if London was the wrong place to be living in every other way, I couldn't go on doing it just because my parents were so close. It wasn't fair on them in a way, me expecting them to drop everything if I had a lot of work. They have their own lives.'

'And how did they take the news you wanted to move away?'

'Obviously they were a bit unhappy but once Richard – he's the friend – found me this place they were fine.' Sian counted her new home's advantages off on her fingers. 'It's in a village so I won't be too isolated. There's a lovely school within easy walking distance. It's only just under an hour to London by train and the station's not too far away. It has a huge garden so I can grow vegetables and the rent is extremely reasonable.'

'Because the kitchen is cramped and damp,' said Fiona.

Sian laughed too. 'I can put up with that, or even change it.'

Fiona laughed too. 'Luella probably isn't the most attentive landlady, but she's very nice.'



'She sounded nice on the phone and while we were arranging things.'

'She doesn't really need the money for renting this place and she'll probably sell it eventually, but she thought she'd like to keep a foothold in England while she's in France.'

'I've got a three-month lease that will probably be extended,' said Sian, suddenly chilled by the thought that she might have to leave her cottage if it was going to be sold. It might be damp but it was perfect for her and Rory.

'And I'm sure you can stay much longer than that if you want to,' said Fiona, suddenly realising she'd worried Sian. 'Last time we emailed she said she had no intention of coming back to the land where you drink tea instead of wine. I missed her when she went to France. She was my best friend locally.' She took a chocolate finger. 'I love chocolate fingers. There's something about them, isn't there? Nothing else tastes quite the same.'

Sian agreed. 'Would you like another one? Otherwise I think I should take the tin inside to stop them all melting. Rory? One more?'

Rory helped himself to another biscuit and then leant against Sian's chair, playing distractedly with a toy truck he'd retrieved from under the table, whilst his mother went off with the tin.

'So tell me your plans?' said Fiona once Sian had returned with a damp flannel for Rory's face and everyone's fingers. 'Or haven't you got any yet?'

'Oh no, I have plans. For one thing I want to get going on the garden. I've never grown vegetables before but I'm longing to try. It'll be quick-growing plants to start with, spuds and things later. Then I need somewhere to carry out my business in. I'm hoping to rent something.' She didn't mention the possibility of settling down with

Richard. She was by no means sure she would, although sometimes the idea seemed tempting. He was a dear friend and definitely a 'catch', as her father would have said.

'What sort of business? I mean, do you need an aircraft hanger or a garret?'

'Something in between, but more hanger than garret. I paint furniture, customise it.'

'Oh?'

'If you're really interested I'll show you some pictures.'

'Oh do! I'd be thrilled. Rory, would you like to take me up the other end of the garden again while your mother gets the pictures? There seems to be a little house.'

'All right,' said Rory after a moment's thought. He clambered to his feet and they set off.

Sian found her albums easily and turned the pages on her own while she waited for Fiona and Rory to come back – they were engrossed in what looked like the remains of a summer house at the bottom of the garden. Sian hadn't had time to investigate it yet herself. She was pleased to have met someone so soon – she'd been a bit worried about her and Rory becoming too dependent on each other and Richard if they had no one else to talk to. She might meet some mums at the play scheme Rory was booked into, but she might not. And Fiona seemed so good with Rory, friendly without being patronising. She sighed. Richard was a bit of a worry to her. She liked him very much but she wasn't in love with him, not in the way he so obviously was with her, and while he knew this and accepted it, he clearly hoped she would come to love him as more than just a friend. Sian hoped that too, in a way. He was perfect in so many respects. But she couldn't marry a man she didn't love, not even for the financial security she longed for.

Rory dashed back when he saw his mother, Fiona

following more sedately behind. 'That's my one!' he said, pointing to a picture of a chest of drawers covered with dragons, castles and seascapes.

Fiona inspected it. 'It's wonderful! What beautiful painting! How did you get the idea?'

'Well, Rory was obsessed with dragons at the time – still is, to some extent. My mother had bought this chest of drawers for half nothing at an auction – she's addicted to auctions – and as it needed something doing to it I decided to do more than just sand it down and put on a coat of white gloss.' She chuckled. 'I went to art college. I wanted to earn my living doing something that was actually connected to my degree but I could do from home. This is perfect – or it will be, when the business has built up a bit.'

Fiona turned the pages. 'But not all these are yours – your furniture, I mean?'

'Oh no. But when my friends saw the chest of drawers they started getting me to paint things for them. Now I have a website and stuff, but I need somewhere where I can paint bigger items. I've done one or two adult pieces, too.'

'So what sort of premises do you need?'

'Do you think you might know of somewhere? I need a barn or something. Some of the paint is a bit toxic so I need plenty of air around if possible.'

'I might indeed know of somewhere – my own barn in fact, just by my house – but it's absolutely full of stuff.'

'Well, if you did think you wanted to rent it out, I could help you clear it first.'

'That would be worth it, even without the rent. I've been meaning to do it for years and have never been able to face it.'

'I think that sort of thing is fun.'

'I suppose I'd think it was fun if I didn't have to make decisions about everything, but if you can help me with that, well, I'd be thrilled.'

Fiona seemed a little tentative. Sian didn't want her to change her mind about the barn and so nodded enthusiastically. 'I'd love it. Apart from it being fun I might be able to buy some things from you that I could paint. It seems a waste to buy new when there's so much perfectly good furniture around that just happens to be hideous – before I get my hands on it, of course!'

'Personally I don't think if furniture is hideous it can be described as "perfectly good",' Fiona said dryly, handing back the album to Sian.

Sian laughed. 'That's just the sort of thing my mother would say.'

'I hope you mean that in a good way!'

'Oh yes, definitely. My mother and I have a lot of fun together.'

'Well, that's a relief.' Fiona put her hand on Sian's briefly and got up. 'I should go. Now, were you serious about being willing to help with the flowers?'

'Oh yes.'

'Then I'll pop by at about two tomorrow and we can pick the cow parsley and then arrange it. Will that fit in with nap times and things?'

'I don't have a nap now,' said Rory. 'I'm too old.'

'I have naps all the time and I'm much older than you,' declared Fiona. 'But we won't argue about it. Until tomorrow then?'

When Sian had seen her guest out and renewed her thanks for the house-warming presents, she rang her mother. She would be thrilled that Sian had a new friend already. Sian was thrilled herself.

'It's Fona,' said Rory the following afternoon, looking through one of the small front windows at the person on the front doorstep.

'Oh good.' Sian went and opened the door. 'Hello! Come on through to the garden, we'll get picking.'

Fiona was carrying a bucket in which there were a pair of secateurs and what looked like an old curtain. 'Good afternoon. Hello, Rory! Are you going to help us put flowers in the church? There are toys there if you get bored.'

The two women cut swathes of cow parsley, filling Fiona's bucket and another one they found in a shed, and then set off for the church.

'Can I carry the bucket?' asked Rory, anxious to be involved. He'd been a little put out that he hadn't been able to help with collecting the cow parsley but Fiona had said the secateurs were too dangerous and only to be used by adults and his mother hadn't felt his pulling at the plants was achieving the desired effect. He'd had to watch them both and had got bored.

Sian thought about it. The bucket was heavy but she didn't want to start a row in front of Fiona. Rory was an easy child on the whole but he could get terribly offended if anyone suggested he was too young or too small for a particular task, and he'd already sulked a bit when they wouldn't allow him to help pick the flowers. 'OK,' she said casually, hoping he'd abandon the idea quite quickly.

'Actually, I could do with a hand with mine,' said Fiona. 'Your mum could carry that one but I'm not sure I can manage this one on my own. If you'd be a kind chap and carry it with me, I'd be very grateful.'

Flattered by this request for help, Rory took hold of the handle.

'It's quite hard to carry with all this cow parsley, isn't it?' went on Fiona.

'It's not heavy,' said Rory.

'Not for you, perhaps!' said Fiona. 'But you're a strong boy.'

Sian let herself lag behind her son and her new friend. It was nice that they got on so well. Fiona was very good with him. She thought Rory might miss her parents, being used to the company of adults. She locked the house and put the key in the pocket of her jeans. Fiona and Rory began to sing as the three of them lumbered up the lane towards the churchyard.

The church was cool and dark and Rory was a bit overawed until Fiona put on some lights, chatting away as if she was somewhere familiar and friendly. It took Sian a few moments to feel it was OK to talk above a whisper but by the time Rory had been shown the toys, which included a train set, she was soon helping Fiona pull out the faded flowers from the stand of oasis and fielding the dead leaves that missed the curtain Fiona had spread out to catch them.

A little later she was taking the lower leaves off the cow parsley and handing the sprays to Fiona as if she'd always done it. There was something satisfying about flower-arranging, especially in the calm interior of an ancient building. 'It only has to look good from the back of the church. That's where most people sit,' said Fiona, stepping away and looking at the display with a critical eye.

'It looks good from here!'

'Thank you! I do hope you'll come back to tea afterwards,' said Fiona. 'I've made a cake and Jody and Annabelle are coming. Annabelle's about Rory's age and you'll like Jody.'

'That's so kind. We'd love to meet them and we love cake. Especially homemade.'

'Me too. I've trained myself to believe that shop cake

isn't worth getting fat for, but I'm not sure I believe it.'

'You really needn't have made a cake just for us. We're not proud about shop cake!'

Fiona laughed. 'Actually, I've got a bit of a favour to ask you. I thought I'd soften you up first.'

Sian laughed too, hoping she wasn't about to let herself in for something she wouldn't be happy about. 'Well, anything you think we can do.'

'You don't really have to do much but it's not something I can ask Jody, for example.' Fiona bit her lip, frowning a little as she adjusted her arrangement. 'It is a bit mad and I don't want to ask anyone I know well.' Fiona stepped back from the pyramid of frothy white and green, which to Sian looked like a patch of starlight. 'Do you think that looks all right? People always say my arrangements are "unusual" and I'm never sure whether to take that as a compliment or not. No one's ever done anything like that as far as I know but I always remember my mother telling me about Constance Spry having a big jug of cow parsley in the window of her shop, in London, just after the war. I've always wanted to do it.'

'I think it looks stunning. Really simple and pure. And if it is unusual, it's lovely.'

'As long as it looks OK from the back of the church,' repeated Fiona, walking in that direction.

Once Fiona was happy with the arrangement and they'd cleared up and put the train set away, they headed back to Fiona's house. As they approached, Sian said, 'I don't suppose you could tell me your mad thing now? I'm dying of curiosity.'

'Well, we can't have you dying, although really I'd prefer to tell you with a paper bag over my head. And not a

word to Jody.' Fiona plunged on. 'It's all your landlady's fault. She put me up to it.'

'But what is it?'

'Internet dating,' said Fiona. 'There, I've said it. And look, there's Jody.'



## Chapter Two



An orange people carrier drew up and parked. The door opened and a young woman wearing shorts and a stripy top jumped out. She was tanned, freckled and looked very fit. She reminded Sian of a tennis player.

'Hi, Fiona! So kind of you to ask us. I'll just release Annabelle.' She slid open the side door and began fiddling with straps. By the time Fiona, Sian and Rory had reached them there was a small girl on the ground, scowling at them from under dark black brows.

She had bare feet, long curly black hair that tumbled down her back, pink pedal-pushers and a matching T-shirt. Sian thought she looked like a gypsy queen and quite magnificent.

Jody held out her hand to Sian. 'You must be Sian. Jody. And this little princess is Annabelle.' Jody looked at Rory and said, 'Don't worry, she's better with boys than girls. She's got two older brothers and apart from liking pink, thinks girly things are silly.'

Rory looked up at Jody and smiled, responding to her warmth and relaxed attitude.

'Fiona's got a train,' said Annabelle, proud of her greater knowledge.

'Why don't you two go and find it?' suggested Fiona. 'The gate's open, you can go in.'

Bustling importantly, Annabelle led the way, with a willing Rory following.

'She's a heartbreaker in the making,' said Fiona as the adults followed more slowly.

'Don't say that!' said Jody. 'She gives me enough trouble when the boys have sleepovers. She harasses their friends in a most embarrassing way.' Jody looked at Sian apologetically. 'You must tell me if she's too much for Rory. And you must come over soon. We live in a mess but it's a massive house so we seem to be sleepover central.'

Sian smiled, feeling immensely grateful to Fiona, first for knowing someone who seemed so much fun and secondly for introducing them. 'It sounds like heaven. We live in a fairly small house but we're still up for the odd sleepover.'

As she followed Fiona and Jody through the big gate into the yard, which gave on to an open-sided barn, now being invaded by Rory and the Gypsy Queen, Sian couldn't help wondering about what Fiona had confided.

Fiona was obviously a pillar of the local community. She was probably chairman of the WI and certainly did church flowers. The idea of her internet dating seemed bonkers! But fun. Sian acknowledged, going into the house of her mother's dreams, that the thought was definitely fun.

The kitchen was huge, with some sort of range cooker up one end and a table up the other. An island unit and various cupboards, a dresser and a desk took up the rest of the space. A long shelf above the window that looked out on to a charming garden held huge majolica plates and jugs. It was either designed by an expert or was a wonderful accident, but the result was delightful.

'This is lovely!' said Sian. 'What a perfect room!'

'Oh, do you like it? I sometimes think it's a bit of a shambles but the thought of sorting it out just makes me feel weak. Now, you two go and sit down and I'll make tea.'

Jody and Sian were seated at the table when Annabelle and Rory came in. Annabelle was obviously about to ask for a drink when she caught her mother's eye and didn't.

Fiona, apparently fluent in small-child-speak, said, 'Would you two like a drink? Apple juice? Annabelle, can you show Rory how to work the ice machine?'

'What an amazing fridge,' said Sian, watching Annabelle and Rory fill two glasses with ice.

'It's ridiculous really when it's just me most of the time. My sons gave it to me one Christmas so I would always have enough ice for my gin and tonics. Not that I drink that many of them, but I do like a lot of ice.'

'I think that's a lovely present. Far better than a new iron or something,' said Jody, when Fiona had added apple juice and straws to the ice.

'Yes, they're good boys. One of them has been away for ages and is coming back here to write a book. The other one lives in Canada.' She opened a cupboard and took out a tin. 'At least, that's the plan for Angus. Not sure I can see him doing it, he's always been a man of action, not to mention a bit dyslexic.'

'So why the book?' Jody asked.

Fiona shrugged as she took a plate from the drainer and opened the tin. 'I don't think he knows what else to do, really. Not that it's easy writing a book, of course – think of all those tortured souls. And it'll be very odd sharing the house with someone again, even though it's huge. One of the reasons I want to clear out the barn is I'd like to be able to convert it for him to live in, if he finds he can't live with his mother now he's grown up. I'm not the most organised person.'

'Nor me,' said Jody.

'I'm not all that organised but I love clearing other

people's clutter,' said Sian. 'It's so much easier than doing your own.'

The cake now on a plate and on the table, Fiona turned to the children, who were making loud sucking noises with their straws. 'Do you want cake now or later? More juice? Or the train?'

Annabelle looked at Rory. 'Can we take cake to the train?'

'Oh, I should think so. Mums? What do you think?'

'Definitely less messy if they have it outside,' said Jody.

'And you don't mind them having cake?' Fiona looked at Sian, apparently knowing Jody's feelings.

'Cake is fine in moderation,' said Sian, 'and I think taking it outside is a brilliant idea.'

Annabelle and Rory ran off happily, clutching chocolate cake in bits of paper towel.

'Oh the peace!' said Jody, flopping back into a chair.

'I'll make the tea,' said Fiona.

'That cake is delicious!' said Sian, picking at the crumbs the children had created in their excitement.

'Oh, have a proper slice, do!' Fiona handed Sian a knife and three plates. 'I don't want it in the house for long.'

'We'll do our best to help,' said Jody with a smile.

Two cups of tea and a slice of cake later, Jody got up to go. 'My boys' swimming lesson will be over by now. I'd better pick them up, I suppose, if I can tear Annabelle away.' She looked at Sian. 'She and Rory obviously get on. No one's come in crying or moaning about being bored. That's brilliant!'

'It is. Lovely for Rory to have found a friend so soon,' said Sian with a real sense of relief.

'You must come over . . .'

The party moved out into the yard where the children were playing with a wooden train set large enough to sit

on. Eventually Jody extracted Annabelle with the promise of chips on the way home from picking up the boys. 'They're always so starving after swimming and if their blood-sugar level drops they become like animals – more like animals . . .'

Sian looked at Rory, wondering if they should go too when Fiona said, 'While you're here, Sian, come and look at the barn and see what you think.'

The barn was full of furniture – Fiona hadn't been exaggerating – and as Sian followed her between wardrobes, tables, cupboards and upturned chairs she realised it would make an ideal space to work in – without quite so much in it, of course.

'Who does all this belong to?' she asked Fiona.

'Various people. A lot of it can be just got rid of, but there are some family pieces the boys should have a look at, to see if they want them. Some of it's my ex's – my second husband's. That can all go. I do need this space cleared,' Fiona said with a frown. 'I shouldn't be hanging on to all this stuff.'

'You need a life-laundry person to come and counsel you over every oversized chest of drawers and convince you that you've moved on from it.'

Fiona smiled but Sian sensed she'd stumbled on a germ of truth.

'I could help you,' Sian went on. She didn't want to sound mercenary but the barn would be a perfect workspace. 'Pure self-interest, of course. I might like the furniture to paint and I'd definitely like the barn to work in.'

'Although,' said Fiona cautiously, 'as I said before, if Angus discovers he can't live in the same house with me, he might want me to convert it into living space.'

Sian brushed away an unexpected flicker of resentment for the absent Angus. He was Fiona's son: of course he

should have first dibs on the barn. 'Well, that would be OK. I'll still help,' she said magnanimously.

'Would you?'

'Of course.'

'I've done a lot of clearing in the house. I've sorted out loads and loads of books; a whole library, in fact. Though I haven't gone near the attic.' Fiona sighed. 'It's not that I want to move, I don't, at all, but it's a huge house, I'm only one person, I'm rather rattling around in it and, much as I do like my space, I can't help feeling the boys might like to have a bit of capital now, rather than waiting for me to pop my clogs. Although Russell's well set up in Montreal.'

'Oh.' Fiona seemed as far away from popping her clogs as Sian herself did.

'I've found a shop that might take a lot of the books. Second-hand – or rather "antiquarian" – books are mostly sold on the internet these days. This man sells them. I'm going to take a selection over soon.'

Sian had spotted something. 'Oh, a nest of tables.'

'I hate nests of tables,' Fiona exclaimed. 'I know they're useful but I just hate them.'

'Why don't I paint them for you, all with different flowers or something, and you could put them in different rooms?'

Fiona laughed. 'OK. My ex-husband would be livid at the thought of his dead aunt's nest being painted with flowers. However, as he left them here and has shown absolutely no interest in reclaiming them, what he thinks is of little consequence to us!'

Sian's imagination was already fired up. 'Not too many flowers, of course, and I'd put some sort of glaze on before I started. What about a sort of pale clay colour? That would set off the flowers beautifully.'

Fiona was amused at the younger woman's enthusiasm over a nest of tables. 'Just you do what you think best. If I hate them I could give them to my friend to sell. She's got a shop in Fairsham. You know the kind: it sells things you don't really need but can't resist buying.' Her brow wrinkled. 'Sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that. I've even bought stuff from there myself. She'd be a really good contact for you. I must get you together. Her name's Margaret Tomlin. Her shop is called something like Eclectica. You should have a look if you ever get the chance.' Fiona paused but before Sian could reply she continued, 'Hey, I've had an idea. I've been meaning to have a dinner party. I can invite Margaret and introduce you both. I've been wanting to welcome you properly into the village. This is the perfect way. I'll get on to it straightaway.'

'A retail outlet would be good,' said Sian cautiously, less certain about the dinner party. She wasn't sure she was ready to be launched into village life yet, although she had enjoyed meeting Jody. She much preferred more informal occasions. She climbed over a chair and headed for a corner. 'Look at that cupboard – perfect for a child's bedroom. I can just see it with delicate trails of ivy climbing up it and a tiny row of antique baby equipment along the top.'

'That sounds nice,' said Fiona, looking at the cupboard with renewed interest. 'Maybe I'd rather have that. It was my aunt's.'

'How did you come to be left with so much furniture?' Sian asked.

'Easy,' said Fiona. 'Whenever anyone died or people didn't know what to do with anything they said, "Fiona lives in that huge house, she'll store it for us." But no one ever took anything away again.'

'Abso-bloody-lutely!' Sian replied, looking out across a sea of assorted bits and pieces that lined the barn from ceiling to floor. There really was a daunting amount of stuff. 'Now, please, put me out of my misery and tell me about the internet-dating thing!'

'It's Luella's fault!' said Fiona. 'She put me on a site where you recommend your friends. She did ask my permission, but only after she'd done it.' Fiona shook her head slightly. 'I think what really clinched it was that she had a very flattering photograph of me, taken when I was staying with her. I was laughing and playing with her dog. A good look for the more mature woman. When I saw it I thought, why not?'

Sian hesitated. 'I wouldn't describe you as more mature. I mean – That's not to say I think you're immature, what I mean is you're like my mother, you wear jeans and funky jewellery and you're fun. More mature sounds, well, old.'

'Ridiculous as it sounds, I only feel about eighteen a lot of the time.' Fiona frowned. 'And goodness knows what Angus would say about me internet dating.'

'But surely, anything that made you happy . . . ?'

'Yes, but my boys don't trust my taste in men. We all had an awful time when I married my second husband.'

'But you're not going to marry anyone,' Sian pointed out, 'just have a good time.'

'That's exactly what Luella said,' Fiona replied with a smile as she led Sian out of the barn to a bench in the courtyard. Rory played happily with the trains as they watched.

'So, you need me to do you a favour?' said Sian. 'To do with the internet dating?'

Fiona laughed. 'To be honest, you're doing me a favour not dying of shock.'



'Well, everyone seems to be doing it these days,' Sian said in a reassuring tone (not that she could think of a single person she knew who had). 'But there's more to it?'

Fiona nodded. 'Just a bit. It's a safety thing. I've got a date and I need someone to know where I'm going and who I'm with and when I should be back, that sort of thing.'

Although she'd only met her the day before, Sian secretly felt that Fiona could handle any situation, however precarious, but didn't voice her thoughts. She would be very happy to help someone who had been so welcoming in any way she could. 'No problem. So where are you going?'

'We're going to an antiques fair. I mentioned that I liked them and he said there was one on and why didn't we go together? As it's not too far, I said yes.' Fiona paused. 'I can't remember the last time I've been out with a man like that.'

'That sounds a perfect first date.' Sian smiled enthusiastically. It must be nerve-racking, but exciting too. Just for a second she wondered if her life was rather lacking in excitement. It was full and productive but not exactly spine-tingling. And here was a woman her mother's age who wasn't afraid to get out there and try something different. Fiona put her to shame.

'I hope so. And you don't mind texting me during the date so I can alert you if I need rescuing? Which I won't, of course. I can just walk out and go home if I'm unhappy. But they do say it's better to be safe . . .'

'Of course. How much chance will you have to get to know each other at an antiques fair, though?' Sian asked.

'Enough, I should think. But there is one thing . . .'

'Go on.' Whatever it was seemed to be bothering Fiona.

'Well, on the dating site and in all the emails and phone calls we've exchanged, there's one thing they won't tell you and doesn't show on photographs . . .'

'What, chemistry?' Sian understood this. To her it seemed that good sexual chemistry was possibly a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

'No, although of course you're right about that. What I'm worried about is much more mundane.' She paused. 'Bad breath. Have you ever noticed how many older men seem to have it?'

'I hadn't, actually.' Once again Sian marvelled at the way Fiona's mind worked. She was wonderfully honest.

'You probably don't need to get near to many of them but I promise you, it's a problem. And unless there's some way you can drop "mouth wash" or "dental floss" into an email or chat on the phone without looking completely barking I'm not going to know until I'm committed to an afternoon of browsing antiques.' She gave a rueful smile. 'Shall we have another cup of tea?'

## Chapter Three



Rory walked along next to Sian, his hand in hers, singing to himself. They were both tired and dusty but had had a lovely time with Fiona. She had invited them to supper but Sian felt she should get Rory to bed.

'We'll just have scrambled eggs on toast and then get you into the bath,' she said now, wondering if she had the energy to work after he was asleep. She needed to finish a piece of furniture but what with meeting Fiona, the flower-arranging, being introduced to Jody and Annabelle and checking out the barn she'd hardly had a moment.

'Will you read to me?' Rory asked.

'OK, darling.' Reading to Rory in the bath had started as a time-saving exercise but they had both come to enjoy it. Having first done the tooth-brushing, Sian would sit on the floor, leaning up against the bath, while Rory splashed around, getting more and more drowsy. When Sian judged the moment was right, she whisked him out with a big towel and popped him into bed. He quite often begged another story once he was in bed but was usually asleep before she'd finished.

Tonight he was full of chatter about Fiona, Annabelle and the train set in Fiona's barn. He was also thinking about going to the play scheme tomorrow.

'Emily will be there, won't she?' he asked, squeezing a sponge full of bubbles.

'Yes, and she'll have helpers, because she'll have more children. It won't be just you.' Sian wiped his face with a flannel. Relaxing bathtimes sometimes meant the washing part got overlooked.

'And will they be girls?'

'Who, the children or the helpers?'

'The helpers. Helpers are always girls.'

'They may not be. Emily might have got some young men to help now she's down here.'

Rory sighed. 'I don't think so. I don't think boys look after children. I like boys.'

'So do I.' She paused. 'Are you ready to come out now, darling? I've got a bit of work to finish and I'd like to get you tucked up.'

'OK, Mummy,' said Rory, resigned to there being no male carers and to going to bed. He did it with relatively good grace.

Sian had been working with all the doors open to minimise the smell of paint and had just wrapped her paintbrush in clingfilm when her phone went. It was Richard. She remembered he was due back from a business trip.

'Hey!' she said. 'Are you at home?'

'No, but I'll be back tomorrow. I just wondered how you were getting on?'

'Fine! We're nearly all unpacked. Mum helped quite a bit when she was here. And we've met a really nice woman. Fiona Matcham. Do you know her? She lives in the big house at the end of the lane. She seems lovely!'

'Oh yes, she is lovely. I was at boarding school with her boys, but I haven't seen her in a while. I'm not surprised she's taken you under her wing. That's just the sort of person she is.' He paused. 'And how's Rory? Looking forward to tomorrow?'

'Oh yes. He hopes there are boy helpers there.' Then she wished she hadn't said that. Richard felt that Rory needed an adult male role model and that he should be it. While Sian agreed on some levels, she wasn't sure marrying Richard so he could be a role model was the answer. She sighed and said more brightly, 'He's met a little girl called Annabelle, who goes there. And he's looking forward to seeing Emily again. Has she got lots of young helpers, do you know?'

They chatted on gently about Emily's project and ended with a plan for Richard to come over the following evening and have supper. He was driving down from London that afternoon for a flying visit home before his next trip. Sian went to bed feeling fond of him. He might never set the world on fire but he was nice, and niceness had a lot going for it. She hadn't always thought like that, of course. Once she'd followed her heart – and her hormones – and had a mad, brief affair that had resulted in Rory. But now, nearly six years on, she felt she'd grown up a bit and no longer looked for heart-stopping passion but for something more comfortable and secure. Her head was definitely sure this was what she needed and wanted, she just wished she could convince her stubborn heart of this. However, she had to be practical. It was no good thinking she was a heroine in one of those books she'd devoured as a teenager. Real life wasn't like that, and as she was never going to see Rory's father again she just had to get on with it. And the love one felt for a friend could grow into a deeper love, couldn't it? All the articles said that a relationship based on friendship was an enduring one and she knew that arranged marriages often lasted longer than those where the couple had married 'for love'. She was sure if she decided on a life with Richard, as he wished, she and Rory would have a very contented, safe, one.

Brushing aside the nagging little voice inside her heart that said, 'Contentment, is that what you really want?' she turned over and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Sian managed to persuade Rory to eat Marmite soldiers. At first he'd been too excited for breakfast but Sian had been firm. He couldn't go to the play scheme on an empty stomach. She had only been able to sip a cup of tea; she seemed much more nervous than her son.

As they walked up the lane, Rory chatted excitedly, swinging her arm and striding purposefully, his little backpack perched on his back. This was a very good sign, thought Sian. He liked Emily, who had helped tutor him when Sian had taken him out of school, but the last time he'd been around a group of children he'd hated it. But that was at a big ugly institution in London, Sian reminded herself. As he asked her about the other children – he knew Annabelle now, of course – she also realised with a pang of guilt just how much he must have been missing the company of children his age.

They had walked to the nursery the day before so that Rory had an idea where he'd be going and how far it was from the cottage – and his mother. Although the building itself was somewhat utilitarian it was in a lovely setting, a safe distance from the main road and with plenty of space for the children to run around in.

Much to Rory's pleasure and surprise, there was a young man helping out with the older children. Rory was delighted to see Emily and after saying hello to her and throwing a cursory glance at his mother, he rushed to join the other children. Emily raised an eyebrow at Sian as if to say, 'What did I tell you, there was nothing to worry about,' and Sian smiled. This was all a great relief to her.

She needed reliable childcare where Rory was really happy so she could work. She would only get paid for the few commissions she had outstanding when she could deliver them. She loved the fact that she had her own business and was making money from doing something she loved, but it could be precarious. When she wasn't doing the painting, she had to drum up more work. She hoped Fiona's friend with the shop would turn out to be a good contact. And at least Rory looked as if he was going to be happy. She said goodbye to Emily and waved at Rory, who was by now busily playing trains with another little boy, while Annabelle directed proceedings.

It was a slightly paint-spattered Sian who went to collect Rory some five hours later. She had had a very productive day. She'd even worked through lunch, so absorbed had she been in a particularly intricate design on a child's bedroom chair.

She was welcomed by Emily who said that most of the children were outside.

'It's so lovely doing this where there's space for them to play outside,' she said, leading Sian out into the garden. 'I'm hoping to get some more equipment for them to clamber over but this is good to start with.' There was a small paddling pool, a sandpit and a climbing frame.

'It's the room to run around that's the most important thing,' said Sian. 'And you've got plenty of that.' Much as Rory enjoyed the garden at the cottage, which was more outside space than he'd been used to in London, she knew this would be heaven for him. It would almost certainly tire him out too. She loved it when he was able to run around and burn off some of his boyish energy.

'True,' said Emily, 'and today we've had the weather to enjoy it.'

All the children – and there seemed to be plenty of them – were wearing baseball caps with flaps at the back to keep their necks protected from the sun. The boy helper was playing French cricket with the older children. ‘That’s Philip,’ said Emily. ‘He’s a student. The children love him. I’m trying to persuade him to go into teaching.’

Rory spotted his mother and came flying up to give her a hug and then rushed back into the game.

‘No need to ask if he’s been OK then?’ said Sian, resigning herself to watching the children a little longer.

‘No, he’s been amazing. He’s a sweetie. He adores Philip.’

‘He does like boys, as he calls them. He and my dad get on brilliantly, but older men are different.’

Emily laughed. ‘Maybe you should marry my brother then, and give him a permanent “boy” to look up to.’ She laughed. ‘Only joking.’

Sian gave a rueful smile. She knew Emily was only half joking. Emily would like nothing better than for Richard and Sian to get together properly. She really liked Emily but that wasn’t a good enough reason for her to marry her brother. ‘Well, who knows?’

Sian and Rory were just walking up to the cottage when they saw a car parked outside it.

‘I wonder who that can be?’ said Sian, hoping it wasn’t a visitor. She was wearing her painting clothes and Rory was worn out; he was dragging his feet already, and his manners weren’t reliable when he was tired.

As they reached the front door, the owner of the car spotted them. A vision of Boden loveliness wearing a summer dress and designer sunglasses emerged from the neat little soft-top. She looked leisured and relaxed and had perfectly tanned legs and pretty sandals. ‘I’m Melissa