GEORGIA HILL

Sunny New Beginnings at Sea Haven House

Can one summer change everything?




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Sunny New Beginnings at Sea
Haven House

GEORGIA HILL



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For Julia

One

SATURDAY AFTERNOON 10TH AUGUST

Claude Monet 1840–1926
Painter celebrating the beauty of nature. Loved to paint outdoors. Known for his paintings of flowers and gardens – and so much more. Teaching point: look beyond the cliché.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie lugged her suitcase up the steep path to the cottage and paused for a moment, looking up. Easing her motorway stiffened shoulders, she took in the view.

The house was postcard pretty. Against a brilliantly blue Dorset sky, it was painted the palest pink with a roof of deep grey slate.

Gorgeous. Her painter's fingers twitched.

She followed the path a little further. Uphill, uneven and pebbly, it made pulling her case extra tricky. Relief that it was all as advertised, and she'd actually got here tempered the headache which a peak holiday season Saturday on the M5 had caused. The journey had taken three times as long as it should, and having to squeeze her car next to a battered Fiat hadn't improved her mood. The cottage's tiny parking space was located at the bottom of this track and off the steep Harbour Hill.

‘Stop stressing. You’re here, you’re on holiday and the sun is shining,’ she muttered, wiping her sweaty brow with her T-shirt sleeve. ‘A hot bath and a glass of white and you’ll be fine. Who cares if Frida bailed at the last minute and swanned off to Ibiza instead. Look at what she’s missing!’

Pausing at the cottage’s white gate, she breathed in a sigh of pure happiness at the sight of the garden brimming with purple phlox and snowy Japanese anemones in between soaring palms.

Frida’s choice of holiday still rankled. The last thing Callie had wanted was a solo trip. She’d been looking forward to reconnecting with her daughter; she’d been weirdly distant recently. ‘Oh well, who needs fishbowl cocktails and foam parties?’ she muttered to the gate as she pushed it open.

The cottage’s garden and location were what had drawn her to it. Available in August too. A miracle. Teachers didn’t have much choice about when they took their holidays so she’d snapped it up. After the year she’d had, she was desperate for a break. Frida professed the same – until a mate had offered a spare room in a villa in Playa d’en Bossa.

Close up the house was even prettier, if that were possible. Stopping at the glossy front door she dug out the raft of paper with the instructions. Tongue out with concentration, she scanned down, found what she was looking for and entered the number into the key safe. She feared the worst. Technology had a habit of failing her; it was a long-running gag at school. Holding her breath, she pressed the button to release the key. As she did so, the front door swung open.

‘Hello, can I help?’ A man stood framed by the white roses which grew round the front door; they gave off a heady sweet scent.

Shocked, Callie stifled a giggle. He was a tall, dark and good-looking cliché, and about her age. She liked the touch of silver at his temples. Very distinguished. This must be the owner, although it was strange; she’d only dealt with a Miss Grosvenor when booking. ‘Hello, I was just opening the key safe to get the key.’

‘No need. I have it here.’ He held it up, dangling from a seashell key ring.

‘Great,’ Callie said with relief and held out her hand to take it. After the journey she’d had she was keen to unpack. The bottle of white wine in the food box still in her car was calling a siren song, although a mug of tea might hit the spot first.

‘Are you the housekeeper?’ he asked. ‘There was no need to come over. The place is immaculate, and I’ve found everything. Thank you for coming though.’

‘Housekeeper? No. I’ve rented the place. For three weeks.’ Callie felt the first stirrings of unease.

‘You’ve rented the cottage?’ A frown flickered across his brow. ‘There must be some mistake. I’ve booked it. I’ve just arrived. You must have the wrong house.’

Callie stiffened. ‘I can assure you I have not.’ Fishing in her handbag she drew out the sheaf of papers again. Waving them at him, she explained. ‘I booked Sea Haven House with a Miss Grosvenor beginning Saturday the tenth.’ She felt her face grow warm. ‘This is Sea Haven House. It said so on the gate, and it’s most definitely the tenth.’

The man disappeared into the house and returned with a wodge of paper. Callie’s heart sank as she recognised the distinctive heading. Hysteria bubbled up. She might have known something would go wrong. Had she booked the wrong date? Shoving her sunglasses onto the top of her head she squinted at Miss Grosvenor’s small forest of paperwork. Definitely booked for the tenth. Anxiety hollowed her stomach.

He flourished his papers at her. ‘You see, booked to J. Starling – that’s me – in the week beginning–’

‘The tenth,’ finished Callie. Her shoulders slumped. ‘This is all I need,’ she wailed. ‘I’ve been driving all day. The traffic on the M5 was terrible.’

‘I know, I came that route too.’ He paused, studying her. ‘Look, come in and we can talk about this.’

‘I’ll do nothing of the sort.’ He didn’t look like an axe murderer but Callie had absolutely no intention of going into a strange house with an unknown man. She’d watched her fair share of Netflix real life crime. From Ibiza she could hear Frida laughing and saying, *Get yourself in there, Mum. He’s gorg!*

He held out a hand. ‘Where are my manners. Let me introduce myself. Jonathan Starling. I live in Stratford, as in Shakespeare. I drive the dilapidated Fiat you probably parked next to. I’m forty-five, currently unattached, have family staying just up the road who will vouch for me being a decent type and am as keen as you to get this mess sorted out.’

Go on, urged Frida’s voice in her head; she seemed to have a remarkable grasp on the situation from her sunbed over a thousand miles away. *What have you got to lose? Live a little.*

Callie glimpsed the temptingly cool interior of the cottage. With her throat begging for a cup of tea and her bladder pleading for relief, she gave in. Wiping a sweaty hand on her shorts, she shook the one Jonathan held out. ‘Calliope.’ She grimaced, embarrassed as usual about her name. ‘Bit of a mouthful. Callie for short.’

‘Lovely to meet you, Calliope.’ He peered behind her. ‘Is that your case? Let me carry it in. I’ve just put the kettle on. Would you like tea?’

Callie nodded. She followed him along the stone flagged hall into a sunny kitchen-diner-family room. Jonathan deposited her case at the bottom of a steep set of stairs and began making tea. He made it the old-fashioned way using a teapot. For some weird reason, this reassured her a little. She doubted axe murderers bothered warming the pot first.

‘There’s scones and jam too. Would you like some?’ He nodded towards the wicker basket on the work surface. ‘It’s a pretty impressive welcome pack.’

‘Just tea please.’ She perched on a stool, one foot on the floor, ready to run if necessary. She was hot, tired and irritated. Why should *she* run? She’d booked the cottage. *He* should be the one to move out!

Jonathan eyed her. Putting the tea things on the breakfast bar he said kindly, ‘Look, you drink your tea and I’ll phone Miss Grosvenor. I’ll have to go outside though: it’s the only place I can get a decent signal.’

Callie concentrated on pouring tea, ridiculously close to tears. She’d been looking forward to visiting Lullbury Bay for ages.

As she drank, she watched Jonathan in the back garden. With his silvering hair and smooth suntanned skin Frida would declare him a hottie. Her daughter was always on at her to find a man. Callie could hear one or two words of the conversation float through the open French doors.

‘Can you hear me now?’ His voice rose. ‘Yes, the reception *is* poor. We’ve got a bit of a situation here.’

Judging by his gesticulating the conversation wasn’t going his way. She wondered who had booked first. Surely that person would have priority. Hoping it was her, she gazed at Jonathan, regretting that she would have to spoil his holiday. He seemed okay. Impeccable manners. Kind too. He didn’t have to take on sorting the mess out.

The tea helped restore her reason. She found a tiny downstairs loo decorated in seaside creams and blues, splashed icy water on her face and dragged a comb through her hair. Her curls were already frizzing; they always did at the seaside. She pulled a face at herself reflected in the mirror. Red hair and freckles didn’t always do heat well. One reason she avoided places like Ibiza.

The cottage, immaculately decorated, had its walls filled with art prints. An eclectic mix with no apparent theme, Gauguin mingled with Botticelli and her favourite Georgia O’Keeffe. It intrigued her. She’d expected the usual but anonymous sea views or cartoon seagulls. Returning to the kitchen, she felt much more in control by the time Jonathan came in.

He flung himself onto the sand-coloured sofa, drank his tea down in one and looked Callie in the eye, pulling a face. ‘Do you want the good news or the bad?’

She was intrigued to see his hand shook ever so slightly as it gripped his mug. Maybe he was more rattled by the situation than he was letting on? ‘That bad, eh? I’ll take the good first.’ She managed a laugh, warming to him.

‘The good news is Miss Grosvenor is appalled at her mistake and is refunding all our costs.’

‘But?’

‘She has no other cottages available and doubts there is anything else around.’

Callie sank back against her stool. ‘It being August.’

He nodded. ‘Apparently, there’s a huge art festival on, it’s Lifeboat Week and there’s some kind of food event on too. Lullbury Bay is rammed.’

‘One reason I’ve come,’ Callie explained. ‘For the Art Festival. I’m an art teacher.’ She poured them both more tea and took a fresh mug to him. Settling on the opposite sofa, she asked, ‘Why are you here?’

‘My youngest sister lives here. My niece is getting christened tomorrow. Our family have rented a house further up the hill.’

‘No room for you, Jonathan?’ she tried not to sound too hopeful.

He chuckled. ‘Please, it’s Johnny. Jonathan’s a real mouthful. And, don’t get me wrong, I love my family dearly.’ He winced. ‘I have four sisters. Between them they have nine children. Plus my parents and assorted aunts and uncles.’ He looked out at the peaceful garden. ‘Thought I’d get more work done here.’

‘Oh, so this isn’t just a holiday for you?’

‘No, I’m staying on after the party tomorrow.’ He shot her a look. ‘Or was hoping to. I write travel articles,’ he added. ‘I’m here to write about the resurgence of the British seaside holiday.’

‘Sounds more exciting than being a teacher.’

‘Judging from my sisters’ children,’ he said, with a grin, ‘I’d say being a teacher is quite exciting enough!’

Callie laughed again, this time more freely. She felt herself begin to relax. Jonathan – Johnny – *was* nice. An idea was beginning to form. She planned on being out quite a lot. Maybe…

Uncannily he picked up on her thoughts. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I’ve been thinking. There are two bedrooms upstairs, each with its own en suite. Instead of us wasting time looking for other accommodation, why don’t we share? I’ll be at my sister’s so not here much and, as I don’t cook, the kitchen will be yours. Let me show you upstairs and you’ll see.’

He hauled Callie’s suitcase up the narrow stairs. Although the cottage was smaller upstairs, there was a wide landing, with two doors facing one another. Johnny flung one open.

‘Yours.’ He dropped the case by the wardrobe and invited her to the window. ‘How could you resist a view like this? My room has the same.’

Callie gazed out and gasped. The cottage looked down over the steep slope to the harbour below. To her left she could see Lullbury Bay’s long sandy beach, the cliffs which led east and a panorama of sea and sky gleaming an unending blue, stretching out to the horizon. She couldn’t give up this view. And it seemed unfair to ask Johnny to.

‘Your bathroom’s through there and there are locks on the bedroom doors. You’ll be quite safe.’

Callie didn’t think she needed locks to reassure her, although she supposed it would be sensible to lock herself in. Johnny Starling was, after all, a complete stranger. The name flickered across her memory. Something about it was familiar. Shaking the thought off, she realised he was waiting for her response. ‘Sold,’ she said and turned to him, her eyes shining. ‘It’s all I thought it would be. I’d be mad to try to find something else.’

He met her grin with a warm one of his own. ‘Deal. You know, somehow, I think we’ll be fine together.’

As she stared up at him and into his vivid grey eyes, sparkling with humour, she heard Frida’s voice again. *Mum, he’s such a silver fox!*

Two

SATURDAY NIGHT 10TH AUGUST

Pierre-Auguste Renoir 1841–1919
A painter of beauty and the sensuality of women. Examine the use of paint to show flesh tones.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Johnny was as good as his word. Callie unpacked her stuff, made an omelette and took her glass of wine out into the garden to soak up the cool of the evening. Whatever plans Johnny Starling had, it involved being out of Sea Haven House and she had it all to herself. Sending a quick text to Frida to say she'd arrived and all was fine, Callie sank back into the old-fashioned blue and white striped deck chair breathing in the sea air. The night was scented with the perfume from tubs of nicotiana, and brine.

Marvelling that the garden was flat – a miracle as the steep hill she'd coaxed her car down before parking at the bottom of the track had been anything but – she surveyed it. A rectangular lawn was surrounded by rough, white-painted walls. Tree ferns, beds of tumbling Japanese anemones, pots of flowers – white geraniums mixed with lime green nicotiana and collections of glossy grey pebbles. Someone spent a great deal of time lavishing care and attention.

No views from here but perfect privacy. It was exactly the sort of garden she'd have if given a choice. Her tiny stretch of lawn and a few pots didn't compare. Easing off her trainers she scrunched her hot toes into the dampening grass. Bliss.

She must have dozed off because a text pinging through to her phone woke her up.

Glad u got there ok. All good here. Hot. Luv F

Brief and to the point and too little information. Callie stifled the unease in her gut. Frida had been vague about who she was holidaying with, stating it was friends of her old school friend, Leah. The girl had never been a great influence, but Callie tried to keep out of it. Her daughter knew she disapproved but Callie figured, at twenty-three, Frida could make her own decisions.

Clambering, with difficulty, out of the deck chair, Callie returned to the house and poured another glass of white. It slid down her throat with welcome ease, so she poured another, deciding to take it to bed. Locking the French doors to the garden it occurred to her she and Johnny hadn't discussed keys. She didn't want to lock him out, and wanted even less to have to roll out of bed to let him in. What a nuisance! Then, as she reached to switch off the kitchen lights, she spotted a corkboard by the door with a note attached. In scrawled handwriting it proclaimed:

Taken the spare key from under the flowerpot. Don't wait up.

At her smile, all irritability fled. He really was a thoughtful man. Yawning, she climbed the stairs.

Settling into bed with the latest bestseller and her wine, she sank down. The room was decorated in soothing whites and creams with the walls adorned with Renoir prints. Miss Grosvenor was obviously an art fan.

Callie thoroughly approved. Wriggling a little against the cool cotton with sensual pleasure, she opened her book and began to read.

The window was ajar and the scents and the sounds of the night drifted in. Gulls cackled against the purple sky. After her drive on the motorway, when her shoulders had been up near her ears, she felt her body relaxing. But her mind wouldn't comply and refused to shut off.

Worries over Frida chased around her brain. Picking up her phone, she went to text her daughter.

How's the holiday going? Tell me more. Mum x

It had been the two of them from the very beginning. Callie had become pregnant when a student. Her parents, once they'd realised she was going to keep the baby, had distanced themselves. All communication stopped and they'd lavished attention, instead, onto her brother, his wife and their perfect two-point-two lifestyle.

Callie had concentrated on making a life, thrown herself into her career and bought the little terraced house she and Frida still lived in. It had been unspeakably tough at the beginning, but she'd survived. Frida had grown up to be a kind affectionate girl and had even forgiven her mother for naming her after an iconic painter.

The fierce love Callie felt when first cradling her waxy mewling newborn daughter hadn't lessened but she fretted Frida, as a young adult, hadn't found her path in life. After dropping out of a degree, she'd drifted from bar job to telesales back to waitressing, and was now stuck in a dead-end office job. She seemed happy to still live at home, content to drift.

And now there was an additional layer to the worry which niggled at Callie. Frida had become increasingly distant over the last few months, but Callie, busy with end of term head of department stuff, hadn't had time to sit her daughter down to discover what was going on. The guilt gnawed. But then, sighed Callie, as she closed her book having read the same

paragraph three times, the guilt as a parent always did. And, as a single parent, it was a double load. When Frida was small, she'd had no choice but to put her into childcare. It had been an excellent nursery but Callie had longed to spend more time at home with her tiny daughter.

If only Sunil had stuck around things might have been different. But he'd disappeared off the radar as soon as Callie told him about the baby. She and Frida had heard nothing from him and expected less. She had no idea where her daughter's father was or even if he was still alive.

Checking her phone only to be disappointed to see no new text from Frida, Callie went for a wee, cleaned her teeth and settled into bed again, determined to sleep. She was halfway to dozing off when she heard a key in the lock of the front door. *Ah good, Frida is home.*

Callie was suddenly wide awake. She bolted upright. She wasn't in the Victorian terrace in a narrow street in Worcester but in a holiday cottage in Dorset. And that wasn't her daughter coming in from a night out; it was the strange man she'd agreed to share with. A seemingly well-mannered man but a stranger no less.

Clutching the duvet to her as a defence, she listened to the faint noises coming from downstairs. A tap running, cupboards being opened and closed. And then steps ascending the stairs. Staring across in horror she wondered if she'd locked her bedroom door. Holding her breath she heard Johnny open his own door and close it quietly.

She slid back down again, desperately trying to ignore the man sleeping across the landing. Whoever thought sharing with a stranger would work? Lying there, her breathing regulated and all became silent. She flipped onto her side, closed her eyes, thinking she'd never sleep.

Five minutes later the only sound was her deep breathing.

Three

SUNDAY MORNING 11TH AUGUST

Laura Knight 1877–1970
Painter of women. Realist school. Look at paintings of women and girls in Cornwall and depiction of light. Long career, often overlooked – because female?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

The following morning dawned bright and clear, so Callie ventured out to explore the town which was to be her home for the next few weeks. She inched down the steep path to where her car was parked and found herself on the hill which led towards Lullbury Bay harbour.

An elderly man huffing his way upwards paused and held on to the lamppost.

Callie looked at him in concern. 'Are you okay?'

He waved a hand and paused before answering, waiting to get his breath back. 'Good morning. Nice day for it.'

'Morning.' She looked up at a peerless blue sky eager to get her paints out. 'It is.' Returning to focus on the old man she asked again, 'But are you sure you're all right?'

He tutted. ‘Tell you the truth, my lovely, I’m right cross with myself. Since the passing of my Gretel, I’ve let myself get unfit. She was my German Shepherd, see. Walked her for miles round the town. Always at my side.’ Fumbling in his pocket, he drew out a large white handkerchief. Taking off his glasses he peered at them and polished the lenses vigorously.

‘I’m so sorry. I’ve never been able to have a dog, but I know they leave a huge hole when they go.’

Replacing his specs he regarded her owlishly. ‘That they do. We had a funeral service for her. Ever so nice. The vicar led it in the church.’ He shook his head, his jowls wobbling. ‘Wonderful woman is Verity. Wonderful.’ Rubbing his chest, he added, ‘I’ll be as right as rain once I’m at the top of this bugger. They don’t call it God Almighty Hill for nothing.’

Callie was confused. Had she encountered the local eccentric? A funeral for a dog? And God Almighty Hill? ‘I’m Callie. I’m staying in Sea Haven House just back there but I’m pretty sure the address is Harbour Hill.’

‘Oh, old Gracie Grosvenor’s place.’ He nodded. ‘I knows it. Nice place. Lovely bit of garden. And you’re right, Harbour Hill is what it’s called and what the grockles call it. Born and bred Lullbury Bay me. Always knows it as God Almighty Hill.’ He reached out a hand to shake. ‘Nice to meet you, Callie. Austin Ruddick.’

She shook it. ‘Why?’

‘Dunno, my lovely.’ He gazed at her from milky blue eyes. ‘Suppose me old mother liked the name.’

Callie giggled. ‘No, I mean why is it called God Almighty Hill?’

‘Because, and especially when you gets to my age, by the time you’ve got to the top, all you can gasp out is, “God almighty!” Nice talking to you. Will see you around I expect, it’s a small place. Lovely spot to live. Wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.’

He waved and was striding uphill before Callie could ask him what a grockle was. Laughing to herself, she carried on walking down to the

harbour, trying not to think of her straining knees and the return climb back to the cottage. She passed several houses, huddled at right angles to the road. One called Christmas Tree Cottage made her smile.

Reaching the RNLI station, she admired the dogs created from yellow wellington boots and carried on wandering around the harbour. The strong smell of fish from the boats and the heaps of lobster and crab pots made her nostrils shrink. It didn't seem to put people off, though, as tourists thronged around her, many walking dogs, some with children in tow carrying buckets and fishing nets.

Reaching the end tip of the harbour wall, she found a bench to sit on and paused to take in the view. This was what she needed to paint. The dip and surge of the cliff lines made her ache to paint them. The sea deepened to a navy with rich foamy waves cresting and the horizon smudged into the distance so that sky and sea merged into one everlasting, heavenly shade of blue.

The promenade stretched from the harbour to another steep hill at the other end of town. She could just about glimpse the trail of the high street as it curved upwards, with the sun glinting hotly on car windscreens. A glorious sandy beach fringed the sea, already dotted with family groups. Screams of delight drifted over to her on the breeze as children ran into the sea. A row of pastel coloured beach huts completed the scene. As an example of an English seaside resort, it was pretty perfect.

The lifeboat chugged back in through the harbour mouth and she watched as it was towed aboard a tractor to be taken into the station. Volunteers all kitted out in yellow and red stood around chatting. The scene lacked any urgency so she guessed it was a training exercise.

Taking a few pictures with her phone she thought how much Frida would have loved all this. Stamping on the pang of loneliness she vowed to begin to let go. Being so dependent on her daughter's company wasn't

healthy. For either of them. She should be glad Frida had decided to go off and do her own thing this summer.

Callie scuffed a fragment of crab shell away with her toe, its strong fishy odour rising pungently. She refused to give in to the low mood which threatened. Hadn't she always done things independently, relied on herself?

Early experiences had taught her people generally let her down. It was safer to be self-reliant. And, if she thought she was going to be lonely, she could have invited her old friend Donna if it was possible to prise her away from her children, or Karen from school, or one of her other friends from choir.

Callie wrinkled her nose, watching as a massive herring gull swooped down and carried off the crab shell. She smiled. Maybe it was just as well only she had turned up at Sea Haven House. What would have happened with the double-booking otherwise? There were only two double rooms. She liked her friends enormously but not enough to share a bed for three weeks. It would have been either herself or Johnny going home.

The thought of turning round and tackling the return journey up the M5 filled her with horror. At least this way she'd actually get a holiday. And sharing with a stranger was turning out to be okay. Uneventful. Johnny had been nowhere to be seen this morning; he must have gone out early. If this carried on, they'd be able to coexist in a civilised manner.

Her stomach rumbled reminding her she'd not eaten, so she made her way back along the harbour, over a wide space in front of gates claiming it was the yacht club and was halted by the tantalising aroma of bacon drifting into the sea air from a café. Going up to it, her stomach protested even more but, as she peered through the windows, she couldn't see an empty table. The place was rammed.

'Going in?' enquired a friendly voice behind her.

Turning she saw a tiny woman of maybe about her own age. 'I don't think there's room. Shame as I'm starving.'

‘Come in and share my table. Tracey can always find me somewhere to perch. We can’t have you starve. I’m Avril by the way.’

Callie hesitated. The woman could just be friendly or could be another of the town’s odd characters. ‘I don’t know,’ she said lamely.

‘Get away with you. Come on in. I’m only suggesting sharing a table, not proposing marriage. You want to eat, I know there’ll be a space. Solves a problem, doesn’t it?’

Callie’s stomach rumbled yet again. Last night’s omelette hadn’t been very filling. ‘If you’re sure and you don’t mind,’ she began saying and was inside the café sitting at a tiny table for two by the counter before she knew it. Inside, the café was a comforting fug of steamy cooking smells, happy chatter and a radio playing eighties oldies in the background. Hunger overcame any social anxiety, and she began to relax.

‘Now then, what can I get you?’ A curvy woman, with frizzy pink curls and pad and pencil in hand, approached. ‘Hello, Avril, my lovely. How you doing this day, maid?’

‘I’m great, Tracey. Having a rare day of freedom. Day off from work and Merryn is over at Holly’s. This is,’ Avril turned to Callie, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name. I was so busy bullying you in here I didn’t ask!’

‘Callie Thorne. I’m staying at Sea Haven House.’

‘Oh, that’s just up the hill from us. We live at Christmas Tree Cottage.’

‘I saw it on my walk down. Lovely name.’

‘It is, isn’t it?’ Avril beamed. ‘We love it. Don’t know about you but I’m in the mood for a full Lullbury.’

‘A what?’

‘A full English breakfast. The usual eggs, bacon and beans but,’ Avril paused and winked, ‘even more so. Bit like the town itself.’

Thinking of the eccentric Austin she’d encountered on the way down Callie smiled and agreed. ‘Sounds wonderful. I’ll have the same. I didn’t eat much last night.’

‘Coming right up. Pot of tea too?’ Tracey asked. ‘And toast?’

Both women nodded.

‘Are you on holiday, Callie?’ Avril asked, when Tracey bustled off through a door with a porthole window.

‘Yes. Arrived last night. Getting my bearings this morning. I was heading to the Art School, but my stomach had other ideas.’

Avril grimaced in sympathy. ‘I find it almost impossible to walk past the Sea Spray Café myself. It’s murder for the diet. And I advise you to steer well clear of The Codfather. Once tasted, their chips are never forgotten. I swear there’s something addictive in them. My little girl, Merryn, is obsessed.’ The tea arrived and Avril poured for them both. ‘She’s ten now. Going into Year 6 in the autumn. I can’t believe it. They grow up so fast.’

Callie covertly checked her phone. Still no new text from Frida. ‘Tell me about it. My daughter’s on holiday in Ibiza and hasn’t returned my text.’

‘How old is she?’

‘Frida’s twenty-three.’

‘Frida? Unusual name.’

‘I named her after Frida Kahlo.’

‘Wonderful painter.’

‘She was. Unfortunately, Frida my daughter hasn’t inherited any of Frida the painter’s spirit. Don’t get me wrong,’ Callie added hastily, feeling disloyal, ‘she’s a really lovely girl and I’m very proud of her but she’s quite a young twenty-three. Bit directionless.’

Avril added milk to their mugs, nodding in sympathy. ‘I can’t claim my Merryn has a lack of spirit. Rather too much to be honest.’ She sighed. ‘You never stop worrying about them, do you? I’ve a boy too and he’s married, and I *still* worry about him.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Bit of a gap between my two offspring. He and my daughter-in-law are in Scotland at the moment. Honor’s the deputy head at the primary school in town so she has to grab her chance for a holiday in August.’

‘Same here.’ Callie stirred her tea. She was warming to Avril. ‘I’m an art teacher. Secondary for my sins. Have you always lived here?’

‘No. Haven’t lived here very long at all.’ Avril sipped. ‘But there’s something so welcoming about the place it didn’t take us very long to feel at home. My son volunteers for the RNLI and Merryn’s very happy at school. She’s with her best friend today.’ She pulled a comical face. ‘Holly has horses so we find it hard to compete.’

Callie laughed.

‘I have a job at Bee’s Books and I run a community group there. I love it. You’ll have to pop in, it’s a real old-fashioned book shop with a community space attached.’

‘Sounds wonderful. And what does your husband do?’

Avril’s face clouded, all merriment gone. She looked into her mug. ‘I’m a widow,’ she said eventually, looking up to give Callie a tight smile. ‘It’s taken me a long time to say that without crying. I’m on my own with Merryn now Jago’s married. It’s just the two of us. Oh, and an assortment of Merryn’s animals.’

Callie gasped and put a hand up to her mouth to cover her embarrassment. ‘I’m so sorry. I had no right to pry.’

‘You didn’t pry, my lovely.’ Avril shrugged softly. ‘We were making small talk, getting to know one another. After all, we’ll be near neighbours for a while.’

There was a pause while the women drank tea, lost in their thoughts.

‘It’s just the two of us as well,’ Callie said eventually. ‘Me and Frida. Always has been. I got pregnant young and the father slid into the night never to be seen again.’ It wasn’t quite the truth, but it was the one she told.

Avril put a hand over Callie’s. ‘That must have been so hard. However did you manage?’

‘Had to, I suppose.’ Callie was beginning to like this woman a lot. Her sympathy was genuine and came from a place of understanding. ‘Didn’t

help that my family more or less disowned me. I didn't like their way of parenting, so I was determined to be different with Frida.' She pulled a rueful face. 'I worry I'm too overprotective though.' She nodded to her phone, remaining stubbornly silent. 'Like this holiday. She was supposed to come with me here but decided to go off to Ibiza instead. It's not like her. We've always holidayed together in August, even if I could only afford a long weekend. I was looking forward to spending a few weeks with her. School's been so busy this year I worry I've neglected her and wanted to reconnect. It's not only that. Something's wrong and I don't know what it is.'

'Hard when she's so far away.' Avril leaned back. 'From experience all I can say is they share their worries when they're ready. And I've learned nagging does nothing.'

'So I shouldn't keep texting her?'

'Probably not a good idea. I'm sure she's fine, having an amazing time with her friends and sleeping it off on the beach. Is she a sensible girl?'

Callie nodded as their breakfasts arrived. 'She is. Bit immature, bit easily led but I can trust her to do the right thing. I think. Thanks, Avril.'

'For what?' The woman arched a surprised brow.

'Listening to a stranger witter on.'

'You'll find you won't be a stranger in Lullbury Bay for very long. The town has a way of reaching into your heart and it doesn't let go.' Avril cut into her fried egg. 'How long are you staying?'

'Three weeks.' Callie mumbled through a mouthful of the most delicious bacon she'd ever eaten. Salty and crisp and cooked to perfection. Dipping a corner of her toast into her sunny-orange egg, she almost moaned. 'This is so good.'

'Three weeks? That's a long time. My goodness, Callie. You'll be a local come the Bank Holiday!'

Four

Gustav Klimt 1862–1918
Known for his paintings, sketches and murals. Painter of women and eroticism. Teaching point: design element and enigmatic nature of work. Discussion point: is there something hidden?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie was almost too full to move but she had to. Having paid for breakfast, she promised Tracey she'd be back for another soon and received an invitation for coffee from Avril. Emerging from the cosy fug of the café into the bright sunshine, she wobbled along Lullbury Bay's promenade in search of the Art School.

Avril and Tracey had told her to head eastwards and to follow signs to the tennis courts. The school was hidden away in a residential area of town, well away from the touristy attractions.

Callie paused for a moment, feeling too full to hurry. She leaned on the railings that divided the promenade from the level below, which was crowded with the beach huts she'd spied from the harbour.

Looking over the hut roofs, she admired the beach scene. It was crowded with holiday makers. All sorts of accents drifted up, along with the

hot smell of suntan lotion, vinegary chips and salty air. Liverpudlian and Scottish, London and Birmingham, one or two French and a smattering of Italians. A small boy ran along the water's edge trying to raise his kite and someone bellowed a howl of outrage as a seagull swooped to steal a pasty.

As far as Callie could see, families had set out their patch with rugs, plastic tubs of food, beachballs and the clutter necessary for a day on the beach. A pang of longing assailed her for the time when Frida was small and enjoyed such simple pleasures. There was a time when she was all her little girl needed or wanted. Even when Frida had gone to university, she'd enrolled in the one in Worcester, living at home to save money. But this latest venture of her daughter's seemed so much more dramatic. Maybe, by jetting off to Ibiza, Frida was finally asserting some independence?

'Be sensible, little one,' Callie murmured. 'Keep safe and come back in one piece.' She needed to let her daughter go but when she was all she'd had for twenty-three years that was easier said than done.

'Hello there.'

It was Johnny, looking cool in a short-sleeved linen shirt and shorts.

'Hello.' Callie felt suddenly shy and slid her sunglasses back on from the top of her head.

'Isn't it amazing?' He gestured to the beach scene and came to stand beside her, resting his arms on the railings. 'I can't count how many times I've done exactly what they're doing.'

Callie eyes him curiously. 'You don't strike me as the sort to be content with an English beach holiday.'

'And sometimes I'm not,' he agreed. 'I've been lucky enough to travel for work and seen some extraordinary countries and–' he paused, on the verge of saying something, then changed his mind. 'And experienced many things,' he blew out a sigh, 'not all good. But it's the simple joys of a sandy sandwich and a kickabout on this beach I remember with most pleasure.'

His words were casual, almost throwaway, but Callie noticed his knuckles were clenched to white. She wondered why. ‘Is your family from here?’

He shook his head. ‘No. We’re from Exeter.’ He grinned. ‘Crossed the border from Devon into west Dorset clutching our passports every year for a family holiday. And trust me, with my family that was quite the holiday. My youngest sister, Jess, loved Lullbury Bay so much she’s ended up living here. Married. Baby. Living the dream.’

Did she imagine it or was there an edge to his voice?

‘And, besides here, where’s your favourite place for a holiday?’

He glanced at her quickly, sadness shadowing his eyes. She thought he’d come up with somewhere exotic or far flung but all he said was, ‘Anywhere peaceful.’

‘Sounds good. I could do with a sunbed and a good book myself. Or somewhere quiet to paint. Sounds like heaven.’

‘You paint?’

Callie nodded. ‘When I have the time. That’s where I’m heading for. The Art School. It’s putting on an exhibition of amateur painters as part of the Art Festival. It’s a competition. Winner gets display space in a London gallery. I’m going over to introduce myself to the school owner and check they’ve hung my paintings correctly.’ This time it was her turn to sigh. ‘It would be my dream come true to have them in a proper gallery.’

‘Then I wish you luck. And I’ll be certain to come along to the awards ceremony.’

‘Thank you.’ Callie almost embellished her thanks with, *It’s a date,* but stopped just in time. How crass would that have been? God, she was rusty at talking to anyone male who wasn’t a pimply teenager or the parent of said pimply teenager. A man in her life was a complication she definitely didn’t want, despite Frida’s encouragement. ‘I’ll let you know the day.’

‘Do that. Drop me a note on the kitchen noticeboard.’

This made her giggle. She went to go. ‘I will. Oh, and if you’re looking for an amazing breakfast, try the Sea Spray Café. I’ve just come from there. That’s the reason I need the walk to the Art School. I’ve got to burn the eleventy-million calories off.’

She walked off, certain, for some deep instinctual reason, that Johnny was watching her. Suppressing the urge to wiggle her hips, she nearly slipped on the sandy concrete. *Get a grip woman,* she admonished herself. *Behave.*

What with the eccentric Austin, a road named God Almighty Hill and a friendly café serving gut-busting breakfasts, she was beginning to like Lullbury Bay. She was beginning to like it a lot.

❧

She nearly missed the Art School after taking a wrong turn. Having puffed up the steep, narrow lane which ran parallel to the main shopping street, she’d stopped a group of teenaged boys carrying skateboards who pointed her back in the right direction. They’d done a graffiti painting course at the school recently and were full of praise for it.

Spotting the tennis courts, she turned a corner and came across the building suddenly. It wasn’t what she expected. A great white block of a place, run-down looking and accessed over a pot-holed car park. Her heart sank. She’d entered the competition in great faith and blind optimism, hoping it would all be a little more prestigious.

The front door was open so she walked in and announced herself at the reception desk housed in a cubbyhole of an office. The interior of the school was more reassuring. A corridor stretched either side of her along the building’s length, painted white and hung with framed photographs and artwork. While she waited, she examined a few. They were excellent. As

the familiar scents of paint, varnish and clay tickled her nostrils she began to feel at home. Her hopes began to rise.

‘Calliope Thorne?’ a voice boomed from the furthermost end.

A stocky man of medium height and dressed in paint-stained dungarees and beret approached her. He clasped his hands around one of hers. ‘Good to meet you, my friend. Welcome. I’m Dave Wiscombe.’

Dave Wiscombe was the owner of the school and organiser of the competition, and emails had been flying between them for some months.

‘Hi. Nice to meet you in person at last,’ she replied as her hand was pumped vigorously up and down. ‘And it’s Callie, don’t forget.’

‘Then it’s definitely Dave.’ He grinned cheekily. ‘Can I make you a cuppa? Would you like a look around or do you want to go straight into the exhibit space to check on your bad boys?’

‘I’d rather check they’ve all arrived, if you don’t mind.’ She eyed his jaunty red beret and the one strap on his dungarees left artfully undone. Was he yet another Lullbury Bay character?

‘Completely understand.’ He winked. ‘You want to check your babies got here safely. This way.’ He opened a door off the corridor and led her into an enormous room.

It was beyond all preconceptions Callie had formed from the tatty outside. ‘This is glorious,’ she breathed, gazing around. Double height, the room was painted white. Strong summer light streamed in through huge windows at one end, and the room was further lit by roof windows. It was the perfect backdrop for art. She was envious; her display space at school possessed nothing as professional.

‘We’re pleased with how it’s turned out.’ Dave gave her a mischievous look. ‘I’d rather sacrifice a few bust tyres in the car park and spend the money where it’s really needed. After you’ve checked on your paintings, I’ll show you the rest of the place.’

Callie spotted her work, already hung, dominating one wall.

‘We’ve got your stuff up. As they were so big we thought it best to give you a wall to yourself.’ He gestured to the vast empty space in the middle of the room. ‘We’ll have display stands with other entries here but haven’t sorted that yet. Wanted to get yours up out of harm’s way. Looks the bizz, don’t it?’

A breath caught in Callie’s throat. On ridiculously shaky legs she made her way to stand in front of her artwork. The competition had been a series of steps racing fast out of her comfort zone. From making time for herself to paint, to having the confidence to enter and then shipping her precious paintings off, via a courier, to an unknown destination.

She gazed up at her three paintings, dashing away a quick tear. Pride swelled. They were the result of all those snatched Sundays and evenings. Of putting herself first for once. She’d spent the last twenty odd years putting the needs of the young people she taught, and of Frida, first. It had been a huge act of courage, maybe defiance, to do this. She was grateful to see the three large canvasses, inspired by the patterns and colours of lavender and Japanese anemone, had been hung with care.

A small photograph of herself (how she and Frida had sweated over creating the exact right image!) with a short biography was placed near the largest.

‘I reckons you got a good chance of being placed, my lovely,’ Dave said, interrupting her reverie. ‘I’m not usually an abstract man but I dig these. Delicate, ethereal, love the way you’ve compressed paper into them to give texture.’

‘Thank you. I make the paper myself. I incorporate flowers from the garden.’

He nodded. ‘I can see. Highly feminine and influenced by natural colours. They’re superb. But commercial too. The sort of thing people want to buy and live with.’

Callie laughed. The relief that her work had arrived in one piece and was displayed so beautifully made her giddy. ‘Wish you were judging.’

He snatched off his beret and scrubbed his hand over his greying head. ‘Me too. I had a hand in guiding the school board committee to choose what we included but that was it. Adya Blanca and a panel of three will make the final decisions. And just as well, girl. Left to the committee we’d have wall to wall Constable landscape rip-offs. Good to see work in mixed media and I really rate your stuff. Seen enough? Want to have a look-see at the rest of the place?’

Callie nodded eagerly. ‘Could I take a few photos first?’

‘No probs. Knock yourself out.’ He gave her a knowing look. ‘Never gets old, does it? Seeing your hard work on a wall for all to set eyes on.’

He waited patiently while she took a few photos on her phone and then escorted her out. Callie gave one lingering glance over her shoulder. The next time she’d be in here would be for the awards presentation. Trying not to get her hopes up, she followed Dave.

He showed her the tutorial rooms, several large art studios, a pottery room complete with kiln – all impressive – and finally the staffroom. ‘Sit yourself down, my lovely,’ he said, throwing his beret onto the large circular table in the middle of the room. ‘I’ll make a brew. Need an excuse to take a break. Been a hectic morning.’ He pulled a face. ‘Paperwork. Wrangling money out of folk isn’t my strength.’

Callie pulled out a chair and sat down. ‘Is that how the school is funded?’ She took in her surroundings while Dave bustled about, making tea. It was a utilitarian space, white-painted, with a small kitchen area along one wall and dominated by an enormous corkboard. It displayed notices familiar from every staffroom she’d ever been in: a milk buying rota, a reminder to wash up, a pizza takeaway menu. She felt even more at home.

Dave nodded. ‘Grants mostly. One from Dorset Council, smaller one from the town council who are very supportive.’ He shrugged, filling the

kettle. ‘But you know what it’s like. Everyone’s strapped for cash, and the first casualty is always the arts.’ He gave a heartfelt sigh. ‘If only they could see the good it does. My graffiti art classes are always popular, and the pottery evening class has a waiting list.’

‘I met some boys on the way here. Had to ask them for directions. I got a bit lost. They’d not long done the graffiti class. They’d loved it. Wish some of my students were half so enthusiastic.’

‘Well, there you go, see. Kids like that need encouragement. I mean, a painting class isn’t going to change their world but it’s something.’

‘It’s *everything.* I’m a teacher, don’t forget. I believe in the power of education, otherwise I’d find myself an easier way of making a living.’ She smiled warmly at Dave. He was a nice man with his heart very much in the right place.

He laughed. ‘Ain’t that the truth. We’re not just about education, here, though. We use the big space for town events, workshops for children which we charge for and the Christmas Craft Fayre. We’ve just begun to charge sellers per table. Didn’t want to as it’ll put off some craftspeople, but it’ll be another revenue source.’ He snorted. ‘Income stream they calls it.’ Reaching into a cupboard for mugs and a packet of digestives, he added, ‘I wanted to spruce up the outside, first impressions and all that, but put security lights in instead. Some of the artists who rent space here have expensive kit, especially my glass guy, Jago.’

He poured boiling water onto teabags and brought them over to the table. Slumping down, he added gloomily, ‘And, to make matters even more complicated, my fine arts tutor has got herself preggers, which is fine and dandy and I couldn’t be happier for her, but it means she’ll leave at Christmas. Not coming back. Wants to spend the time with the baby. You can see her point.’ He dunked the teabags unceremoniously and put them on a saucer. ‘Milk?’

‘Thanks.’

Getting up again, he went to the fridge. ‘Should be a pint in here. Ah!’ Bringing it back he slammed the carton down. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to trot out my woes. Biscuit?’

Callie shook her head. ‘Have you thought of sponsorship?’

‘What, from big business, like?’

‘Yes.’

‘Worth looking into I suppose. Only trouble is, the biggest business round these here parts is tourism. There’s a computer company, mind.’ He stared into the distance. ‘Could give them a tap. I know the bloke who’s just taken over. Ambitious type.’ He shook himself. ‘I’m off again. Rambling.’ Rubbing his eyes, he explained, ‘Knackered. It’s one reason I like your paintings. Can come out of a stressy email or phone call and go stand in front of them for ten minutes and all is right with the world again.’

Callie felt tears threaten again. ‘That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.’

He pushed her mug of tea over. ‘I’m sure that’s not the case. You’re a high school teacher, aren’t you? Don’t you get grateful parents throwing praise at you all the time?’

‘More likely they’re at me to get their precious child’s GCSE grade remarked.’

Dave harrumphed. ‘Can well believe it. Well, if you ever fancy a change of scene and a job in Lullbury Bay. There’ll be a tutor’s position going come January.’ He winked again. ‘Worse places to live.’

‘So I’ve heard but thanks I’m settled in Worcester. Job. House. Friends. That’s where my life is.’

‘Shame.’ He took an enormous gulp of tea. ‘Could do with a talent like you about the place. And there really are worse places to live.’

As Callie made her slow way back to Sea Haven House, breathing in the fresh sea air and dodging happy, suntanned tourists, she thought the same. She could imagine walking along this promenade every day, soaking

up the ever-changing moods of sea and sky, making friends with Avril and Tracey.

Had she got it in her to make a move so drastic and life-changing? She doubted it. As she neared the bottom of God Almighty Hill, she paused before tackling it and dismissed the thought as the daydream of another Midland tourist wanting to run away to the seaside.

Five

SUNDAY LATE MORNING 11TH AUGUST

Beryl Cook 1926–2008
Painted flamboyant and extrovert characters. Very different to her own personality. Teaching point: naïve versus trained painter. Are they both valid artforms?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Johnny sucked in a deep breath, rested his hand on the gate to the house his family were staying in, and girded his loins. The house rejoiced in the name Sandy Vistas and was a Victorian Gothic monstrosity. Trust his family to rent somewhere completely over the top.

'There you are.' Stella, his oldest sister, pounced on him and claimed his arm. 'Come on in, darling. We're in the garden. There's enough champagne to sink a battleship and everyone's getting nicely sloshed so the edge has been taken off the Starling Flock.'

He followed her to a trestle table laden with glasses and ice buckets. Stella handed him a glass. 'Chin-chin.' She saluted him with her own and winked. 'Or should I say, chin up? I know you don't find us easy when en masse. Speaking of which, here comes Mummy.' She gave him a

mischievous look and melted away before he could claim her for moral support.

‘Jonathan! Where have you been?’ Dorrie Starling proffered her cheek. ‘Why weren’t you in church?’

‘I was. Slipped in at the back.’

‘At the back? But we’d reserved you a space on the front pew.’

Johnny gulped his champagne feeling, as ever when in the company of his redoubtable mother, reduced to a naughty teenager. ‘I was late so didn’t want to disrupt things. And you know how I feel about organised religion.’ His mother sniffed disapprovingly so he changed the subject. ‘Looked like it went well, though. Baby Inigo behaved and the vicar seemed okay.’

Dorrie pursed her lips. ‘Yes well, I like a man to lead a church service, always seems more proper somehow, but I thought she did jolly well. Very highly thought of in the town, I believe.’ She gave him a little push. ‘Now go and say hello to your father. You haven’t seen him since you came back from abroad. Why you had to disappear off and live in *Stratford* of all places, I’ll never know.’ She made it sound as if it was another planet. ‘Must dash. Haven’t circulated yet.’ She waved at someone at the other end of the garden and beetled off.

Johnny watched her go, a smile creeping across his face. For someone in her mid-seventies she had more energy than he’d ever have. Grabbing a fresh glass, he made his way over to his father who was sitting on the grand old house’s terrace and looking down upon proceedings with an amused eye.

‘Johnny, old boy.’ Sid Starling patted the vacant chair beside him. ‘Come and perch.’ Johnny sat down. His father leaned over confidingly. ‘Your mother’s in fine fettle. Loves a good party. She’s not content with just this you know. Afternoon tea for the ladies, a luncheon and a barbecue too. Costing us a fortune and I don’t even think Jessica and Connor wanted all this fuss.’

‘Payback for them eloping?’

Sid chuckled. ‘Oh, most certainly. Your mother can’t abide missing an opportunity to show off her latest outfit. I have to say, though, she’s looking remarkably well today. What a splendid filly, eh?’

Johnny’s heart warmed at the thought of his father still finding his wife attractive. His parents’ marriage, a survivor of nearly sixty years, five children and nine grandchildren, was as solid as a rock and grounded in mutual love. He’d never found that certainty for himself. Maybe that was why he’d chosen the lifestyle that, until recently, he’d been so careful to create. ‘She is.’

‘Cross with you though. Keep on your toes, old boy. She’s missed out on being there to see her youngest get married and she won’t do the same with her only son.’

Johnny groaned. He knew where this was going.

‘By that I take it there’s no one in tow today?’

Johnny shook his head.

‘Come on, feller-me-lad, get courting. Your mother wants to see you settled down, provide us with some grandchildren.’

Johnny surveyed the chaotic scene. The very young Starling children were dodging around the guests, Percy and Magnus were at the end of the garden putting their smart shirts and trousers at risk by playing a noisy game of football, and Stella’s older two were squabbling over something on their phone screens. ‘Aren’t nine enough?’

‘Never enough grandchildren,’ his father proclaimed robustly. ‘They bring joy to life. Trust me. And, if you settled in one place for long enough, you’d find out. What about that girl you were seeing in Bangkok?’

‘All over.’

‘And no one in Stratford?’

‘Have a heart, Dad. I’ve only just moved there.’

‘Why Stratford, old chap? Why didn’t you come back to Exeter? We’d have put you up in the old homestead for a while until you found your feet.’

Johnny patted his father’s liver-spotted hand. ‘I know you would. Wouldn’t have done much for my love life living back at home, though.’

‘Seriously, Jonathan, you’re in your mid-forties. High time you got rooted somewhere. And with some nice girl. Your mother and I were eighteen and twenty when we married. By the time I was fifty I’d had all my children.’

‘I know.’ Johnny scrubbed a hand over his face. ‘And if I could find what you and Mum have, I wouldn’t hesitate. Besides, things are different these days. People settle down later. And with the job I had I never knew where I’d be sent to next, or what into. It never felt fair to partner up with someone who didn’t appreciate the score.’ He paused and forced his hand to stop trembling. ‘And there was always the risk I wouldn’t come back.’

His father snorted. ‘You weren’t involved in those wars and earthquakes, son.’

‘No I wasn’t but I was reporting on them.’ Johnny downed his second glass. ‘And I was there.’ This was why he avoided family gatherings. Added to the jibes and teasing about his resolute bachelor state was the complete lack of understanding of how his work had impacted him. The only one who showed any compassion was Stella and even that was demonstrated in her pure-Stella-no-nonsense style. An explosion blasted and he jumped a foot, nearly dropping the champagne flute. But it wasn’t a landmine, it was a waiter dropping a metal serving tray on the hard patio slabs.

Thankfully it distracted his father. ‘Oops,’ Sid said. ‘Dorrie won’t like that.’

In the confusion surrounding his mother berating the unfortunate waiter Stella sidled up. ‘Need rescuing? Come and raid the canapés with me.’ She addressed Sid, ‘Just taking Johnny for some grub, Daddy. Back soon.’

Putting an arm through her brother's, she led him into the dining room, a vast space cleared of furniture except for parallel lines of tables dressed in snowy white cloths and groaning with food. Blue balloons created an arch over a door, with a banner proclaiming, 'Happy Christening Day, Inigo!' Dorrie's work. Jessica would be apoplectic at all the single-use plastic.

'Soak up some of that fizz,' Stella ordered. 'Come on, it's all got to be eaten.' She loaded a plate with smoked salmon, soft cheese, olives and crackers and handed it to him. 'Eat up.'

'Always so bossy,' he grumbled.

'The prerogative of the eldest child.' She eyed him penetratingly. 'So, as my oldest offspring would say, what gives?'

'What *are* Euan's plans?'

'Excellent A-levels and a Russell Group university,' she said crisply. 'Or he's disinherited. Stop swerving the question. How are you?'

Johnny put his plate down. The smoked salmon no longer appealed. 'I'm fine.'

'You don't look fine.' Stella narrowed her eyes at him. 'You're too thin and I'd say you're not sleeping well. Finally given up careering around the world putting yourself in mortal danger?'

He nodded.

'And?'

'Gone freelance. Writing travel pieces.'

One perfectly groomed eyebrow rose. 'So, still careering around the world, then?'

'Don't you start. I've just had Dad bending my ear. At least I'm not putting myself into mortal danger anymore.'

Stella sniffed in a way that was pure Dorrie. 'You obviously haven't been on some of our holidays. That last one in Iceland was quite the adventure.'

He smiled. Picking up his plate he resumed eating.

‘We were all so worried about you, darling. You do know that?’

‘Were you? It didn’t show.’

‘Yes well,’ Stella huffed. ‘You know what the family is like. Deflect true concern into nagging about something else.’

‘Like why I’m still not married and providing yet more grandchildren. Already had a bucketful of that.’

This time it was Stella who changed the subject. ‘Why Stratford, darling?’

‘It’s pretty. Good access to motorway networks and airports. I like Shakespeare and rumour has it there’s a theatre there.’

‘And it’s not too near the clan Starling,’ his sister said, knowingly.

‘It’s not too far away either.’

‘Johnny, you’re a west country boy. You simply cannot hole yourself up in the Midlands. The call of the sea gets all of us in the end.’

‘Is that why you’re in Budleigh and poor old Brian’s in London?’

Stella sipped her champagne and narrowed her eyes at him over the rim of the glass. ‘It suits Brian to commute back for the weekends and having a London pied-à-terre is so useful. I like my trips to town as well, you know.’

‘And you like your own space when Brian’s not around.’

‘It has its advantages. Only God knows what I’ll do when he retires. Under my feet all the time. It’ll be like having a third son. The horror, darling. I just hope he takes up golf.’

Her dismay was so apparent it made him laugh and jolted him out of his mood. He ate some more and said, after a pause during which he was aware of his sister staring at him questioningly, ‘I’m okay you know, sis, I really am.’

‘As long as you are. Despite all the nagging, we do care about you, you know.’

To avoid any more questions, he began to tell her about the mix-up at Sea Haven House. Licking his finger clean of cream cheese he added, ‘So

we've ended up sharing.' He shrugged. 'Seems to be working out.'

Stella, having been sidetracked by Euan trying to swipe a glass of champagne, turned back to him. 'You mean you're sharing the holiday cottage with a complete stranger?'

'Trust me. In comparison with some of the places I've had to kip down in, this is the height of luxury and at least she–'

'It's a *woman?* I say!' Stella's interest was well and truly piqued.

Seeing her successfully distracted, Euan saluted his uncle with a brimming champagne flute and disappeared.

'Yes, her name is Callie and she's here for the Art Festival.'

Before he could say more Stella had gone out to the terrace and shrieked. 'Jessica, come here at once.' Returning to Johnny she said, 'Jess will know her. She's had a hand in organising the festival.'

Jessica, their youngest sibling, trotted over carrying baby Inigo. 'What's all the yelling about?' she complained. Spotting her brother, she added, 'Oh hi, Johnny. Thanks for coming.' She reached up and kissed him. 'Here, could you grab hold of the sprog for a second while I eat. I'm ravenous.'

Jessica went to survey the buffet. While she filled a plate Johnny held the baby at arm's length. He really wished people didn't do this. He hadn't a clue what to do with babies. Little Inigo thankfully didn't pick up on his uncle's uncertainty and just grumbled sightly, holding out pudgy arms.

'Hold him closer,' Stella said, amused. 'He won't bite. Make him feel safe.'

Johnny cradled the baby closer to his chest. A waft of baby scent hit him, vanilla sweet. Before he could stop it, an image flashed into his head of a shattered child he'd seen crushed under an earthquake flattened building. Screwing his eyes shut he determinedly concentrated on the one in his arms.

Jessica returned, stuffing Kettle chips into her mouth. She was the prettiest of the Starling sisters with wild curly hair and clear, knowing blue

eyes. As a concession to the occasion, she wore a vividly patterned dress but had temporarily jettisoned shoes to go barefoot. ‘You look the bizz, Johnny. He likes you. He doesn’t settle for just old anyone.’

Johnny gazed down at Inigo, at his creamy innocence, at the perfect four limbs and undamaged downy head so different to the child whose image tormented him.

With great relish Stella filled Jessica in on what Johnny had told her about his unusual living arrangements.

‘Oh, that must be Calliope Thorne.’ Jessica nodded and bit into a slice of red pepper. ‘She does amazing work. Huge canvasses. Abstracts sort of, but you can still see the flowers that inspired them. She works in clumps of coloured paper to give a 3-D effect too. Adore them. Would love one for the house. They’re the most gorgeous colours. Soft purples and greys.’

Stella suppressed a shudder. ‘Not sure they’d be my cup of tea but you being in the same world would probably appreciate that sort of thing.’

Jessica sniggered. ‘Deffo don’t look realistic enough for you, sis.’ She rounded on her brother, talking with her mouth full. ‘These are so good. Breastfeeding makes me permanently starvo.’ She pointed a half-eaten cucumber sandwich at him. ‘So why are you and Callie living together? Don’t know why you’re not staying here, to be honest.’

At that moment the footballing boys skidded into the dining room, jackets and ties jettisoned, holding onto one another’s shirts and yelling. The football bounced around the table making the towers of sandwiches wobble. Stella turned on them, furiously.

Jessica pulled a face, laughing as her couture dressed, high-heeled sister chased them out. ‘Well, okay, it might be a bit chaotic with everyone here. But you could have stayed with me and Connor. Only a sofa bed but you’re more than welcome and Inigo only wakes up a million times a night now.’

Johnny jiggled the baby gingerly. ‘Thanks for the offer, Jess, but, tempting as that sounds, I’ll stick to Sea Haven House.’

‘And your Callie.’ Jessica smirked.

‘She’s not *my* Callie. We just happen to be sharing for a couple of weeks or so.’

‘So you’re staying for a while?’ Jessica looked delighted. ‘Aw, that’s great, big bro. I’ve hardly seen anything of you since I moved here.’ Face mischievous, she took Inigo’s tiny hand. His fingers gripped her thumb. ‘Babysitter on tap, baby boy. Your daddy and me might actually be able to have a night out.’

Johnny tried not to panic. ‘Trust me, you wouldn’t want to leave your precious firstborn in my care. I don’t know one end of a baby from the other.’

Jessica spluttered through a cracker laden with hummus. ‘’Bout time you learned then. Always does my head in how you can be the second eldest and not know anything about children.’

Playing up to Jessica’s view of him as an unreconstructed male, he teased, ‘Our mother is many things, one of them, an incredibly capable woman.’ At her scandalised gasp he added, ‘Stella and I never got a look in. And, as you well know there’s quite the gap between me and Stella and you and the others. We were sent off to school by the time your second shift came along. Have you eaten enough? Ready to have him back?’ He sniffed tentatively. ‘He doesn’t smell quite as fresh as when you foisted him on me.’

‘Give him here then, you sexist pig.’ Jessica inhaled. ‘Thank goodness I married a proper man who knows how to change a nappy. Probably needs a feed then changing.’ Her tone softened and her face crumpled, suddenly looking exhausted. ‘Think you’re right though, big bro, to avoid sprogging. It’s bloomin’ relentless.’

Johnny smiled. He handed Inigo back, brushing hair off his sister’s face and kissing the top of her head.

‘And I could have done without this ruddy great palaver,’ she rolled her eyes. ‘I would have been happy with a picnic on the beach. It’s always lovely to see you all but this *fuss.* I mean, what was Mum thinking?’

‘She loves a party, does our mother.’ He paused and then added tenderly, ‘You know you’re doing great, Jess.’

‘Oh I know *that,’* she replied airily. ‘I’m a regular earth mother.’ Hoisting the protesting baby up she turned to go and wiggled her fingers in a little wave over her shoulder.

Johnny watched as she wove between the guests to disappear into the bowels of the house. He smiled. He loved his youngest sister deeply, even though they were separated in age by over twenty years. Stella was, in some ways, a carbon copy of his mother. Isabel a trophy wife to her corporate businessman husband. And Lesley was some kind of accountant who did something unknown and incomprehensible.

But Jessica had always forged her own path. She’d avoided any well-meant but pressured insistence on a career in money or business and had pursued art school. She was now a sought-after illustrator. Much to their mother’s horror. In Dorrie’s eyes, art was an acceptable hobby, not a livelihood. Despite being horribly spoiled by her older siblings, Jessica had evolved into a loving, competent human being and, most of the time, bore the unremitting pressure and interrogation from their parents with a serene indifference. Both siblings knew it came from a place of love, but it didn’t make it any easier to deal with.

Johnny suspected that Dorrie’s antipathy to a career in the arts had its origins in her own experiences in showbusiness. Back in the late sixties and along with two of her sisters, she had been part of a girl group. They’d had some success as a British version of The Supremes, riding on their tailcoats before prog rock took over in the seventies.

Dorrie had retired to concentrate on bringing up her family but her sisters, Becky and Maria, had continued for some time singing on cruise

ships. Although none of them had ever forgotten their years in the entertainment industry and when pressed shared their mini-skirted and beehive memories, Dorrie always made it clear how precarious a life it had been.

Becky and Maria had no such qualms and could always be relied upon to break into one of their song and dance routines, with Dorrie joining in if she'd drunk enough champagne. She'd made it clear to each one of her offspring that they should have careers which guaranteed absolute financial security. Stella and Isabel had married wealthy men and propped up their careers by supporting them with impeccably run homes. Lesley made her own money in her own mysterious unfathomable way.

It was just Jessica and himself who did anything creative. The only low-key aspect to Jessica was how little she needed to exist. For himself, he'd been content with what his journalism career had provided; a reasonable salary when employed and the chance to travel the world. The cost, for him, had been paid in another way entirely.

His reverie was interrupted by the spectacle of his mother's three sisters as they hove into sight. Maria led the charge, with Becky following on. The eldest, Sybil, who eschewed anything so superficial as showbusiness and had embraced a life in academia, puffed behind. Even now they were, in their different ways, a formidable trio. Panicked, he looked for an escape route but was trapped.

'Jonathan!' Maria, the youngest and loudest, cried. 'We saw you from afar and simply had to say hello.' She grabbed hold and hugged the breath from his body. Petite and whip thin, she had the grip of a bear. Kissing him on both cheeks, she added, 'I was just saying to Becky, we haven't seen you for so long.'

'We haven't seen you for so long,' his Aunt Becky echoed, her jowls wobbling. Resplendent in cerise silk decorated with cabbage roses, she threw her arms around both him and Maria.

‘How are you, dear boy?’ Sybil boomed. She was the aunt of whom he was most fond. Thankfully she refrained from joining in the group hug. The tallest and roundest, she was draped in a tent of crumpled khaki linen.

Once he surfaced, he found breath enough to splutter, ‘I’m okay, thanks, Aunt Syb.’ Contemplating his three elderly aunts, one tiny, one curvy and the eldest six feet tall, he fondly imagined they disappeared into each other at sunset like Russian dolls.

‘Saw that article you did on hidden Italy,’ Sybil said. ‘Jolly good, I thought.’

Sybil was about the only member of his family who actually read anything he wrote. ‘Thank you. I’m sorry I missed your eightieth.’

‘Oh pish, old chap. It’s only another orbit around the sun. Got your card, though. Much appreciated.’

‘Have you bought yourself a little house yet?’ Maria asked. ‘Now you’re back in Blighty?’

‘Yes, have you bought a house yet?’ Becky repeated. ‘Settled down with a nice girl?’

‘Have you settled down? Is there a girl on the scene?’ Maria demanded, without giving him a chance to answer the first question. ‘Love a good wedding, me.’

‘Oh yes, another wedding would be topping.’ Becky clapped her hands, her chins trembling.

‘Chance to buy a new hat,’ Maria and Becky chorused.

‘Leave the boy alone,’ Sybil protested. ‘He doesn’t want to be hectored about his love life. You two would make a glass eye weep. There are more ways to skin a cat than marriage.’

Johnny wasn’t sure what she meant but was glad of the support.

She leaned in. ‘I’ve been at the champagne, Johnny. Very delish it is too.’ She winked enormously. ‘I believe I’m a little squiffy.’

‘Really, Sybs,’ Maria scolded. ‘It’s simply not cricket to get tipsy at a christening.’

‘Yes, Sybil. It’s not on, you know,’ Becky added.

‘Why don’t you have some food, Syb?’ Johnny nodded to the tables still groaning with party food and canapés. Sybil, having taken drink, could be a handful.

‘Oh Lordy, what an excellent idea.’ Sybil swayed dramatically.

Johnny found her a chair and issued orders to Maria to grab a plate of something substantial and for Becky to find a glass of water. Maria returned first but not before Sybil had clutched his shirt front to her and whispered, ‘I’m really top hole, old boy. Thought you might need to tunnel out. You know. Escape route. Sand in your trousers sort of thing. If you go when Maria and Becky are fussing around me, they won’t notice.’

He kissed her powdery cheek. ‘Have I ever told you you’re my favourite aunt?’

‘Frequently. Just don’t tell the other two.’ She shoved him away. ‘Off you go. You’ll have had a bucketful of us all by now. Maria,’ she bellowed, ‘where’s me vittles?’

Scooting around Becky who was haranguing an unfortunate waiter, he nipped into the kitchen and out into the garden via the side door. He thought he’d shown his face long enough. Turning to see if anyone was witness to his ignominious departure, he bumped into someone.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said, holding onto the woman’s arms to steady her. ‘I do apologise. Wasn’t looking where I was going.’ Looking down he saw, with horror, it was the vicar who had led the service.

‘Making good your escape too?’ she said, looking up and grinning impishly.

She was tiny, a drab little sparrow of a woman but Johnny sensed her inner vigour. It shone from her so blindingly it was almost visceral. Over his career he’d met many religious figures. Although he couldn’t agree with

any one organised religion, he'd been fascinated by their human representatives on earth. Some were well-meaning, a lot had teeming egos, most were trying their best in gruelling situations. He could imagine this woman blasting her way through any war-torn country fighting for her community. In what he assumed must be a fairly peaceful corner of west Dorset she must be quite the life force.

'Leaving the party so soon? Looks like it's only just getting going. The Starling family certainly knows how to celebrate.'

'We do,' he said, amused. The scent of damp earth and yew rose to make his nostrils prickle. It was shaded and secretive in the shadow of the hedge. He rubbed his eyes, exhausted.

She put a hand to her mouth. 'I'm so sorry. Foot in mouth yet again. Lack of tact not the best quality for a vicar.' Thrusting out her hand, she said, 'Verity Lincoln. Lovely to meet you.'

He shook it. 'Johnny Starling. Uncle to little Inigo.'

'I see,' she said on a long breath. 'Which makes it all the more surprising you're leaving so soon. Not the party sort?'

He winced. He had a feeling she could see right into his soul. Pangs of guilt assailed. He should have stayed at the party longer. Jess would understand but his parents would give him hell. It was holding baby Inigo that had done it. He tried to blank the images which flashed through his mind but holding his nephew close had broken through his control. The familiar panicked feelings were beginning to swamp him. Thumping head, shaky hands, a churning stomach. He didn't want any of them to see him like this. He hoped it was just too much champagne. Too few canapés. Or possibly too much family. 'Not really.'

'Forgive me.' Digging a tissue out of a pocket Verity reached up and rubbed at his cheek. Looking at the smudge of violent pink lipstick she'd removed, she commented, 'Nice colour.'

Johnny sighed. 'My aunt Maria.'

‘Families can be tough.’ Putting an arm through his she pulled him to her side. ‘Come on then. Let’s escape together. If we open and shut the gate quickly, I have it on good authority it won’t squeak and give us away.’

They walked down the short track to the main road in a surprisingly companionable silence.

‘I go this way,’ Verity said. ‘I’ll walk through the gardens to get back to the vicarage. The knees can’t face the downhill slalom to the harbour.’ He expected her to pursue why he was leaving so early but all she said was, ‘Come and find me at St Winifred’s. I’m a good listener and St Winnie is even better.’ She winked. ‘Doesn’t answer back, you see.’

She’d disappeared through the gate to the public gardens before it occurred to ask her why she thought he needed a sympathetic ear. Staring after her, he shook his head and, turning his face into the sun, marched decisively towards Sea Haven House, gulping in great calming breaths. It was named well. After the noise and bustle of his family, if ever anyone was in need of a haven it was him. He just hoped his housemate was out.

Six

SUNDAY EARLY EVENING 11TH AUGUST

Berthe Morisot 1841–1895
French Impressionist. Wracked by lack of self-confidence. One of only a few female painters at the time. Teaching point: why? Examine social mores, barriers to women becoming successful artists – then and now.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'You a painter then, me duck?'

The comment was the fifth Callie had received since taking up position with her easel and paints at the far end of the harbour wall. Hoping this would be out of the way from most tourists, she'd presumed incorrectly. It seemed a woman sitting innocuously painting was fair game.

'I am, yes,' she replied, through gritted teeth.

'You any good, then?' The middle-aged man in checked shorts and no T-shirt bent over her, his large brick red stomach threatening to dislodge the canvas.

Her self-restraint fled. Waving her brush at him, she responded, 'I don't know, what do you think? A budding Renoir, an embryonic Turner, a Georgia O'Keeffe? Have you a degree in art history, or maybe you work at

one of the top London fine art galleries? If so, do tell me if I'm good enough to exhibit.'

'All right, love, keep yer hair on. Only showing an interest, like.' He huffed and wiped a hand over his sweaty brow.

'Vernon, come away.' A woman, possibly his wife, emerged from behind the mountain of crab pots, phone in one hand, holding her nose with the other. 'Blimey, these pot thingies stink. Leave the woman alone, V. She's trying to work. Come on, I've got my photo now. I'm gasping for a cider; you can grab a pint and a nice ploughman's at the pub over there.' She put an arm through his. 'I need to phone the kids an' all.'

Vernon allowed himself to be led away, grumbling indignantly.

Callie felt her shoulders drop. She shouldn't let herself be irritated. It wasn't the first time she'd been the victim of interest, and it wouldn't be the last. People were naturally drawn to an artist working but Vernon had been the last straw. Interestingly, all today's comments had been from men; they just hadn't been able to resist saying something, anything. One had even suggested she might find it easier to simply take photographs and paint indoors. After Vernon she was inclined to agree.

Always insecure about her art, it had taken all her courage to set herself up on the harbour this afternoon. People's interest, however well-meaning, just put her on edge and made her horribly self-conscious.

Putting down her brush, she shoved her curls up into the sweaty headband of her sun hat. It was hot. In so many ways this was possibly not the best time or place to position herself. Her day had been filled with a leisurely breakfast and the visit to the Art School, so she'd missed the quiet dawn light.

Her fingers had itched too much with a longing to capture the seductive curve of the cliffs which stretched to the east of Lullbury Bay, tumbling down to the little fishing village of Charmouth, rising in ginger biscuit

perfection to West Bay and lurching out to Portland shimmering in the far distance. So she'd collected her gear anyway and set out along the harbour.

It seemed an almost impossible task to capture the hard glittering light, the sparkling dances on the rich blue sea, the scudding ever-changing clouds but she was desperate to try. For too long she'd limited her subject matter to the few plants which grew in her tiny back garden, limited by time and head space. She wanted to stretch herself like the cliffs rolling out to the east, wanted to dance like the diamonds on the waves.

Picking up her brush again, and ignoring the little voice inside which screamed *Imposter!* she swept on a long line of French ultramarine. Then she put the brush down again. It was no good. It wasn't the heat or the nosey passersby putting her off. She suspected it wasn't even her possible lack of skill. She still hadn't heard from Frida. Even Vernon and his wife didn't seem to have problems contacting their kids.

Ignoring Avril's advice to leave Frida well alone, she'd fired off a few texts. She'd also rung, only to be forced to leave a faltering voicemail. Callie winced now, recalling the attempt to sound breezy and unconcerned but also determined that her daughter should get in touch. She imagined Frida, lying on her sunbed, rolling her eyes at Leah slumbering prone next to her. *Oh it's Mum again. Why won't she leave me alone to have a good time?* Except she couldn't imagine Frida ever being that cruel. So why hadn't she answered?

Leaving her painting gear, Callie went to sit on the low stone wall which bordered the harbour. Near enough to keep an eye on her easel but in the thankful shade. Half in earnest she began searching for flights to Ibiza. Maybe there was something wrong with Frida? If so, she needed to get out there. Her phone buzzed causing her to almost drop it. Wonder of wonders, a text from her daughter vibrated through.

Soz mum. Phone out of juice. Lost charger. All good.

As a message to a mother from a daughter a thousand miles away it wasn't informative and it certainly wasn't reassuring. Callie's thumb hovered over the phone. Should she reply? What could she say? Frowning down at the screen and biting her bottom lip, Callie considered what to do.

This just wasn't like Frida. Usually texts flew between them. Frida wasn't keen on actually phoning people but she was an obsessive texter.

A seagull landed on the cobbles next to her. It peered down doing a strange little hopping dance and then eyed her avidly, its yellow eye knowing. *Leave the girl alone,* it seemed to say. *She's young and having fun.*

Was the sun getting to her? Callie blinked slowly and then glared at it. It did the trick as, with a dirty look, the gull opened its wings majestically wide and took to the sky. She felt the air brush her head as it flew over her and tried not to duck. They had seagulls in Worcester but they weren't this enormous and they certainly didn't talk.

A spurt of laughter escaped. She needed to get out of the sun, grab a cool drink and take a break. The stress of the academic year and especially the last term must be getting to her. Glancing at the easel she thought she might have enough 'notes' for a bigger painting. The stench of old fish wafted over from the crab pots. It stuck in her throat, making her eyes water. Vernon's other half had been right; they did stink. Definitely time to cut her losses and move. She was supposed to be on holiday, after all.

Gathering her stuff, she made her way slowly along the harbour wall, picking her way over the rough cobbles. The chink of glasses and the sound of happy tourists met her as The Old Harbour Inn loomed, its beer garden brimming. Vernon and partner had scored a table right next to the harbour and its bobbing boats. Vernon, still shirtless, drank deep from his pint of beer, gave a loud burp and then began chewing on a pork pie from his ploughman's. His wife appeared to be immersed in a phone call and was gesticulating around her, only pausing to pick up her pint of cider. A wave

of something like envy passed over Callie and she bit down on it. They seemed a content pair, but she'd rather be happily on her own and independent than put up with a man like Vernon.

As she passed them, she heard him yell to the unfortunate waitress, 'Oi, me duck. Another two pints out here, luv, and be quick about it. I've got a throat on me like the bottom of a parrot's bird cage.' Giggling, Callie turned to attempt the climb up God Almighty Hill.

Deciding to go into Sea Haven House via the garden, Callie turned the salt air stiffened handle of the garden gate, picked up her painting gear and made her way to the French windows. Disappointment flooded through her as she saw they were open. The hope that she'd have the house to herself died as she saw her housemate was in.

Seven

Canaletto 1697–1768
Italian painter known for his sublime Venetian landscapes. Try to get students to look beyond cliché, chocolate box images, and see how exciting they would have been in eighteenth century.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'Hi.' Johnny stood in the kitchen. He saluted her with a wine glass. 'Drink?'

Callie dumped her stuff by the sofa. *Why not, Mum?* Frida's voice in her head said. Muttering something rude to her daughter under her breath, she smiled. 'Think I need to rehydrate first.' She observed him with her painter's eye for detail. Tense. White about the mouth, shoulders hunched. Then she eyed the bottle of white, the glass running condensation and her mouth watered. 'On the other hand, that looks tempting, and I've had a frustrating day.'

He gave a terse nod, collected the bottle and another glass and said, 'I'll be in the garden.'

Callie poured herself a glass of water and sipped it thoughtfully. She wondered what had happened to change Johnny from the genial, easy-going

man she'd bumped into earlier to the rigid person she'd just encountered.

He'd slumped into one of the blue and white striped deck chairs and was lying back, face up, greedily drinking in the sun. She wondered if he was a man with problems. And here she was, sharing a house with him.

Might be an idea to find out more about this Johnny Starling, Frida. But her daughter remained stubbornly silent, so Callie slipped out her phone and googled his name. Something familiar was nagging at her. Didn't he say he was a travel writer? Maybe she'd read one of his articles. She didn't have to hunt too hard.

'Johnny Starling, journalist,' came up at the top of the search.

Leaning on her elbows over the kitchen's breakfast bar, she read on. 'Highly regarded. Worked for several respected newspapers, BBC foreign correspondent. One of the youngest reporters in Iraq. Went on to report on many global crises. Originally from Devon, now lives in London and is a freelance journalist.'

Callie glanced outside. They'd got that wrong. Hadn't Johnny said he lived in Stratford? Gulping back the water she refilled her glass, wondering how being a journalist had affected him. It must have, surely? It had got to the stage where she could only watch the news headlines, the rest was too distressing. She could only imagine what being in the middle of a tragedy and having to report on it would do to you. Would it harden you, make you remote and unfeeling, or crush you?

Johnny hadn't seemed tough; in fact he'd come across as kind. He'd sorted the problem of them sharing, had displayed sensitivity when explaining the en suite bedrooms and locks and he'd left that note about her not worrying about staying up to let him in. A thoughtful man, then, but one who had witnessed great suffering and had had to make sense of it to share with the rest of the world. What impact had that had? Was this what was behind his change in mood?

Spying the family pack of Kettle chips still in the welcome basket she poured some into a bowl. It was habit. She and Frida never shared a bottle of wine unless it was accompanied by salty snacks. Besides, she might need something to soak up the alcohol. She still wasn't sure she'd drunk enough water and drinking wine to assuage a thirst wasn't wise.

Who needs wise, Mum? Frida's voice in her head chided. *Live a little.*

'Oh, you're back, are you?' Callie muttered as she carried her glass of water and the bowl of crisps outside. 'Shame you can't text your mother a little more instead of choosing to invade her head.'

Johnny lifted his head and slipped his sunglasses over his eyes. 'Did you say something?'

'No. Talking to myself. Bad habit.' Slipping down into the deck chair next to his, it felt a little close. Too late now. To get up and move it away would appear rude. She took a second to enjoy the slide of the sun over her skin and the birdsong. It was going to be a lovely evening. Aware of the silence between her and Johnny, she said, 'Crisp?'

He shook his head, gave a tight smile and slid more upright. Holding the two glasses he poured a generous amount for her and topped up his own. Passing hers over, he said, 'Sorry.'

'Whatever for?'

'Being in a grump, as my youngest and wisest sister would say.'

Callie sipped her wine observing him over the rim. His sunglasses made his expression difficult to read. 'You weren't a grump at all. And your sister sounds charming.'

He gave a flash of a grin. 'Best of the bunch. Jess is. She's an illustrator. Just had a baby.'

'And that's the christening you're here for?'

He nodded.

Callie put her wine glass on the grass next to her water and slid upwards too, with difficulty. The wooden ridge across the bottom of the deck chair

was digging into the back of her thighs. ‘I know a Jessica Starling. She helped organise the art exhibition. I’ve only spoken to her on the phone but she’s a powerhouse. So she’s your sister?’

‘That’s the one. Jess kept her maiden name much to our mother’s disapproval.’

Callie’s lips thinned. She knew all about disapproving mothers. She watched as a blackbird swooped down, eyeing the crisps. Crunching one up, she threw it for the bird. ‘When is the christening?’

‘It was this morning. I’ve just come from there, although the party was still going strong when I left.’

‘And you didn’t stay?’

‘I was saved by the vicar.’ A grin twitched at the side of his mouth and he gulped wine. ‘In a way.’

Callie looked at him curiously. ‘Was it that bad?’ The blackbird pecked at the crisp fragment, gave her a beady stare and flew off.

‘My family en masse are overpowering. I love my parents, am close to my oldest sister and I love Jess to bits. The trio of aunts just about finished me off. Well, you know what families can be like…’ He let the sentence hang.

‘I don’t, not really. It’s been just me and Frida, that’s my daughter, since forever.’

Johnny twisted in surprise. ‘I’m sorry.’ Taking off his sunglasses, he pushed them into the neck of his shirt.

She shrugged, feeling the wine go to her head. His sympathy was sincere and it made her want to talk. It made a change to chat to a real person and not Frida’s disembodied voice in her head, or the art critic Vernon. ‘I’m not. I met Frida’s father when I was at teacher training college. I got pregnant, he disappeared. My parents paid me off.’

Johnny choked on his wine. ‘They did what?’

‘Here.’ Callie handed him her glass of water. She watched as his throat worked as he drank. He looked very fit with the lean sort of muscle that comes from being naturally active rather than gym workouts. It came to her in a flash that she liked him. Liked his easy charm, was intrigued by the underlying tension. ‘Frida’s dad has Indian heritage. My mother is nothing if not racist. When I made it clear I was having my baby, she gave me a large sum of money. Said it was my inheritance, and I may as well have it. The subtext being *Go away*. So I did. They seem perfectly happy with my brother and his wife and their children. I got myself through teacher training and put down a deposit on a tiny Victorian terrace. And that’s the way it’s been.’

‘Have you seen them since?’

She shook her head. ‘No. At least not on purpose. I saw them shopping in the middle of town once but didn’t feel I had anything to say to them. Haven’t wanted to keep contact.’ Staring into her wine and enjoying the way the sun refracted through the glass, she remembered coming across her parents in The Shambles in Worcester.

She’d turned a corner pushing Frida in her buggy in front and had stopped abruptly as she’d nearly bumped into a middle-aged couple. Her mum and dad. Her mother had recoiled in horror, glanced down at the toddler, had tugged on her husband’s arm and yanked him over the road. It had cemented in Callie that she’d done the right thing. ‘I don’t think Frida has missed out on anything by not having them in her life. However, they’ve missed out seeing a beautiful, clever, kind girl grow up into a delightful young woman.’

Johnny remained silent. He passed back the water and grabbed a handful of crisps. Eating them slowly he said, ‘That was an incredibly brave decision.’

‘Thank you. Quite often strangers tell me I made a huge mistake and one which I’ll regret but I haven’t. Frida and I have a good found family

around us and, as I say, she's grown into someone I'm very proud of. I'd rather that than expose her to my mother's very peculiar brand of morals.'

'What does she do?'

'Frida?' Callie sipped wine before answering. 'Office admin at the moment. She hasn't really found her thing yet. Mine was teaching and I slipped into it easily. Frida's still discovering who she is.'

'Plenty of time yet. She can't be very old.'

'Twenty-three. I wasn't all that much older when I'd progressed to head of department.' Callie took another reflective sip, watching a seagull land and go on the hunt for whatever the blackbird had left. 'But I suppose I was different.'

'You had to grow up quickly. It must have been hard.'

'Yeah well,' Callie said dismissively. 'You never know what you can do until it's asked of you.'

Johnny blew out a great sigh. 'Very true.'

He remained silent for a while and Callie sensed he was thinking of something profound in his own life, but his next words belied her guess. 'I can't imagine my mother doing something so heartless to her children and grandchildren. I mean, she's a terrific snob, likes everything done just so, has the highest of expectations, but family is at the core of everything she does. Hence the party for the christening.'

'So why did you leave early?'

Giving her a speculative glance from his vivid grey eyes he said, 'It pales into insignificance compared to what you've gone through.'

'I'd still like to hear.'

'Really? You would?'

She settled more comfortably into the deck chair and stole a crisp. The sun had slid over into the west now and the garden was in shade. It was still warm though. 'I'm feeling incredibly lazy and have no inclination to move.

Besides, always enjoy the pastoral role I have with my pupils. I'm a good listener.'

'You are.' He gave her a warm smile which did something severely clinical to her insides. 'I warn you, though, even I think I come out of this sounding pretentious and self-indulgent.'

Callie laughed. 'Go ahead. Think I'll cope.'

Putting his wine glass down he scrubbed a hand over his face. 'I'm the only child who hasn't settled down, hasn't produced grandchildren. In their minds all I've done is racket around the world writing down a few words. I don't think they've ever really understood what I did.' He screwed up his face. 'At the party I was getting the third-degree interrogation about my lifestyle.'

Callie picked up on the past tense. 'Did? Have you retired? You're far too young.'

'I'm forty-five. Too early to retire as you say. I've changed what I do. Taken a swerve. Got fed up living out of a suitcase, changing assignments every three years.'

Callie wondered if he'd expand on why he'd changed job, mention being a foreign correspondent, talk about the impact of it but he simply picked up the bowl of crisps and ate a few before handing it to her. 'So now you've settled in England?' she asked.

'Yup. Gone freelance. Might write a book. Maybe. Something else my family doesn't understand. It's not a good solid profession like accountancy or banking, you see.' Idly twirling his wine glass by its stem he added, 'I'm not an expensive person, I drive a battered old Fiat, don't need much. I'm taking some time out to…' he paused, '…regroup, I suppose.'

'Doesn't sound too awful.' Callie thought it sounded like heaven. She longed for a chance to leap off the treadmill.

'I don't think it is but my family don't see it like that. They worry about me. Want me to have some stability.'

‘And you’ve never felt the need?’

He shook his head, lips pursing. ‘Always liked the life. I’ve seen the world, including places many don’t have the privilege to get to, met some fascinating people, encountered some truly terrifying ones, worked with great teams.’

‘But now?’

‘Got older. Got tired.’ He blew out a breath. ‘Beginning to appreciate having my own bed, having more than a shelf of books around me.’ He drank some wine. ‘There might be a time I go back on the road again but at the moment it feels good to sit back. Chill as Jess would say. Of course, my parents can’t understand, now I’ve settled back in the UK, why I haven’t bought a house, found a wife, had a tribe of children.’

‘That’s not on the agenda then?’

He laughed. ‘Don’t you start. Remind me never to introduce you to my aunts.’

‘You’ve lots of sisters, haven’t you? I seem to remember you saying you had, what, four, five?’

‘Four sisters. And they all have children. From seventeen down to six months.’

‘Big family then. Were they all at the party?’

‘Oh yes. All of them.’

He said it so mournfully Callie giggled. ‘Oh dear. Are they that bad?’

‘Worse,’ Johnny replied. ‘My mother’s sisters, my aunts Sybil, Rebecca and Maria, hunt as a pack of three. They pinned me down insisting on knowing why I hadn’t got a wife and thirty-two children and a mortgage on a five-bed in the suburbs.’

Callie burst out in a peal of laughter. ‘You don’t seem the sort of fit for a house in the suburbs. You seem very urban to me.’

‘Thank you!’ He clinked his glass with hers in a salute. ‘You can see that. Why can’t my family?’

‘They just want you to be happy.’

‘I am happy.’

Callie didn’t reply. Under the charming surface she sensed the opposite.

‘You’re wrong about one thing though. When I was with the BBC it made sense to live in London whenever I was in the UK and it’s true I’ve lived in some of the most major cities in the world: Cairo, Moscow, New York, Bangkok, but I’ve just moved to Stratford. Thought I’d try a small town for a change. And I have to confess it could be seen as suburban.’

‘Stratford’s nice.’ Callie didn’t add she thought it a strange choice for him. ‘Not quite Bangkok though.’

‘That it isn’t but I’m a Shakespeare buff.’

‘Oh.’

‘Surprised?’

‘I am actually.’

‘Fully paid-up Silver Level Patron of the RSC.’

‘Then Stratford is the place to be.’ His choice made more sense now. ‘Think there’s something on at the castle here in Lullbury Bay.’ Callie’s brow furrowed as she tried to remember the details, her brain fuzzy with alcohol. ‘Open air theatre? Might be *Twelfth Night?* Not going to compete with the Royal Shakespeare Company but might be worth seeing.’

‘Shall we go? I’d love to. Would you like to accompany a down-at-heel ex-journalist who is doing his best to flee from family life?’

He said it casually, but Callie was very aware of how their relationship had shifted. In a short space of time, over wine and Kettle chips, from strangers who happened to share a house, a friendship had developed. ‘I’d really like that.’

‘Okay. I’ll look into it.’

‘Tell you what I need to look into.’ She peered into her empty glass.

‘What’s that?’

‘Food. How about I make some pasta? Something simple but filling, and to soak up the alcohol.’

He got up effortlessly and stretched his arms above his head, easing out the kinks in his neck. ‘I was a bagful of tension when I got back here this afternoon but this – talking to you, I mean – has helped so much. And,’ he added, grinning down at her, ‘pasta sounds wonderful.’

‘That’s unless you tell me you’ve lived in Naples too?’ Callie squinted up and tried to slide out of the deck chair but couldn’t get purchase on the slippery canvas.

‘Need a hand?’

‘I do,’ she replied helplessly, beginning to giggle. He hauled her up and she wobbled against him. ‘Whoops. I told you I should have drunk more water. Drinking wine in the sunshine goes straight to my head.’

‘Then there’s only one solution.’

‘What’s that?’ She put a hand up to his chest enjoying the hard muscle and the scent of sun warmed cotton.

‘We either sober up or open another bottle. And you’re wrong. It wasn’t Naples but I did live in Rome for a short while.’

‘Oh bugger. If you’re used to Italian cooking, there’s only one thing for it then. If I’m forcing my carbonara on you one more bottle may not be enough. We might need the whole crate.’

Eight

MONDAY MORNING 12TH AUGUST

Frida Kahlo 1907–1954
Known for her portraits and the vividly coloured decorative quality of her work. Look at life story of Frida, examine cultural aspect – compare Mexican folk art.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie stretched luxuriously, enjoying the cool cotton against her skin. She'd slept better than she had for years. Must be the sea air. Sliding up in bed and reaching for her glass of water she giggled at the time, her head slightly groggy. She'd slept in. Unusual. Even during the long summer break she tended to wake at six.

Going to the window she drank in the view. Brilliant sun made diamonds dance on the sea and the harbour was busy with people messing about on boats. She could even hear excited childish voices floating up in the breeze. A fishing boat chugged out through the gap in the harbour wall, a pirate flag fluttering and its side painted with the sign, *Bay Fishing Trips.* She watched until the bright light made her eyes hurt.

She and Johnny had eaten her pasta and his garlic bread, drunk another bottle of wine and had fun. The evening had stayed sultry, so they'd

returned to the garden and chatted and laughed until late. She'd been fascinated by his descriptions of living in some of the most exciting cities in the world and had giggled through his review of a particularly experimental version of *Romeo and Juliet* which he'd just seen at The Other Place theatre in Stratford.

Callie made a promise to book something. It had been ages since she'd seen any theatre and after all Stratford wasn't too far from Worcester. It had been so late they'd left the clearing up to do this morning.

Feeling the beginnings of a hangover headache kicking in, she half hoped Johnny had got up early and done it. The last thing she wanted to face was the creamy pan she'd made carbonara in. Ferreting in her bag for aspirin and glugging back more water she began to feel slightly more human.

On her way back from the bathroom she heard her phone ring. Pouncing on it she saw, to her relief, it was her daughter.

'Frida!'

'Jeez, Mum, you don't have to shriek.'

'Sorry, love. It's just so good to hear from you.'

'I texted.'

Callie made a cushion of the pillows and slid back onto the bed. Reining in her exasperation she said, 'You did. But I've been dying to know what it's like. Is it hot? What's the villa like? Have you been in the sea? What's Leah been up to? Are you being sensible?'

Frida laughed. 'Muuuuum!'

'Well, what's it like?'

'Bit wild. I've left Leah to it most nights. I'm not keen on the nightlife.'

'You left her on her own? You've been on your own?' Callie couldn't stop a note of concern creeping in.

'Nah. Leah's mate, Alice, whose parents own the villa, is really nice. I've hung out with her and some Dutch boys we met. Leah's been out with

Alice's sister. They're into clubbing more than Alice and me.'

Callie swallowed the information. It sounded as if Frida was being sensible. 'And how's the tan coming on?'

'It's well hot, Mum, I've been in the shade most of the time. Yesterday it was 41C, so we hung out by the pool. It was well lush. I've been reading loads.'

'And you found your charger?'

'What?'

'You said that's why you hadn't rung or texted much.'

'Oh yes.'

'So it's all working out okay then? You're having a good time?'

'Having a pretty good time.'

'Drinking plenty of water, got enough money? Using sunscreen?'

Frida laughed again. 'I'm not the one who goes lobster red in seconds.'

Frida had inherited her father's cappuccino skin and lustrous black hair. 'No, but you still need to protect your skin, kiddo. Or it'll be wrinkle city by the time you get to my age.'

'Understood. So, how's your place? Nice?'

'It's lovely. Really lovely.' Callie glanced at the blue sky scudding with cotton wool clouds glimpsed through her bedroom window. 'The view is wonderful. Only–'

'Only?'

'I'm sharing the place.'

'Noooo! How come?'

Callie settled back and filled her daughter in.

Through spluttering laughter Frida responded. 'Sounds like you've landed on your feet there. Sounds like he's a hottie.'

'Thought you'd say that.'

'Go for it, Mum. Silver fox and all.'

‘Thought you’d say that too.’ Callie heard someone knocking on the front door. ‘Look, I’ve got to go. Keep in touch, you hear!’

‘Will do. Bye, Mum.’

Barefoot, Callie padded down the steep cottage stairs. A note pinned to the noticeboard said Johnny had gone for a run and would do the clearing up when he got back. She swung back the front door, hazily thinking he may have forgotten his key.

‘I’m so sorry about this. There was nothing I could do.’

Callie stared at the girl with the wildly curling brown hair and startlingly blue eyes who was standing on the doorstep of Sea Haven House jiggling a baby on her hip. The voice was familiar, but she didn’t know the face. And why was she sorry?

An older woman’s voice boomed from the gate. ‘That hike up this hill will see me off. Far too steep.’ A tiny older woman, her petite appearance at odds with her carrying tones, began walking up to the house.

She was followed by a well-rounded version. ‘I agree, Maria. Far too steep. I’m out of puff.’

A third woman, tall and with a florid complexion, followed. ‘By Jove, that’s a climb,’ she exclaimed. ‘But you and Maria did insist on accompanying Jessica, so you’ve only got yourselves to blame.’

The young woman holding the baby grimaced. ‘As I said, I can only apologise. Tried putting them off with a walk around the harbour but failed.’ She grinned, dimples appearing.

Callie looked at her, to the baby, then to the trio of old women and back to her with mounting horror. ‘Jessica?’ she squeaked. No wonder the voice was familiar, Callie had spoken to her on the phone about the art competition.

‘That’s me. Jessica Starling. You must be Calliope.’ Thrusting out a hand she shook Callie’s. ‘Thought I’d introduce myself in person. It was supposed to be a solo mission, but The Aunts overheard and, I’m afraid,

rather jumped on board.' She leaned closer. 'There was nothing I could do. Once they get an idea in their heads there's no dissuading them. They're on an almighty sugar high from three enormous salted caramel cornets from The Ice Cream Dream Kiosk.' She screwed up her face. 'And I'm afraid it gets worse. Ma and Pa are on their way too.'

'But… but… but I'm not dressed, the house is a mess and… I'm not dressed,' Callie repeated limply, horror mounting at the thought of an invasion by most of Johnny's family.

Jessica looked her up and down. 'Satin lounging pyjamas. You look fine to me. Besides, you're an artist. Style it out with some artistic temperament and eccentricity.' And, with that, Jessica brushed by her and into the house, followed by The Aunts. They made themselves comfortable in the sitting room, leaving Callie speechless and embarrassed. Her head began to throb in earnest.

'Well, I must say, this is jolly pleasant,' the thin aunt said, who Callie had established was called Maria. 'Isn't it, Becky?'

'It is,' the curvier aunt replied. 'Jolly pleasant.'

'Super to do a reccie on young Johnny's gaff,' the tallest aunt said.

'It wasn't the reason for my visit, Aunt Sybil,' Jessica put in, reprovingly.

'No?' Sybil said it innocently but Callie caught the wink. 'Smashing to see a different part of the town although,' at this she fetched out a large white handkerchief and mopped her face, 'I'd forgotten just how jolly steep this hill is. Rather glad to have a sit-down-breather before we mosey on up further.'

'It's called God Almighty Hill apparently,' Callie said, edging over to shield the worst of the disaster in the kitchen and raking her hair into some kind of order. 'Because the only thing you can gasp when you've got to the top is, God Almighty.' How had she got to standing in front of a mess of

dirty pans, crockery and unwashed wine glasses in her pyjamas, entertaining four strangers?

Sybil began to laugh. It began as a quivering of her magnificent bosom, gurgled up into her throat making her jowls swing and emanated from her mouth as a loud honk. ‘Oh I say, that’s funny,’ she managed when the laughter stopped. ‘That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard since I got here. Did you hear, Maria? God Almighty Hill.’ She slapped a hefty thigh. ‘Have to say I was blaspheming like a good ’un on that climb up from the harbour. God Almighty Hill. Oh, I say!’ she roared.

Maria nodded and joined in. ‘Too funny,’ she spluttered.

Becky glanced at her sisters and got the joke. ‘Oh I say. Too funny!’

Johnny chose that moment to appear after his run. Callie tried not to notice his long well-muscled legs. Even hot and sweaty he was, well, hot. He seemed his usual calm self but she noticed a muscle tense in his cheek. He surveyed the scene. ‘This all sounds fun. What’s going on? And why are you all here?’ Filling a glass from the kitchen tap he drank it down in one, slammed it onto the kitchen work surface and mouthed, ‘Sorry,’ at her.

‘The Aunts are finding the name of Harbour Hill extremely amusing,’ Jessica said.

He frowned. ‘What’s so funny about Harbour Hill? It’s hilly and leads up from the harbour.’ He shrugged, nonplussed.

This elicited another round of laughter.

‘Let you in on the joke when your parents arrive, dear boy,’ Sybil said, in between snorts and guffaws. ‘Dorrie will appreciate it.’

Callie moved towards the kettle. Only one thing would do in such circumstances, and that was tea. Ignoring the pan with the remains of her carbonara in, she filled the kettle and flicked it on.

Johnny came close, whispering in her ear, ‘I’ll make the tea. If you want to escape, feel free.’

‘Thank you,’ she replied, relief flooding her. ‘I’m still in my pyjamas.’

His brows quirked. ‘And very nice they are too. Don’t worry, doubt if The Aunts will have noticed but my mother surely will.’ He chuckled at her scandalised horror. ‘Go. Make your escape now and no one will notice if I ply them with tea and biscuits.’ As she turned to leave he added, ‘And I’m sorry. I had no idea the family were going to descend en masse.’

‘Oh dear boy–’ one of The Aunts piped up, commanding his attention.

Callie fled.

Having had the quickest shower possible and thrown on jeans and a loose linen shirt, she considered hiding upstairs but, remembering Jessica saying she had a reason for the visit and guessing it might be something to do with the exhibition, she put on her metaphorical big pants and trotted downstairs again. After all, Johnny’s family looked good fun, and she could cope with them better now she was fully dressed.

‘Ah, Calliope, there you are.’ Johnny greeted her with a mug of tea. She couldn’t discern his mood but he looked fairly relaxed, still dressed in his running gear. High on endorphins perhaps. ‘May I introduce you to my father Sidney Starling and my mother Dorothy.’

An impeccably dressed woman in maybe her seventies approached Callie. ‘Oh, do call me Dorrie.’ She extended a manicured hand with a wrist jangling slim gold bangles. ‘Everyone does. And Calliope, what a darling name!’

‘It’s lovely to meet you, Dorrie.’ Callie thought Johnny’s mother was quite the force of nature. Silver hair swept up in a chignon, subtle pearls at the ears and palazzo pants in vivid swirls of pink and yellow. ‘Most people call me Callie.’

‘So you’re Jonathan’s flatmate, eh?’ Sidney Starling thrust out a hand and pumped hers vigorously. ‘Super to meet you. Can’t understand why he didn’t bring you to the party yesterday. We can always do with another attractive filly about the place.’

‘Pretty sure that’s not an appropriate thing to say, Dad.’ Johnny winced. ‘Besides, Calliope and I weren’t much more than strangers yesterday.’

‘Well don’t hang about, son. You don’t want to let this one get away.’

‘Why don’t you sit down, Dad. I’ll bring your tea over.’ Johnny steered Callie towards the French doors. With a clenched jaw, he added, ‘I know Jess needs to see Calliope about something. I’m so sorry,’ he whispered in her ear, his warm breath tickling her neck. ‘The feminist movement completely passed him by.’

Callie let a giggle escape. With his elegant bone structure and high-bridged nose, Sidney was an older, unreconstructed version of his son. Clutching her tea, she slipped past the trio of aunts and into the garden. She found Jessica lounging in a deck chair, the baby scrabbling about on a throw Callie recognised from the sofa. Sitting in the chair next to her, she said, ‘Gorgeous baby.’

‘He is,’ Jessica agreed. ‘But I would say that, wouldn’t I? Let me introduce you to the youngest in the Starling clan, Inigo.’

‘Hello, Inigo.’ Callie wiggled her fingers pulling a face. The baby giggled, little dribbles emerging onto his chin. He flopped onto his back and took a foot in each pudgy hand, going cross-eyed in concentration. ‘They’re adorable at this stage. My little girl was just the same.’

‘I hadn’t realised you had a daughter.’

‘Grown-up now. In Ibiza.’

‘Oh my. I remember that stage. I backpacked around the Greek islands before I got married and all sprogged up. Now I’m a proper grown-up I suppose.’

Callie observed her. The curly hair was held back by a colourful scarf, the cheesecloth smock crumpled, and the cut-off jeans bore a large grass stain. She didn’t look any older than Frida. The difference lay in the sense of determination and strength of character coming off her in waves. Must be in the Starling genes. ‘Had you come to see me?’

‘Yes. Thought I’d introduce myself and, rather selfishly, little Inigo was fractious, and a walk settles him. He’s teething.’ Inigo blew a bubble confirming it. ‘But I’d popped in to see the family and The Aunts caught wind of the plan and trooped along with me. As I said, I’d hoped to lose them at the harbour, but they were determined to check you out. Their stamina coming back up the hill rather impressed me, but then I was hampered by the buggy. I’m so sorry, Callie. They’re a bit much to deal with but it had gone ten so I didn’t think it was too early.’

‘I overslept and then Frida, my daughter, rang me so I hadn’t got as far as the shower or the washing up.’

‘I saw the wine bottles and glasses for two. Did you have a guest?’ Jessica asked innocently.

Callie knew Jessica knew but played along anyway. ‘No, actually. Johnny and I shared some wine, got to know each other a little and I made pasta. I’d planned on clearing up this morning.’

‘Well, it’s good to know who you’re sharing a house with, I always say.’

There was a silence only filled by the baby gurgling and a seagull crying overhead.

‘We’re just friends, Jessica.’

‘Shame. He’s a nice man. Been through it a bit recently. Could do with some cheering up.’

‘It’s not my job to cheer men up.’

‘Oh absolutely. Quite rightly so. I completely agree.’ Jessica lifted her hair off her neck. ‘I just hoped… well, you look right for one another somehow.’

Callie gave a short laugh. ‘I agree Johnny is a nice man, but we barely know one other. Fate has thrown us into each other’s way and we’re dealing with it as best we can. We had said we probably wouldn’t see much of each other but it doesn’t seem to be working out that way.’

Jessica screwed up her face. ‘And it’s going to carry on that way, I’m afraid. Ma and Pa are hosting a barbecue and an invitation is coming your way. You don’t have to accept, of course, but there’s always loads of food and lots of booze. It can be fun. Why don’t you come? The Starlings can be a bit much as a flock, but I’ll be there to rescue you.’ She paused meaningfully. ‘And my big bro too. In fact, it’ll be marvellous for him to have someone to concentrate on to look after. Might deflect some of the family’s flak.’

‘I’m not here to protect a man from his family either.’

‘No, you’re absolutely not. It’s just you’d be doing him a huge favour.’ Jessica bit her lip giving Callie the side eye. ‘And the food really is good. Ma’s using external caterers. If you don’t want to come for Johnny, come for me and Inigo.’ She picked up the gurgling baby setting him on her knee facing Callie. ‘How could you resist him?’

‘Do you always get your own way?’

Jessica grinned. ‘Always. Ask Johnny. Oh, here he is now. I have great news, bro. Callie has agreed to come to the famalam barbeque.’

Johnny glanced from one woman to the other. ‘Wonderful.’ He frowned. ‘Did Jess bully you into it?’

Callie took one of Inigo’s hands, loving the never forgotten feeling of a baby’s fingers curling around hers. ‘Not at all,’ she said blithely. ‘I’m really looking forward to it.’

Nine

TUESDAY AFTERNOON 13TH AUGUST

Camille Pissarro 1830–1903
French Impressionist. Painted subjects in their natural setting. Activity: examine and try out pointillist technique – how detail becomes evident but only from afar.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

The Starling family had been good fun. Loud and eccentric but enjoyable company. After several pots of tea, they'd queued up to bestow lavish kisses and hugs on Callie and had then clattered out, as noisily as they'd arrived.

Johnny had disappeared for the rest of the day, and she hadn't seen him since. She couldn't really understand his problem with them. However, she accepted wryly, she was the last person qualified to comment on family relationships and admitted they might overwhelm someone not quite as extrovert.

Plagued with contradictory feelings about Johnny, suffering a little social anxiety over the forthcoming Starling barbeque, all against the background of nagging Frida worries, Callie poured herself into her work.

Avoiding the busy harbour, she found a quieter spot in the public gardens to set up her kit to paint.

Far behind, the town castle ruins stretched, its gate tower reaching up into the cobalt-blue Dorset sky. Her fingers itched to paint it but not today as it was a mass of activity. The theatre company looked to be setting up for the forthcoming production. A bevy of low loaders were parked up on the track outside and a scruffy army of men were carrying in a strange assortment of enormous wooden frames – which she assumed were scenery – into its grounds. She hoped the good weather held; there was nothing better than sitting outside watching theatre underneath balmy night skies. She and Frida had often seen plays at Ludlow. This castle was nowhere near as grand but was impressive in its own way.

In her position against the shelter of a venerable oak tree, partly hidden but with an excellent view of the harbour directly below, and of the stretch of coast to her left, she was able to paint uninterrupted. Gradually, her shoulders relaxed and the stiffness in her neck eased. The rigours of the last academic year were loosening their grip and, while not disappearing, all the strains and stresses seemed less urgent.

As she swept a colour-wash over as a base, she frowned, deep in thought. Why did she let it get to her? She'd been teaching all her working life. Even though new initiatives came along with predictable and depressing regularity, she'd dealt with similar before. She'd risen to become team leader quickly and knew she was an effective manager.

Chewing the end of her brush she squinted into the sunshine. She'd worked so hard for so long but none of it seemed worth the effort anymore. She put the paintbrush down, waiting for the wash to dry. It wouldn't take long; there was a delicate shiver of a sea breeze taking the edge off the heat of the day. Was she getting jaded with teaching? It had seemed much harder work this year, had left her sapped of energy or emotion.

Leaning back against the tree trunk, she gazed at the view. It was stunning. Blue as far as she could see. Sea and sky smudged together, the horizon indistinguishable. The occasional snatch of sound drifted up from the beach and promenade: a childish squeal of delight, a dog bark, a keening gull. The cliffs to her left, a tangy orange in the sun, stretched out to Portland which was just about visible in the sea haze. In the calmer water near the shore, paddleboarders tried to stay aboard. One fell off with a shriek. Out to sea, it looked windier, and several white yachts bobbed and dived gleefully, while a sightseeing boat plugged away stoically through the waves. A curl of breeze drifted towards her, ruffling the pages of her sketchbook and bringing in from the sea a fresh salty tang. She inhaled deeply, feeling it cleanse and invigorate her lungs and lift her mood. Much as she loved Worcester, you didn't get this back there. She was probably just end of term exhausted.

'I certainly need this holiday,' she murmured. 'I'll be fine come September. The teaching mojo will come back,' she added bracingly. It was the same every summer. After a punishing academic year, she'd happily never step foot in another classroom. And then, come the new term, she was back at it with renewed vigour. However, for the first time ever, she wasn't sure it was what she wanted the rest of her life to look like. 'I'm only forty-two,' she murmured. 'It's a long way to a pension.' The oak tree and her colour-wash prep refused to answer.

The thump of something wooden falling and splintering, and a cut-off curse from the castle ruins behind her brought her back to reality. Testing the watercolour paper with a fingertip, she decided it was ready. Time to paint. And to forget all about having to teach for another twenty years.



She was going to be late. Time had drifted in the gardens, and she'd painted until her shoulders hunched, and the frown of concentration between her brows threatened to become permanent. Shivering and realising how low the sun had dipped in the west, she hastily got her things together and half jogged back to Sea Haven House. Did she have time for a shower? What was she going to wear to this family barbecue? She'd only brought one decent outfit and intended saving that for the competition awards ceremony at the Art School.

Dropping her gear by the French windows, she shot upstairs to arrive on the landing just as Johnny left his bedroom. Wearing a crisp white shirt and chinos, his hair was still wet from the shower. Callie felt forgotten lust pool in her stomach and the breath stole from her body. Sensations she'd left behind long ago fired through her. Perhaps it was the hot sunshine or being more relaxed on holiday but her hormones revved into overdrive. It had been years since she'd desired a man and Johnny's attractiveness hit her like a sledgehammer.

A flickering memory of Sunil's meltingly good looks and their youthful passion returned. They'd had fun and she didn't regret Frida, the result of their brief coupling, for one second, although couldn't claim it had been easy bringing her up single-handedly. After she told Sunil she'd decided to have a termination, he'd disappeared. The relief on his face told her everything about how he felt about the situation. She couldn't blame him; they were only nineteen after all and still student teachers. His family, she assumed as disapproving as hers, had whisked him off somewhere out of temptation. Unable to go through with her decision, she'd gone on to have Frida and hadn't seen Sunil since.

Sometimes regret that she hadn't ever told him he had a daughter nagged at her but she stifled it. She and Frida managed just fine. The two of them. There hadn't really been anyone else. Didn't have the time, for one thing.

Teaching was a lifestyle choice, a vocation rather than job and definitely not nine to five. In between school prep, choir, her painting and sorting out Frida, Callie had no spare time and even less energy left over. Plus, she hadn't wanted to introduce a relationship to Frida only to risk it going pear-shaped. Frida had been strangely uncurious about her father, content with their life in Worcester and the status quo. Callie hadn't wanted a man inserting himself into what they had and then leaving. Besides, the whole Sunil experience had left her wary.

'You're staring,' Johnny said.

'Sorry?'

'Are you okay, Calliope?'

For the first time she realised Johnny nearly always used her full name. The only person who ever did. It was a bit much, she supposed. She had no idea where her usually ultra-conventional mother had dreamed it up from. Her nostrils widened as the scent of his cologne drifted over. Johnny looked – and smelled so good. Maybe sex hormones were like muscles, the more you used them, the more toned and strong they became? If so, hers were currently easing painfully out of early retirement. She couldn't tear her eyes away. He had such an arresting face and, while she preferred creating landscapes, thought it would be an interesting exercise to draw it.

'You're still staring.' The words were softened with an irresistible smile.

God he is gorgeous. Callie shook her head, gulping. 'I'm so sorry. Miles away. Been painting all day and I'm still in the zone. Having trouble bumping down to earth. What time do we have to be there?'

'At the barbeque? The later we arrive, the less time we have to spend there.'

This made her giggle. 'Your family can't be that bad.'

Cocking his head onto one side, he said, 'Perhaps we can decide that on our return. I'll be in the sitting room having a numbing whisky. No hurry.'

He brushed past her, trailing the scents of soap and spicy aftershave in his wake. Callie unlocked her bedroom door, jiggling the key with shaking fingers. Closing the door behind her, she collapsed against it. Images of a naked Johnny in the shower, water cascading erotically down his body, crowded her brain. Running her hands over her breasts, she tried to breathe. Her nipples felt swollen and tender, as if bursting from her T-shirt. Either she was perimenopausal, turned on, or pregnant. If the latter, it was an immaculate conception. Just as well she and Johnny would be surrounded by other people and especially the sobering company of his family; she'd jump him otherwise. Having been unused for so long, the sex hormones or muscles or whatever they were, had flamed into action with alarming speed.

'Get a grip, Calliope Thorne. He's just a good-looking bloke and you haven't had sex for over twenty years. And look where it got you the last time! He's just a reasonably presentable, intelligent man who you happen to get on with. A new friend.'

The beat urgently throbbing between her legs told her she was a liar.

'Liar, liar, pants on fire,' she scolded. Ripping off her clothes she ran the shower as cold as she could stand.

Ten

TUESDAY EVENING 13TH AUGUST

Edward Burne-Jones 1833–1898
British star of Aesthetic Movement. Lesson notes: put sensual and sinuous style into historical context. Reaction against industrialisation?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

The house which Johnny's family had rented was a short distance away. They walked in silence. Callie didn't have much option. The house was further up God Almighty Hill from Sea Haven House, Johnny walked at speed, and she only had breath to concentrate on the climb.

Eventually they came to the beginning of a track, very similar to the one which led up to Sea Haven House. If she lived here permanently she'd have thighs like tree trunks Callie thought, pausing to lean against a stone pillar bearing the name Sandy Vistas and with a post box attached. Staring over to the entrance to the public gardens, now shadowing away into the dusk, she puffed out, 'Could we just stop here for a moment? I'd like to catch my breath.'

Admiring the tub of purple nicotiana and silvery blue lavender, she snatched a quick photo on her phone. The plants' scent misted up, mingling with Johnny's soap and spice and slight whisky fumes. Before she could

prevent it entering her mind, she wondered what it would be like to kiss him and taste the whisky on his lips.

Johnny leaned against the pillar too, alarmingly close. ‘Sorry. Did I march you up here? Bit tense. I haven’t had much to do with my family for a long time and this is the third social event in as many days with them.’ He looked at her through dark lashes, his eyes glinting dangerously in the lowering light. ‘They’ll give you the third-degree, you do know that?’

‘I’ll cope.’ Callie pointed her phone towards the gardens, needing to change the subject to one more neutral. ‘I found a really tranquil spot in the gardens today to paint.’

‘It’s where the castle is, isn’t it?’

She nodded. ‘They were getting it ready for the Shakespeare today. Moving scenery in.’

‘I’ve bought two tickets. You were right, it is *Twelfth Night.* My favourite.’

‘Mine too. It would explain the stormy coloured sheets of plywood being carried in.’

‘You’re welcome to come with me, if you like. The invite still stands. No pressure though. I can always take Jess. I’m sure she’d love a night away from the baby.’

‘Might be tricky if she’s breastfeeding.’

‘Ah. I hadn’t thought about that. There you go then. I have a spare ticket. All paid for. Best seats in the house. Or castle.’ He grinned, looking more relaxed.

‘I’d love to. As long as you don’t want to use the ticket for anyone else.’

‘Can’t think of anyone I’d rather spend time with.’

Callie felt heat rise into her neck and then into her face. Hot flush, or power surge as her friend Donna called them. Or the route march uphill at pace on a warm summer’s evening? Or was it the effect of Johnny gazing at her, sardonically, eyes gleaming silver between dark lashes. Clutching at

something to say, she murmured, ‘Lullbury Bay must be a wonderful place to live in.’

‘I’m sure it is. Jess loves it here. Are you tempted?’

Callie lifted her hair off her neck, glad of the salty breeze which drifted up from the harbour. ‘To run away to sea, you mean? Who isn’t. I live in Worcester, and you can’t get much further away from the coast than that.’ She shrugged. ‘But it’s where my job is and, much as the stress of it is getting to me, it pays the mortgage. Plus Frida has her life there. I couldn’t uproot her.’

Johnny thrust his hands into his chino pockets, staring down at his suede loafers. ‘That’s your daughter?’

‘Yup. It’s where she went to school, where her friends are. It’s all she’s ever known.’

‘But you said she hadn’t really found what she wanted to do yet?’

Callie was surprised he’d remembered. ‘She hasn’t.’

‘So there might be a chance she’ll move away, for work maybe or to study somewhere.’

‘I suppose.’ Callie was startled. ‘I’d never really thought of it being a possibility. Suppose I’ve spent so long, nose down, working and stuff, I haven’t given any thought to her moving away.’

‘Would you mind if she did?’

Callie was beginning to see what a good journalist Johnny was. His questioning technique was gentle but probing. ‘Oh, Johnny, I don’t know. It’s been her and me for so long, the team of two, that I can’t imagine her not being there.’ She wrinkled her nose, thinking hard. Who was she kidding? Frida, although some might say was an immature twenty-three, was a fully grown adult. She may well want a different sort of life than her current one in a small Victorian terraced house in a Midlands city. There was a whole world out there. Was that what was behind this sudden decision to go to Ibiza instead of accompanying her to Dorset? Callie

conceded Dorset might be considered tame by comparison. She vowed to sit Frida down on her return and have a heart-to-heart. She hated the idea that Frida might be putting her ambitions on hold so as not to leave her mother alone. And, after all, wasn't it a sign of love and good parenting that you knew when to let your children fly free? Realising Johnny was waiting patiently for her to expand her reply, she muttered, 'As I've said, I wish Frida could find her passion in life.'

'What are her strengths?'

'She writes. Has done evening classes in creative writing. She's a good listener. She's an amazing friend. Kind, thoughtful. She's working in an office at the moment in an engineering firm but it's a bit dead-end.'

'She writes? Maybe she could pursue that?'

Callie pulled a face. 'Can you make a living being a writer? It's like me trying to exist on art.'

Johnny smiled. 'I've made a fairly good fist out of it.'

'A journalist?' Callie huffed. 'I don't think she's hard-bitten enough.'

The smile widened. 'You think I'm hard-bitten?'

'Sorry, no I don't.' *Whoops.* 'But you were very young when you covered some major stories, weren't you? It must have had an effect.' Callie felt the heat rise again. She was digging the hole even deeper.

Why did you blurt that out, Mum? Cool it, said Frida's voice in her head. 'Might as well come clean. I'm so sorry, I looked you up. Wanted to know who I was sharing a house with. You must think I'm awful.'

'It's the last thing I think about you, Calliope. I completely understand you wanted to check up on the stranger who had barged in on your holiday. And yes, I was one of the youngest correspondents in Iraq and yes, what I saw and had to report on affected me deeply.' He looked down and rubbed the S carved into the stone pillar. A little of the mortar came away and he crumbled it into dust. 'The longer I was in the job… what was making more

of an impact was,' he paused and swallowed a breath. 'I'm not making much sense.'

'You are,' Callie urged. 'Go on.'

'I suppose what I'm trying to say was I was *stopping* caring, rather than caring too much. I'd seen so much, had written about so many awful, tragic things, met people who were at the very edge of existence, out of all hope, that I was becoming numb. And it terrified me. I knew I had to get out before I lost my humanity.'

Callie gazed at him, sympathetic. 'Isn't that self-protection though?' She shuddered. 'I can imagine it's a way of getting yourself through it. You have to remain somewhat apart otherwise you'd go loopy.'

Johnny laughed, a sour sound. 'And a lot do go loopy. Or drink too much, or womanise, or burn themselves out and become embittered old men.'

'I know it's not remotely the same, but I understand.' She hesitated, questioning if what she was about to say was too crass a comparison. 'It's sort of the same with teaching. In a far milder way, of course. I've learned to stay dispassionate. If I get too emotionally involved I can't focus enough to do the job properly. Obviously there are a few pupils that get to you but you soon realise there's a limit to what you can actually do. You're a tiny cog in that young person's life, and a mostly ineffective one.' She blew out a breath and paused, deliberating what to say next.

'You can't do a great deal about the dad who alternates between spells in prison and being at home and walloping his son,' she continued, 'or the mother who sees little point in letting her incredibly bright daughter go on to university because it "isn't for the likes of us". I try my best, but I've learned the hard way not to bring my work home with me, the emotional baggage that is. There are enough other stresses in the job.'

Johnny nodded. 'You're right, it is similar. You're very wise, Calliope. I've hopefully got out of the job in time and I'm working on some issues.

The earthquake I covered in Turkey has left some… scars. But at least I got out. Thousands didn't. The death toll was horrific. I'm investigating having counselling. Might help. And at least I have that luxury, those poor bastards are still there.'

His voice was calm and quiet but Callie sensed the pain. 'You always call me Calliope.'

He smiled at her again. 'It's a beautiful name. Like you.' Reaching out, he touched her hair, curling a lock around his finger.

Callie ducked away, embarrassed. 'Red hair and freckles!'

'Your hair's like fire. You'd be a superstar attraction in China. Red hair is so unusual there. And why shouldn't I use your full name? Calliope, beautiful of voice and muse to epic poetry. It's a wonderful name.'

Callie felt her face become scarlet yet again. No one had complimented her like this for years. Actually, forever. She had no earthly idea how to handle it. Smoothing down the hair she'd always hated – it was far too like her mother's for comfort – she wondered if Johnny had had more than one whisky while he waited for her and it was the alcohol talking. Luckily, she was rescued.

'Big bro, Callie!' Jessica clambered out of a taxi which had pulled up outside the public garden gates. 'Marvellous. We can all go in together. Callie, could I ask you a favour? Connor's got the sprog but could you carry the bag with the baby stuff? It seems I can go nowhere without lumbering along with at least three bags. My once spontaneous and glamorous life is no more. Come on, bro, you can help too. About time you learned what being a parent involves.'

Callie crossed the road, took the baby bag, said hello to a tall thin man she assumed was Jessica's husband and went to stand back by Sandy Vista's pillar. She'd grown rather fond of it during the last twenty minutes.

Having unloaded and paid off the taxi, Jessica shoved her arm through Callie's. 'Once more into the breach, dear friends. Once more. Those who

are about to die, we salute you! Ooh look,' she said, changing tone dramatically and pointing to the stone pillar. 'Sandy Vistas. Nice girl.'

'I see your sense of humour hasn't matured one iota,' Johnny complained, 'despite motherhood.'

And to his little sister's raucous laughter they climbed the track to the party.

Eleven

J.M.W Turner 1775–1851
English Romantic painter. Known for dramatic watercolours, landscapes and seascapes. Try out large scale colour washes. Sunset background with black sugar paper silhouettes.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Sandy Vistas was a large rambling Victorian villa with an enormous garden. Higher up God Almighty Hill than Sea Haven House, it had spectacular views, not just over the cliffs to the east but of the sun currently setting out its glory westwards. It was just dipping its toe into the sea and a vivid orange, rippled with pink and purple, spread over sky and water.

As the others opened the garden gate and headed around a tall hedge to the sounds of revelry, Callie caught her breath and held back, letting them go ahead. She couldn't resist pausing to take some pictures on her phone. A painting of a sunset was clichéd beyond belief but there was no denying its beauty. *Scope for an abstract? The colours were irresistible. Maybe add in some 3D where the golden streaks pierced through? Gold foil perhaps.* Ideas formed and reformed in her head, swirling around as much as the clouds above.

‘Absolutely marvellous, isn’t it?’

Callie had been so lost in the view she hadn’t noticed Johnny’s Aunt Sybil approach. Dressed in flowing lime green linen she was as colourful as the sunset – and clashed horribly.

‘Nature giving us a jolly good show,’ Sybil continued. ‘Top hole. Can’t beat it I say.’ She thrust her arm through Callie’s and forcefully tugged her forward. ‘Carrie, isn’t it? Come along. You must tell me *all* about yourself.’

‘It’s Callie.’

‘That’s right. Carrie. I never forget a name. Let’s grab some vittles. Stomach feels like the old throat’s been cut.’

Callie looked around frantically searching for Johnny, or even Jessica to rescue her from the rather alarming Aunt Sybil but they’d disappeared into the higher part of the garden nearest the house and which was crowded. White lights had been strung up all around the garden but were only just warming up into illumination.

Against the light spilling out from the open French windows of the house all she could see were flitting silhouettes, none recognisable. Most of the garden was now in a deep and slightly damp shade.

Johnny’s mother brushed past. A cloud of Diorissimo enveloped them. ‘Oh there you are, Sybs,’ she said, sounding exasperated. ‘Can’t find anyone, it’s getting so glum. The band is complaining it’s too dark for them to see to play, the torches should have been lit by now and those solar powered lights are worse than useless.’

‘Fret ye not, Dorrie. We’ll grab ourselves some meat and all will be well.’

‘That’s just it, Syb,’ Dorrie said, increasingly agitated. ‘The catering team have only just arrived. It’ll take an age for them to get the barbeques hot enough to cook anything and the pig roast hasn’t turned up at all. Why doesn’t anyone do their jobs properly anymore? It would have been easier

for Sid and the boys to run the barbeque themselves, but you know how Sid likes to burn his sausage.'

'Has the champagne been opened?' Sybil boomed.

'I've absolutely no idea. Sid's in charge of all that.'

'Then, all hands to the deck, let's get the guests sloshed and they won't notice how long they have to wait for a bit of snap. Come along, Carrie.'

Callie felt rather than saw Dorrie peer at her. 'Oh is that Callie? How good of you to come. It's rather a disaster, I'm afraid. Isn't Jonathan with you? He really shouldn't run off and leave his guest alone.'

'She's not alone, Dorrie,' Sybil said. 'I'm looking after the gel.'

'That's rather what I'm afraid of. Come along both. I think a glass of bubbly is in order. Everything always seems so much brighter after fizz, doesn't it? This way, I think the booze has been set up on the terrace. I have to say it's far chillier than anticipated but that's England in August for you. At least we won't need wine coolers I suppose.'

'Colder than a badger's arse in the snow,' Sybil put in.

'Yes, quite, but not a terribly helpful observation, Sybs. The patio heaters should have been turned on by now. Oh it's all *such* a mess.'

Callie followed Dorrie and Sybil to some steps which led up to the brightly lit terrace and the sound of chatter. Taking each woman by the elbow, she helped them up and, once her eyes had adjusted, spotted several tables covered in white cloth and groaning with alcohol. It bore no resemblance to any barbeque Callie had ever attended. Servers, dressed impeccably in white shirts, black trousers and long khaki aprons stood behind, heads down, shoulders slumped, engrossed in their phones.

Indignant in fuchsia pink and kitten heels, Dorrie marched over to them, had stern words and they leaped into action. She returned with three champagne flutes. Handed one to Callie and Sybil in turn and downed her own in one.

‘I say, steady on, old girl. Got to keep a clear head at these things. Otherwise the whole caboodle will fall apart.’

‘But it always does, Sybs, it always does without me. I don’t know what Sid has been up to. He’s probably hit the port. But really, you simply can’t leave your guests without a drink.’

‘Just as well he wasn’t left in charge of his sausage then,’ Sybil replied stoutly. The sisters caught each other’s eyes and burst into giggles.

Callie stared at them. They were unlike anyone she’d ever met and certainly nothing like her own dour, joyless parents. She joined in with the laughter.

‘Ah, there you are.’ Johnny appeared and gave his mother and aunt a kiss.

‘Hello, Jonathan darling,’ Dorrie said as she proffered her cheek. ‘You really must look after your guests better. Poor Callie has been left to the tender mercies of your Aunt Sybil.’

‘Rather harsh, Dorrie. I took Carrie under my wing.’ Sybil emptied her glass. ‘Off for another,’ she declared and barged her way through the crowd now three deep at the makeshift bar.

‘I’m so sorry, Calliope. I looked around and one minute you were behind me, the next you’d gone. Jess needed help to cart all her stuff into the sitting room and then I got cornered by aunts Becky and Maria.’

‘And I expect The Gruesome Twosome gave you quite the grilling,’ his mother said.

‘Couldn’t get away.’

Dorrie tapped him on the arm. ‘Well, you know the answer to that.’ She nodded meaningfully at Callie.

‘Thanks, Ma. Subtle as a flying brick.’

‘Just saying, darling boy. The solution is right in front of you,’ Dorrie said airily. ‘Now, you two, I must away and sort out this absolute dregs of a party, otherwise it’ll be Christmas before anyone eats. Look after her,

Johnny, and don't let Sybs pounce again.' She leaned nearer and hissed, 'She's *drinking.*'

Dorrie ducked gracefully between several couples and glided away, a vision in shimmering pink chiffon. Johnny glanced ruefully at Callie. 'You okay?'

She laughed up at him. 'I'm having a wonderful time. It may be the champagne talking on an empty stomach, but it's been great fun so far.'

'Fun? I've never heard my Aunt Sybil be described as fun.' He steered her away from the crush on the terrace, down the steps and towards a patio heater which blazed with a welcoming heat. 'Overbearing, feisty, fiercely intelligent, prone to the occasional bizarre idiom, but fun? No.'

Reaching the heater, they stood underneath it. She gazed up at him, enjoying the warmth and the sight of his dark hair glowing orange in the heat and shivered a little.

'Are you cold?' Johnny's brow crinkled in concern. Then he breathed out, 'You look very lovely, by the way.'

Callie sent up a silent prayer that, despite many of the other guests being dressed to the nines in enough sequins to furnish movie night on *Strictly*, her black jeans and white silky vest didn't look too out of place. She *was* chilly and goosebumps were rising on her upper arms. Nothing, though, would induce her to move and spoil the spell. Shaking her head she wondered what Johnny would do if she stretched up and kissed him. It was a terrible idea but an intoxicating one. She suddenly became very aware of her naked shoulders and how deep the vest dipped at the front.

They smiled at one another and, at that moment, the garden burst into light. Sidney Starling was lighting the great fire pits dotted around at intervals. As he moved from one to the other flames shot into the night, sending fiery embers into the starlit sky. It was impressive and Callie observed, with her teacher's hat on, a health and safety nightmare.

In one corner of the garden, there was a flurry of activity as a bank of barbecues were fired up. In the other, illuminated by the now brighter white lights, a quartet began to play something softly jazzy and classic. ‘The Way You Look Tonight’, she recognised. Agonisingly romantic. Everyone cheered. One or two brave souls even ventured onto the lawn and began to dance.

Callie tore her eyes from Johnny’s and gazed around her. The garden, having sunk into gloom, was now shimmering with light and heat and filled with gentle chatter and the clink of glasses. It was like a grown-up fairyland. ‘I’ve never been to anything quite like this before,’ she whispered. ‘It’s amazing.’

Johnny followed her look and smiled. He gave a wry chuckle. ‘My mother likes to relive her days in showbusiness and loves to cut loose occasionally. She throws a good party.’

‘She certainly does.’ Callie turned to him. ‘Showbusiness?’

He frowned down at her. ‘I’ll fill you in sometime. Knowing Becky and Maria, all may become apparent later. I’m very glad you’re having a good time. But I need to ask you something.’

Callie braced herself but all he asked was, ‘Who’s Carrie?’

She giggled. ‘Get me another glass of champagne and I’ll tell you.’



Later, Callie lay in bed, sure she could still hear sounds from the party drifting down the hill on the breeze. She stretched sensually, enjoying the cool cotton on her overheated skin and the buzzy feeling in her head. She’d had a wonderful time. The food had been spectacular, no gastroenteritis-inducing half-cooked chicken thighs and burned sausages that were all too common at the barbecues she usually went to. At the Starling party the bao buns oozed lobster, the pig roast was caramelised and succulent pulled pork,

and there were platters of hundreds of handmade chocolates for pudding. When Callie bit into her first, she met delicious vanilla ice cream and raspberry coulis.

The champagne flowed all evening, money apparently no object, and it all felt impossibly glamorous and more than slightly bonkers.

Johnny hadn't left her side. They'd even danced, once the alcohol had hit and loosened the inhibitions, joined by Jessica, the older Starling children and, for a time the three aunts. Then Becky and Maria, embarrassingly, had plucked petals off the hydrangea bushes and thrown them, humming 'Here Comes the Bride' until chased off by an exasperated Jessica.

Johnny fended off the most intrusive attentions of his enormous and eccentric family but, just as they were leaving, she'd heard his eldest sister, an imposing figure and a younger version of the abrasive Aunt Sybil, hiss at him, 'She'll do. I heartily approve, bro.'

Johnny had glowered at her, slung an arm around Callie's shoulders and eased her through the crowds – how did the Starlings know all these people – to the gate and the track down to Sea Haven House.

They ambled down God Almighty Hill, Callie only slightly swaying. To her regret, Johnny had dropped his arm, which had tingled warmth on her skin and had retreated to the roadside of the pavement.

'Here we are then. Home sweet home,' Johnny said as he put the key in the lock of the front door. He paused and looked down at her again. 'I hope– I hope it wasn't all too much.'

She grinned up at him. 'Of course it was too much. Too much food, far too much bubbly. Too much fun.'

'I meant Sybil and Stella and the others.'

'Well, Jessica does have an unusual style of dancing.' She giggled. 'I can't believe she got me doing the Birdie Dance. And did my eyes deceive

me or did your mother and Becky and Maria do a passable rendition of "Baby Love"?'

Johnny gave a rueful smile. 'They were in a girl group once; they don't let anyone forget it, but it's not what I mean.'

Callie reached up and stilled his words by placing a finger on his lips. 'I'd love to hear more about that sometime and I know that's not what you meant. I'm teasing.' His face was illuminated by the porch light they'd left on to welcome them back and it lit his sharp features. Puzzled why he seemed so tense, she added, 'I think your family are wonderful. The party was too. I had a wonderful time.' She stopped and laughed again. 'Think the alcohol has clogged up my vocabulary. I haven't drunk so much champagne in…' she stopped and gasped theatrically. 'Since forever.' Collapsing against the door, she smiled up at him, only half blearily.

'Better get you to bed.' Johnny sounded stone cold sober but had matched her drink for drink throughout the night. He must have a higher tolerance.

'Sounds promising,' Callie purred in what she hoped was a seductive manner, but which came out as a series of hiccoughs. Aghast, she clapped both hands over her mouth and prayed he hadn't heard.

She hardly ever drank. As a single parent she was only too aware it was down to her and her alone should anything go amiss with Frida so had been forced to be boringly sober for years. She had little head for alcohol, especially expensive champagne. Her tipple was more likely to be cheap white plonk from the local Spar. And there was always the fact that teaching with a raging hangover was the stuff of nightmares; it was a hard enough job as it was, let along attempting it without full control of your capacities. She'd learned that to her cost.

She let out a wavering but happy sigh. After a lifetime of being sensible, it had been good to let rip this evening. Felt as if she was rediscovering her youth. 'Actually, I'm having the youth I never had,' she murmured.

‘Sorry?’

‘Oh, did I say that out loud. I had a good time tonight. Thank you.’

He reached behind her, so close she could smell his skin, and opened the door. Disappointment fluttered inside as she realised there would be no goodnight kiss. Probably just as well though. Better to stay friends. Anything else was too complicated. She fell into the hall.

‘Water,’ Johnny said, reprovingly, helping her up. ‘And then bed.’

‘Yessir.’ Callie had saluted him, followed him into the kitchen where he’d poured her a pint of water and had let him guide her up the stairs. He’d said a curt goodnight, she’d shown her teeth the toothbrush and flopped into bed.

Sleep evaded. All her senses were tinglingly alive. It had been a wonderful party. Listening to the faint sounds of the band still playing at Sandy Vistas and the occasional call of a gull as it swooped past her bedroom window and into the night, she giggled yet again. Lullbury Bay parties were *wild.* Or at least the Starling family version of them were. Had she glimpsed a woman in a clerical collar there? Had that been Austin she’d spotted doing a wild okey-cokey with Dave from the Art School? And had Johnny’s cousin Gilbert really requested the Stripper theme and stripped to his boxers? Laughter gurgled up as scenes from the party flashbacked. It had all been such fun.

What was this strange emotion running through her? *Happiness.* She was happy. Pint of water ignored, she rolled over, sucked in a great gulp of soft salty night air and felt her eyes closing as she drifted off to the distant sounds of Black Lace’s ‘Agadoo’.

Twelve

WEDNESDAY MORNING 14TH AUGUST

Paul Gauguin 1848–1903
A lover of Paris café life. Best known for his uninhibited paintings of Tahiti and its people.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

A gull screeched. Callie opened one eye fractionally, only to shut it again. The sunlight was harsh and firing daggers. She smacked her mouth open and shut. Dry and gritty and, ugh, her teeth felt furred and disgusting. Someone appeared to have taken up residence in her head, and they were playing drums. Timpani drums. And a double bass. They must have eight arms as they went on to hit a dinner gong. Loudly. Oof.

Through the pain Callie heard a gentle tapping on her bedroom door and Johnny's voice saying, 'Pot of tea here if you're up to it.'

Groaning, Callie threw the duvet off. Hearing his footsteps retreat downstairs and the front door close, she forced herself up. Opening her bedroom door, through bleary eyes, she spied a tray. Teapot, mug, milk, a plate of biscuits and a packet of paracetamol. And a bud vase with a single white rose from the garden. Even though the peculiar orchestra in her head

was revving up for its finale, she mustered a smile. He was such a nice man. Wincing, she really, really hoped she hadn't embarrassed him last night.

Thirty minutes later, having scrubbed her teeth, downed the pint of water neglected from last night, then taken an equal amount of tea and two paracetamols, Callie felt slightly more human. She eyed the biscuits and nibbled one. It was ginger. Her stomach heaved, thankfully settled and then gave out an enormous rumble. It seemed a long time since the lobster bao buns. There was only one cure for a hangover this bad. Mind made up, she headed for the shower.

An hour later, she sat at an outside table, eating a Sea Spray Café Lullbury Bay full English breakfast. Tracey, having clocked her wan face and dark glasses, had supplied an unfeasibly large pot of scalding tea and added fried bread. It was kill or cure.

As Tracey came to check if she wanted more toast, Austin ambled out from the inside the café. He was ashen-faced. 'He was at that fancy party last night, up God Almighty,' Tracey explained with a wink. 'Had a right old good time, by the looks of it. Green as a mussel, he was, when he turned up this morning. Nonstop champagne, I heard. You all right, or can you manage a bite more, maid?'

'No more toast, thanks, Tracey, but I'd love another pot of tea. I was at the party too and I'm as hungover as–' Callie let the sentence trail. The right idiom escaped her.

'Rough as a badger's arse, I'd say, my lovely.' Tracey chuckled. 'Thought you looked a bit washed out behind those sunnies. Was it worth the pain though? That's the question.'

Callie squinted up at her, the sun bouncing off the concrete making her eyes throb. 'I'll tell you in a couple of hours but a full English is working its magic already.'

'Always does, maid, always does.' Tracey looked up as a customer approached. 'Hello there, Johnny. What can I get you?'

He looked down at Callie, a smile playing about his lips. ‘If it’s okay with Callie to share her table, I’d love a black coffee.’

‘Not sure she’s up to company,’ Tracey said protectively and rested a hand on her ample hip.

‘I’m fine and recovering by the minute,’ Callie reassured her. ‘Sit down, Johnny, but sit this side next to me, if you don’t mind, then I won’t have to look into the sun.’

‘Righteo then, folks, a pot of tea and a black coffee coming up. Won’t be long.’ Tracey bustled into the café and they were left alone.

The awkward silence was punctuated only by the call of gulls, the shifting of the turquoise sea and the slap of flip-flops on sandy concrete as tourists began to make their way down to the beach. In the harbour flags fluttered in the gentle breeze and yacht halyards clanked. Callie found she was coping better with the sensory load so decided her hangover was receding.

‘Feeling more human?’ Johnny asked, after Tracey had delivered a pot of tea and Callie had gulped down yet another cup.

‘Getting there. Bacon and eggs helped. And thank you for the tray of tea, it was very thoughtful.’

‘Not a problem. I always crave tea and ginger biscuits after a drink or two so thought you might appreciate not having to get yourself up and into the kitchen.’

‘I did.’ Another leaden silence descended. ‘You were up bright and early. You obviously have a better head for alcohol than me.’

Johnny snorted. ‘Years of practice, although I try not to indulge too much. My family drives most people to drink. I’ve just been up to see them. The party finished at four this morning, the neighbours are apoplectic, and Family Starling has some serious appeasement to do. Mum is still drunk, Dad is flat out on the sofa snoring and there were at least five people who

slept in the garden all night, including one on the compost heap. Warmer apparently.'

Callie sniggered inelegantly. 'I just hope when I'm their age I can still party like that. To be honest, I think last night was the first time I've ever partied quite like that. They really are impressive.'

'It's one way of describing them.'

'I hope,' Callie began, took a deep breath and went on in a rush. 'I hope I didn't do anything to annoy or embarrass you?' She refilled her cup to keep her nervous hands busy. It was something to concentrate on.

'You?' Johnny leaned back in surprise. 'Good lord no. You make a very sweet drunk.'

'Thank goodness for that. I'd hate to show you up. They'd put a lot of alcohol in that champagne.'

Johnny laughed and then nodded gravely.

Callie relaxed, knowing her behaviour hadn't been too awful. 'You mentioned something last night about showbusiness. Tell me about this group your mum and aunts were in.'

Johnny sipped his coffee and then placed the cup on its saucer with deliberate precision. 'Not much to tell really,' he shrugged. 'Mum was very young at the time, not quite seventeen. Becky and Maria are older. They always sang together apparently, modelled themselves on those girl groups who always sang songs about motorbikes and tragic early death.' He frowned at her questioningly. 'The Ronettes? The Shangri-Las?'

'No idea.'

'Nor me. Before my time. Anyway, the three sisters were up in London seeing a show and hitting Carnaby Street one weekend when a talent scout spotted them. Long story short, they had quite a lot of success for a time, made records, appeared on television, were famous for a while as The Bonner Sisters. The "Bonnie" Bonner Sisters they were known as. Mum's

got a fabulous collection of memorabilia. Then she met Dad and left the group to start her family.'

'She must have loved your dad a lot to give up all that,' Callie said thoughtfully. 'Not sure I would have given up fame and fortune.'

Johnny flicked her a glance. 'Different times I suppose. Even in the late sixties most women weren't expected to have a career and marriage.'

'Must have been tough for Becky and Maria.'

He nodded. 'I think it probably was. I understand there was a rift between them all for some time. Becky and Maria recruited another singer and carried on into the seventies but by then tastes in pop music had shifted. They went on as a duo singing on cruise ships, had quite the life. Had a pretty wild time. Didn't retire until about ten years ago. Bought a house together near Mum and Dad in Exeter and rebuilt some relationships.' He looked down into his coffee cup. 'It always puzzles me why, whenever they see me, all they do is harass me about why I've done exactly the same. You know, travelled the world, never settled in one place for long.'

Callie observed him. There was a deep groove running down his cheek and the lines fanning around his eyes spoke of someone who laughed a lot and often. At the moment though, a beat pulsed and his skin seemed too thin, as if all his emotions were flayed bare. Whatever experiences laid into him during his years as a journalist had marked him deeply. She hoped he was getting the help he so patently needed. *It's not your job to make him better,* she reminded herself. But she couldn't help it, she was beginning to care about this man very much. *And that's going to work out how?* she mused. *I don't even have time to breathe most weeks during term time, let alone foster a relationship. Between school, choir and Frida I have no time or emotional space left.*

Her pastoral instinct, the aspect of her teaching career she enjoyed the most, came to the fore. In lots of ways Johnny was no different to the many young people she'd counselled over the years. Maybe, no matter how old

you got, you remained the eternal teenager to your parents and older relatives? ‘Well,’ she began tentatively wondering if she was being intrusive, ‘maybe they feel they missed out and don’t want you to do the same?’

His lips thinned. ‘Possibly. Even Sybil, who renounced any sniff of showbusiness and embraced academia and a resolutely single life, constantly bangs on at me to “settle down”. All Becky and Maria ever talk about is how great life at sea was, how many countries they saw, the partying. So why don’t they accept that’s what I wanted too?’

‘What people say and the truth is rarely the same,’ she added gently.

Johnny was silent for a long time, staring out at the beach, now rammed with deck chairs and towels and happy families. Shaking his head, he blew out a huge sigh and then laughed. ‘And I should know, having seen that exact same thing in action time after time in my job.’ He snorted. ‘And yet I never applied the knowledge to my own family.’ He slapped a palm to his forehead. ‘I’m an idiot.’

Callie put her hand on his. ‘No you’re not,’ she said kindly. ‘You’re just too close to them all to see them as people in their own right.’ She’d said the same repeatedly to her students.

He turned to her and smiled. It took her breath away. ‘It’s true. I’m in my mid-forties and still, even now, react like a child when I’m with my family. Despite her rallying cry for us all to couple up, go forth and procreate and have careers in something financially lucrative, I suspect Mum would have loved at least one of us to follow in her show biz footsteps; she occasionally makes her disappointment pretty clear. Becky and Maria never married or had children, so they regard us all as their surrogates; they don’t hold back their opinions. Thank goodness, despite Sybil’s peculiar ways, she at least shows a genuine appreciation in how we’ve chosen to live our lives.’

‘Tell me about your sisters.’

He rubbed a thoughtful hand over his chin and Callie could hear the stubble rasp. ‘I suppose, when you think about it, we’ve all gone our own way, quietly defying them on our own terms. Mixed results though. Kicking back in a passive aggressive way. Stella hasn’t a creative or showbusiness bone in her body but she’s more like Mum than she realises. Her wedding to Brian was spectacular. Mum organised for a troupe of actors to sing show tunes from *Salad Days.*’ He laughed at Callie’s confusion. ‘It’s a rather twee stage musical which at one point features a Cleopatra style seductress. Guess who dressed up in a green snake costume and was the star of the show?’

‘She didn’t!’

‘I can assure you she did. Search out *Asphynxia* on YouTube for the full horror.’ Johnny’s lips quirked as he allowed Callie a moment to picture the scene. ‘Isabel is a more subdued version of Stella. Lesley is like me; doesn’t have much to do with the family. We have no idea what she does except it’s something to do with high-end forensic accounting. Whatever *that* is. Gets Mum totally exasperated as, despite claiming she wants us all to have financially secure careers, she actually considers anything “officey” dull and dry and anything to do with money distasteful.’

He shook his head. ‘Total enigma and contradictory to boot, is my mother. Lesley stays in London as much as she can, I think distance is the only thing that keeps her sane but both she and Isabel suffered the same interference in their weddings. If you think my mother can throw a spectacular party, you haven’t seen anything until you’ve attended a Starling daughter’s wedding. Mum controls everything with military precision and thinly veiled hysteria. We had ice sculptures at Lesley’s as hers was a December wedding. It was a mild winter and they melted all over the marquee carpet. We were an inch deep in water. Oh,’ he said, as a thought occurred. ‘We also had a colour theme at that one. Everyone was instructed, on pain of death, to wear red and green. Mum stood at the

entrance of the hotel and turned anyone away who wouldn't look right on the photographs.'

Callie gasped. 'She didn't actually turn guests away?'

'Oh she did. Brooks no opposition, does my mother. Most lived near enough to go home, get changed and be back in time for the wedding breakfast but one couple had to drive into town and buy something new. She's really something and even in her seventies isn't showing any signs of slowing up.'

Johnny shook his head wearily and then smiled. 'The only one who is really upfront about ploughing her own furrow is Jess. Maybe she gets away with it because she's the baby, or perhaps Mum is slowing down after all. Jess has been with Connor since school. As far as I know, they'd never contemplated marriage, or even getting engaged.' He pulled a face. 'And then one day, out of the blue, they eloped. Mum was apoplectic. She hadn't been allowed to orchestrate the wedding in her unique style and to her own exacting standards.'

'Oh dear,' Callie murmured, thinking she would have done exactly the same as Jess and Connor.

'You'd think, having ruled the roost on every decision in three weddings, Mum would have retired gracefully but Jess caught wind of Mum and The Aunts gleefully discussing how impressive an Arthurian themed wedding, complete with a mock Camelot castle, would be.'

'That would be something.' Callie agreed, stifling a giggle. 'Each to his own. I've been to quite a few themed weddings in my time, but none have stretched the concept quite that far.'

'Mum and Maria love the theatricality of it all and Becky follows on wherever Maria leads. After this conversation, I've only just realised how much they miss their showbusiness life. Doesn't excuse overriding the wishes of everyone else though.'

'Particularly what the happy couple want.'

‘I completely agree. And, if anything, I think they’ve all got worse as they’ve got older.’

‘They make my family pale into insignificance.’

‘Enough about me. I’ve gone on far too long.’ Johnny broke the shortbread biscuit, which had come with his coffee, into two and gave her half.

‘Thank you,’ Callie said, as she accepted it.

‘So, Calliope. I remember you saying you had a difficult relationship with your family. Have you ever been able to see your parents as people in their own right?’

‘Ah.’ Callie stalled for time and ate the shortbread. It was sweet and gritty with sugar so she drank what seemed to be her millionth cup of tea that morning. Her story was dull and colourless in comparison. It made her feel inadequate. ‘My problem was I saw my parents for *exactly* who they were. Deeply conservative, rigid in their thinking and view of the world, with a nice side order of racism.’

‘Ouch.’

‘Exactly.’ She paused and then went on. Might as well get the sorry truth out there. ‘My brother and I had a strict timetable. Same food for breakfast every day, same rota of dull meals each week, nourishing but like something from the fifties. “We’ll have no foreign muck like chilli or lasagne in this house,” my mother often said. Homework four to five, reading until tea, then bed and lights out at eight, without question and no matter how old we got.’

Johnny frowned. ‘No television?’

‘They didn’t own one. We had to read and that was limited to the classics. No comics, no felt pens to colour in or draw with. We were allowed Sunday School every week where we absorbed pictures of a blond blue-eyed Jesus welcoming little children onto his knee and who preached turn the other cheek and forgiveness.’

‘God,’ Johnny said, appalled.

‘Don’t think God had an awful lot to do with it. Neither did forgiveness. My brother conformed, let it all float over his head, married someone suitable when very young, I think to escape as soon as possible, and then provided them with grandchildren.’

‘And you?’

‘They were delighted when I said I wanted to train as a teacher, a teacher being a good solid respectable job and all that, less so when they found out I wanted to teach art. I mean, art of all things. Not something useful like maths or chemistry.’

‘How did you find out you wanted to be involved in art?’ He was listening intently.

‘Good question when you come from a background as sterile and joyless as I did.’ Callie concentrated on her teacup, turning it round and round. She had no idea why she was telling him all this but wanted to – *needed* to let him know who she was. ‘I made a very good friend at primary school. Began spending as much time as I could at her house. I’m still friends with her now. We go to a rock choir together. Donna. Think she saved my life in some ways. My parents approved as Donna’s dad was a bank manager and thoroughly “suitable”. They weren’t suspicious about the amount of time I spent over at her house. In fact, I think they preferred it when I wasn’t there trying to interrupt their routine.’

Callie chewed her lip, remembering. ‘Donna had a dog, a daft black spaniel called Coco. She’d give the best cuddles but I had to examine every inch of clothing before I went home.’

‘Why?’

‘My mother thinks dogs are dangerous and infested with germs. If she thought I’d allowed one to jump all over me, she would have banned me from ever going to Donna’s again. And I was there all the time. I often stayed for tea, think Mum was only too glad to foist the cost of feeding an

ever-hungry teenager onto someone. We ate chicken korma, and fajitas with guacamole and sour cream. Donna's mother made gateaux with real fruit and fresh cream. We watched *Friends* and *The Vicar of Dibley* and toasted marshmallows on the fire. No hysterics if we accidentally made a mark on the carpet. Best of all, Donna's mum was a stationery sales rep so there was an endless supply of notepads, paper, pens. I couldn't take them home, so I had a special drawer there to keep stuff in. I'd spend hours just doodling cartoon figures.'

Callie was lost in the moment, picturing herself and Donna with orange Fanta, complete with red and white striped paper straws, and Club Biscuits as they sat at the dining room table, surrounded by sheets of scribbled on paper.

This time it was Johnny's turn to comfort Callie. He reached for her hand and held it. It brought her back to the present. To the vivid blue sky and the keening gulls, the excited squeals of children as they skidded past on the slippery sandy concrete. Her parents had never taken them to the beach. At the time she accepted their reason that it was too far away but now she knew they'd consider a trip to the seaside as impossibly frivolous. What purpose would a day by the sea have other than pleasure? And pleasure was something so deeply alien to them as to be incomprehensible. She lifted her face to the sun, risking yet more freckles and not caring. 'I mean, I wasn't neglected,' she went on. 'I was fed, had a bed and a roof over my head. No love though. No cuddles or affection. It was a very dull, rigid existence. Dreary. Going to Donna's was like going from black and white to pure bright technicolour.'

She glanced at him. 'I discovered what life could really be like and, as soon as I was able, made the decision to get away. I also decided, if I were ever to have children, I wouldn't bring them up as they had me. I've tried my best with Frida but accept I've probably spoiled her as a result.' She

flicked him a humorous glance. ‘Your family suffers from an excess of everything; mine,’ she shrugged, ‘from an excess of nothing.’

Johnny squeezed her hand. ‘I remember you saying you’re no longer in touch.’

Callie shook her head. ‘No, although I hear from my brother occasionally. Apparently, Mum and Dad still don’t have a TV or central heating, don’t take any holidays, despise and ignore their neighbours because they have Pakistani heritage. Are happy to live as if it’s still 1947. Sam lets them get on with it, plays the dutiful son while he’s there and then goes home to his wife and children. They’re worth a fortune, my parents, but they scrimp and save like misers.’

She tried to make sense of it. ‘I mean, what’s the point?’ She sucked in a breath, appalled. ‘I’m so sorry. I had no intention of letting all that out. I haven’t thought about them for a long time, so it all spilled out. I’m having a good life, making the most of any opportunity,’ she added, determinedly. ‘I made sure they didn’t stop me.’

Johnny was silent for a long time; she could sense him thinking. He held her hand tightly and she could see his mouth working.

‘I don’t know what to say, Calliope, except to admire how you’ve got on with life and shaken their influence off.’

‘There’s really not a lot to say. I’m sorry I blurted it all out.’ She gave a short laugh. ‘Once I’d started talking, I couldn’t stop. Quite cathartic actually.’

He blew out a breath. ‘Yours make mine seem harmless by comparison. Don’t know what I’ve got to complain about. Families, eh?’ He straightened. ‘They manage to mess you up one way or another.’

‘Yup. Maybe it’s our destiny to fight against them?’ She laughed again, feeling lighter somehow. Everyone in her life already knew her history and it was no longer an issue. She rarely shared it with anyone new, didn’t see the point.

Her life was so busy she seldom gave any thought to her strange upbringing – and it had been strange, she hadn't realised just how odd until moving out of their sphere of influence. She'd come to terms with being non-contact with her parents and low contact with her brother and didn't feel she missed out on much. She'd determinedly filled her life with her found family.

'You know what we need?' Johnny squared his shoulders, suddenly decisive.

'I couldn't manage any more tea. I am completely and utterly rehydrated.'

'Do you fancy doing something completely daft and stupid? Will your hangover allow?'

Callie turned over his hand and caressed the fleshy part at the base of his thumb. 'What hangover?'

Thirteen

Michael Ancher 1849–1927
Member of the Danish Skagen Group. Realist painter of beach scenes. Examine cloud formations and depiction of light.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Having waved goodbye to Tracey, Johnny took Callie's hand and led her along the promenade and down the concrete slope to the beach. She tried not to dwell on how natural it felt to hold hands with him. After being resolutely man-less for most of her adult life she couldn't believe how easy it was being with him.

As they picked their way through the family groups on the beach, she asked, 'Where are we going?'

He grinned, impassive behind his sunglasses. 'You'll see.'

The sand was flat and wet, the tide having not long receded, the sun shone high above and a gentle breeze wafted briny air towards them. It was a perfect day for the beach. As they strolled towards a red and white striped tent, from which Bay Radio blasted out golden oldies, her suspicions grew. Squeals and laughter rose above 'Club Tropicana' and she could see small groups of children hard at work with spades.

‘Hi,’ an affable-looking youth in a high-vis jacket carrying a clipboard said. ‘You looking to enter?’

‘We are,’ Johnny answered, equally cheerfully. He peered at the name badge the boy wore. ‘If that’s okay, Eli.’

‘Cool. Just let me have the names and ages of your children and I’ll jot them down and they can get started.’ Eli peered behind them. ‘No buckets and spades? No worries, we have spares.’ He paused, looking uncertain, his dark hair flopping over his forehead. ‘Sorry, I can’t see your children. They can’t begin until I enter them.’

‘It’s us who’d like to enter,’ Johnny said.

‘You?’ Eli’s mouth fell open.

‘Yes, hope that’s not a problem? I can give you *our* names and ages, if you like.’ Johnny turned to Callie. ‘Unless you don’t want to reveal your age?’

‘I’m fine with that,’ she answered on a long breath, beginning to get a fit of the giggles.

‘Erm… ah… I don’t *think* it’s against the rules,’ Eli stuttered, making Callie feel sorry for him. He didn’t look much beyond twenty. ‘But I’ll have to check. Hold on a sec.’ He disappeared into the red and white tent from where they heard an animated discussion and then uproarious laughter.

‘Are you serious, Johnny?’ Callie hissed over Katy Perry. ‘California Gurls’ had replaced Wham. ‘A sandcastle competition?’

‘Why not? Think we need to do something frivolous, don’t you? And we’re by the seaside and on holiday. It’s what you do. Besides, I can use it for the article.’

‘What article?’

‘The one I’m writing on British seaside holidays. Great research.’

‘Oh yes, I remember you mentioning it.’ She grinned, slightly mollified. ‘I suppose, if it’s in the interests of research, I don’t see how we *can’t* not do it. Consider me a fellow constructor in sand, then.’

Eli returned, looking pink and flustered. ‘Boss says you’re good to go. We’ll waive the questions, but you still need to pay the entrance fee. It’s three pounds each. All proceeds to the RNLI. It’s a Lifeboat Week fundraiser.’

‘In that case, I’ll add a donation.’ Johnny popped a few twenty-pound notes into the yellow bucket Eli held out.

‘Wow. Thanks, that’s well cool. Go through out the other side of the tent and you’ll see what to do. Well,’ he amended, ‘I suppose you’ll know what to do. You being adults and that. Have fun guys.’ Callie could feel Eli’s bemused gaze on their backs until his attention was claimed by a family of five.

They went into the tent. A deck had been set up by Bay Radio, from where a middle-aged man wearing headphones grinned at them. ‘When I’m Sixty-four’ by The Beatles began to play.

‘Cheek.’ Callie said to Johnny. ‘I’m only forty-two.’

He grabbed a couple of pastel sparkly spades and two buckets from a dark corner of the tent and pointed them, through the open flap, towards the sea. ‘Come on. Work to do. We need to find our spot. Optimum sand to sea ratio.’

‘Thought this was supposed to be fun,’ Callie teased, following him. This part of the beach, the one nearest town, was pegged out with blue nylon rope enclosing the space. It was awash with groups of children industriously creating sandcastles of all shapes and sizes. What looked like the judge, in a high-vis waistcoat and with another clipboard, passed between them, taking pictures and putting a flag into those which had been finished.

Although Callie was relieved to see family groups which included adults, she couldn’t see any child-free adults. Embarrassingly, it looked as if they were the only participants over ten years of age. Scanning the beach, a hand held up to shield her eyes from the blazing sun, she grinned. There

was another adult. And he was definitely making sandcastles. ‘Oh, there is one grown-up on his own,’ she said. ‘Look over there.’

In the drier sand near the wall separating beach from prom, was a man carving sand sculptures. He’d gathered quite a crowd. Amongst his creations was a tyrannosaurus rex, a giant gorilla, and most impressive, a detailed and to scale pirate ship.

‘Hope you’re not going to attempt to rival that.’ She laughed, as Johnny glanced at the sand sculptor.

‘You never know. I’m a man of many talents.’ He resumed studying the beach for the perfect spot. ‘Over there,’ he pointed and strode off seawards.

Callie was thankful he’d chosen to be away from most of the children; it made her slightly less self-conscious. The sea lapped contentedly not far from their feet, frothing as it met the sand. Gulls called and swooped and the air smelled of seaweed, salt and hot sun. It was the most delicious day. All introspection from earlier fled and she gave herself up to the simple pleasures of sun, sea and sand. ‘What’s the plan?’

Johnny slid his sunglasses onto the top of his head and surveyed her with narrowed eyes. ‘Moat, I think, don’t you? With a channel to the sea. And Camelot?’ He chuckled.

‘Nothing like ambition. Does that make you King Arthur?’ She began to mark out a circle for the moat.

‘Only if you’ll be my Guinevere,’ he answered cheerfully, beginning to dig.

‘Didn’t she come to a sticky end, what with Lancelot and all? Can I be Morgan le Faye instead?’ She paused and looked up. ‘Always fancied being a baddie.’

He frowned over. ‘Is that the one depicted in all those torrid Victorian paintings, with all the hair and dramatic robing?’

‘Torrid Victorian paintings? Wash your mouth out, Johnny Starling. Nineteenth century art happens to be a favourite of mine, especially the Pre-

Raphaelites. They loved a bit of red hair.'

'I can definitely see you in wind-blown purple velvet. Somewhere in my memory I can picture a painting of Morgan le Faye.' He straightened, thinking. 'Or was that Samson and Delilah? A head in a pot?'

Callie giggled. 'Maybe you're thinking of Isabella and the pot of basil. Samson got away with only his hair cut off, not his head. There's a painting which is an illustration of a Keats poem of Isabella and her murdered lover, Lorenzo. It's a Holman Hunt. Poor Lorenzo's head was chopped off and Isabella buried it in a pot of basil and watered it with her tears.'

'Jeez,' Johnny said affably.

'You may be a bit of a writer, but you know diddly-squat about art.'

'Or Keats apparently. That poem slipped by me.' He pointed his sparkly mauve plastic spade at her. 'And here's me having visited most of the major galleries in the world. A shocking admission.'

'Then I'll just have to complete your education.'

'Is that a threat or a promise?' He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

'Whatever you want it to be. Now, get digging, King Arthur, or the tide'll be back and sweep your castle out with it.'

For thirty contented minutes they dug, filled buckets and finally cut a channel to the sea which allowed the moat to fill.

'If I say so myself, that's a pretty good effort.' Callie stood back. Rubbing her sandy hands vigorously down her shorts, she took a photo on her phone. 'Wait until Frida sees this. She'll think I've lost my mind.'

Johnny laughed, took a few pics on his phone and then slung a casual arm around her shoulder. 'Love the crenellated walls. It's a masterpiece.'

The girl with the flags approached. She had lustrous dark red hair and a beaming smile. 'Hey. Looking good. Have your kids finished this? If so, I'll take a pic and stick a flag in it. I'm judging them all at the end of the day.'

'Thing is, we don't–' Callie began.

The woman did a double take as realisation dawned. ‘Oh yeah, Eli said. My little brother,’ she explained. ‘Grudgingly helping me out, claiming to be bored rigid. Think you’ve livened up his day no end. You guys entered yourselves, didn’t you? Fabbie. And you put in a really generous donation too. Can’t wait until I tell Jamie, that’s my husband. He crews on our lifeboat.’ She shoved the clipboard under her arm and thrust out a hand. ‘I’m Lucie. Can I say thank you on behalf of Lullbury Bay RNLI? If you ever fancy a pint of rough cider, you can find me and Jamie plus some of the other crew in The Old Harbour on a Friday night. Come on down. It’s a good craic.’

Callie took her hand and shook it. ‘Callie Thorne.’

Johnny stepped forward. ‘And Johnny Starling. Nice to meet you, Lucie. And thanks for the invite. We may well take you up on your offer. I’m writing an article on British seaside holidays. I’d love to get your viewpoint.’

‘That why you entered the sandcastle comp?’ Lucie giggled.

Johnny glanced at Callie with a conspiratorial smile. ‘It was one reason.’

‘Well, if you want the lowdown on Lullbury Bay, it’s no problem. Me and Jamie have lived here all our lives so what we don’t know about the town isn’t worth knowing. I was a Wiscombe before I married, still am really. Big local family, there are millions of us around.’

‘I know Dave Wiscombe from the Art School,’ Callie said.

‘My uncle. Have you entered the competition? Hang on,’ Lucie gave Callie a penetrating look. ‘You’re Calliope Thorne, the artist who does those huge flowery abstracts, aren’t you? They’re fabulous. I had a quick look-see when Uncle Dave was putting them up. I’d love one but haven’t the wall space. I live in a little flat next to the yacht club.’

‘I am.’ Callie blushed, embarrassed at being recognised. ‘Lovely place to live.’

‘It’s ace and handy for Jamie to get to a shout but it’s not huge. And I’m a student, so moving out isn’t an option any time soon.’

‘What are you studying?’ Johnny asked.

‘English lit.’ Lucie pulled a face. ‘Which I love as I’m a real bookworm but it’s not exactly going to get me walking into a job.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I’m an English lit grad. I’ve made a living of a sorts from journalism.’

‘Have you?’ Lucie looked animated. ‘I’d love to talk to you about all that sometime, if I can. I’d like to write books, but fiction doesn’t pay the rent unless you’re JK Rowling.’

‘Be more than happy to. Then I’ll–’ he glanced at Callie, ‘*–we’ll* see you in the pub.’

‘Just don’t ask him anything about Keats,’ Callie put in, unable to resist, receiving a poke from Johnny’s elbow.

‘Okaaay,’ Lucie said, looking bemused. ‘It’s a date, then,’ she added, more cheerfully. ‘And I take it you’ll both be at the Shakespeare up at the castle?’

‘Oh yes. Wouldn’t miss it,’ Johnny said.

‘See you there too then. And can I just say again how brilliant it is that you’ve entered the sandcastle comp. I’ve just about had enough today, of precocious Fenellas and Tarquins and their helicopter mummies doing all the work for them. Oof, better go, duty calls.’ Lucie looked over to where Eli was trying to deal with a queue. ‘Need to rescue Eli. Don’t forget to take a pic of your masterpiece.’

‘Already done.’ Callie waggled her phone. ‘But thanks for the reminder. My daughter would never forgive me if she thought she’d missed out on this.’

Lucie giggled. ‘Here, hand me your buckets and spades, I’ll take them back for you and then you can escape.’ She began to jog over to the tent and put up a hand as she went. ‘See you sometime then.’

As they meandered through the sandcastles, Callie said, ‘You were very kind to Lucie.’

Johnny frowned. ‘Was I? I didn’t think I did much. When I started out, I had a fantastic mentor. I like opportunities to pay it forward. And I like talking to young people.’

‘Have you any children of your own?’

He shook his head. ‘None that I know of.’

‘Would you like some?’

‘Think I’m happy being an uncle. All the fun and none of the responsibility.’

‘True.’ Callie looked about her happily, neatly dodging a beach ball. She stooped and threw it back to the owner. ‘You know, I don’t think I’ve been anywhere so friendly. Almost straight away I met an eccentric but charming old man called Austin, then there’s Tracey in the Sea Spray Café and another woman I met in there called Avril. She was lovely. Hadn’t moved here all that long ago herself.’

Clambering up the steep sandy steps to the promenade, they strolled westwards, the sun in their eyes. Callie sucked in a deep breath of briny sea air, inhaling scents of vinegary chips and sweet cloying candyfloss. ‘I mean, I know it’s a cliché, running away to the seaside but I could almost see myself living here.’

Johnny raised his brows. ‘Big change.’

‘And a pipe dream. Mortgage to pay. Life and friends in Worcester.’

He shrugged, putting a companionable arm through hers. ‘Mortgages can be covered by renting property out. It’s only a jaunt up the M5 back to see your friends.’ He spread an arm to the busy seaside-y scene. ‘And, living here, you’d be popular with visitors.’

‘Oh yes, a really quick jaunt up the M5. On all days except an August Saturday.’ Callie lifted her face to the sun. ‘You’ve moved all over the world. Moving somewhere new isn’t a big thing for you. I haven’t. I’ve

lived in the same city all my life.' *If only I could relocate here.* The treacherous thought nagged. She shoved it away. It was nothing more than a dream.

Fourteen

George Stubbs 1724–1806
English painter. Best known for his paintings of horses but he also painted dog portraits, especially working breeds and gun dogs.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Halfway up God Almighty Hill they paused to catch their breath.

Callie rested against the wall of the striking Victorian house called Christmas Tree Cottage. She remembered this was where Avril said she lived. It was a pretty house and the view of the harbour was impressive even from this low down the hill. Amused, she watched as a gull flew overhead, its beak full of stolen booty. Johnny had been in a great mood today, so easy to get along with. It was in direct contrast to how he'd been after returning from the party. Granted her recall was hazy but she could remember his tight lips and closed face. He'd said it wasn't her being drunk, so what had been the cause? 'I hope you don't mind me asking you something–' she let the sentence trail, wondering if she was going to spoil what had been a happy morning.

Johnny turned to her, leaned his elbow on the wall beside her and lifted up his sunglasses. 'Ask away.'

‘You seemed a bit out of sorts after the party. And you said it wasn’t because I was completely hammered.’

‘It really wasn’t you. As I’ve said, you make a very sweet drunk.’ He looked down and scuffed sand off his deck shoes. ‘My family has that effect on me although I try not to let them get to me. After hearing all about *your* parents, I really should stop being quite so self-indulgent and man up. Remember your advice about seeing my family as people in their own right.’

‘Easier said than done when you’re trying to break the habit of a lifetime.’ Callie winced. ‘And I hate that phrase, “man up”. I’m all for getting emotions out there and dealing with them, *especially* if you’re a man.’

‘Well, rest assured, it really was my family that made me moody – for which I apologise.’ He gave an enigmatic smile. ‘It wasn’t you, or at least not in the way you think. Shall we?’ Offering her an arm, they resumed the ascent.

Callie, frustrated by his answer, concentrated on breathing, intent on probing further when back at the house. What had he meant? However, when they got to Sea Haven House’s pretty front garden, an older woman and a black spaniel stood waiting for them. Dressed in a pink flowered shift with a turquoise scarf holding her long silver hair back, the woman’s face bore an anxious expression.

‘Ah you must be Mr Starling.’ Coming forward she grasped his hand and shook it. She did the same with Callie and with a surprising strength. ‘And you must be Miss Thorne. Allow me to introduce myself, I’m Miss Grosvenor. Grace to my friends, of which I hope to count you as two. And this is Vinny. Short for Vincent. Both the love and bane of my life. Say hello Vinny.’

Callie bent down to greet the dog. His coat a shimmering black, he possessed enormous mournful eyes and a beautiful plumy tail. He nuzzled

at her hand, his tail wagging so furiously his entire bottom wiggled.

‘Oh my dear,’ Grace exclaimed. ‘He likes you. He doesn’t take to everyone. He’s most unlike a spaniel in that way. They’re usually best friends with everyone at first acquaintance.’

Callie straightened and Vinny jumped up, putting his front paws on her hip.

‘Goodness. What a naughty boy. Get down, Vinny. I do apologise.’

‘Don’t worry. I love dogs. Just never had the right lifestyle to have one. Vinny reminds me of a black cocker I used to know when a kid.’ Callie heard the regret in her voice. A little voice in her head suggested if she gave up teaching, she’d have time for a dog. *And no money,* she reminded herself. *Can’t live on air.* She tickled the spaniel’s soft ears and he whickered in ecstasy. If only people were so easily pleased.

‘I’ve come to apologise about the mix-up,’ Grace continued. ‘About your bookings. I feel quite dreadful.’

‘Of course,’ Callie said warmly. ‘You’re the Miss Grosvenor who owns Sea Haven House. We’ve muddled through, the two of us, so please don’t worry about the double-booking.’

The relief on Grace’s face was palpable. ‘I’m so relieved to hear it. I confess it’s been preying on my mind.’

‘Why don’t you come on in,’ Johnny suggested. ‘We’ve been down on the beach and have worked up a thirst. I’ll put the kettle on.’

‘Dear boy, how kind.’

They all trooped into the kitchen. Johnny began making tea and Callie opened the French doors to let Vinny out in the garden. He sped off, doing mad little sniffing circuits, nose to ground. She laughed. He was the most delightful dog.

With mugs of tea in hand they sat on the sofas, Grace on one and Johnny and Callie opposite, side by side. Callie was very aware of her bare

knee next to Johnny's, then she concentrated on Grace as she began speaking.

'Firstly, can I say, in all my years of running Sea Haven House as a holiday let, I have never made such a mistake and double booked. I'm normally so careful about these things. I check and check and then check again. My children say I should get it all online, but, my dears, I'm nearly eighty. I can't bear messing about with computers. Besides, my method has always been foolproof. Up until now.' The woman sipped some tea looking agitated. 'I'm not making excuses,' she paused, 'well actually I am, I suppose, but I haven't been at all well and I managed to muddle up the dates. I had Mr Starling's booking down for next month. For the month of September.' She tutted in exasperation. 'I remember thinking how unusual it was that two guests wanted such long lets. You were both asking for three weeks when most only want a week at most. I really should have taken more care.' Her voice trembled.

'Please don't get upset,' Callie said. Glancing at Johnny she added, 'I think I can say for both of us that it's working out quite well to share.'

Johnny nodded. 'I completely agree.'

Grace's shoulders slumped. She looked almost tearful. 'I'm so glad,' she said on a long sigh. 'You have no idea how relieved I am.' She closed her eyes for a second, calming herself down then she snatched in a quick breath, opened her eyes and seemed a different person. Brightening, she added, 'I must say it's a privilege to have a fellow artist living in Sea Haven House. I so much admire your work, Miss Thorne.'

'It's Callie, please. And thank you. Although I'm not sure I count as a proper artist. I'm an art *teacher* more than an artist.'

'Rubbish,' Grace said stoutly. 'I popped in to take a peek at your work when it was hung and am completely delighted with it.' She leaned forward and winked. 'I really shouldn't divulge but I'm on the judging committee

and a lot of old fuddy-duddies they are too. Dave Wiscombe and I joined forces in support of your beautiful paintings to get you into the final.'

Callie felt Johnny slide her a look. 'I'm going to have to see these paintings,' he said. 'Everyone is praising them to the hills.'

'And so you should, young man. They're excellent.'

Callie stifled a giggle at Johnny being so roundly scolded. 'Did you say you're an artist too, Miss Grosvenor?'

'Grace please. And yes, I am. Or rather was. Events have rather overtaken my artistic pursuits so these days I make sure I support others instead.' She held out a hand. It was gnarled and white knuckled. 'Arthritis has struck, much to my dismay. I find myself having to limit myself to the odd watercolour.' She gave a tinkly laugh. 'And, indeed, they are very odd. But I take inspiration from that dear man, Matisse, who, even in his dotage and when he could no longer paint his masterpieces, still created art using cut out paper. The creative force in us is strong and should not be ignored.'

'Are you responsible for the art prints in here. I felt right at home as soon as I saw them.' Callie nodded to the Georgia O'Keeffe 'Blue Flower' abstract hanging on the sitting room wall. It was a curiously erotic choice for a holiday let.

Grace smiled. 'I am.' She shuddered a little. 'I cannot bear to see white walls. It's anathema to my soul. One needs art to cherish, to enrich. Why, even cave men painted images and I should imagine they had rather more pressing things to do.'

Callie's interest in the elderly woman quickened. The outer package may be old and ailing but the spirit inside shone young and vital. 'Tell us about your art career. That's if you don't mind.' She rose and topped up Grace's mug. 'Biscuit?'

'Mind? Of course I don't mind. I'll bore anyone who's willing to listen. I'll say no to a biscuit, if I may. Sugar doesn't agree with me any longer. Now, my art career.' She huffed out a short breath. 'Oh it's all so long ago.

Another life. I studied at the Slade and then had some success with my life studies.' She chuckled. 'I caused no little controversy being a very young woman painting the nude male figure. It wasn't really the done thing back then.' She eyed Johnny and her lips twitched. 'But I always say a naked male can be a work of art in itself, don't you agree, Callie?'

Callie, now back next to Johnny on the sofa, sensed him stir. She couldn't tell if he was amused or embarrassed. 'And did you go on to have success?'

'I did. Some. Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1966. A strange year. We were all caught between the establishment, in their suits and the new youth with their jeans and long hair. Ah, the sixties. Such a glamorous exciting time to be alive. London was the beating pulse of the planet then.' She giggled girlishly. 'Swinging London. We swapped soggy Brussel sprouts and cold mashed potato for pasta arrabbiata in the new trattorias and danced to Mick Jagger. To be British at that time was to be cool and happening. Oh the pop music, the football. We were all on top of the world.' She leaned forward and said with glee, 'Can you picture me as a dolly girl? Well, I was. All white foundation, back combed hair and enormous black spider false lashes.' She paused and sipped her tea, thinking. 'And then it all stopped. At least my public art life stopped.'

'But why?' Callie couldn't imagine why a vibrant life should come to a halt.

'I married,' Grace said simply. 'Not that my darling husband banned me from painting but he was a busy man with an important career, the children came along and,' she shrugged, 'the rest, they say, is history. I kept it up but have to confess only as a hobby.' She sighed a little and finished her tea. 'In my new role as a mother I *always* encouraged my children to draw and paint and make. It's so important when young, don't you agree? I was so happy creating with them.' She smiled. 'Such wonderful times with the three of them elbow deep in mess at the kitchen table.'

Callie couldn't help but reflect on her childhood, sterile and dull until she'd discovered art at Donna's house. Her mother would never countenance a creative hour at the kitchen table. Wouldn't dream of spending money on anything deemed so frivolous and, horrors, it would create far too much mess.

'Not that it did any good,' Grace continued, matter-of-factly. 'My children turned into hugely important but strictly non-artistic business people. Their skills favoured their father rather than me.' Her faded blue eyes twinkled. 'But what can you do? I couldn't force them to become artists.' She winked. 'And besides, they are terribly successful and now keep me in my old age and in the manner to which I have become accustomed. So I benevolently forgive them.' She paused. 'And press colouring sheets and stubby crayons into the hands of my tiny grandchildren. The genes will out somewhere and somehow!'

Callie laughed. 'I wish I'd had a mother like you growing up. Mine didn't value art in any way.'

'Oh my dear. How ghastly.'

Grace's sympathy was so sudden and heartfelt, Callie felt tears prickle. Had her childhood really been so awful? In some ways she supposed it had.

The moment was broken by Vinny bounding in from the garden. He barked, turned circles and then flopped at Callie's feet, staring adoringly up at her.

Grace chuckled. 'You *have* made a conquest, dear Callie.' Getting stiffly to her feet, she added, 'And now, I must leave you good people to enjoy the rest of your day.'

Callie and Johnny rose and Grace lifted her cheek to him for a kiss. 'Good bye, dear boy. So marvellous to meet you.'

Callie saw her to the door. 'It's been lovely meeting you.' She meant it. The woman was someone she wanted in her life. 'I hope you'll be at the awards ceremony.'

‘Try keeping me away, my darling girl. Of course I will.’ She leaned in closer. ‘And don’t let anyone stop you making art. I can tell it’s in your soul and you’ve been heart starved of it. Don’t do as I did and let it simply become a hobby. Make it the very reason for existing, your life force!’ After this odd speech, she added, ‘By the way, I rather like your young man. I spied how he was looking at you. Maybe having to share a house hasn’t been too much of a hardship, after all.’

Fifteen

WEDNESDAY EVENING 14TH AUGUST

John Singer Sargent 1856–1925
Leading portrait artist of his generation. Discussion point: what do his portraits tell us of the feminine idea of beauty? Image versus reality.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie took a pint of water up to her room. She was hot and sand-sticky, but after a shower and a long, indulgent pamper session that included a desperately needed conditioning hair mask, she felt fresher.

The view from the window drew her so she stood, breathing it in. The sun, edging lower into the west, cast mellow golden shadows onto the rooftops and the sea was a dappled purple. She wished her mood was equally tranquil but couldn't stop thinking about what Grace Grosvenor had talked about.

She hadn't plans for this evening and was glad. She hadn't stopped since getting here and was tired. A glass of wine and a fat bestseller beckoned. Padding back downstairs, she was relieved to find Johnny had gone out and she had the house to herself.

Grabbing a bottle of white, a glass and a family pack of Doritos she snuck back upstairs and shut the door. For some reason she craved privacy.

It was weird. She liked Johnny. She liked him a lot. Couldn't deny his attractiveness and envied and admired his worldliness. But this evening she wanted to be alone.

Setting herself up on the chair in front of the open window she inhaled the gentle salty breeze, poured a glass and opened the crisps. Finding her place in her book, she began to read. Ten minutes later she slapped it shut in annoyance. Unable to concentrate, she stared out of the window at the darkening blueness and let her thoughts drift.

Why had her parents been like that? Why had they painted their walls a dirty magnolia, unrelieved by even one colourful cheap print. Why had they covered the sofa in plastic when they could easily afford to get it cleaned or replaced? Why had her mother pounced avariciously on the yellow-ticketed items in the supermarket? Why did her dad drive a meticulously maintained old car until it keeled over through exhaustion? Why did they keep the curtains on the front windows resolutely closed at all times? Why had they no friends, or hobbies, didn't belong to any groups or clubs, scorned any overtures of friendship from neighbours and relatives? Why had they allowed so little joy into their lives?

The carefulness and penny pinching she could understand if they were badly off, but they sat on a fortune taking no pleasure out of what it could give them.

She'd said to Johnny she believed in pursuing any opportunity that came along but that was more wish fulfilment than truth. Yes, she tried to open up to as much as possible but, with a demanding job, a needy daughter and a mortgage to pay, she was limited as to how much she could actually do. Mostly, her time was spent head down getting on with the everyday, dull minutia of life. Like everyone else she knew.

Her friend Donna had four children. She spent her life taxiing the older ones around to their hundreds of clubs and social events, and potty training the youngest. She knew Donna loved family life, but she also knew it didn't

leave much time or energy for herself. Callie's lips pursed as she sipped her wine. In contrast, Donna's husband, a lovely, devoted husband in many ways, never seemed to struggle to find the time for his thirty-mile cycle rides every Saturday. And did so apparently guilt-free.

Was it true men were more able to compartmentalise their lives into next little boxes: family time, hobby time, work? Her thoughts strayed back to Johnny. His peripatetic lifestyle had only been possible because he'd stayed commitment free. Could she have had a similar life, if Frida hadn't come along?

The contrast between her life and Johnny's seemed more acute the better she got to know him, and it was beginning to make her feel dull in comparison. Callie loved her daughter with a fierceness that blazed and never regretted having her, but she often wondered what her life would have been had she not become pregnant so young.

But it wasn't just that which preyed on her mind. There was something else too.

Discontent overwhelmed her, bitter and irrational. Reaching for her phone, she clicked on Donna's number.

'Callie, great to hear from you, babe. How are you doing in sunny Dorset?'

'Have you got time to chat?'

'Hold on a sec.'

Callie heard voices mumbling in the background, a teenager moaning sulkily and a wail from the toddler, all overridden by the deep voice of Donna's husband. A clink of glass on bottle, the glugging of wine and a deep sigh followed.

'All good,' Donna said. 'Graham's doing the kids tonight to make up for disappearing with his men in Lycra all Saturday. Again. He owes me big time.'

Callie smiled. Perhaps she didn't need to worry about her friend after all. She had her life sorted.

'So, what gives, Cal? I have wine and am all ears for the next thirty minutes until Graham pings the Charlie Bigham fish pie.'

'Do you think I'm influenced by my parents?'

She heard her friend take in a sharp breath. 'Going right in with the heavy, Cal. What's brought this on?'

Callie described Grace Grosvenor and how her amazing art career had been cut short by having children. 'She's got me thinking. I don't regret having Frida, how could I?' She paused and then said what was really worrying her. It came out all in a rush. 'I'm beginning to think, having Frida so young and fixating on work and keeping a roof over our heads… Well, I'm terrified it's making me as careful as my parents are. That my life is turning out as mind-numbingly tedious as theirs.'

Donna chuckled. 'Well, firstly, I don't think there's any comparison between you and your parents. Mum always thought there was a bit of a mental health problem going on there. How your parents lived – and still live – isn't normal, Cal. I don't think you realised just how abnormal it was until you began coming over to my place.'

Callie gulped some wine, giving herself time to answer. It was rare that Donna was so honest. 'You don't know how grateful I am for what you all did for me. How grateful I'll always be. I don't think I began properly living until I got to know you and your parents. I thought how my mum and dad lived was totally normal.'

'Of course you did. But how could you think otherwise? We all of us grow up with what we think as normal because it's normal *for us.* It's only when we branch out in life, see a bit of the world, that we find out every family has its own eccentricities and other people do things differently. My family are the same. Graham can't get over some of their quirks.'

'Just that my family had some *extreme* quirks.'

‘That they did, babe. Just as my poor little Alfie thinks it’s perfectly natural for him to go to bed at the same time as his three-year-old sister just so his old dad and me can have a five-minute breather, a glass of red and a ready meal.’ Donna giggled. ‘Poor old sod. He’ll only find out once he gets to uni how wrong that is.’

Callie giggled. Talking to Donna always set her right. ‘Not sure that’s a quirk, more of a survival tactic. How are the other two?’

‘No problem at all. Like all good teenagers they stay in their rooms, glued to their screens, only emerging for the odd snort and shuffle.’

Callie smiled. She knew Donna was exaggerating.

‘It sounds as if you’re really worried, Cal?’

Callie heard the clink of glass on glass again. Donna must be pouring herself another. ‘I’m beginning to realise how much it’s been nose to the grindstone all my life. All work, no joy, just to actually survive.’

‘But you live as well. You come to choir, go to the theatre. We go out for a drink when we can.’

‘I think I want more than that, Donna.’ Callie chewed her lip. ‘I think,’ she paused and then went on more decisively as the idea took hold, ‘I think I want a change of direction. A new beginning. I’m really terrified I’m going to end up like my parents, sitting on a thirty-year-old sofa which has been preserved with plastic–’

‘If you lived with a messy three-year-old you wouldn’t knock a plastic sofa cover.’

‘I know. I know. That’s not what I meant. Oh, I don’t know what I *do* mean. I just feel scratchy and unsettled. I want change but I’m terrified to make it happen.’

‘Well, there’s a lot to consider,’ Donna said thoughtfully. ‘Are you talking about giving up teaching?’

‘Maybe.’

‘You can’t do that without thinking through the consequences. Eating is quite important for instance. How are you going to pay the mortgage? And what about Frida? This Grace Grosvenor, she sounds a character, but life was different back in the sixties. And I bet she came from a well-heeled background.’

‘I think she did.’

‘So had the comfort of mummy and daddy’s money to fall back on, not to mention her wealthy husband. And jobs were easier to pick up and drop back then; you knew there was another one in the pipeline. I know Graham’s dad got through about fifteen jobs in his twenties before he settled on one. We’re all a bit more constricted now. Can’t just give up a job cos there’s no guarantee you’ll walk into another one.’

‘Yes.’ Callie tried to keep the defeat from her voice. It was the truth, but she didn’t want to hear it. She couldn’t give up teaching just like that. She had to be realistic.

‘Soz, babe. I lapsed into the speech I give the kids when they moan about their exams. I’m trying not to be the pushy parent but the sort of world they’ll inherit frightens the bejeezus out of me. If you want my opinion, I don’t think for a minute you’ve been damaged by your parents. You’ve coped brilliantly with what life has thrown at you, made of it what you can–’

‘Do I have any joy though?’ It was Callie’s turn to interrupt.

‘Of course you do! Is that what’s behind all this introspection?’

‘It’s just that my parents have no enjoyment in anything. Never opened up their life to anything new. I don’t want that for me and Frida.’

‘Rubbish. You’ve done the absolute best for Frida. Given her lots of joy.’

‘On a budget,’ Callie said, bitterly.

‘Like lots of parents, single and otherwise. And Frida’s not going to be around for ever, my love. She’ll spread her wings at some point. She

already has in a way. I reckon this Ibiza holiday will be the making of her. Then maybe you can investigate *your* next adventure in life.'

'Maybe it's important that I learn how to live now?'

'You *do* know how to live. You're just like ninety-nine per cent of the rest of us, concentrating on emptying the dishwasher, doing the school run, paying the council tax.' Donna stopped to take a breath and then continued more kindly. 'Look, I think you've had a shitty year at work and this is the first chance you've had to put your head over the parapet, have a look around and breathe. Life's busy, babe, but maybe it's a good thing it doesn't give us the luxury of time for navel-gazing.'

'You think I'm being self-indulgent?'

She heard Donna blow out a frustrated breath. 'Maybe. A little. Look, you're on holiday. Enjoy it. Drink some wine. Eat ice cream. Get some sun. Relax, love. And then come back to reality to–'

'Pay the bills.'

There was a silence.

'What's the alternative, Cal?'

'There isn't one. You speak words of wisdom as ever.' Even as Callie admitted her friend was right, a little shard of rebellion lodged in her heart. She wanted a different way of living. Wanted to break free. But how could she? And was she brave enough?

'Got to go. I can hear Graham thundering down the stairs. We'll speak again. Don't do anything hasty, will you? Send me a postcard and I'll treat you to a humungous glass of Chablis when you're back. Love you.'

'Love you, Donna,' Callie said softly and clicked off the call. She stared out to the now inky-blue velvet sky. Was this it? Was this all she had to look forward to? Work until into her late sixties at a job with which she was disenchanted and which was stressing her out, the odd break away, painting as a hobby? What had Grace said? *Make art your life force!*

Callie refilled her wine glass and sipped some, feeling the cool liquid glide down her throat. It was easier said than done. She had a life most people would envy. A secure job. A roof over her head. A loving daughter. Good friends. To change it would risk losing it all. Did she want change that badly? She gulped down more wine. But her life wasn't enough. She now knew it wasn't. It just remained for her to be brave enough to do something about it. But had she the courage?

Her phone buzzed. A text from Frida.



Callie stared at the mummy endearment in shock. Frida never reverted to the childish term unless something was very wrong.

Sixteen

THURSDAY EVENING 15TH AUGUST

Georgia O'Keeffe 1887–1986
American modernist painter. Look at technique, especially in still life – how does she capture texture? What makes it so sensual?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

The following day dawned hot and humid. Callie spent the day painting, had a quick phone call with Frida who assured her, despite her best mummy interrogation techniques, that all was well, and returned home to get ready for *Twelfth Night.*

Callie felt curiously uneasy and it wasn't just the call with Frida. Her daughter's blithe tones hadn't convinced her that everything was okay in Ibiza. She was also apprehensive about spending more time in Johnny's company. The more she saw of him and learned about him, the stronger the attraction. No longer denying the effect he had on her hormones, she recognised he represented something she'd never had in her life, a sophisticated well-travelled view that was very attractive. He'd lived, *really* lived, had travelled all over the world, had experienced so many more things than she had. As she'd said to Donna on the phone, she'd had her

head down slogging away, too busy worrying about paying the bills to swim to the surface of life, take a breath and appreciate all that was on offer.

Her phone buzzed just as she'd stripped for a shower. Standing naked in her bedroom, she read the text that had just landed. It was from Donna.

> Meant to tell you this yesterday but you went all existential on me. Remember Vivek Patel?

Callie did. He'd been at college with them all. She and Sunil had done teacher training and Vivek and Donna had studied business studies. Donna had always said Vivek had a mind like a steel trap and was destined for great things.

> He's back in Worcester. Multi-millionaire apparently. Bought up several local companies. We missed our chance there. He was gorgeous too!

Callie smiled. She knew Donna had liked Vivek. Along with Sunil, they'd often gone out as a four. Their happy, casual trips to gigs at the Student Union seemed long ago and so innocent. It was only when the hot water of the shower blasted into her face and she spluttered before adjusting it, she remembered Vivek Patel was Sunil's cousin.

She dressed in her black jeans and silk top again. Had she known her holiday was going to be packed with social events she would have brought more clothes. Downstairs, she spotted Johnny sitting in the garden drinking wine. Pausing in the kitchen diner before going through, she luxuriated in studying him undetected. Long legs crossed at the ankle and clad in cream linen, a loose white shirt unbuttoned low revealing a tanned chest with a sprinkling of dark hair, sunglasses resting on a high-bridged nose. Unsmiling, his face bore a severe expression and she wondered what he was thinking. He'd caught the sun but, whereas she went pink and freckly, he'd acquired a bronzed glow and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to the elbow revealing long brown forearms which she found impossibly sexy.

Going through the French doors, she was suddenly strangled with nerves. ‘Hi, Johnny. Haven’t seen you today.’

He raised his glass. ‘Wine before we go? Did you see my note about times?’

He’d left her a note on the kitchen noticeboard, in his usual thoughtful way. ‘I did. Thank you.’ Slipping into the deck chair next to him, she added, ‘And a glass of wine before we go would be very acceptable.’

He poured her one. Handing it over he asked, ‘Good day?’

‘Not bad. Painted in my spot in the gardens again. Only bothered by an elderly couple who were actually very sweet. We had a great discussion about Georgia O’Keeffe.’

‘Georgia O’Keeffe?’

‘One of my favourite painters. The print on the sitting room wall is one of hers.’ Callie got out her phone, skimmed through a few images and held one up to show him. ‘Here’s another.’

Johnny perched his sunglasses on top of his head and scrutinised it. ‘Oh. Of course. I knew I knew the name. American?’

‘Yes.’ Callie took the phone back and admired the image of the pink hibiscus before clicking it off. ‘So you do know a little about art then?’

‘I was in New York and remember seeing some of her paintings. Very sensual. Loved the vivid colours.’

Callie suppressed a sigh. ‘You’ve been to so many places.’

‘True. I’ve travelled the world but it’s not without its downsides. I don’t have a home of my own, or children. Being in Stratford is the closest I’ve been to settling anywhere.’

‘What I wouldn’t give to see her stuff in the flesh. I’d love to go to the Met or the MoMA. The only thing I use my passport for is for identification.’ Callie tried, and failed, to keep the sulkiness from her voice.

He observed her over his wine glass. ‘You okay? You seem a bit out of sorts.’

‘Just having a moody day, I think. Sorry.’ Shaking her head she held her glass up. ‘This, and the prospect of *Twelfth Night* is improving things.’



Johnny had somehow acquired seats on the front row so the view of the stage was perfect. Callie leafed through her programme absorbing the atmosphere and trying to shrug off her lingering fretful mood.

Live for the moment, she reminded herself. The actors were making their way into the audience, revving them up for the performance. Some were juggling, one was playing a lute and singing, another was fire-eating. It was going to be an interesting production.

‘What did you say?’ Johnny leaned nearer.

Inhaling his spicy aftershave she forced a smile. ‘Didn’t mean to say anything out loud. I was just reminding myself to live for the moment.’

‘Excellent advice. Something I stand behind.’ He reached over and took her hand. Squeezing it, he asked, ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

She nodded, tears ridiculously near and closing her throat. ‘Absolutely fine,’ she said robustly. Turning her hand over underneath his, she squeezed back. How long had it been since she’d held a man’s hand? She yearned to tell him how she was beginning to feel but didn’t dare. She wanted to share how unsettled she suddenly felt, how rudderless and frustrated at what life had dealt her but was saved by the actors assuming their starting positions on stage and Count Orsino belting out the famous first lines.

‘If music be the food of love, play on…’



At the interval they wandered over to a long trestle table where their drinks order waited. Callie sipped her wine and looked about her. The castle green

was a magnificent backdrop for the evening. What was left of the granite walls towered above them, jagged like teeth against the night sky. Gauzy white cloth was strung from roughly hewn wooden frames, lit from below so it seemed to come alive when it billowed in the breeze. Battered flags, representing Illyria, had been dotted about at intervals and swallows flitted to and from their shadows. Simple staging but effective and atmospheric. The evening was warm and sultry and a buzz of contented chat surrounded her. It had been a good night so far and her mood had lifted a little. The production was imaginative and the acting superb. It had been easy to lose herself in it for a while.

She was saved from further introspection by Johnny slinging a casual arm around her shoulders. ‘Enjoying it?’

Gazing up at him, she couldn’t help compare herself with Viola, just witnessed on stage, hopelessly in love with Orsino.

They were interrupted by Lucie bouncing up to them. ‘Hi, sandcastle peeps. Are you having a good time? Gotta say this beats a night down The Old Harbour drinking Claud’s horrible cider. I can’t wait to see Malvolio all yellow stockinged and cross-gartered.’ She held out the skirts of her sundress. ‘I wore my favourite yellow dress in tribute. Oh, and didn’t you love Viola as Cesario proclaiming love for Olivia on behalf of Orsino? I love how it gets all so muddled up before it unravels and sorts itself out.’ Without giving them a chance to answer, she went on, ‘Are you enjoying it?’

A tall man with black hair and dressed in a navy sweatshirt and jeans, loitered self-consciously behind her. Dragging him forward she explained, ‘This is Jamie my husband. Jamie, this is Johnny and Callie. Remember I told you about them and the humongous donation.’

‘Oh yes. Sweet. Everything helps, mate.’ Jamie nodded vigorously and a boyish lock of dark hair flopped over his forehead.

‘This isn’t really Jamie’s thing, but he’s come along because he loves me. Haven’t you?’ Reaching up, Lucie plastered a sloppy kiss on his cheek. ‘Would you make me a willow cabin at my gate, or had you fallen asleep at that point?’ She passed him a pint of lager.

He grimaced. ‘Think I’d drifted off by then.’ He gestured to the castle. ‘This old place looks a treat though, doesn’t it?’

Lucie giggled. ‘Think Jamie is half hoping for a shout to come through so he can shoot off down to the station.’ At their bemused expressions she went on. ‘A shout is the RNLI crew’s term for when a distress call comes in.’ She elbowed her husband in the ribs. ‘Sadly, the sea’s been far too calm this summer for any drama. And you love a bit of drama, don’t you?’

‘I do but prefer mine on the telly box.’

‘Heathen,’ Lucie said good-naturedly. ‘You’ll have to make do with what’s on stage tonight.’

Observing their banter Callie thought Lucie seemed far too young to be married but she sensed the relationship, underneath the teasing, was strong and rooted. She watched as Jamie tweaked a curl of Lucie’s crimson hair. She’d like Frida to find someone like this. Hell, *she’d* like a bit of what Lucie and Jamie had for herself.

Irritated at her introspection, she reflected that if this is what happened when she had time on her hands to think she’d welcome a return to work. She turned to the younger woman and said brightly, ‘I’m really enjoying it. Does anyone recognise the actor playing Malvolio? I’m sure I’ve seen him somewhere.’

Jamie took a swig of lager and answered. ‘I’ve seen him somewhere before too.’ His good-looking face crinkled as he thought. Raising his pint glass in triumph he exclaimed, ‘I know! He was in Coronation Street last year.’ Elbowing Lucie back, he added, ‘See, this heathen has his uses. So, Callie, are you a Corrie fan too?’

‘I’m not but Frida, that’s my daughter, is glued to it. I wander past when she’s got it on and end up drawn in. Then I have to watch the next episode to find out what happens next. Talk about a time suck.’

He laughed. ‘It’s my guilty pleasure.’

‘And the only one you have time for, apart from me.’ Lucie slipped an arm around her husband’s waist. ‘He’s always so busy,’ she complained. ‘What did Frida think of you two building a sandcastle? Didn’t she want to join in?’

‘She would have loved it but she’s currently sunning herself in Ibiza,’ Callie answered, not challenging the assumption that she and Johnny were a couple and Frida belonged to them.

‘Lucky her.’ Lucie pulled Jamie closer. ‘What we wouldn’t do with two weeks in the sun, eh? No chance of that. We’re stoney broke. I’ve just finished my second year at uni and did bar work to get me through.’ She blew out a breath. ‘Suppose I’ll have to grow up and get a proper job when I graduate. Bring some pennies in.’

‘You had a proper job.’ Jamie looked at her fondly. ‘So there’s every chance you’ll get another one.’ He turned to them. ‘Lucie was at the estate agent’s in town for years but it was too much with studying and everything.’

Callie’s admiration for the woman grew. She seemed so clued-up and vivacious. Much more so than Frida. She wondered where she’d gone wrong with her daughter. Why did she lack the energy and ambition that Lucie had in such abundance? Guilt, never far away, washed over her, then she jumped as a fire-eater announced the end of the interval with a roar of flame.

‘Look, we’re popping down to The Old Harbour for a last drink,’ Lucie said suddenly. ‘Join us. I’d really like to talk journalism with you, Johnny, if you’re still willing.’

‘No problem, if there’s time,’ Johnny answered.

‘There’ll be plenty of time, no chance of us missing last orders. Claud won’t turn us away, we’re regulars. Please say you’ll come?’

Johnny looked questioningly at Callie. ‘Fine by me,’ she nodded back.

The fire-eater roared again, accompanied by an actor playing a flute and insisting the interval was over. ‘Better get back to our seats.’ He smiled at Lucie. ‘See you later at the pub.’

Seventeen

Hokusai 1760–1849
Painter, print maker and portrait artist, especially of courtesans and actors. Discussion point: art beyond western Europe, thinking beyond cultural boundaries. There's a big world out there to be celebrated!

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

The pub was crowded and, as the evening was still warm, they took their drinks outside to sit by the water's edge. The pub commanded the best position in town, being right by the harbour. As Callie squeezed onto the bench next to Jamie, she thought how wonderful it all was.

The lights festooned along the harbour building danced in the water. A slight breeze took the edge off the sultry heat and made the halyards on the yachts clink. And the sky merged, inky, into the calm sea beyond the harbour wall. Looking to the east, white lights led the eye along the prom to the shops inching up the steep main street in town.

She inhaled. Salt and a subtle salty, fishy odour. Worcester had a lot to offer and, up to now, she'd been happy there, but to live so close to the ever-changing shades of a coastal sea and sky would be inspiring. Her fingers ached for her paints; she longed to capture the velvety purple and

indigo. ‘Lullbury Bay must be a fabulous place to live,’ she said to Jamie, Lucie being deep in discussion with Johnny on the opposite side of the bench.

‘It is. I’m born and bred, as they say. As is Lucie. We’re both from local families, although Lucie’s is far bigger than mine. You can’t throw a pebble without hitting a Wiscombe.’

‘And you obviously love living here.’

He nodded. ‘We do.’ He spread a hand to where a fingernail moon lit a silvery path on the sea. ‘We’ve got all we need here. Family, friends, jobs. I work at the local council, Lucie’s at uni in Exeter, which can be a bit of a drive but she only has to go in twice a week.’ He shrugged. ‘We don’t have much money and I doubt we’ll ever get a foot on the property ladder but it suits us.’

‘And volunteering with the lifeboat must put you right at the heart of the community.’

‘Oh yes. Any seaside town needs its RNLI crew and the lifeboat needs the town.’ Jamie’s lips twisted. ‘We get the odd really serious shout, like a couple of Christmasses ago when we had to rescue a stricken yacht in a storm but a lot of my time is spent picking up stranded tourists who haven’t read the tide table. I do a lot of fundraising too, of course.’

‘Like the sandcastle competition?’

He took a swig of cider. ‘Like the sandcastle comp. It’s always popular. There’s a raft race on next week if you fancy it. That’s always good fun. And don’t forget to buy your town quiz sheet and raffle tickets. Lucie’s put loads of work into the quiz questions.’

‘Do you ever wonder what’s beyond Lullbury Bay?’ Callie asked, envying his rock-solid sense of his place in his community.

‘Oh yeah. Wouldn’t be human if I didn’t. Lucie gets a bit fidgety sometimes. Wants to do stuff we don’t have the money or the time for but

mostly she loves it here as much as I do. And of course, come winter the place'll be completely different.'

'In what way?' Callie tore open a bag of nuts and put them between them to share.

'Thanks.' He took a handful. 'Fewer tourists.' He nodded back to the pub with a grin. 'More lock-ins. Place goes quiet, comes back to its own. And, when you get a warm sunny day in February, it's a gift.'

'A gift?'

'Light's so clear it's like a jewel. You can see to Portland and beyond, and to Berry Head down west. You have the beach to yourself. The winter storms will have brought in sea glass and the odd fossil and the tide stretches out so far, the sand is like a mirror.' He stopped, looking embarrassed at how much he was revealing. 'Wouldn't live anywhere else.'

Callie pictured herself in front of her easel painting that wonderful light, so clear it was like a jewel. 'People keep saying that to me. That they'd never live anywhere else.'

'Well,' he admitted, flicking back a lock of hair, 'the place can be a pain in high summer. Crowded, nowhere to park. Bank Holidays are a nightmare. If I'm not on a shift at the lifeboat, I hunker down and don't go anywhere. But, give the town another month and it'll all calm down, give a sigh, shake its feathers and rest up until the new season. Christmas is really good fun. We have a carol singsong down here on the harbour, the beach huts get decorated and everyone troops up to St Winifred's in the old town for the Christmas Eve service. I mean, I'm not religious or anything but it's something I never miss. Oh, and the New Year's Day Dip is a right laugh, although I'm normally on duty then.'

'The what?'

He took another handful of nuts and said, through a mouthful, 'You get sponsored, get up in fancy dress and go for a swim in the sea.'

'In January?' Callie couldn't keep the disbelief from her voice.

Jamie laughed at her horrified expression. ‘It’s okay if you’re swimming, not that most do, all they tend to do is run in and then run straight out again. Shrieking. Think of me, standing thigh deep, making sure no one gets out of their depth or has had one too many in here beforehand. It’s brilliant fun and raises shedloads for the lifeboat. Claud here puts on food afterwards. You can’t count yourself a true Lullbury Bay local until you’ve done at least one New Year’s Day Dip.’

Looking round at the packed beer garden, it was hard to imagine Lullbury Bay in a quieter season. But Christmas in a seaside town appealed. She loved the sense of community that shone through Jamie’s words. Most of what she did was school based; she hadn’t had time to do much more beyond her weekly rock choir. The idea of throwing herself wholeheartedly into wider community life was seductive. After all, as Donna had pointed out, Frida wouldn’t be around for much longer.

Staring at Jamie’s handsome face and at the goodness that emanated from it, she fervently hoped her daughter would find a man as kind. If that’s what she wanted.

She was jolted out of her reverie by Avril appearing at her shoulder.

‘Callie! Hi. Thought it was you I saw up at the castle. Wasn’t it good? Let me introduce you to Brenda, another blow-in and a fellow Shakespeare nut.’

Callie said hello to an immaculately groomed older woman with a pin-sharp silver bob and long dangly earrings. A little girl of about ten stood with her.

Jamie stood up. ‘Room for you two if you don’t mind a squeeze. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll pop back inside and have a chat with a couple of crewmen. Hope Jago and Honor are having a good holiday, Avril?’ He ruffled the little girl’s luxurious curls. ‘Hey, Merryn, are you allowed a Coke? And can I get you and Brenda a drink too?’

‘She is,’ Avril replied, ‘but just the one or she’ll never sleep. Two white wines if you don’t mind. Thanks, my lovely. That’s ever so kind of you, Jamie. Crowded down here tonight. I was dreading going up to the bar. It’s a right ruckus in there. And, yes, Jago and Honor are having a wonderful time. Honor’s nearly exhausted her Kindle and Jago hasn’t stopped painting. Had a postcard this morning. Don’t you just love an old-fashioned postcard?’ She lifted a leg over the picnic bench, surprisingly niftily and plopped herself down next to Callie. ‘Here you go, Mer, you can sit on my lap.’

The girl eyed her loftily. ‘Not a chance. I’m happy to stand, thanks, Mum.’

‘This is my daughter, Merryn,’ Avril said to Callie, with a grin. ‘Once met never forgotten. This is Callie, Merryn, who is staying at Sea Haven House up the hill from us. She’s an artist.’

‘Cool.’ The girl’s eyes gleamed. ‘My big brother’s an artist. He’s a glass artist. Makes big panels and they go into a posh gallery in Islington. That’s in London. His name’s Jago Pengethley.’

‘But I know his work,’ Callie answered, surprised. She remembered Avril mentioning a Jago. ‘It’s beautiful. I love the colours he uses. So your son is Jago Pengethley, Avril? I hadn’t realised. He’s getting really well known.’

‘He is. He has a studio over at the Art School. We’re very proud of him, aren’t we, Merryn?’

Merryn nodded vigorously. ‘He makes little light-catchers too. I like them the most. I’ve got one of a yacht on a stormy sea. Like the storm in the play. It was good how they lit that material blue and grey and made it wave up and down to show the storm, wasn’t it? And it was all sequin-y. Caught the light.’ She nodded again. ‘Although I think *King Lear* is my favourite play.’

Callie suppressed a smile. It was a surprising statement from one so young.

‘Yes, I like how Lear goes mad. It’s a theme, you know,’ Merryn continued.

‘Is it? I’m afraid I don’t know *King Lear* very well.’

‘And the theme of *Twelfth Night* is love.’ Merryn said it scornfully. ‘Far too slushy in my opinion. I don’t want a boyfriend. Me and my best friend Holly agree boys are stupid. Holly says she’d rather have her pony and her dogs. She’s got dachshunds. They’re little with long bodies. Ever so cute. Sausage dogs – although Holly hates them being called that. We’ve got Ivy. She’s a spaniel. We rescued her. And I’ve got guinea pigs too. Have you got a boyfriend, Callie?’

Callie shook her head in response, blinking at this barrage of information.

‘Mum hasn’t either. And *Twelfth Night* should be put on in January not in the middle of the summer. It’s meant to be performed after Christmas. And of course, in Shakespeare’s time, the girls’ parts were played by boys. So, you got a boy playing a girl like Viola who was pretending to be a man. Confusing.’ Merryn pulled a face. ‘Don’t you think it was unfair not to let girls be actors?’

‘Extremely unfair.’ Callie was bemused. ‘And, actually, I often find Shakespeare confusing.’

Lucie broke off her conversation with Johnny to accept the pint of cider Jamie had brought out. ‘Is that my favourite Shakespeare expert?’ she called over. ‘Come round here and tell me what you thought of tonight’s performance.’

‘Lucie!’ Merryn scampered round the table to her and hugged her around the neck. Squeezing onto the woman’s lap they began an animated critique about the play.

Avril took her wine off the tray Jamie held. ‘Thanks, my lovely. Oh, and here’s one for you, Brenda.’ Twisting to Callie, she added, ‘I’m so sorry. Merryn can get intense.’

‘She’s obviously very clever.’

‘Too sharp for a box of knives, as my mother would say. She gets obsessed with things, but this Shakespeare craze has lasted a couple of years now.’

‘Is that what she wants to do? Act?’

Brenda leaned in from her position perched on the edge of the bench and giggled. ‘We all say Merryn can and will do anything she takes a fancy to.’ Pausing to sip wine, she added, ‘Avril tells me you’re on holiday, Callie?’

‘I am. And it’s going by so fast.’

‘Make sure you get to the food festival tomorrow. Lots of local produce on offer plus crafty stuff.’ Brenda swung her impressive earrings. ‘I always get a few more pairs of these. Made by a local jeweller.’ She eased one off. ‘Have a closer look. They’re silver and glass.’

Callie took it. She dangled the exquisite object into the light from the white lights strung along the beer garden wall. Glimmering swirling blue and green it was a miniature work of art. ‘It’s beautiful. I’d love some.’

‘Made by Dipti,’ Avril supplied. ‘She’s a friend of Jago’s. Has the next studio along from him in the art studio. She’ll no doubt have a stall at the market tomorrow. Do come along. As my son is off enjoying himself on the Isle of Skye, I’m doing him a favour and manning his stall in his absence. And I know August is far too early to mention the C-Word but Jago’s light-catchers make fabulous presents.’

Callie laughed. ‘Then I will. I could do with getting a few souvenirs and I’m definitely coveting these earrings.’

‘And you’ll be supporting local craft makers at the same time.’ Brenda lifted her glass. ‘Cheers!’

As Callie lifted hers in a return toast, she watched Lucie nodding at something Merryn said. Johnny leaned in, listening intently to the little girl. With her teacher's eye, she could see Merryn might be considered a little challenging by some, but Lucie, Jamie, Brenda and now Johnny accepted her without question. And with love.

Perhaps, if Frida had had a wider found family around her like this she would have blossomed in the same way? Not for the first time, Callie felt her single mother status keenly. She'd tried to do as good a job as she could but had had to do it alone. No parents, no grandparents. She was lucky to have Donna and Graham but they had their own family and were often busy.

The guilt returned and lay heavy. Had she done the right thing by going non-contact with her parents? Taking a glug of wine she tried to shake some common sense into herself. Of course it had been better with just her and Frida and one or two carefully chosen people in their lives rather than her parents with their poisonous philosophy. Her parents' racism alone was enough reason to go non-contact. How could she have exposed Frida to that?

Soaking up the easy chatter, listening to Avril and Brenda tell a gossipy story about someone called Marion and watching Lucie with Merryn, a great wave of something like love engulfed. Maybe it was contentment? There was something about this little town by the sea that soothed her.

Johnny lifted his head up and laughed uproariously at Merryn and the girl giggled back. Or maybe the feeling was growing love for the man sitting opposite?

Eighteen

FRIDAY MORNING 16TH AUGUST

Pieter Bruegel the Elder 1525–1569
Significant painter of Flemish Renaissance. Painter of landscapes and peasant scenes: weddings, dances, feasts. Teaching point: art as a record of history.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

As Callie wandered around the stalls in the food festival, her mouth watered. For too long she had regarded food simply as fuel to get her through and as something quick to put on the table at the end of a long day at work. She had a few standby recipes she relied upon as failsafe end-of-the-day fillers, like the carbonara she'd thrown together when half tipsy with Johnny but didn't consider herself adventurous. Frida was beginning to be interested in cooking and sometimes prepared a meal but it was still a chore for them both.

Now, looking at the tables overflowing with home-made pasties, luscious local soft fruit, enticing non-alcoholic cordials and intoxicatingly aromatic bread she had a sudden urge to buy, cook and nurture. She wasn't sure who she had to nurture but doubted Johnny would refuse the platter of locally cured meats, soft Somerset Brie, the enormous focaccia loaf and

black garlic spread she'd popped in the old-fashioned wicker basket she'd found in Sea Haven House. Adding a bottle of elderflower cordial, she also bought a bouquet of flowers from a delightful woman called Daisy.

'The sunflowers represent loyalty and wise thoughts,' the dark-haired girl said. 'The red roses mean long-lasting love and the calla lilies mean a new beginning. And if you want more, pop into my shop on the main street. You can't miss it. *Va Va Bloom, Flowers by Daisy.* Enjoy!'

Wise thoughts, love and a new beginning, pondered Callie, as she walked away, her nose deep in the bouquet, enjoying the scent of the roses as it drifted up. What could be more apt?

'Oh my dear,' said a familiar voice behind her. 'I see you're giving that old basket of mine a good outing.'

Callie turned and greeted Grace who was holding Vinny on a very short lead. The woman was wearing a faded red linen shift, her silver hair twisted up in a loose knot. 'Hello, both. Isn't this all wonderful? I've shopped till I've dropped.'

'So I see,' Grace replied, sounding amused. The old woman looked around her at the crowds milling about the cobbled square squashed in at the bottom of the main street and usually used as a car park. 'Such a good use of this space. We had a marvellous German market in this spot one Christmas.' Her nose twitched. 'Really rather good *glühwein* I seem to recall.'

Callie thought she could imagine the scene well. The square was atmospheric with walls on three sides, an arch for access and a wide-open vista of crashing sea and turquoise sky on the fourth. She'd love to see it decorated for Christmas with cute Bavarian stalls and a tree.

Peering into the basket, Grace added, 'Now, my dear, what you need with that elderflower cordial is some local gin.'

She steered Callie to a stall nearest the sea wall selling a variety of gins one of which Callie dutifully bought. 'I'm going to have a real job carting

this up God Almighty Hill,' she jokingly complained. 'All this lot weighs a ton.'

'I'll pop it all in my car for you and drop it off on my way home. It would be no trouble.'

'Really? That's incredibly kind of you, Grace.'

The woman looked positively shifty. 'Actually, I have a rather large favour to ask of you. Two if I'm being completely honest.'

'Yes?'

'Would you, could you, do you think–'

Callie hoped Grace hadn't made another booking mistake and was asking her and Johnny to move out. She was so settled at Sea Haven House now it felt like home. 'What is it, Grace? What can I do for you?'

'My family are all away at the moment, you see. On their holidays like the rest of the world in August. I have a medical appointment later this afternoon. It's in Exeter which is such a long drive and you know what it's like with the NHS, not to mention the traffic, I can't guarantee when I'll be back. My regular dog walker-sitter can't fit Vinny in.'

Callie wondered where this was going.

Grace took in a huge breath. 'So I'm asking if you'd consider looking after Vinny for this afternoon and, oh dear, I'm afraid, overnight too? I know it's an awful imposition on your holiday time but I'm in such a bind.' Grace was beginning to look flustered. 'I've waited an age for this appointment and do so want to try to get to it–' she trailed off.

Callie was so delighted it wasn't anything to do with Sea Haven House, she blurted out, 'Oh, Grace, is that all?' Without thinking how Johnny might feel about an extra housemate, no matter how temporary, she grinned and said, 'I'd love to look after Vinny. How much trouble can he be?'

'Now, there's someone who doesn't know spaniels very well,' Grace replied, looking relieved. Callie thought there may even be tears brimming. 'I'll pop him over later today, if I may, with all his toys and some food. Oh,

and his bed. He knows Sea Haven House so will feel comfortable there, but it always helps to have familiar things around you, doesn't it?' Gazing down she added fondly, 'Now, Vinny, you're going on a little holiday. Do you promise you'll be good?'

As an answer the dog, on hearing his name, lunged at Callie's basket, nearly getting his teeth round the paper packet of cold cuts.

'Oh I say, I do apologise,' Grace said. 'Shall we take your shopping to my car and then you can look around the market unhindered? I promise to drop it all off, along with this little rascal, on my way into Exeter. As long as you're sure it's not too much to ask?'

'Not at all. I was planning on a quiet night in anyway. I was out last night at *Twelfth Night* and ended up having a late night at the pub afterwards.'

'Did you, dear? We went too but didn't see you there. Jolly good production I thought. Vinny enjoyed it tremendously. We're so lucky to have things like that come to us. I'm a great fan of the Northcott, that's the theatre on the university campus in Exeter and a wonderful space it is too, but it's rather an effort to get to.'

As they walked to the car park along a narrow street opposite the square, Grace continued as she stopped at a new plate VW. 'Here we are. Pop your shopping in the boot so Vinny doesn't get his mitts on it. He sits up front with me safely tucked in with his harness.' She opened the boot and, after Callie had propped the basket in the corner, shut it with a resounding thump. Leaning in to kiss Callie on the cheek, she said, 'I do so appreciate this. I'll be at Sea Haven at about three, does that suit?'

'No problem. Hang on, Grace, you said there were two favours you wanted to ask.'

'Oh yes.' Grace shook her head. 'Mind's all over the place. We wondered if you'd be up for judging the children's art competition? It would be so lovely to have someone judging who actually knows what

they’re talking about. Our mayor is utterly divine but knows precious little about art. We rather thought you could be his guiding light. I can fill you in on what you need to know.’

Callie laughed. ‘I’d love to.’

‘Marvellous. Toodle-pip then. Come on, Vinny my lad. In the car. The day’s getting away from us.’

‘I’ll see you both later then.’ Callie watched as Vinny leaped into the passenger seat and Grace secured him. The spaniel sat bolt upright, his tongue lolling, eyes bright with a mischief.

Grace backed the car carefully out of the space. Waving her off it occurred to Callie that Lullbury Bay was wrapping its tentacles around her. If she moved here, she would already know quite a few people. Avril, she thought, could be a friend. She’d liked Brenda immediately and was already becoming fond of Grace. Contemplating the seagull sitting on the car park wall and which was glaring at her with one knowing yellow eye, she said to it, ‘Still got to find a way of making a living though, haven’t I? And I really can’t see Frida being willing to give up her city lifestyle.’

The gull suddenly took off, with a screech. Seeing the vicious beak coming towards her, Callie ducked and ran back towards the market.

Nineteen

FRIDAY EVENING 16TH AUGUST

Lawrence Stanley Lee 1909–2011
British stained-glass artist. Created windows for Coventry and Southwark cathedrals. Discussion point: art in different forms and for different purposes.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'Those are pretty.' Johnny leaned in to have a better look.

Having played with Vinny in Sea Haven's garden they'd finally tired the spaniel out and he was now snoring. Callie was making gin cocktails with the elderflower cordial she'd bought earlier.

Johnny had on worn Levis and a faded pink shirt. It set off his new suntan perfectly. Callie's knees weakened at his proximity. Turning to the kitchen work surface, she stopped pouring gin into glasses and fingered her new earrings self-consciously. 'Thank you. I bought them from Dipti. She had a stall at the market today.'

After dropping her basket off with Grace, Callie had returned to the market to have a better look. She bumped into Austin and was introduced to his imposing and quite frankly terrifying wife Aggie and she'd been rescued by Brenda. Together they'd headed to the stall Avril was running on behalf

of her son. Brenda, having slipped her arm companionably through Callie's, whispered that Aggie ran a vlog and wrote books all about making the most of life in your silver years.

'And when I say making the most of all aspects of your life, I mean *all*,' Brenda had giggled. 'She's quite the local celebrity but a little of Aggie goes a long way.'

'It would explain this. She pressed into my hand.' Callie held the business card up for inspection. A lurid pink in colour, it featured abstract lines that, on closer inspection, revealed themselves to closely resemble female genitalia. 'I may never dare venture onto her website.'

'Trust me,' Brenda intoned solemnly with a wink. 'Don't.'

Jago's light-catchers were all so beautiful Callie found it impossible to choose but had eventually bought three. Two seascapes with bobbing yachts for Frida and Donna, and a heart made of her favourite greens and turquoises for herself. She didn't have anywhere to hang it in the Worcester house which tended to be on the dark side, but it was so lovely she hadn't been able to resist.

Now, smiling at the happy time she'd had, she resumed making the cocktails and expanded on her answer to Johnny's comment. 'I loved Dipti's jewellery so bought Frida a pair of earrings too.'

He leaned a hip against the work surface, watching her. 'Have you heard from your daughter recently?'

'I tried ringing earlier, actually.' Callie frowned and added ice. 'Her phone was dead or switched off or something. Couldn't get through. Wish I'd thought to take down the details of where she's staying or knew her friend's number, but Leah and I don't get on so we're not very friendly.'

Johnny took the glasses. 'Her phone probably just needs charging. I'm sure she's fine and having a great time. Shall we sit in the garden? After all that running about with Vinny, I could do with a sit down.'

Callie followed him through the French doors. ‘Thank you for not minding about us having the dog.’

He grinned and slid elegantly into a deck chair holding the glasses aloft.

Callie admired the feat. He must have incredible core strength.

‘It’s really not a problem,’ Johnny continued. ‘He’s a great little dog and I like him.’ Casting a glance over to the spaniel, now curled up in his basket in the early evening sunshine, he added, ‘Even more now he’s asleep. Always hankered after a dog but my lifestyle was never settled enough. I’ve had one or two attach themselves to me when on a job.’

Callie saw a shadow flit over his face and also saw the determination to chase away the bad memories. ‘I tried to find them homes before I left.’ He shrugged. ‘But in situations where human life is worth little or is endangered, animals are right at the bottom of the pecking order.’ He sucked in a decisive breath. ‘However, on such a gorgeous evening, I am not going to dwell on such things. Come and sit down and tell me all about the market.’

She sat down and he passed her a drink. Sipping it, she told him about bumping into Grace and then Austin and Aggie, chatting to Dipti about how marvellous having a space at the Art School was, and having a giggle with Brenda and Avril.

He looked at her keenly. ‘You seem to have the knack of making friends.’

‘Trust me, it only seems to happen in Lullbury Bay. At home I have my school colleagues, my rock choir friends and that’s about it. What about you?’

He paused for a minute. ‘My contracts were short. Certainly when I worked for the BBC, I only stayed a maximum of three years in a posting. So it was a case of forging friendships which became intense because of the situation we were all in. A colleague who had a sister who acted likened it to the relationships formed on set. Potent and meaningful while everyone

was thrown together but quickly forgotten when we moved on. Having said all that, I do have a few friends who have lasted the pace.' His lip curled. 'I'm not a complete saddo.'

Callie laughed. 'Never ever thought you were.'

'I suppose, in many ways, we're quite similar.'

'In what way?'

'Self-reliant. Independent.'

'True.'

He gave her a casual look as he sipped his gin. 'But everyone needs someone.'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak and, instead, watched a lazy bee buzz in and out of the dusky pink echinaceas. A couple of the flowers had bent stalks thanks to an over enthusiastic Vinny.

After a pause he went on. 'I wasn't at the market, although I would have loved to have had a look.' He brushed a speck of grass off his jeans. 'Actually, I went to see my parents.'

'Oh?'

'Tried to talk to them without it raising my blood pressure to dangerous heights. It helped to see them as you do. I owe you a huge debt of thanks.'

'Me?'

'Yes. You've made me see that they nag from love, out of concern. And you've also made me realise that my issues with my family pale into insignificance with what others have to contend with. I've decided to try and build some bridges.'

'That's wonderful, Johnny,' Callie said warmly. 'I'm so pleased. I know they may have their faults but they really are marvellous. Funny, warm-hearted–'

'Eccentric as hell,' he finished.

She held up her glass in a toast. 'Where would we be without a little eccentricity?'

Johnny clinked his against it. ‘Life would indeed be a lot more boring.’

‘And you can never claim your family are boring!’

‘That they’re not.’ He laughed.

They lapsed into silence. Vinny stirred in his basket, sighed and then resettled. A blackbird dropped down, bathed vigorously in the stone bath Callie had filled earlier and then the bird lifted itself silently onto the wall, where it sat, preening its feathers.

‘Do you think you’ll ever make amends with your parents?’ Johnny asked.

She studied her gin and swished the lemon slice out with her finger. Sucking it she grimaced, enjoying its gin-soaked tartness. ‘Don’t think my story will have a fairy-tale ending.’ Nibbling the peel she added, ‘I might get in touch with my brother when I get back. It would do Frida good to have a male role model in her life, but I can’t see anything changing between me and my parents. For that, *they* need to change, and I can’t see it happening.’

The night settled around them. The light faded and tiny pinpricks of stars appeared. Callie watched, entranced, as something black flitted, silver-quick across into the palm trees. A bat. Another joined it, dancing against the luminous turquoise sky. She stared, trying to commit the image and the colours to memory, wishing she had her sketchbook to hand.

She was just about to get up and find it when Johnny said suddenly, ‘Jeez, this gin is strong. What are you going to feed me?’

Giggling, she raised her eyebrows at him. ‘Am I your servant, yours to command?’

‘Would you like to be?’

The heat that passed between them took Callie’s breath away. ‘I think we *had* better eat,’ she stuttered.

He rose effortlessly and held out his hand to help her up.

As their flesh met, a wave of electricity pulsed through her nerves so acute she thought she'd light up the sky. They stood, her breasts in her thin T-shirt pressed against him. She thought she'd explode.

The movement made Vinny wake. With a yawn he stretched and then gambolled over to them.

Callie eyed the dog, amused. 'You feed Vinny and I'll get our food ready.'

'Now who's the master? Or should I say mistress?'

Still holding his hand and still standing pressed against him, she gazed up into his clear grey eyes. 'I'm extremely confused.'

His eyes flickered as he answered. 'And you're not alone.'

Vinny, scrabbling at his jeans, broke them apart.

Twenty

Egon Schiele 1890–1918
Major figurative painter. Check images carefully for appropriate use in classroom! How does Schiele convey intense, raw sexuality? Are the paintings ugly or beautiful?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Aware Vinny was eyeing all food prep avariciously, they'd eaten, sitting side by side, at the kitchen work surface, keeping it all at a height even a bouncy spaniel couldn't reach. The combination of Brie and cured meats, along with the focaccia bread was simple but satisfying. Callie had added a salad and Johnny had produced several bottles of good Merlot and two slices of cherry tart and some clotted cream.

As Callie ate, she remembered him making a pot of tea whilst she'd perched on the same stool, poised for flight, on that first Saturday. It seemed a lifetime ago. Johnny had been a stranger then and, while she still didn't know a great deal about him, she certainly no longer regarded him as a potential axe murderer. In fact, feeling the warmth from his body as he sat next to her, all she could think about was how much he attracted her. Her throat closed with lust and a sliver of olive went down the wrong way.

Coughing, she reached for her glass. It seemed criminal to waste the wine but she glugged some down.

‘You okay?’ Johnny asked, concerned. ‘Need a thump on the back?’

Their eyes met and Callie felt a great wave of heat rise. She shook her head, dumbly. Coughing again, she found her voice. ‘I’m fine,’ she said feeling anything but. Her face must be embarrassingly crimson. ‘Think I’ve had enough to eat though.’

He nodded in agreement. ‘Let’s take the second bottle and sit on the sofa. Be more comfortable there.’ He took the Merlot and their glasses and put them on the low coffee table in front of the sand-coloured sofa. Vinny followed him, glued to the back of his legs but dropped onto the rug in front of the French doors as soon as he realised there was no food. The spaniel collapsed with a mournful sigh, nose resting on his front paws, eyes reproachful.

Callie sank down. Undecided if she was tired, relaxed, or strung out with sexual desire.

‘You all right?’ Johnny repeated.

‘Yes really. Just something went down the wrong way. Shouldn’t inhale my food with such indecent haste.’

‘It was all delicious. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome, although all I did was open a few packets. We still haven’t eaten that delicious-looking cherry pie you brought.’

‘I couldn’t eat another thing. Maybe we can eat it later? It was all exactly right for an evening as warm as tonight though. I love lots of different things to pick away at. Some of my favourite meals have been tapas or mezze.’ He went on to describe a meal eaten on a roof top restaurant in the old town of Marrakech.

Callie had been about to explain that putting together cold cuts and cheese, along with some good bread, had taken little thought and had been a welcome change from throwing something dull but nourishing onto the

table at the end of a long workday. But she kept quiet. Tonight she didn't want to be seen as the workaholic single mother who dished up quick pasta bakes. She wanted to be the woman Johnny desired.

As he opened the second bottle of Merlot she listened, rapt, to his story of kofta rich with paprika and cumin, and sardines stuffed with chermoula, all eaten under the stars on a hot Moroccan night. Dreamily picturing them lying on rugs and gazing up at a dark sky studded with stars, she promised herself she'd check Lakeland to see if they sold tagines. Then she shook her head on a suppressed laugh. She had a hot man next to her and she was thinking about cooking pots!

Johnny batted away an insect and rose to light the candles. They chased shadows around the walls and made it all impossibly romantic. Vinny grumbled so he took the dog into the garden. By the time they'd returned, Callie had downed another glass of red and made her decision.

Johnny flung himself down next to her and rested an arm along the back of the sofa. 'Hopefully the candles will keep the worst of the midges off. It's far too lovely an evening to close the doors. And sorry.' He sipped his wine, a rueful expression playing about his well-defined features.

'What for?' Callie asked, surprised.

'For boring you about Morocco.'

'Nothing you could say would bore me,' she said simply and honestly. 'You're one of the most interesting people I've met in a long time.'

'I am?' He blew out a breath. 'You flatter me but I really don't think I'm particularly interesting.'

She leaned forward. 'You've had the most fascinating life. Lived all over the world, seen so much of it. Seen and done things most of the rest of us can only dream about. It's all so exotic, so glamorous.'

Johnny looked down, suddenly unsure of himself. Placing his glass on the coffee table with careful precision, he said, 'It really isn't, you know. Oh, I know it seems that way but it's mostly living out of a suitcase,

washing your boxers in a sink and then only when there's a water supply, sitting around bored waiting for a story to break, then trying to cover it only to find your rival got there first.'

Moodily, he adjusted his wine glass so that it sat dead centre on a coaster depicting Monet's garden. A muscle worked in his cheek. 'And then there are the things you see which drive you to drink or insanity, or out of the job altogether. Trust me, it may look glamorous but it's anything but.'

Callie's compassion for him overwhelmed her. 'I'm sorry for that. It must have been hard. I didn't mean to be glib or dismiss what you've gone through.'

Taking the wine glass off her, he took her hands in his. 'You haven't. I don't think you've got a glib bone in your body.' He paused, his mouth working. 'One of the things I talked about with my parents this morning is seeking out some counselling, therapy or *something.* So I can work through the stuff that's followed me home.'

'Sounds an excellent idea. Remember I said I don't believe in bottling things up? Talking with someone properly qualified may make a huge difference. Some kind of psychotherapy, perhaps. CBT, maybe.'

'Yes, perhaps.' He stared down at their joined hands. 'I don't think my parents understood how much it's all affected me. At Inigo's christening party one of the waiters dropped a tray. It went off like a rocket. I thought it *was* a rocket. Jumped a foot. Dad looked at me as if I was mad. I've also developed claustrophobia.' He flicked her a glance. 'Can't bear small spaces. I can't be in a room without knowing where the escape route is. Have a window or door open if I can. Queues get to me too and sometimes I can't deal with crowds. Bit weird.'

'Not weird at all,' Callie replied robustly. 'It all sounds a completely understandable response to the things I imagine you've been through. And it can be worked on. You were okay at *Twelfth Night,* though?'

He shrugged. ‘I can control it some of the time. It’s unpredictable. Being out in the open air helped then. Exhausts me though.’

‘It must do. But I think it’s a really positive thing, to have decided to seek help.’

‘Hope so. This morning I finally had a long talk with my parents, explained it all, or tried to.’

‘How did they react?’

‘Surprisingly well. Jess was there, supporting me. Mum even googled some therapists.’ A smile twitched. ‘Likes to do something, does Mum. Be practical. I thought they might see it as weakness but I think, if anything, it’s brought us closer.’

Johnny was still holding her hands. His vulnerability made him even more attractive. *It’s not up to you to save him,* she reminded herself but she couldn’t help it; she was falling for him, for the whole man and if that included his issues then so be it.

She lifted his hands to her mouth and kissed them tenderly. ‘I’m so pleased you’ve talked things through with your parents. Admitting your difficulties must have been hard but I’m glad it’s brought you closer to them. And I know your life has brought you all this pain, but it’s taken you to places I can only dream of. Think of the things you’ve achieved. You make me feel so ordinary in comparison. I mean, what have I done with my life?’

‘Don’t say that, Calliope,’ he replied urgently, looking deep into her eyes. ‘Don’t ever say that. You’ve done the most wonderful things. Your body has grown a child. You’ve raised that child on your own, become the best role model that little girl could have, built your career, kept a home going. You’re a hero.’

‘I’m no hero,’ she answered stoutly.

‘Oh yes you are. Calliope, muse of all poetry.’ Reaching in he kissed her lightly on the lips. ‘Calliope.’ Her name was uttered on a long breath.

‘Tell me if I’ve got the wrong impression here but there’s something happening between us, isn’t there?’

‘Not yet,’ she breathed, too affected by the feel of his firm mouth on hers, to answer coherently. It had been so long since anyone had kissed her like this. Every nerve and sense was aflame. She forgot she was a woman of a certain age whose only fitness regime was walking to work, she forgot the marks childbearing had left as a legacy on her body, the threads of silver emerging in her hair. All she could focus on was how good this felt and her decision of earlier; if Johnny made a move she’d go with it.

‘Not yet?’ He looked taken aback. ‘I’m so sorry, I *have* misinterpreted this.’ Releasing their hands he held his up in apology. ‘I’m so sorry. So very sorry. I’ve overstepped the mark. Let’s call this a night and forget this ever happened.’

‘Don’t be sorry. I’m not.’ She looped her arms around his neck, pulling him nearer. Was she too out of practice for this? ‘I only meant nothing has happened *yet.*’

‘But?’ His mouth hovered close again.

‘But I’d like it to.’ Pulling him in, she whispered, ‘I’d very much like it to,’ and kissed him hard.

He thrust a hand through her hair and pushed her back against the sofa. At the feel of his hard body against hers, at the weight of it over her, she let out a moan of arousal and stopped thinking altogether.

It was delicious. Kissing Johnny was delicious. His mouth tasted of red wine and desire. His body was taut and muscled and exciting. And his mouth, when it found her breasts was hot and demanding. An urgent beat set up inside. If she didn’t have him now, she’d explode. She guided his hand to between her legs, bucking against him.

‘Calliope,’ he murmured, the sound coming in short breaths. ‘God, you’re driving me wild.’ He fastened his mouth onto her neck, nipping and sucking. ‘Are you sure?’

In answer, she reached down and unfastened his belt. It fell away, an erotic slither of leather. She began unbuttoning his fly, the feel of him thrilled her beyond belief. She felt reinvented, a world away from her life as teacher and mother.

A shudder rippled through him. ‘I feel about fifteen again,’ he panted. ‘Heavy petting.’ It made her giggle and he joined in. Resting his forehead against hers, he said, ‘Shall we go upstairs? I mean, I’m very fond of a sofa but it might be more comfortable.’

Clasping his face between her hands she gazed into his vivid grey eyes, made hot with desire. ‘Yes.’ Then she pulled him in for another kiss and all thought of her comfortable king-size bed was forgotten.

Someone thumped on the front door. Vinny shot into the hall, his paws scrabbling and sliding on the tiles, and threw himself against the door, barking furiously.

‘What the f–?’ Johnny came up for air.

‘Leave it.’ She pulled him back. ‘Kiss me.’

The knocking came again, a fist against the door hammering impatiently. Vinny let loose another volley of barks.

Johnny stopped. ‘They’re not going to go away. And Vinny isn’t going to shut up. It might be Grace I suppose,’ he sighed. Putting a hand through his hair and brushing it off his face, he flung himself off her.

Callie, looking at his state of disarray, felt her mouth twitch. ‘I’ll go.’

He held on to her hand as she rose. ‘Get rid of them quickly,’ he implored.

‘I’ll do my best.’ She bent over him and kissed him again, lost in the moment, only interrupted by yet another hammering on the door.

Callie took a minute to adjust her T-shirt and smooth her hair down as best she could but there was no hiding her hot cheeks and stubble-grazed lips. Hurrying to the door, she restrained Vinny by his collar and pinned on a welcoming smile. If Grace had come to collect her dog earlier than

expected, she and Johnny could get back to what they'd started. They had the whole night ahead. The thought made her dizzy with lust.

Opening the door, she gazed in blank shock at the person who stood there.

'Finally! I thought you'd never let me in.' Her daughter looked down at the spaniel. 'And, Mum, why is there a dog here?'

Twenty-One

Johannes Vermeer 1632–1675
Dutch painter. Specialised in domestic interiors of middle-class life. Does art always have to depict grand or 'important' scenes? What domestic moment would students like to represent and why?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'Have you got any money for the taxi? Driver only takes cash. You okay, Mum? You look a bit flushed.'

All sexual yearning shrivelled and fell away in a cold disappointed lump. 'Frida. What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Ibiza!'

'Mum. Money.'

Callie looked around blindly for her bag. Luckily, she'd hung it on the hook next to the front door. 'Frida,' she yelled it back into the house, to warn Johnny, 'hold on to Vinny, would you? Don't let him escape.'

'Is this Vinny?' Frida dropped to her knees and cuddled an ecstatically writhing spaniel. 'He's cute. Why's he here? Thought you were sharing with Mr Silver Fox?'

'Get up, Frida.' Callie located her purse at the very bottom of her bag and thrust it at her daughter's chest. 'No idea if there's enough in there. I

don’t have much cash on me.’

‘I know,’ Frida grumbled. ‘I mean have you ever heard of a cab not taking contactless these days. He’s holding on to my case as ransom in case I don’t go back. He’s waiting on the main road. Took me ages to find my way up that track in the dark but I knew I was in the right place as soon as I spotted your car. What a farce.’

‘Well, go back down and pay him,’ Callie snapped. ‘I’ll take Vinny into the garden out of the way and leave the front door on the latch. Go on.’

‘Okay.’ Frida pouted. ‘You’re weirding me out though, Mum. Stick the kettle on, will you? I’m desperate for a tea.’

Callie grabbed Vinny back, lifted the latch on the front door and shunted it shut with her behind before running back to Johnny. ‘It’s–’

‘I heard.’ He was still on the sofa but had got himself sorted, had had time to rebutton his shirt and fasten his belt. Smoothing his hair back, he managed a grin. ‘Timing could be better.’

‘Tell me about it.’ She put Vinny out into the garden and shut the French doors, ignoring the dog’s plaintive whines.

Johnny rose to stand in front of her. He took her hands. ‘Unfinished business?’

Callie blew out an exasperated breath. ‘Definitely.’ Rising to tiptoes she kissed him lightly. And then deepened it. She could scream with frustration. Feeling her nipples budding again in arousal, she moaned against his mouth. ‘I can’t resist kissing you.’

Frida, encumbered by her wheelie suitcase, rumbled along the hall. ‘Shall I leave this by the stairs?’ she called out. ‘I can lug it up later. Got that kettle on yet? Could murder a lemon and ginger. I mean, I know it’s a short flight but took ages on the train to get here from the airport. Sorry I didn’t ring. Phone was low on juice.’ As she entered the kitchen diner she lurched to a halt. ‘Oh!’

Callie and Johnny were several feet apart by the time Frida arrived. Callie bit her lip in dismay as she regarded the scene and saw it through her daughter's eyes. The candles lending a seductive light, the wine bottles, the remains of an intimate meal for two and, most damning of all, the crumpled and squashed cushions on the sofa. Vinny pressed his nose against the windows, his breath steaming up the glass, huge spaniel eyes reproachful. It was the last, ludicrous detail.

Callie felt a hysterical giggle rise and swallowed it. 'This is J-Johnny Starling,' she said, guilt making her stammer. 'My… um… housemate.'

Frida looked about her with wide eyes. 'Your *housemate?* Yeah sure.' She fixed an accusing gaze on her mother.

Johnny rescued the awkward pause by striding forward, hand out. 'Pleased to meet you, Frida. I've heard a lot about you.' They shook hands, Frida reluctantly.

'Cool. I've heard practically nothing about you.' She glowered.

Vinny whined and scrabbled at the window.

'I'll take the dog out,' Johnny put in hastily. 'He could probably do with a last-minute walk. I'll take my key, Callie, so don't worry about not locking up.'

They stood in a frozen silence watching each other. Johnny disappeared into the hall and returned carrying his jacket and Vinny's lead.

As he passed Callie on the way to the garden, she hissed, 'Coward.'

'Too right,' he whispered back. 'Plenty of wine left if you want some, Frida,' he added, more loudly. Easing himself out of the French doors, he called out, 'Night.'

Callie collapsed on the sofa. Picking up her glass she drank the contents and then refilled it. 'Grab a glass if you want some. As Johnny said, there's some left if you fancy it.'

Frida crossed her arms and looked down at her mother. 'Think it's more about what *you* fancy, Mother.' She flounced into the kitchen, hunted

through the cupboards, located a tumbler and emptied the remains of the wine into it.

Perching on the arm of the sofa, she looked daggers. ‘So, what gives, Mum? Just what have you been up to?’

Callie wasn’t having this. ‘Could ask you the same thing, Frida. Why have you cut your holiday short and why have you been so uncommunicative?’

Frida slid down off the arm and swallowed some wine. ‘Reasons.’

Anger began to lick at Callie. She loved her daughter unconditionally but sometimes the girl infuriated her. ‘I’ll tell you all about my holiday if you spill the goss on yours.’

Frida rolled her eyes and sniggered. ‘Spill the goss? How old are you, Mum?’

‘Not too old to take you across my knee, young lady.’

This time Frida snorted. ‘Try it and I’ll have you up on a child abuse charge.’

Callie slammed her glass down on the coffee table so hard wine spilled. The swerve from sexy lover back to concerned mother was disorientating. She let rip at Frida. ‘This isn’t like you. This isn’t the Frida I know talking. It’s Leah’s influence, isn’t it? You know I never liked her.’

Frida stared into her glass in mutinous silence. Eventually she blew out a breath. ‘You might have a point there,’ she finally admitted. Huffing moodily, she added, ‘Don’t think she’s the friend I thought she was.’

Callie’s irritation fled. ‘What did she do?’

‘Met some bloke on the first night and abandoned me. I hung out with Alice and Elodie – their parents own the villa.’ Frida shrugged. ‘They were okay but I don’t know them that well. It wasn’t like having a mate there. Once Leah met this Rico bloke I didn’t see her for dust.’ Her bottom lip quivered and, all of a sudden, she looked far younger than her years. ‘And it wasn’t what I hoped it would be, Mum. Don’t think I’m cut out for nonstop

nightlife and drinking.' Her eyes widened. 'And the drugs! People were off their heads on stuff.'

Callie sat up in alarm. 'You didn't–'

'Come on, Mum, what do you take me for?' Frida stretched out a long, suntanned leg. 'Got to keep this temple of a bod pure,' she said, with more than a little complacency.

Her mother let a laugh escape, the last vestiges of her anger dissipating. She never could keep up with Frida's mercurial change of moods and could never stay angry at her for long. 'You're a lovely colour. Wish I tanned like you.' Lifting up a strand of her daughter's lustrous jet-black hair, she said, 'Wish I had hair like this too instead of my frizzy mop. But,' she added, sternly, 'if I thought you'd even gone *near* any drugs, you'd be disinherited, my child.'

Frida shifted away, seemingly uncomfortable. 'Can promise you, the drugs weren't an issue for me. I'm not that daft. Didn't even drink much. Couldn't afford it.'

'Did you get charged for changing your flight?'

Frida took another sip of wine, deliberating her answer. 'Nah,' she said evasively. 'It was sorted. I'd…' she paused. 'I'd stopped having a good time so decided to cut and run. See what the good old UK could offer for a holiday.' She brightened. 'Gotta say, from the little I've seen of Lullbury Bay, it looks ace.'

Callie accepted the deflection in subject matter. Her daughter was obviously not ready to tell her the real reason behind the sudden decision to leave Ibiza. 'It's lovely. You can have a good look round tomorrow. You can walk over with me to the Art School. I'm in charge of judging the children's art competition.'

'Oh, Mum, thought you were on holiday?'

'It won't take long and I volunteered as part of my competition entry. Once they found out I'm an art teacher, I got jumped upon.'

‘You’re too soft.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Callie answered, with asperity. ‘When are you going to pay me back for the taxi?’

Frida raised one black, perfectly groomed brow. ‘I’ll pay you back if you tell me all about this little seduction scene.’

Twenty-Two

Thomas Gainsborough 1727–1788
English portrait and landscape painter. Often commissioned to paint family portraits. Discussion: what do society portraits want to convey? Can we see beyond what's intended?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie picked up her wine glass and ran a finger round the rim. 'Not much to tell.'

'Oh, come on, Mum, it's textbook. The candles, the wine.' Frida spread her hands to indicate the room.

'The wine went with the food I'd bought, and Johnny lit the candles to keep the midges away.'

'Oh yeah,' Frida said disbelievingly. 'Bet you'd been DTD before I crashed the scene.'

'DTD?'

'Doing The Deed.' Frida made exaggerated kissing noises.

'Do you have to be so vulgar.'

Her daughter sniggered. 'Payback for when you walked in on me and Josh Reece. You were furious!'

‘Bit of a difference. I’m an adult. You were seventeen. And Josh Reece was a chancer.’ Callie paused, sucking in a deep breath. ‘I didn’t want you ending up like me. Pregnant at nineteen and alone.’

There was a shocked pause. ‘You regret having me?’ Frida asked in a strangled voice.

Callie put down her glass and gathered her daughter in her arms. ‘Never. That’s not what I meant at all. You know I’ve never regretted having you for a moment. You’re the best thing I’ve ever done. Even when you’re annoying the hell out of me. Like now.’ Kissing the top of her daughter’s head, she released her and added, ‘You must have realised it wasn’t easy at times.’ She pushed her away a little. ‘There’s not been one moment in one day when I’ve wished anything different but–’

‘But?’

Callie hesitated, choosing her words carefully. ‘It wasn’t always much fun being the solo parent, being the only one responsible for paying the bills, keeping a roof over our heads. I had to grow up very quickly.’

‘And you didn’t have anyone around you,’ Frida said mournfully. ‘I didn’t have grandparents.’

Callie gave her daughter a sharp look. Frida had always accepted their lifestyle as normal. She’d explained, even when her daughter was little, that her grandparents didn’t want to be friends with them, but they had a different sort of family to other people, family like Donna and Graham who they’d specially chosen.

For a while Donna’s parents had taken Frida under their wing just as they’d done with Callie all those years ago, but they were older now, frailer, and with less energy for those beyond their immediate family. Callie and Frida helped them out as much as they could, but it was just the occasional Sunday afternoon cup of tea these days.

Frida had never questioned that her father didn’t want to be involved in her life. At least two of her close school friends had estranged fathers, and

one friend had two women as parents, who made no secret of the fact their child was created via a donor, with no father on the scene. Frida was just another child who came from a background which veered from the accepted norm. Callie had always emphasised families came in all shapes and sizes and all were valid. It was unusual for Frida to voice any introspection about their set-up. 'What's brought all this on?'

Frida puffed out a short breath. 'Oh nothing.' She looked down, her mouth working. 'I didn't want to be the thing that held you back, is all.'

Callie gasped. Was this what her daughter was thinking? 'Oh, darling girl, that's not happened, has it? You have *never* held me back. Not once. Not ever. I've got a great job; we've got a nice house to live in.' Even as Callie said the words, she wondered if all that was enough for her any longer. But how could she change anything? Donna was right. Her dreams were simply that – daydreams. She shook sense into her head; that wasn't what was important right now. She stroked a strand of long silky hair back off her daughter's face. 'I've never once regretted having you.'

'But you don't want me to end up the same way?'

Callie bit her lip, regretting her words of earlier. Again she hesitated and the silence became profound. She needed to be honest with her daughter about this. 'If I'm really honest, no. The only thing I'd change, the *only* thing, I tell you, is that I would have had you slightly later in life, maybe when I'd got my career more established and perhaps when I was in a solid relationship. If I could choose for you, then that's what I'd want in your future.'

'Have you been lonely, Mum?' Frida pleated the hem of her cheesecloth smock.

'Lonely? Me? How could I have been when I had you and Donna and Graham and the girls from choir.'

'You know what I mean. Did you ever want a bloke around?'

'Maybe.' Callie tried for humour. 'They have their uses at times.'

Frida twisted round to her. ‘Then why didn’t you? I wouldn’t have minded, honest.’

Callie laughed. ‘There was Shane,’ she said, referencing a man she’d become close to in her thirties.

‘Shane Trent? What, Mr Trent from school? No way. I never knew that! Go, Mum, he was dead gorg.’ She pouted, her nose wrinkling. ‘Apart from the fact he was a maths teacher.’

‘Yeah well, no one’s perfect. We got quite close but, oh I don’t know… then I thought about how I’d introduce him to you, when would be the right time, what would happen if you got attached to him and our relationship didn’t pan out. Not to mention we work together. It would have been beyond awkward. Finally decided it was all too much hassle so stayed just friends.’

‘And then he married Miss Spinks from the science department,’ Frida said, dolefully, draining her wine in one gulp. ‘The whole of the sixth form was heartbroken.’ She pointed the glass at her mother. ‘Get you, though, going out with the school hottie.’

‘I didn’t go out with him as such.’ Callie couldn’t quite keep the wistfulness from her voice as she pictured Shane’s wedding day, a high summer celebration in a classic country hotel with Nadia Spinks looking breathtaking in white tulle and orange blossom. ‘It was a nice day, I seem to recall.’ She and Shane hadn’t progressed beyond a few drinks in the pub where they’d shared the stresses of the job, but she’d liked him.

‘Poor Mum.’

‘Poor Mum nothing,’ Callie replied robustly. ‘There’s more to life than having a man in it, you know!’

‘But this Johnny bloke, this Johnny Farthing?’

‘Johnny Starling.’

‘You like him?’

‘Yes. Yes, I do. He’s lovely.’

‘Sex on legs more like.’

Callie giggled. ‘If you say so.’

‘And you don’t work with *him*,’ Frida pointed out.

‘This is true.’

‘Could be a holiday fling.’

‘Or just sex?’ Callie said innocently, knowing it would wind Frida up.

‘Muuuum! That’s gross.’ Frida put two fingers to her mouth. ‘Don’t make me vom.’

Callie laughed again. ‘We haven’t got beyond the kissing stage. We haven’t talked about what “this” is, if it’s anything. We’ve just enjoyed each other’s company.’

‘Drunk a lot of wine!’

‘Went to the theatre, entered a sandcastle competition, oh and I’ve met his family.’

‘You’ve what?’ Frida was aghast. ‘Not wasting much time.’

‘Only because they’re staying in town for a christening. I was invited to a barbeque. They’re a bit mad but great fun and I really like Johnny’s youngest sister.’

‘Gawd. How many’s he got?’

‘Four. And he has three rather alarming aunts.’

Frida laughed out loud. ‘Bit different to our set up then.’

‘Families come in all shapes and sizes,’ she reminded Frida, ‘including the found sort.’

‘Including the found sort,’ Frida parroted back the expected answer. ‘And, don’t get me wrong, I love having Donna and Graham and their kids around. It’s just–’

‘It’s just what, love?’

‘Oh nothing. So tell me all about this Johnny bloke, then. What does he do? Where does he come from? Has he got any money?’

Again, Callie accepted the deflection in subject matter. Instead, she filled her daughter in on everything she knew about Johnny.

By the time she'd finished, the third wine bottle was empty and the candles had burned down low. When one puttered out with a hiss sending up a whisper of acrid smoke, Callie stretched. 'Time for bed. It's late, kiddo. You're going to have to share with me, I'm afraid. This place has only got two bedrooms.'

Frida rose with a grumble. 'Better get together with Mr Silver Fox as soon as, then, so I can have a bed to myself.'

'Cheeky mare,' her mother responded, as she collected the bottles and glasses and put them by the sink. 'For that you can wash this lot up in the morning.' Switching off the lights with a yawn she led Frida along the hall to the stairs before stopping abruptly. 'Oh, I thought you'd brought your case in? Don't say you left it outside in the garden, Frida!'

'Give up on the panicking, Mum. I left it here at the bottom.' Taking the steep cottage stairs two at a time with enviable ease, she called down. 'It's here. I suppose Johnny must have brought it up.'

As Callie trudged up the stairs at a more sedate pace, she smiled to herself. Johnny Starling really was the nicest man.

Twenty-Three

SATURDAY MORNING 17TH AUGUST

Edouard Manet 1832–1883
French painter. Often painted café scenes and Parisien life. Examine 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergere'. What do the details tell us? What is the relationship between the woman and the man?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

In the morning Callie came down to a snoozing Vinny. As she let him out into the garden, Grace rang to express her sincere thanks and to say she'd be along to collect him. When Callie explained she was going to the Art School later to judge the children's painting competition, Grace said she'd meet her there.

After a quick breakfast and prising Frida out of bed and into the shower, they walked out into a sunlit, salty breeze filled summer's day.

It was fun strolling along leading Vinny, who insisted on stopping every three paces to sniff. 'He's a real spaniel, isn't he?' Callie said, amused. There had been no sign of Johnny so she'd left a note to explain where Vinny had gone. She didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed by Johnny's absence. The frustrated thrum in her body hadn't gone away, no matter how cold she'd run the shower that morning.

Frida yawned. She wasn't a morning person. 'If you say so.'

'He reminds me of Coco, Donna's dog she had when she was a kid. Coco had the longest eyelashes I've ever seen.'

'I've never heard you mention Donna had a dog.' Frida nodded down at Vinny, currently investigating a splash of melted ice cream. 'It suits you having a dog. You look right together. Why don't you get one? Might be fun.'

'Oh yes. And when have I got the time to look after a dog?'

'Yeah. Suppose. Suppose they're a bit of a tie too. You know,' Frida added impulsively, 'when you get shot of me, you ought to go travelling.'

Callie looked askance at her daughter. Sometimes she felt as if she didn't really know her. 'You got plans to leave home?'

Frida scuffed her trainers on a ridge of sand. 'Might do. Got to spread my wings at some point. It's just deciding what I want to do, that's all.'

'You don't see your future at Price's?' Having dropped out of her degree, Frida had most recently been working in an admin role for a local engineering company.

'Get real. D'know there are women in that office who have been there since they were sixteen? Carol's sixty-two and *still* there.' Frida rolled her eyes. 'I so don't want that to be me.'

'But what *do* you want to do?' Callie swallowed her exasperation with her daughter's lack of direction and gathered Vinny in on a short lead as a family carrying bacon rolls wandered past. The smallest child held his just at the right height for a greedy spaniel to snaffle.

Frida gave a gutsy sigh. 'That's the prob. I'm not sure I know.' There was the hint of an unattractive whine. 'Did you always want to be a teacher?'

Callie thought back. At first, doing her teaching qualification had been the obvious choice and an escape route from her home life. Then, having done her first placements, she'd begun to love it. When Frida had come

along, a job with security and good career progression was a no-brainer. The long summer holiday had been the ideal solution for childcare too. Now she had taught for over twenty years, she wasn't sure she wanted to do it any longer. The spark, the drive, had gone. And young people deserved teachers who were fully committed to their education. She couldn't say she was that person anymore. 'I suppose,' she said, lamely, unwilling to discuss it in any depth.

Having passed The Ice Cream Dream Kiosk and the yacht club they reached the Sea Spray Café. Callie waved to Tracey who was putting up the sun umbrellas.

'Morning, maid,' Tracey called out. She ambled over. 'And who have we here?'

'Hi, Tracey. This is my daughter, Frida. Frida, this is Tracey who runs the best café in Lullbury Bay.'

'About that I cannot lie,' Tracey replied, with a grin. She shoved a lock of pink curly hair behind her ear, squinting into the bright sunshine. 'Nice to meet you, Frida. Not looking for a job, are you?'

Frida, taken aback at the blunt question, laughed.

'We're only here for another week or so, Tracey,' Callie explained. 'We're on holiday, remember.'

'Oh yes. You've become such a fixture round these here parts, maid, I forget. Got used to seeing you wander past. You fits right into the place. Still, Frida, even if you've only got a few days, it would really help me out. I pay above the national minimum, and you'd get free meals and as much coffee or milkshake as you can drink, thrown in.'

'How come you're short-staffed?' Callie asked, restraining Vinny as he yanked at her arm, catching an enticing new scent drifting in on the breeze from the sea.

'Alice Ruddick, she's Austin Ruddick's granddaughter, you know Austin, always in here. Well, she usually works her summer holiday but she

got taken into the RD&E last night. Hospital in Exeter,' she explained to Frida. 'Emergency appendectomy, poor mite. By the time she recovers, it'll be nary time afore she goes back to uni. I've got my two other regular staff but could really do with a table clearer and order taker. Not skilled but you need to have the patience of a saint, lots of energy and feet which don't mind a battering.'

Callie looked at Frida askance. She couldn't imagine it appealing to her at all. Suppressing a frustrated sigh, she knew she should be kinder about her daughter but the truth was she didn't have the strongest of work ethics. She'd lost track of the jobs Frida had had, only to leave for a variety of vague reasons. The office job at Price's had lasted the longest but it was obvious Frida didn't intend to stay there long-term either.

Frida shrugged. 'Suppose I could give it a go. How about I do a trial run?'

'Really?' Callie gazed, open-mouthed. 'You never fail to surprise me, Frida.'

'No time like the present, my lovely,' Tracey said. 'How about you start by putting up the rest of the parasols? I'll rustle us up a bacon sarnie and we can eat our breakfast before the rush starts. Give me a chance to explain one or two things.'

'Cool. See you later then, Mum. Have fun at the art comp.'

With that, Frida followed Tracey into the café leaving her mother standing shaking her head in amusement. 'Is it the magical effect this town has, Vinny,' she asked, looking down at him, 'or has something miraculous just happened?'

'Not a good look, you know, standing talking to a dog,' a male voice said. 'Although I don't blame you. Vinny is a handsome beast. Want me to walk him? I quite enjoyed our enforced nocturnal stroll last night.'

Callie looked up to see Johnny beside her. He was wearing a sky-blue linen shirt, and cargo shorts. Her heart did a little treacherous flip. 'Hi,

Johnny. No, you're okay. I'm taking him along to meet Grace at the Art School.'

'Mind if I tag along?'

'Please do.'

After pausing to allow Vinny a moment to greet Johnny in effusive spaniel style, they began walking along the slippery, sandy promenade.

Austin, hurrying from the opposite direction, almost bumped into them. 'Oh, do forgive me. I'm in a right fumble this morning.'

'I've just heard about your granddaughter,' Callie said. 'I'm so sorry, Austin. I hope she's better soon.'

'Just on me way to fill Tracey in. They got the bugger out last night. Had a nasty infection, fit to bust, they said, so it was just in time. She's shaking off the anaesthetic and feeling a bit groggy but they say she'll be fine.' Austin stooped to pet an over excited Vinny. 'What a smashing dog. Didn't know you had one.' He peered closer. 'Looks the spit of Gracie Grosvenor's spaniel.'

'He is Grace's. We were looking after him yesterday for her.'

Austin looked alarmed, above his specs his bushy grey eyebrows knitted together. 'Don't tell me Gracie's ill an' all?

Callie didn't think it her place to share Grace's medical history. 'She's fine. I'm just on the way to reunite them now.'

'Good. Good.' Austin looked as if he hadn't heard a word.

She put a hand on his arm. 'Why don't you go and get a coffee? You look as if you could do with one.'

'Yes.' Austin gave Vinny one last ear scratch. 'I certainly need a pick-me-up. Was at that blasted place until the early hours. Left Alice's mum there. I'll go back with fresh supplies later. I've got a whole list of stuff Alice needs.' He tutted. 'What a to-do!'

The old man looked so distressed it moved Callie to offer help. 'If I can do anything, let me know. I'm happy to drive you to the hospital. My

daughter, Frida, is in the café with Tracey. She can pass a message on.'

'Oh my lovely. How kind. I'm minded to say yes but my son-in-law will drive us back in this afternoon.' Tears shone bright.

Callie fished out her phone. 'Let me give you my number anyway.'

Austin reached into his shirt breast pocket and, rather surprisingly, drew out the latest iPhone. He tapped her number in. 'Must go now. Sooner I tell Tracey, sooner I can get home and get Alice's things together.' Suddenly he clasped Callie to him, giving her a hug. Muttering, 'So kind, so very kind,' he marched into the Sea Spray.

After flicking Johnny a look, Callie resumed her walk. 'What?' she asked, irritated at his silence. 'There's something about this town. It makes you want to help people. Become part of the community.'

As he was still mute, a slightly amused expression on his face, she huffed out, 'He's an old man, worried about his granddaughter. It felt right to help.'

A guilty pang assailed her that Frida had been robbed of a concerned grandfather like Austin. It must be wonderful to be part of a warm, loving family like the Ruddicks.

'You don't know him.'

'I do,' Callie protested. 'I met him on God Almighty Hill. We had a conversation about dogs. Don't laugh at me for being kind.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.' Johnny put an arm around her shoulder, hugged her to him and gave her a resounding kiss on the cheek. 'You're one of the kindest people I know, and I wouldn't have you any other way!'

Twenty-Four

Lorraine Tuck
English contemporary painter based in France. Inspired by landscapes, plants and flowers. Also uses textiles and collaged paper. Activity: make paper and incorporate gathered, natural material.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Johnny took Callie's hand as they strolled along the prom. It seemed natural to hold his hand, with Vinny's lead in the other. In a kind of flash forward she saw a possible life in the future; Johnny, herself and a dog. But there were too many variables, too many things left undiscussed. Besides, she had her life in Worcester, Johnny had his in Stratford. How would it ever work? And she was still none the wiser about how Frida might feel about it all. And wasn't she jumping the gun a bit? For all she knew Johnny considered this a holiday fling. After all, he hadn't demonstrated much in the way of commitment in his life. With her thoughts becoming ever more muddled, she walked by his side in silence.

'I enjoyed last night. Up to the rude interruption,' Johnny said, with a smile in his voice. 'Is Frida on board about all this, do you think?'

'All this?'

He held up their joined hands. ‘This. Me and you.’

‘I didn’t know there was a me and you.’

‘I’m not messing you around, Callie. I think we have the beginnings of something good between us, don’t you?’

She didn’t have an opportunity to answer as they had to stop at the busy road outside the cobbled square where the food market had been held. Once they’d all crossed, with her keeping Vinny protectively on a short lead at her side and started the climb up the steep lane which led to the Art School, she found some words. ‘I don’t know what Frida thinks. She wanted to know all about you and didn’t say anything disapproving but–’

‘Wasn’t all that positive either.’

‘You can’t blame her. Apart from a very brief flirtation I had with a fellow teacher years ago and which went nowhere, there hasn’t been a man in our lives. In theory she’s all for me having a boyfriend.’

Callie stopped on the narrow pavement to catch her breath. She turned to him. ‘I’m forty-two. I can’t say *boyfriend,* that’s ridiculous. I mean, she *thinks* she wants me to have a relationship, but I wonder if at the reality, if and when that ever happens, she’d feel the same.’ They were standing pressed close to a hedge. Callie could smell honeysuckle, rich and exotic, rising from it. At her feet, Vinny scuffled, impatient to be moving.

Callie felt the exact opposite. While part of her longed for her life to move forward, the other, greater part, yearned for what was familiar and routine. And Johnny Starling-free. She thought about her narrow, safe little life in Worcester. Work, choir, the odd drink or meal with Donna. All very familiar and secure. Dull even. How could she risk what she’d worked so hard to build up for herself and Frida? And, with Frida still so unsettled in life, she needed to devote herself to her daughter.

She’d never have the time for a relationship, however much she wanted Johnny. *Coward,* she chided herself. *All of it is excuses. The truth is you’re just too chicken to take a chance.*

Johnny lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it gently. ‘I’m going to put my cards on the table, going to declare myself. I’d like to develop this, whatever this is, further. I really like you, Calliope. You’re kind and funny, generous and talented, loyal to your family, warm and–’

‘Stop!’ The honeysuckle scent was overpowering and was beginning to make her feel sick. ‘You’ve only known me a few days. I’m not sure I’m any of those things.’

‘I am. And, it may only be a few days, but it’s been an intense few days. We’ve hardly been apart.’

Callie shrugged. ‘It’s not reality though, is it, down here,’ she said, dampeningly. ‘I’m on holiday, so are you. Everything is magical, easy. Neither of us have the stresses and strains of everyday normal life.’

‘I can’t see any problem in working through all that. After all, we don’t live a million miles from each other.’

Callie stared at him, at the puckering worry lines around his mouth, at the slight neuroticism and sensitivity which lay there. She remembered how that mouth had made her feel. Lust stirred deep inside. But wasn’t it simply that? Lust and long buried unused hormones. Basic physical reaction. Authentic but shallow.

She had no doubt Johnny felt a strong attraction to her; he’d made that clear last night. As she recalled his breathless desire, heat swept her. Physical attraction was a good starting point, a powerful starting point. It was how she and Sunil had begun but they’d been little more than kids, with no responsibilities and little idea of what they were doing. And look at how that had worked out.

Doubt swamped her, icy and all-consuming. Once she and Johnny went to their respective homes and she was back to the grindstone of punishing hours and a heavy workload, and once he was back to his glamorous life of freelance writing jetting off here and there, what would happen then? Away from the glitzy bright sunshine and magically salty air of Lullbury Bay,

she'd reveal herself to be the careworn, middle-aged, tired teacher she really was. This relationship, if it could even be honoured with the term, was ephemeral, fairy dust, a bright mote of something intangible. She'd enjoy it while she was here but didn't see it surviving. They were too different. Came from different worlds and hers was as clay to his glittering silver.

Letting her hand rest in his, she shrugged. 'We don't, that's true.' Seeing the frown darken his face at her noncommittal answer, she added, briskly, 'Come on, we need to get a move on. Grace and Dave will be waiting.'

Grace greeted them in the Art School's reception area, letting an ecstatic Vinny jump all over her. 'Oh my dears, I can't thank you enough. And how is my lovely boy? I hope he didn't disgrace himself?'

'Probably has better manners than my big bro.' Jessica Starling let herself out of the office and kissed them both. 'Hello, darling pair. I have an hour off from being a booby mummy so Dave has said I can be in charge of the children's painting competition. Can't tell you the joy in not being covered with baby sick for a whole sixty minutes.' She took Callie's elbow in a firm grip and steered her towards the staffroom. 'All the entries are set out in here. My plan is to make some truly excellent coffee, drink it while it's piping hot and eat all the biscuits. Grace,' she called over her shoulder, 'why don't you find Dave. He's in the main hall. You can show Johnny Callie's gorgeous work at the same time. We'll be busy for a while in here.'

Grace and Johnny, along with a panting, pulling Vinny, headed off down the white-painted corridor. Johnny looked back as if he felt there were unresolved matters to discuss. As indeed there were.

'You two looked cosy,' Jessica said knowingly as she flicked on the kettle. 'Still think you make a great couple. Mum has issued a three-line-whip invitation to afternoon tea, by the way.' Hunting in the cupboards for a pack of coffee and the percolator, she added, 'I'm afraid The Aunts will be there, natch, but they can be managed so as not to be too awful. Actually,

Aunt Sybs is great fun when there's only pots of tea around. It's the alcohol that turns her into a bit of a beast.'

Callie subsided onto a chair. She felt as if everything was colliding, rushing in at her. A panicky sensation rose in her stomach, making her feel sick. Why hadn't she responded to Johnny more positively? Why had she retreated? She liked him. Possibly more than liked. The last few days with him had been wonderful, an escape from her normal life. A true holiday. Frida turning up so unexpectedly had catapulted her back into the role of mother and breadwinner. Johnny in her life could only complicate things. And there was no room for complication in her life.

He'd been so sure of himself earlier when declaring his feelings. Confident she felt the same way, that things would work out. But he knew nothing of her life, of how hard it had been. How hard won. Irritation rose. Jessica had just swept her up and now Dorrie expected her to attend some flamin' afternoon tea, as if she hadn't anything else to do!

She'd had enough of the Starling family trying to run her life. She'd managed perfectly well on her own all these years; she didn't need an intervention now. God, they were all so bossy and confident. 'I'm not sure that will be possible,' she said, her voice sharp. 'My daughter arrived late last night.'

Jessica stood up from where she'd been rootling in the fridge for milk. 'Well, that's okay. In fact, that would be rather lovely. She can come along too. More the merrier I say when it's teeny scones and finger sandwiches. I do like a posh afternoon tea, don't you? Little bits of lusciousness. I'm permanently starving as I'm breastfeeding.' She stopped, finally reading the room. 'You cool, Callie?'

'I'm fine. I'd just like to get on with the task in hand and get back to spend some time with my daughter.' She'd slipped automatically into her no-nonsense teacher voice and saw Jessica start.

'Of course. I'll make the coffee and we'll get going. I understand.'

No you don't, Callie thought. *You don't understand one thing. How can you, when even I don't understand?* She'd never felt so miserable in her life. It was as if a bright shiny thing had been in fingertip reach, only to be snatched away by the cold wind of reality. The more she thought about it, the more unlikely any relationship with Johnny could happen. Besides, she had Frida to consider.

She shuffled the first batch of children's paintings around to study them more intently, blinking her eyes and trying not to cry.

Twenty-Five

SATURDAY LATE AFTERNOON 17TH AUGUST

Edvard Munch 1863–1944
Norwegian painter. His fragile mental health fed into the themes of his paintings. Study 'The Scream' – what does it tell us?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie walked slowly back to Sea Haven House, her feet dragging. Watching a loved-up couple, with arms entwined, going the other way, her heart contracted with a painful envy. Donna had been right, she'd been lulled into living in cloud cuckoo land. How could she have imagined living here in Lullbury Bay, or having a relationship with someone like Johnny Starling? Of course she had to go home, back to Worcester and the little Victorian terrace. What alternative was there? Escaping to the seaside was a pipe dream and one she couldn't hope to aspire to. As was any kind of meaningful relationship with Johnny. She clicked on Donna's number, desperate to speak to her but it went straight to voicemail, so she clicked off without leaving a message.

Unable to face the trudge up God Almighty Hill, she cut up the main shopping street and turned into the public gardens, deliberately avoiding looking at the castle ruins. The sight brought back memories of the evening

she'd spent with Johnny. As she walked through the gardens her feet slowed even more. She had no desire to get back to the house and find Johnny there. The cottage had lost its appeal as a haven. Instead, it was going to be a pit of awkwardness. What had she been thinking getting involved with him? It was making what should have been a relaxing holiday, a nightmare.

The air around her felt different, charged somehow. The wind, cutting off the sea, chilly. It shivered through the palm trees and was making white horses froth on the waves. The sky was thick with gulls, twisting and turning and heading inland. Was the weather breaking? Autumn was hovering on the horizon. And a new term.

For once she'd delegated being at school for the exam results to a colleague. At this time of year she'd usually be with her students. It was always a rollercoaster; wonderful to celebrate with those who had obtained what they needed but heartbreaking to console with those who hadn't quite achieved their desired grades. It was the first time she'd not been there. It would be good experience for Nella who she suspected was nipping at her heels for her job, and who was perfectly capable if a little lacking in empathy, but the guilt assailed her even so. Her life was crowded with guilt. Guilt over not doing her job properly. Guilt over how Frida had turned out. She was tired of feeling guilty but didn't know how to stop.

Callie made a decision. Wednesday was the art awards ceremony. She'd stay for that but would drive home the following day. Frida too. It was time to cut her losses and bite reality.

As she let herself in through the garden gate she heard voices. Johnny and Frida were in the garden. Her heart sank; she didn't want to deal with either at the moment.

Wondering if she could go back out and hide in the Sea Spray for a couple of hours, she heard Frida call out.

'Mum! Come and grab a pew. I had a fab time at the café, Tracey is a right laugh. She's from Cornwall originally but she hasn't been in Lullbury

long. She's travelled all over, spent loads of time in India and South America. She's well cool.'

Johnny offered his deck chair, so Callie sank into it, carefully not meeting his eyes. If she stayed around much longer, she'd really fall for him and that would not do. It would not do at all. He passed her a fresh mug of tea. Muttering her thanks, she tuned into Frida who was still chattering away.

'And I really enjoyed working at the café. Had my lunch there and I'm starting proper tomorrow. Got some majorly good tips too. It's ace.'

'But it's hardly a proper career.'

'What, like working in a boring office shuffling paper, at a boring engineering company, you mean? Everyone at Price's is about ninety. Know what? Today, I ate my lunch sitting on a bench outside in the sunshine and got chatted up by some blokes on holiday from Leicester. They were brilliant fun and I'm meeting them later down The Old Harbour.'

'No, you're not!'

'I am. Get real, Mum. I'm twenty-three. You can't tell me what to do. I'm going with Chelsea. She works at the café in the summer. Says she's got some friends down there she'll meet up with tonight.'

'I thought you didn't like going out drinking.'

'Jeez. Lighten up, will you? I'm going to a pub which is barely half a mile away, in a seaside town in Dorset. It's hardly the Ayia Napa strip.' Frida heaved herself out of the deck chair and flounced off.

Johnny sat down in silence.

Callie concentrated on sipping her tea. 'Didn't handle that well, did I?'

'I couldn't possibly comment. My experience of young women is restricted to Jess, and I don't think she's typical.'

'Not sure anyone in your family is typical.'

Johnny didn't respond.

'Sorry. That was rude.'

‘Is everything all right, Callie? Has something happened?’

Callie ignored him, supplying the obvious answer. ‘I worry about her.’ She gripped her hot mug, finding comfort in its heat. Even here, in the sheltered garden, the wind was brisk.

‘I don’t think she’ll come to any harm in The Old Harbour. She’s still young. Finding her feet.’

‘Then it’s about time she found them. At her age I’d been working for two years and owned a house.’ Callie screwed her eyes shut. She knew she was being unreasonable but couldn’t snap out of her mood.

‘Things are different for young people these days,’ Johnny said, mildly. ‘They mature later.’ He hesitated and then went on. ‘I feel I should warn you about something.’

Callie snapped her focus onto him. What had he to warn her about?

‘Frida and I have been having a fairly intense discussion about journalism. Apparently, Lucie Wiscombe came into the café today. She got chatting to Frida about her plans and about the advice I gave her.’

‘Advice?’ The word came out on a sort of squeak. Callie slid herself more upright, frowning. ‘What advice?’

‘On the evening of the play Lucie and I discussed paths into the career, courses and so on. South Western University in Exeter runs a highly rated degree and conversion degree in journalism. Lucie’s probably going for that seeing as it’s local. She got talking to Frida about it and enthused her with the idea. Frida came home bubbling with excitement. We ended up chatting about my experiences in the job and she’s mustard keen to do the same as Lucie.’

Callie glared at him, trying to take it all in. ‘Are you saying Frida wants to do a degree in journalism?’ she asked stupidly. ‘In *Exeter*?*’* She huffed out a disbelieving laugh. ‘But it’s hardly local for Frida. Not to mention she has a job. She may consider it boring and staffed by geriatrics but it’s secure and pays well.’

‘Ah.’ Johnny looked down, uneasy. ‘It’s not my place to say but I also ought to warn you that Frida’s considering putting in her notice.’

‘What?’ Callie exploded.

‘She’s thinking about trying through clearing to get a place at South Western.’

‘How?’ Callie spluttered. ‘Why? *What?* Where’s she going to live? How’s she going to support herself?’

Johnny was struggling for words. ‘I suppose in the way students usually do. A student loan, or a part-time job.’ He stared at her. ‘I’m sorry. I was trying to help. I thought you wanted her to find her vocation, her direction in life?’

‘Yes, but not like this! She’s only been here five seconds and already her whole life is planned out. Before she came here, she’d never even considered journalism. And she’s already dropped out from one degree course. What if she does that again? It’ll take the rest of her life to pay off the debts. Or, more likely, I’ll have to work until I’m bloody seventy and do it for her!’

‘What if she doesn’t drop out? What if she makes a success of it?’

Callie surged to her feet. She’d had enough. She’d had all she could stand of the Starlings and their middle-class confident assumptions that money wasn’t an issue, that debt wasn’t something to fret about, that you could do anything you liked if you desired it enough. She knew, from bitter experience, that wanting something wasn’t the same as making it happen.

‘You haven’t a clue.’ She pointed a furious finger at him. ‘You know nothing about us. How we live. How we’ve had to scrimp and save. We’re not the sort of people who can just throw in jobs on a whim. We have mortgages and bills to pay. Responsibilities. You know *nothing* about any of that. Dreams aren’t for the likes of us.’

And, after that remarkably silly speech, she tossed her mug to the ground and ran off to find her daughter.

Twenty-Six

L.S. Lowry 1887–1976
'Naïve' painter of scenes of industrial working life. In later life painted seascapes. Contrast Lowry's industrial images to his later, less well-known paintings. Discussion point: do we change as we age?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

She threw open the bedroom door to be faced with Frida's rigid back. Her daughter was sorting through some T-shirts.

Scowling, Frida twisted round. 'You could at least knock.'

'Can I remind you this is my bedroom?'

'Well, if you shacked up with Mr Silver Fox we'd all be happier. And have a lot more room.'

Callie perched on the edge of the bed, anger firing through her. 'I will ignore that comment,' she said tightly, 'seeing as you're supposed to be in Ibiza and I'm supposed to be here enjoying some me-time.'

Frida sloped over to the chair in the window and sank onto it. She stared out at the view. 'From what I can see, you having some time to chill doesn't suit. You're more worked up here than at home.'

'I was having a lovely time–'

‘Until I arrived and spoiled everything.’ Frida huffed and crossed her arms.

Callie stared at her daughter. What was going on with her? ‘To be honest, to be really honest with you, Frida, yes I was. I was painting, relaxing, getting to know Johnny.’

‘Fine. I’ll move out then and find a room.’

‘Oh for God’s sake, that’s not what I meant. And you won’t find anywhere, anyway. It’s coming up to the August Bank Holiday. The town’s rammed. It’s why Johnny and I ended up sharing in the first place. Use your brain, Frida, you’ve got a good one.’

Her daughter glared, bottom lip jutting out. ‘Which is why I want to leave Price’s and go back to uni!’

Callie took several deep breaths. This needed sorting out. ‘And I’m all for that, I really am,’ she said with deliberate calm. ‘In theory. But I want you to think it through. Consider your options. Not rush into anything.’

‘I haven’t got the luxury of time. I’ll miss the clearing window.’

‘In which case, apply next year.’

‘But I don’t want to wait a whole year. I want to do it now. Now I’ve made my mind up.’

‘Frida, can’t you see my point of view? This is all very sudden. Where’s this idea come from? You’ve never mentioned anything about journalism before.’

‘I’ve been thinking about doing something with my writing for ages.’ She glanced up at her mother from under dark lashes. ‘You know I liked that creative writing course I did.’

‘Writing short stories and poetry is very different to journalism,’ Callie said, crisply. ‘And how are you going to fund it?’

Frida threw up her hands. ‘It all comes back to money, doesn’t it? It’s always money, money, money.’

‘Money’s pretty important,’ Callie said, struggling to rein in her temper again. ‘Without it you’d not have a roof over your head, nor food on the table.’

‘But you can manage without a lot of it.’

‘Try paying a mortgage on nothing.’

Frida picked at a thread in her expensive jeans. ‘Tracey travelled the world picking up jobs here and there and she managed fine.’

‘And is working in a seaside café, renting somewhere temporary to live. What’s she going to do when she’s older and picking up casual jobs isn’t so easy?’

‘But she’s happy *now.*’ Frida leaned forward, her hair swinging. ‘Look at you, Mum. You work all the hours you can and does it make you happy?’

Callie was struck silent. Her daughter’s words were too close to her own thoughts of late but the ingratitude smarted. ‘You haven’t a clue, have you?’ she snapped. ‘You’ve had everything you wanted all your life because I sacrificed my desires and wishes to provide it.’

Frida sprang up. ‘But I never asked you to do that. I wanted you, wanted your time. I would have been happy with beans on toast every night if it meant you had more time for me.’

Furious tears constricted Callie’s throat. ‘I was working, Frida. I was working for you. If I didn’t work how do you think the mortgage would be paid? How would we have fitted that new boiler we had to have last winter? Where would your expensive trainers come from? Your salary from Price’s doesn’t run to all the designer gear you say you have to have.’ She clutched her chest in actual pain. ‘Don’t you think I battled every day, every single day, with the guilt I felt about putting you in nursery, into after school clubs, so I could work? Having dreams is all very well but sometimes life doesn’t work out the way you want. I don’t want to stamp on your dreams, Frida, I really don’t, I just think we need to discuss this, consider it more carefully.’

'Your life didn't work out the way you wanted, you mean.' Frida was yelling and crying now, slapping her hips in agitation. 'But I've got dreams and when else am I going to pursue them if not now, when I'm young enough not to have too many responsibilities? *You* were trapped but I'm not. I'm free to do what I want and what I want is to go to uni and study journalism!'

Frida flung open the bedroom door and thumped downstairs. The front door slammed, making the cottage vibrate. Callie winced. Then she began to shake. She'd never seen Frida like this, not even in the so-called difficult teenage years. She'd always thought she and her daughter could talk through anything. Covering her face with her hands, she began to rock.

What had just happened? It was spoiled brat behaviour and Frida wasn't like that. Had never been like that. Was she being influenced by others? By Leah in Ibiza? Was she finally breaking away from her mother, and could only do this by wounding? The comments about money Callie could dismiss as being from someone young and inexperienced, but it was the anguish that Frida expressed about not having enough of her time when growing up that really speared. Surely, when she'd calmed down, she'd see that what Callie had had to do was inescapable. She hadn't a choice.

Callie found a tissue and wiped her eyes. Rising on trembling legs, she went to the window and stared sightlessly out. She had had choices. She could have not gone through with the pregnancy, as had been her first plan. She'd never told Frida that she'd considered a termination – how could she? Only Donna knew the whole situation.

Maybe she should have continued living with her parents? It might have been easier. She doubted they would have been as dramatic as to actually throw her out. They would, however, have found a million other ways to niggle, to get at her, to damage Frida and all with a vile racist subtext. Frida would have grown up believing herself to be a lesser creature, a stain on their dull, penny-pinching lives.

Instead, she'd taken their money and escaped. At the time she'd thought she was better off without them. But she'd robbed her child of family, of grandparents. Instead, she left her precious child in the care of strangers. Would Frida have been happier being looked after by her grandmother? Would she have felt less neglected? In some ways it would have been far easier for Callie, knowing Frida was with family. Childcare had been a constant battle in her life. She knew it was for Donna too. An endless juggling of timing, finding the right setting, not to mention the cost. But, unlike Donna, Callie had no one else to share the load. Had she stayed with her parents she would have had childcare on tap. But at what cost to her daughter and her own mental health? No, she couldn't have inflicted on her daughter the childhood she'd endured. She just hoped, when Frida had calmed down, she would see that.

Hugging her arms, a vision of her mother's disapproving thin lipped expression rose. When she'd explained she was going to take a degree and teach art there had been an appalling argument. It had been about money.

'Get a job,' her mother had screeched. 'A nine-to-five job which pays. You'll get nowhere teaching art. People don't want art, you silly girl. Where's this idea come from? Folk want televisions and fridges. They want something useful. Not some daft thing to hang on a wall. If you have to go off and get some degree or other, get one in something which pays; accounting or business studies.'

And, with a sickening jolt, Callie realised she had just given the same argument to Frida. She'd crushed her daughter's hopes and ambitions by concentrating on money. She'd turned into her mother.

Twenty-Seven

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON 21ST AUGUST

Pablo Picasso 1881–1973
Charismatic and influential Spanish artist. Long career with many notable works including Guernica – depiction of the bombing of the city during Spanish Civil War. Skim over his treatment of women but discuss if we can separate genius from behaviour. Can students think of any contemporary examples?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

For the next few days Sea Haven House existed in a state of silent unease.

Johnny, having tried to talk to Callie and being rebuffed, spent little time in the cottage. She'd heard him having long conversations on his phone in his room. They'd sounded intimate. Maybe he was trying his charms on another woman?

Frida left at first light, ate at the café and came home smelling of the pub late at night. Refusing to talk to Callie, she kept her eyes to the floor and her back turned in the big double bed.

The weather remained warm but there was a horrible dry wind which made everyone bad-tempered and irritable. Austin Ruddick, having come across Callie painting in the public gardens, stopped to fill her in on his

granddaughter's recovery and to warn her there was a storm coming. Judging from the mood in Sea Haven House, Callie thought gloomily, the storm was already here and showed no sign of passing.

The first fat drops of rain fell as she made her way back to the cottage. It was the night of the awards ceremony at the Art School and she needed to get ready. She had little enthusiasm as she jogged down God Almighty Hill from the gardens trying to protect her painting gear from the rain. As she passed Sandy Vistas the evening of the Starlings' lovely party seemed an entire existence ago. Callie wondered if Dorrie and Sid were even still in Lullbury Bay. For a tiny moment she'd enjoyed being swept up in their eccentric, chaotic, theatricality. Loving the feeling of being, in however peripheral a way, part of a family.

'It was all make-believe,' she murmured, hurrying past. 'Do the awards ceremony, get out of Dodge and get yourself back to real life.'

She dropped her stuff by the front door and eased off her shoes. Hearing voices coming from the kitchen diner she emitted a groan. That was all she needed. Frida, or possibly Johnny, had friends round. Putting the thought of a hot mug of tea to one side she made to go upstairs for a shower. As her foot landed on the first tread the old wooden stair creaked.

'That you, Mum? We're in here.'

Callie went through, heart lifting that her daughter seemed to be speaking to her again. And then stopped dead. Sitting on one of the sand-coloured sofas, mug in hand, was a man she'd thought she'd left in the past. The distant past.

Sunil.

She sank back against the kitchen cupboard, her legs so weak she didn't think they'd hold her weight.

'Come and sit down, Mum. I'll get you a brew.' Frida leaped up, took her mother by the arm and guided her gently to the sofa opposite Sunil's. 'You're as white as a sheet.'

Callie collapsed onto the sofa still unable to speak.

‘Callie, it’s been a while.’

She’d forgotten how deep and silky his voice was but maybe it had become so in maturity. After all, twenty-three years was a long time. She studied him over the rim of the mug of tea Frida thrust into her hand. He’d broadened out but still had that long narrow face with its high cheekbones, still had the luxuriant dark lashes and surprising green eyes. His daughter had inherited them. She’d also inherited her height and long slender limbs from her father.

Her father!

Callie blinked. She flicked a glance from Frida to Sunil. What the hell was going on?

Frida perched on the sofa arm. One leg twitched in agitation. ‘Mum, I know you and Sunil knew one another during teacher training. I know Sunil knew Donna and that you and Donna and Sunil’s cousin all used to hang out together.’ She took a deep breath, looking anxious. ‘Thing is, Mum, Sunil says he might be my dad and I, well, I need to know if this is true.’

Sunil’s expression was neutral. There was something happening here that Callie didn’t know about. A tumult of emotions and confusion battled. Anger, fear, suspicion; all overtopped by love for her daughter. How had Sunil found out? How had he ended up here, of all places, in what was supposed to be a haven? She sipped her tea, but it was stewed and too hot and scalded her bottom lip.

Clearing her throat she began to speak. It was only when she was halfway through what she wanted to say she realised no sound had emerged at all. Putting her mug down she coughed and tried again. ‘Yes.’ A croak. *Get a grip, woman.* Of course her daughter needed to know. She had every right. ‘Yes, Frida,’ she said, more firmly. ‘Sunil Patel is your father. We met at university. He was my boyfriend, my only boyfriend, and he is your father.’

'Bhagwan dhanyivaad.' Sunil closed his eyes and then put his face into his hands, his shoulders sagging. 'Thank God.'

'Fuck,' Frida whistled. She was open-mouthed. 'So, what you've been saying all this time is true. About you and Mum and Donna and your cousin?'

Sunil rubbed his hands over his eyes and grinned at her weakly. 'Yes. I'm your dad, Frida. And it's lovely to get this straight at last. We have so much to talk about, you and I, to discuss.'

Callie frowned at the exchange. She was so confused she let Frida's swearword pass. 'Wait, you mean you two know each other already? What's been going on? Frida?'

Sunil rose. 'I think I'd better leave. Now I've found out the answer to a question which has been driving me insane these past few months, I'll leave you two in peace for a while. But we've a lot to catch up on,' he looked at Callie meaningfully. 'All of us. See me to the door, will you, Callie?'

Callie opened the front door and followed him out. Pulling it half shut behind her she sucked in a deep breath. She had to say this, and quickly. It was important. 'I'm so sorry, Sunil,' she whispered, 'that you never knew. I wouldn't blame you for being angry.'

He shook his head. 'Confused maybe. Not angry. How could I be? I wasn't the one whose life was unutterably altered. If I'm honest, I don't think I thought about you and what happened until I had children myself. Then I began wondering about things which may have been.'

Callie was taken aback. So he had children. Other children. Of course he did. Life moved on. Except hers hadn't. 'I'd made the decision to…' she cast a glance behind her, to check Frida couldn't hear, '…go through with the termination but I just couldn't do it in the end.'

'Even though your parents would be furious?'

She nodded. 'And they were. We're – that's Frida and me – we're non-contact with them. I just couldn't stand the thought of them helping me

bring up Frida. If you remember anything about them, you know what they'd be like. I couldn't cope with their poison.'

'And you've done this all on your own?' He shook his head wonderingly. 'Callie. If only I'd known.'

'No one knew where you'd gone. Vivek disappeared off the face of the planet too.'

Sunil's mouth twisted. 'Your parents weren't the only ones who disapproved. Mine sent me off to my uncle's company to work. I've spent the last twenty years in San Francisco. Vivek too.' He reached out a hand and tenderly pushed back a tendril of hair off Callie's face. 'If only I'd known. But I went away thinking you and me were no more and the baby… well, that the baby was no more either.' His face crumpled. 'How I'd wish I'd fought my parents. In that, you were braver, but I was young, I was shell-shocked by what had happened, and I wanted to please them so off to the US I went.'

'But how did all this come about? How did you find us?'

They heard Frida call from inside the house. 'Are you two okay out there?'

'You'd better go,' he said. 'Frida will fill you in on everything. I understand there's an awards ceremony tonight, so she tells me. I'll see you both there. We can talk more then. Callie?'

'Yes?'

'She's wonderful. You've done such a great job with her.' Kissing her lightly on the cheek, he turned and went.

Callie watched Sunil go, leaning her head on the door frame. Her body thrummed in shock and her head was thick with confusion. No wonder he'd never found out about Frida if he'd been living abroad for most of her life. He'd moved on, put it all behind him. After all, he thought she'd had a termination. It had been a student relationship, intense but with no

possibility of a future; they'd been too young, had too much stacked against them.

Oh but Sunil! He'd been a lovely boy and it looked as if he'd grown into a lovely man. How the hell had he found them now? Recalling her daughter's guilty face, she calculated it had something to do with her. Turning to go back into the cottage, she closed the front door decisively. She was going to find out what Frida had been up to whether she liked it or not.

Twenty-Eight

John Everett Millais 1829–1896
Child prodigy and Pre-Raphaelite wunderkind turned society portraitist. Discussion point: did Millais sell out his genius? Money versus artistic integrity.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

When Callie returned to the kitchen diner Frida was rolling her mug nervously around in her hands. 'Are you okay, Mum?' she asked, not quite meeting her eyes.

'Not sure. Any more tea in the pot? I could do with one.'

Frida rose. 'I'll reheat yours in the micro.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort,' Callie snapped out. 'The least you owe me is a freshly made, hot cup of tea. With sugar.' She crumpled onto the sofa, staring ahead at where Sunil had sat. He hadn't looked all that different. He'd had on expensive-looking chinos and an immaculately tailored jacket, but his hair was still thick and luxuriant and his face remarkably unlined for a man in his early forties. Apart from the broader shoulders and the slight American vowels, he hadn't changed.

Her fingers strayed to her hair, remembering how Sunil had brushed it off her face. She exclaimed in horror; her curls had frizzed in the rain. Looking down at her faded jeans and the scruffy T-shirt which bore the remains of a coffee she'd spilled at breakfast, she gave a dry laugh.

Frida placed the fresh mug on the Monet gardens coaster, turning the handle to face her mother. 'Thought you'd be well pissed off,' she said carefully.

'I may well be once the shock's worn off and when you've told me what's been going on.' Callie paused and added, inconsequentially, 'I haven't seen Sunil for over twenty years.'

'He's a good-looking bloke, isn't he?' Frida smiled slightly smugly. 'My dad is a hottie.' She flung herself onto the opposite sofa.

Callie sipped her tea and winced, both at the heat of the liquid and the comment. 'Not sure that's an entirely appropriate but, yes, he was handsome when young and that hasn't changed.'

'And I look like him, don't I?'

'You do.' Callie hadn't the energy to be angry with Frida, although she was sure her daughter had something to do with Sunil's sudden appearance. Perhaps she really was in shock. She felt as if she was floating. It wasn't totally unpleasant. 'You have his eyes. And his height and build.'

'It makes sense now. *I* make sense now.' Frida's nose wrinkled. 'I don't look like you at all. Always felt there was a piece of me missing, like a jigsaw.'

'I could never understand why you didn't ask about your father. You always accepted it was just we two.'

Frida shrugged. 'Didn't matter for a long time. Lots of my friends don't have dads on the scene, or have two mums, or like Scarlett, brought up by her grandparents. We all had our own kind of normal. You accept what you grow up with, don't you, as being what's normal.' She screwed up her face,

risking the familiar refrain. ‘And families come in all shapes and sizes, including the found sort.’

‘Don’t get smart, Frida. You’re nowhere near off the hook.’ Callie collapsed back against the sofa, suddenly exhausted, thinking about her own childhood. ‘But yes, you do accept whatever upbringing you have as normal.’

‘The only family I knew who would be considered typical by any boring standards,’ Frida continued, ‘were Donna and Graham.’

Callie gave her a penetrating look. Was this what had been behind her daughter’s difficult behaviour this summer? The realisation that somewhere she had a father and the search for her roots? A sudden squall of rain attacked the French windows. The storm had arrived. Part of her worried about Johnny being out in it and guilt set in that she’d made it uncomfortable for him to be in the cottage. *Ridiculous. He’s a grown man. Has travelled the world. He can look after himself. Concentrate on your daughter, there’s reason to feel guilt there too.* ‘So what changed?’

‘Remember I mentioned Carol in the office?’

‘Yes.’

‘She’s dead cool, is Carol. I get on really well with her, even though she’s an oldie. Sorry, Mum. No offence.’

‘None taken,’ Callie said mildly. ‘Not about that anyway.’

‘Last year she found out she was adopted.’

‘That must have been a shock, didn’t you say she’s in her sixties?’

‘Yup.’ Frida nodded vigorously. ‘Her mum died and she found all sorts of papers in the house when she cleared it. Turned her world upside down. She tracked down her biological dad and he’s still going strong, ninety-odd though, in a nursing home, but they’ve sort of discovered each other. It’s sweet.’

‘But, Frida, what’s that got to do with anything? You always knew you weren’t adopted. And I’ve always told you I couldn’t find him.’ It was the

truth. Sort of.

‘Oh yes,’ Frida nodded blithely. ‘Out of all the scenarios I imagined that was never one of them. It was just something Carol said when she came back after meeting her biological dad for the first time. She said she made sense now in a way she’d never done before. Apparently, her dad and her have the same nose, the same coloured eyes but it was more than that; they both loved books and reading; Carol’s always got her nose stuck in a book, she belongs to five book groups. She said her adopted dad was lovely and she always felt loved by him, but he wasn’t like her in any way, and I don’t mean physical. Like I said, a piece of the jigsaw was missing.’

Frida lifted up her legs and sat cross legged on the same sofa her father had just vacated. Callie was struck by the resemblance. She had the same calm energy, the same long loose limbs. ‘So that got you questioning?’ she prompted.

‘Yeah. I imagined all sorts. That you’d had a lover who had tragically died maybe, or he was married and wouldn’t leave his wife, or there was some impenetrable barrier that couldn’t be overcome.’

‘That one was close to the truth,’ Callie said dryly.

Frida continued; she hadn’t heard her. ‘I even wondered, at one point, whether you’d been attacked, you know–’ she let the sentence trail, dropping her head, her hair falling over her face.

Callie looked at her horrified. ‘You thought you were the result of a rape? Oh, Frida, why didn’t you talk to me about all of this?’

Frida glanced up, her mouth working. ‘You were always so busy at work and stressed,’ she said emotionally. ‘I didn’t want to land you with all of my stuff when you had enough on your plate. I thought I could sort it on my own.’

‘Oh, darling girl. Come here.’ Callie slammed her mug down and opened her arms. Frida shot over the short distance. Mother and daughter held one another, tears running freely. ‘I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you,’

Callie sobbed. ‘I’m so sorry, Frida. I promise to never let work or money get between us again.’

She stroked her daughter’s silky hair. ‘Just promise me in return that you’ll never keep secrets like this again. We should always be able to talk to one another. We always have in the past – or I thought we could.’ The words were pouring out, the tears streaming. ‘I *knew* there was something wrong before you went off to Ibiza. I should have sat you down and talked to you then. Oh, darling, I’ve just been so knackered with work this year, it’s been grim. I didn’t have any energy left over and that was so wrong. But I can assure you, even though it didn’t work out between Sunil and me, and even though we were very young, we loved each other very much at the time and you’re the result of that love. Don’t ever, *ever* think otherwise.’

Frida snuggled into her mother, tears subsiding into hiccoughs. There was silence for a while. ‘Don’t beat yourself up. It’s cool. I poured all my conspiracies out in my creative writing classes. Including the theory my dad was a multi-millionaire sheik who couldn’t own up to fathering a daughter as he’d be stripped of his status as a prince.’

Callie reared back and looked down at her daughter. ‘What *have* you been reading?’

A giggle erupted. ‘The tutor wasn’t impressed either. Said he thought it was self-indulgent introspective twaddle.’ She let out an undignified snort.

‘Who is this man?’ Callie demanded, instantly on the defence.

Frida sat up, wiped her face with the sleeve of her cotton smock and laughed. ‘It doesn’t matter. Told me I was better at the fact-finding, non-fiction stuff, so he did me a favour really. That’s when I began thinking about what sort of writing I could do as a career. Can’t make money writing fiction unless you’re Sarah J. Maas,’ she added stoutly.

‘There’s my girl,’ Callie said, not having a clue who Sarah J. Maas was.

‘And, Mum,’ Frida concentrated very hard on pleating the hem of her shirt. ‘I’m so sorry about all those things I said. You know, about you

prioritising money and squashing my dreams. I couldn't have had a better mum, and I know all you did, all the hours you worked, were for me. I know that. Of course I know that.'

She shoved at her fringe, irritably. 'It was just that I'd had loads of emails from Sunil by then. Told me he was in Dorset on holiday, told me he thought I might be his daughter and wanted to finally meet. I was panicking big time. Decided to cut short the Ibiza trip and come here. Meet him. Everything was coming at me all at once and I was freaking majorly.

'Then you had a go at me about uni and journalism. Suppose I wasn't angry at you, just at me for not getting my shit together as usual.' She looked down, biting her lip. 'I meant to come clean about everything but there never seemed the right moment and then we had that awful row and everything got on top of me I suppose. I was angry and, God, was I confused so I took it all out on you.'

Callie took her daughter's hands, tears spilling again. 'I can't believe you've had all this to deal with on your own.'

'Well, Leah is a good listener. I know you're not that much of a fan and she can be a right flake if there's even a hint of a man on the scene, but she was really good at talking me through stuff. And, even though the holiday in Ibiza,' Frida hesitated, 'wasn't *brilliant,* I was glad I did it. I tried something. It didn't work out and I probably won't ever do that kind of thing again, it's just not me, at least I had the courage to try it.' She took a deep breath. 'I never seemed to have any confidence, and I could never work out why. Always felt there was something missing. I mean, I did okay at school–'

'You did great at school!' Callie interrupted.

'I did okay,' Frida corrected, shrugging. 'I've got a load of friends, a nice home.' She smiled. 'And the best mum in the world. But I always stopped myself doing stuff. Never felt I could actually succeed, you know?'

Callie had never heard Frida talk so much. Perhaps she'd never allowed her daughter the time? 'Is that why you dropped out of your degree?'

'Suppose.' Frida pulled a face. 'There were other things going on. I was all right at school as long as I worked hard, they thought I was doing okay. Learning stuff, passing exams and all that crap never came easy though, I had to really sweat it. I got to uni and there I was in amongst hundreds of others. They were all so clever, all better at passing exams. It was a bit of a sorry slap in the face. I sort of lost myself for a bit.'

'Oh, Frida,' Callie said, horrified again and shaking her daughter's hands gently. She'd been wrong thinking she and Frida talked about everything. They'd discussed nothing. Or at least she hadn't listened. 'Why didn't you say something? It's a well-known adjustment going on to university and suddenly finding yourself amongst equals and superiors.'

'I had loads of discussions with my well-being tutor, she was really good.' Frida pulled a face. 'But think it was the course that finally did it. I just wasn't enjoying it. Thought, if I got out into the world and earned some dosh it would help things at home. Maybe you could drop a few hours.' She grimaced. 'I just didn't realise how difficult it would be to find a job that would take me without any life skills and pay me what I thought I was worth. I've had a few jobs, haven't I?' She laughed again. 'But I've done a lot of growing up since I started at Price's.'

Callie regarded her daughter with a mixture of sadness and pride. 'You've grown up so much and I haven't noticed. We always used to be able to discuss anything, didn't we? How did that change?'

'I dunno, Mum.' Frida eyed her mother covertly. 'I suspect you haven't been totally honest with me about some stuff too.'

Ouch.

'Maybe. But that's for a discussion. Another time. Tell me, how did Sunil find you?'

Twenty-Nine

Poornima Dayal
Contemporary Indian painter best known for her colourful abstracts. Examine art in India, its cultural heritage.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Frida snuggled into her mother again. 'I was so scared you'd be mad. But Sunil was desperate to know if I really was his daughter.'

'I'm still not sure how I feel. A bit dazed comes close.' Callie hugged her daughter more tightly. 'To be honest, at this precise moment, I'm more relieved than anything that you're okay and I now know what's been going on. I've been so worried about you, Fri. Wracking my brain about how I'd failed you, how I could do better as a mother. I hated how distant we'd become. It didn't help that I've been surrounded by members of the Starling family.'

Frida raised her head, frowning. 'Eh?'

'They all have this uncompromising, all encompassing, you can do anything you put your mind to, middle-class confidence. I don't think one of them has ever struggled to make the rent or lived on beans on toast and lentils for the week until payday.'

Frida spluttered. ‘Don’t think we’ve ever had to survive on baked beans and lentils, Mum.’

‘Not the point.’

‘Know what you mean, though. I met a few like them at uni. Funded by mummy and daddy and drove Range Rovers. When I told them most of us could only afford to get around by bicycle I was told, “But it’s only Daddy’s *second hand* Evoque.” They didn’t live in the real world.’

Callie smoothed her daughter’s hair. ‘And I know you don’t think money is always important–’

‘Oh, Mum, don’t take what I said as gospel. I was shouting my mouth off. I think the same as you. In order to follow your dreams you’ve got to find ways of funding them. Turns out Tracey works jobs for three years and then takes six months off for travelling. She’s not living the life I thought she was. She also said her travelling days might be over. Got an arthritic hip, it turns out. Something only the good old NHS can sort. She isn’t the romantic free spirit I thought she was.’

‘Tracey’s lovely,’ Callie said in stout defence. ‘She is a free spirit, just one with a dodgy hip. Not something you need to worry about.’

Frida sat up, freeing herself from her mother’s embrace. ‘Or you! You’ve still got time to follow your dreams, even though you’re in your *forties.*’

Callie smiled at her daughter’s perception of her mother’s great age. ‘Thank you,’ she said gravely. ‘I will endeavour to do so before turning up my toes.’

‘Turning up your what?’

‘Never mind. Come on, tell me about how Sunil found you. So you didn’t go looking for him?’

Frida battered a cushion into submission and lay back against it. She shook her head. ‘I was getting round to thinking how I could find my dad when everything blew up. It was dead weird, Mum. First, I thought he was

an old perv. When I'd come out of work, this bloke would be there, standing on the opposite side of the road, watching me waiting at the bus stop. It really creeped me out.'

'I can imagine.'

'Turns out Vivek, his cousin who knew Donna and you at college, has bought up a few businesses in Worcester. He's a bit of a Dragon's Den sorta guy. Entrepreneur.'

'Always was, even at college. Donna always said he'd end up a billionaire or in prison. I can't wait to fill her in. She had a huge crush on him.'

'But they didn't go out, not like you and Dad?'

Callie liked the way Frida dropped the word *dad* into the conversation. She shook her head. 'No. We hung out as a foursome, but Vivek was focused on how he was going to make his first million even then.'

Frida pulled a face, making her eyes go huge. 'He's made it, and more. He's got houses in the States, a stonking great country pile in the Cotswolds and an apartment in London. He's made it big time.'

'How?'

'Don't really understand. Sunil said something about buying businesses and stripping the assets?' Frida shrugged. 'Sunil works for him but hasn't made as much. He's comfortable, he says, but not rich.'

'Depends on your definition,' Callie said dryly.

'Suppose. Well anyway,' Frida said, returning to her story, 'Vivek came into Price's for a meeting and a look-see. He came into the office and gave me these really weird vibes. Carol said he kept staring at me. Couldn't look away. She thought I'd played a blinder and bagged myself a millionaire sugar daddy. He's bought out Price's.' Frida frowned. 'Not sure it'll exist for much longer. Really feel for Carol. She can't afford to retire and won't get her state pension for a while yet.'

‘That’s rough. I’d like to meet her. We should invite her round when we get home.’

‘That would be well cool. I think you’d get on.’

‘I’m confused. Who was standing in the road watching you? Sunil or Vivek?’

‘Sunil. He hung around once or twice, suppose he had to check me out for himself. Then I began getting these emails from someone called Sunil Patel.’

‘Where had he got your address?’

‘Off Vivek.’

‘Bloody hell, Fri. How?’

‘He’d gone into company records to get my email.’

‘Jeez, Frida, that’s a hell of a data breach.’

Frida nodded. I know. ‘Freaked me out big time. When Vivek had seen me in the office, he couldn’t get over how much I looked like Sunil’s daughters. That’s why he was staring at me so much. Sunil’s got two girls; did you know?’

‘He mentioned he’s got other children.’

‘He’s got a little boy too. He’s only seven. Anyway, Vivek did a bit of digging, found out my surname, put two and two together and filled Sunil in with the intel. Me and Sunil got chatting on email. Once I decided he wasn’t a creep and it wasn’t spammy, I began talking to him. Opened up a bit. He’s always been nice, very respectful. He said he knew you at uni so I started asking about what it was all like and he mentioned how you and Donna and Vivek hung out as students.’

Callie let out a horrified breath. ‘God, Fri! What have I taught you about online safety? He could have been anybody.’

‘I’m not stupid. I played it well cool until I was sure he was genuine. He told me it had been him who’d been checking me out when I left work. Said he needed to see me for himself and once he did, he was convinced he was

my dad. I look exactly like his oldest. Suppose he could have come over there and then and introduced himself but he wanted to get to know me first. Make sure I was who he thought I was. I asked around at work who Sunil and Vivek Patel were. Looked up Sunil on LinkedIn and he checked out. I knew he was the real deal.'

'So, these emails, they've been going on for a while then?'

'Yeah, since March. Early on, he asked me about my dad and I said I'd never known him, he'd never been on the scene. Then we chatted a lot about how much fun you all had at uni. Then, earlier this month, he finally came out with it and said he thought he was my father. I lost it. I mean, I thought I wanted to find my dad, but the reality was something else. I'd told him I was coming here with you for a holiday and he said, by pure coincidence, he was going to be with his family in Mudeford and could we meet?' Frida screwed her eyes shut. 'It was all too much. I didn't know how to tell you, wasn't sure I was ready to meet him–'

'So you went off to Ibiza?'

'Yup. Had a bit of time to think. Bit of distance to process it all. Sunil sent me a really sad message. He's never once put pressure on me, Mum, he really hasn't, but it made me realise I might miss the opportunity to meet him and if I didn't make the effort, I never would. He's too nice a man to insist. So I gathered all the confidence I had and flew home.' She hesitated. 'I should tell you, Mum, that he paid for my flight back. The airline wanted silly money just to change the dates.' She suppressed a grin, an impish look in the grass green eyes. 'He booked me into first class. Scheduled. It was dead good!'

'I'm not sure he should be giving you money, Frida, and I wish he'd thought to contact me.' Callie was beginning to revise her opinion of Sunil. He'd been underhand. 'Are you sure he's the nice man you think he is?'

'It's okay, I said I'd pay him back,' Frida said breezily. 'And I don't think he had a clue how to navigate this.' She shrugged. 'Neither did I. We

were just muddling our way through.' She paused as a thought occurred. 'Maybe he didn't want to risk you stopping him seeing me? Suppose he didn't know how you'd turned out like either.'

'I suppose.' Callie wasn't sure she had the moral high ground. After all, she'd ended up lying by omission to him about his daughter. 'It's all so complicated.'

'Tell me about it,' Frida replied, warmly. 'So we arranged for him to come over. Meet me, then you.' She blew out an enormous breath. 'I know I've not been telling you the truth about a lot of things but it was okay wasn't it? You meeting him like that?'

'I don't know, Frida.' Callie sighed and reached for her now cold tea. 'I'm still getting my head around all of this. If we think it's complicated now, it's going to be even more so in the future. If you want a relationship with Sunil, I won't stop you but I'm warning you, it won't always be easy-happy-families.'

Frida bit her lip. 'Yeah, I know it might be tricky and I won't do anything you don't want me to, I promise.' She gave her mother a mischievous look. 'But don't families come in all shapes and sizes, including blended ones?'

Callie spluttered through her tea. It may be all right after all. It seemed her daughter had a wise head on her shoulders. Grimacing at the cold tea, she put the mug down. 'If I'm honest, I'm just relieved that you seem okay. I've been so worried about you, baby girl. All sorts of things have been going through my head. I knew something wasn't right.'

'I'm sorry, Mum. I just couldn't get it all straight in my own head enough to talk to you about it, and you've been so busy at school.'

'Some warning about Sunil coming over might have been good. I must look a right mess.'

'You look beautiful, Mum. You always do.' Frida's nose wrinkled. 'You don't… you haven't still got feelings for him? I mean, he's happily married

from what he's said.'

'No.' Callie ruffled her daughter's hair. 'I don't have feelings for him. It all happened a very long time ago and anything I felt for Sunil has gone. But I have my pride, you know. He looks exactly the same and I walked in dripping from the rain and covered in paint.'

Frida snorted. 'Bit of an exaggeration.'

'Just making a point. I was considered a bit of a babe at college,' Callie said airily. 'No one likes being reminded they've got older.'

'You're still a babe. Johnny thinks so.'

'Does he? How do you know?'

Frida tapped the side of her nose. 'I have eyes.'

Callie laughed. 'Oh it's so good to have my daughter back again, even in this dramatic fashion.' She waggled a warning finger. 'Don't ever pull a trick like that on your old mother again, will you?'

'No chance. Mum, can I ask you something?'

'Anything.'

'Sunil's wife knows all about this – me – and wants to meet me at some point and they're going to let me get to know their children eventually. How do you feel about me spending time with them?'

'How do *you* feel?' Callie asked, with a catch in her voice.

'I'm dead excited, to be honest. You know what I said about feeling as if part of me was missing? I think finding out about Sunil and his family and his culture will…' Frida flailed for the right words. 'Oh I don't know, complete me.' She pulled a face again. 'Sounds naff when I say it out loud but that's how it feels.'

Callie bit back the tears. She couldn't deny Frida this but, just as she'd got her daughter back, it felt as if she was losing her all over again. She was growing up, expanding her horizons. It was only natural but it was still painful. Stifling the loneliness which speared through her, she said, 'Of

course you must spend time with them, if that's what you all want. It's only natural. As I said, I won't stand in your way.'

'Thanks, Mum. Just think, I've been an only child all my life and now I have a dad, a stepmother and three siblings. It's wild.' Frida's lovely green eyes went huge at the thought.

Perhaps it would all be all right. Callie prayed it would. She'd rather die than have her daughter hurt. Then she glanced at her watch and jumped to her feet. 'Jeez. Have you seen the time? We've got an awards ceremony to get ourselves to!'

Thirty

WEDNESDAY EVENING 21ST AUGUST

David Hockney
Contemporary English artist. One of the most influential British artists of 20th and 21st centuries. Activity: depiction of sunlight on water in watercolour. How to express joy.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'And first prize in the inaugural Lullbury Bay Art School Competition goes to…'

'Mum. Mum. You've won!' Frida danced up and down and then hugged her mother. 'Fuck, you've won!'

Callie was in a complete daze but the swear word got through. 'Frida! Language!' She'd gone through the evening in a trance. Had it not been for the fact she was stone cold sober, she would have thought she was drunk. Her brain was muzzy, her emotions all over the place. Her daughter's revelations, meeting Sunil after all this time, all on top of everything else that had happened since she'd arrived in Lullbury Bay had, as Frida would put it, done her head right in.

The Art School main hall was unrecognisable. Long trestle tables covered in snowy cloth ran along one side. They were groaning with food

and drink, courtesy of Rick at The Old School Kitchen, the restaurant in town. Displays of artwork ran down the middle of the room and the bigger pieces, like her own, hung on the wall. Brenda, Avril's friend, was already attaching an enormous first prize banner.

Hearing her name being called, she froze. She should be making her way to the front where Dave Wiscombe, Jessica Starling and an elegant woman in cream linen and enormous earrings, who was apparently London gallery owner Adya Blanca, stood waiting for her.

Frida prodded her in the back. 'You need to get to the front. Go on, go get your prize.'

As Callie wobbled forwards, a great howl of wind whipped around the building making it shudder. Or she thought it had. It may just have been her nerves. Rain lashed at the high Velux windows. The storm had worsened.

Her way was hampered by many in the crowd wishing her congratulations. Austin was there, shouting, 'Well done,' in her ear. His wife, Aggie, grabbed her around the neck making them jump up and down together. Sybil Starling bellowed a 'Congratulations' and gave her a bear hug, followed by Maria saying the same and Becky echoing it. Grace patted her arm and said, 'How simply wonderful,' and Lucie, accompanied by what seemed most of the Wiscombe clan, yelled, 'Go, girl!'

Despite the awful weather, most of the town had turned out. Just as she thought she'd fought her way through them all, a slight figure to her right detached from the crowd to give her a hug. 'I knew you'd do it,' whispered Avril Pengethley. She gave her a gentle push. 'Now, take your moment. It's your time.'

Callie gave a speech although she wasn't aware of a single word she said. Frida said afterwards she'd been witty and genuine and everyone laughed so it couldn't have been too bad. Dave handed over a cheque for a huge amount of money and the terrifyingly chic Adya explained that Callie had won exhibition space at her gallery in Islington for the next five years.

It was all a complete whirl. Unreal. She tried not to search the crowds for Johnny but did anyway and swallowed the bitter disappointment that he wasn't there. She saw Frida skip over to a rain-soaked Sunil and saw how happy she looked showing off her father to Avril.

Grace approached. 'Marvellous, my dear girl. Simply splendid. I can't tell you how delighted I am.'

Jessica joined them. She handed over a glass of champagne. 'Congrats, Callie. Knew I'd backed a winner.' Kissing her on the cheek, she murmured, 'I'm so pleased for you. Dave's totally desperate to offer you that job. Think you should take it.'

'Job?' Callie laughed, confused. Jessica never stopped bossing people around.

'Yes. The tutoring job,' Grace and Jess chorused as one.

'Here at the Art School,' Jessica added.

'I can't think of anyone better suited. We'd be thrilled to have you,' Grace said. 'Please do consider it.'

They must mean the teaching job Dave had mentioned. Callie hadn't thought he'd been serious. 'But I already have a job.' She looked wildly around to see who would rescue her, but everyone was too busy attacking the buffet. 'I'd have to give my notice. I have a house in Worcester. My whole life is there.' She caught sight of Frida and Sunil deep in conversation. *But is it? And for how long?* If Frida really was determined to go to South Western to study, she'd be leaving home. It could be the chance to change her life. The change she'd been longing for. But it would mean giving up all her security, taking the biggest risk of her life. *You're not your mother,* she reminded herself. *Don't make the same mistakes.*

'I'd let Sea Haven House out to you at a very reasonable rent,' Grace said. 'I'm getting too old to run it as holiday business. It's all getting far too much bother. It would be a pleasure to have a long-term tenant, especially if

it's you. And,' she added impishly, 'I'd have a ready-made dog sitter for Vinny, if you'd be agreeable.'

Jessica nudged her elbow. 'And with space at Adya's gallery you'd get your work out to really prestigious buyers. Get your name out there. Adya's done wonders for Jago Pengethley's career; he's making shedloads. Shame he isn't here, he could give you some advice. Mainline to Waterloo from Axminster too. Getting up to The Smoke isn't a major deal when you need to show your face at the gallery.'

This was all moving far too fast for Callie. Could she actually do it? She felt sick. Swallowing a great gulp of fizzy champagne and bubbles didn't help. 'I…' she gasped, 'I'll have to think about it,' she finished lamely.

'Well, don't think too long,' Jessica warned. 'Dave needs to advertise soon.'

Grace peered at Callie, sensing her discomfort. 'I think we need to leave Callie to enjoy her moment. I'm sure she'll tell us her decision when ready.' She steered Jessica away, winking and mouthing over her shoulder, 'So sorry!'

Callie was immediately surrounded by well-wishers and, at one point, several journalists wanting interviews. She tried her hardest to deal with it all professionally, as if she'd been the centre of attention all her life, instead of a busy working single mum. But at the very edge of her vision she was aware of Frida and Sunil having an increasingly intense conversation.

After the journalists had had their fill, a man materialised at her side. He smelled of the sea and the rain. Johnny. It seemed an age since the evening when Frida had interrupted them; she'd missed him so much.

He enveloped her in a hug and she hung on to him like a lifeline, breathing in his reassuring presence. 'You came!'

'Of course I did. I'm sorry I missed the actual presentation. Was unexpectedly delayed.' He hugged her again, hard. 'So many congratulations, Calliope. So, so many congrats. I knew you'd do it.'

She eased herself reluctantly away from him. ‘Everyone keeps saying that. Seems I was dead cert to everyone, apart from me.’

He took her by the shoulders, staring into her eyes. ‘Think it’s about time you had confidence in yourself. You do know what a big deal this is? Adya Blanca’s reputation goes before her. She knows her stuff and she knows who’s talented. Only she’s usually a very urban animal. It’s only because she’s an old pal of Dave Wiscombe’s from his protest days that she did this.’ He laughed, making his grey eyes twinkle. ‘Normally she wouldn’t be seen dead in a little seaside town in Dorset. I don’t think she ventures outside of Zone 2.’

Callie laughed, his exuberance igniting her like the champagne she’d just drunk. They still had a great deal to clear up but now wasn’t the moment. ‘Why were you late?’ A movement caught her eye. It was Verity, the vicar, coming into the hall. Like Johnny’s, her coat sparkled with raindrops. She put a hand up to them both and then joined Frida, Avril and Sunil.

Callie watched curiously as Johnny’s gaze lingered on the vicar and then concentrated on the moment. ‘It doesn’t matter though, not now you’re here. Oh, I’ve missed you so much, Johnny. I’ve got so much to tell you. Frida’s father is here.’

‘I know.’

At her confused look he went on. ‘You should know nothing in Lullbury Bay happens without everyone knowing about it. I had a coffee in the Sea Spray and Tracey filled me in. After your argument with Frida I thought you and she could do with some space, so I’ve been making myself scarce. Once I’d heard Frida’s father was here, I guessed you really didn’t want me hanging around.’ He paused, and then went on. ‘I’ve had some stuff to sort out for myself too.’

‘You’re such a nice man.’ She reached up and grabbed the collar of his pea coat, kissing him soundly on the mouth. Someone nearby wolf-whistled

but she didn't care. She kissed him again and for the first time noticed just how wet he was. He was soaked through. 'Is the rain bad out there?'

He nodded. 'Getting rough. It's developing into quite the storm. I've just bumped into Jamie. He was heading down to the seafront. Some kind of problem down there, apparently. But I'm wet because I gave Mum and Dad a lift here and Dad managed to trip on one of the wretched potholes in the car park on the way in.'

Callie put a hand to her mouth in shock. 'Oh no,' she gasped. 'Is he all right?'

'He's fine. Might have twisted his ankle a little. More concerned he'd ruined a pair of his best trousers. He'd been at the gin before he got in the car so I think his fall was relaxed, shall we say. That lovely vicar, Verity, helped me with him. He's sitting in state over there enjoying having several women at his beck and call.'

'As long as he's okay.'

'He is. Callie?' Johnny sounded uncertain. 'I think we really need to talk.' He looked about him wildly. 'Not the time or place and I'd hate to steal your thunder; this is your night, but promise me we'll find the time to talk?'

Callie detached herself. It was only then that she remembered she'd decided she needed to distance herself from Johnny. Maybe, with Frida settled at university she could take the job here and have more time for a relationship? But how would that work, when Johnny would be in the Midlands? She shook her head to force some sense into it. No matter what decision she tried to make there were pitfalls. Too many ifs and buts. Too late she saw his face fall. He'd misinterpreted her gesture.

'I'll go and check on Dad. Get him some food. Rescue him from The Aunts.'

'Johnny I–' but it was too late, he'd disappeared into the crowd. Though she tried to go after him, she was prevented by several people

congratulating her.

Peering over their shoulders, a movement caught Callie's peripheral vision. Frida and Sunil, on their own now, were still deep in conversation and looked to be arguing. She recognised Frida's rigid shoulders. It meant she was upset. Saw her flushed face and her hands rise in indignation… and shock? She needed to get to her daughter.

'It's Carrie!' boomed Johnny's Aunt Sybil, looming large and blocking Callie's path. 'The gel of the night.' She hugged Callie in a gin-soaked embrace. 'I say, this is all rather marvellous. And what a party, eh? Simply splendid.'

Callie tried to dodge around her but the woman's steel-like grip held her still and her generous curves prevented her seeing what was going on with Frida and Sunil.

'I said,' repeated Sybil, as Maria approached, 'it's all simply splendid, isn't it?'

'Oh yes. Splendid. Many congratulations, Callie. Isn't it all splendid, Becky?'

The third aunt hovered at Callie's side, putting a shy hand on her elbow. 'Yes many congratulations. It's all simply splendid. I'm having a wonderful time, and I love your paintings. The way you've incorporated real flowers into them is really rather innovative. I like to paint myself and I'd love to discuss your techniques with you at some point.'

Sybil and Maria blinked at their sister, mouths falling open. Callie wasn't surprised. In her brief acquaintance with the three aunts she'd never heard Becky utter anything the other two hadn't said first. 'I'd love to, Becky, I really would and I promise I will,' she said to the woman, 'but now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find my daughter.'

As Callie pushed through the crowds to the edge of the room, she heard Sybil say, 'I say, steady on, old girl, you're getting to be a regular chatterbox,' and smiled.

The smile vanished from her face when she found Sunil. He was standing, alone, in the long white corridor. Frida was nowhere to be seen.

Scrubbing his hands over his face, he groaned, ‘Oh, Callie. I’ve really messed up.’

Thirty-One

Artemisia Gentileschi 1593–1653
Considered to be the most accomplished 17th century Italian painter of her generation. First woman member of the Accademia di Arte del Disegno. Discuss women's roles in a patriarchal society.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'What's happened?' she demanded of Sunil. 'Where's Frida? What were you talking about?'

'I didn't know. I didn't know you hadn't told her.'

Lumpen horror sank into the bottom of Callie's stomach. 'What do you mean?'

'We were chatting about us all being at college together, she's always been really interested in that part of our lives. I suppose it's because she's about to go herself.'

'Sunil, will you get to the point? What have you told Frida that she didn't know?'

'She wanted to know why I didn't stand by you when we found out you were pregnant. I told her–'

‘Oh God.’ Callie put a hand to her mouth in shock. ‘You told her you thought I was going to have a termination. You told my daughter I was going to abort her. Oh, Sunil, how could you?’

‘I didn’t know, Callie.’ His voice took on a whining quality. ‘She said you two had always talked about everything, were real close. I assumed you’d mentioned it.’

‘And just how do you think I’d do that? Or why?’

Sunil’s voice rose in anger. ‘Then maybe you shouldn’t have lied to me at the time! And denied me the chance to bring up our daughter.’

‘*My* daughter,’ Callie hissed. ‘Frida is *my* daughter. And I didn’t lie to you, at least not on purpose. After you’d so conveniently disappeared, I changed my mind.’

‘Don’t you think I had a right to know?’

‘I looked for you. I asked around everywhere. But no one knew where you and Vivek had gone. And then, well forgive me, but I had other things on my mind. Like parents who were threatening to throw me out, a baby on the horizon and finding a home for us both. Not to mention trying to graduate and getting a sodding job!’

He subsided against the wall. Covering his face with his hands he murmured, ‘I thought all this was going so well. I’ve been through hell you know. Finding out I had another daughter, trying to get to know her, breaking the news to my wife.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Callie said impatiently wondering if he’d always been this self-absorbed. ‘But what happened when you let slip I’d nearly got rid of her?’

‘I don’t know. She yelled a lot, got really pissed with me and then ran off.’

‘Where to? Where’s she gone, Sunil?’

He shrugged, spreading his hands. ‘She said something about going to the sea. Clear her head. Mentioned the prom. You have one of those here?’

Callie groaned inwardly. ‘Yes, we have one of those here,’ she said through clenched teeth. ‘And my precious daughter has just run off into the biggest storm they’ve had round here this year. And you let her!’

As if to underline her point, lightning flashed through the windows followed by a rumble of thunder. The storm must be directly overhead.

‘What should we do?’

‘I think you’ve done enough. I’ll go and find her. You get Johnny Starling.’

‘Who?’

‘He’s a friend. Johnny Starling,’ she repeated, as Sunil still hadn’t moved. ‘Tall. Wearing chinos, a navy-blue shirt and a dark coat.’

‘But how will I know who he is?’

‘Oh for God’s sake, Sunil, have you always been this useless? Ask someone. Ask for Johnny Starling!’

‘What’s going on, Callie?’ It was Johnny. He came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. ‘You trying to find me?’

‘Thank God.’ Callie didn’t analyse the wave of relief washing over her. Johnny had been in far tougher situations than this. He’d know what to do. ‘Frida’s run off somewhere. We think down to the seafront. She’s upset,’ she flashed a glance at Sunil, ‘about something.’

He didn’t hesitate. ‘Let’s go.’

Callie dived into the office and grabbed her jacket. It was the short yellow waterproof she’d thrown on when leaving Sea Haven House and would be worse than useless, but it was better than nothing. They ran out into the car park. Callie was nearly blown over by a gust of wind. She stopped dead at the space where her car should be. ‘It’s gone,’ she said stupidly. ‘Frida must have taken it.’

‘Come on, we’ll take mine. Don’t worry, my love, we’ll find her.’

By the time they’d run to the far end of the car park they were soaked through. Johnny unlocked the doors and Callie tried opening the passenger

side. It slammed shut again in the wind nearly trapping her fingers. By this time Johnny had started the engine. Throwing back her soaked hair so she could see, she slid into the car and they negotiated the car park's bumpy surface.

'Can't see a thing. Windscreen's fogged up,' Johnny complained. He switched on the heater, but only cold air blasted out. 'Don't worry, I'll pick up speed when I'm on the road.'

All Callie wanted was for him to gun the engine but she couldn't see much through the windscreen either. 'I was in such a state when I got here tonight, I obviously didn't lock my car. Frida's found the spare key. I keep one taped to the sun visor.'

'What's gone on?' He glanced over. 'No, on second thoughts, it's not important you tell me now. I need to concentrate on driving.' A gout of rain thrashed at the roof of the little Fiat. 'Bloody hell, this storm is something else.' He wiped condensation off the inside of the windscreen with the back of his hand. 'Not much better.'

The narrow steep lane leading down to the seafront was deserted. Johnny, hunched over the steering wheel, peered out through the driving rain. Callie kept a look out for her car, thinking at least if Frida had driven down she'd be reasonably dry and protected. But it was a horrible night for driving and her daughter hadn't had all that much experience. It was hard to see, despite the wipers going at a manic speed.

Horizontal rain slashed off the sea. Wind buffeted the car making it judder and Callie swore its wheels left the road at one point. The palm trees waved frantically and the thunder and lightning were in overdrive. The storm seemed intent on unleashing its worst right over Lullbury Bay.

They found her car abandoned, empty, on the harbour end of the seafront, so parked the Fiat alongside and ran to the Sea Spray. Callie hoped Frida had sought refuge in the café. To her relief it was open, light from the interior cascading a beacon of hope across the wide space outside the yacht

club. Blown along by the gale, she collided with the café's door. Wrenching it open, she and Johnny tumbled in. Flicking back her drenched hair, she spotted Tracey emerging from the kitchen.

'Is Frida here?'

Tracey ran to her, clasping her hands. 'She was, maid. In a bit of a state, she was. I went to make her some hot chocolate but by the time I came out, she'd gone. Jan here says she's gone to help with the beach huts.'

Callie gaped, wrong-footed. She didn't understand. 'The beach huts? What do you mean?'

'The wind's pulling at 'em. They'll be wrecked by morning, I reckon. Frida's gone to help folk get their stuff out. High summer see, people will have all sorts in there.'

'My partner's gone to help Jamie,' a middle-aged woman with a silver pixie haircut, said. Callie turned to her blankly. 'I'm Jan. Daisy's mum. Daisy who runs the florists,' she added. 'It's chaos down there by the beach huts,' she went on. 'Daisy and her boyfriend are there too, along with Bee from the bookshop. All hands to the deck. Everyone wants to retrieve their belongings. Tracey and me are getting the tea and hot soup ready. They'll need something after being in that storm. The police and coastguard haven't turned up yet so Jamie's in charge.'

'And Frida's gone to help?'

Jan and Tracey nodded. 'You two had an argument?' Tracey asked.

'Something like that.' Callie felt ever so slightly relieved. Frida couldn't be too upset if she'd thought to help others. Then fear for her daughter curled acidly inside again. With the beach huts collapsing, it sounded dangerous. 'I need to find her.'

'Well, I'm sure she'll be all right, as long as she stays with Jamie. Let Johnny go and why don't you wait here with us?' Tracey suggested. 'We could do with some help too. You could make sandwiches.'

Callie wrenched her hands free and ran back to the door. ‘I’m so sorry, Tracey. Happy to help later but now I really need to find Frida.’

With their backs to the harbour, they faced the wind head on. Pulling up the hood of her waterproof was useless. It simply blew down again, billowing out behind her, making the zipped-up neck pull painfully against her throat.

Johnny gathered her to him. ‘Two against the wind. Less chance of being blown over.’

‘It’s bloody fucking August for Christ’s sake,’ she swore as they jogged awkwardly along to the lower part of the promenade where the row of beach huts stood against a retaining wall. ‘Why is the weather so awful?’

It was difficult to see but ahead, blurred in the pelting rain, was a crowd of people. They were running around. A middle-aged couple hurried past, clutching one another. The man was battling to hold on to a deck chair, his face glowing white with strain in the dark. The woman, holding a large canvas picture to her chest, was sobbing. When she and Johnny got closer to the beach huts Callie saw why.

Jamie, in his RNLI waterproofs, was yelling and gesturing frantically at people. As they reached him, they heard him yell, ‘Come away. Get away to safety! Wait for the emergency services.’

Across the promenade was strewn the remains of many of the beach huts. Designed to be easily dismantled for winter storage, the flimsy wooden structures had been no match for the storm. Whole sides of hut lay flat on the concrete, one had a wall blown off revealing a mangled collection of mugs, blankets, a kettle. Everything needed to make a cosy bolthole by the sea. Several huts remained upright and complete but had concertinaed into one another. The wind howled and snatched at a curtain. It sailed off into the darkness and snagged on the low wall which separated this part of the prom from the beach a foot or so below. People ran about,

hands over their heads for protection, searching for their own hut and their possessions.

An older man retreated, shaking his head. He patted Jamie on the shoulder. ‘Rick, Daisy and I are heading back to the Sea Spray,’ he bellowed. ‘Can’t do much out here. I’ll look out for the police and send them your way.’ He was followed by a tall, dark-haired man who was shielding the woman who had sold Callie her flowers at the market.

‘Thanks, Colin,’ Jamie shouted back. ‘Wish the rest would listen. It’s useless. They’re just putting themselves in danger.’

As the trio went past Johnny, he stopped them, asking if there was anything he could do.

Callie tugged on Jamie’s sleeve. He was shouting into a walkie-talkie. ‘Jamie, have you seen Frida? My daughter? Tall, slim, long black hair.’ Her words were snatched away.

‘What?’ He cupped a hand around his ear to hear better against the wind.

Callie repeated what she’d said. ‘She’ll be dressed in a red dress. It’s got sequin embroidery on it.’

Jamie shoved sodden black hair off his forehead, irritably. ‘Yes. She went in that direction.’ He gestured to the far end of the prom where two or three huts could just about be seen. They were jammed together. ‘Said she was going to get Austin Ruddick’s stuff out. Tried to stop her but she was having none of it. Said she was fond of the old man.’

‘Right.’

As Callie went to go, Jamie stayed her arm. ‘I can’t let you go over there, Callie. There’s debris all over the place. Stuff flying too. You could get a serious head injury. And the wooden panels on the ground have got nails protruding. You won’t see them in the dark. Wait here with me or, better still, go back to the café. The emergency services are on the way: the fire brigade and the coastguard. They’ll find her. It’s what they’re trained to

do.’ He turned away as someone approached him from the other side, distracting him.

Callie took her chance. ‘Sorry, Jamie. I know you mean well but I’m going to find my daughter.’ Nearly tripping over a plank of wood and a sun lounger, she dodged around three half destroyed huts and ran.

Thirty-Two

Eugene Lepoittevin 1806–1870
French artist of landscapes and maritime battle scenes. Why do battle scenes need to be conveyed? Discuss bias in point of view.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'Callie!' Johnny yelled at her rapidly retreating back. 'You can't go over there, it's too dangerous. Let me go, Jamie, I need to go after her.'

'Johnny, you can't. It's not safe. Wait until the coastguard and the others arrive. The storm's getting worse.'

Johnny shook him off and ran after Callie. Ducking around several people who were wisely retreating, he lost sight of her yellow coat. The wind threw another gout of rain at him, making him stagger and then a clap of thunder reverberated around the bay, bouncing off the cliffs in the east.

He leaned against a beach hut, hands clamped over his ears. It was so violent it sounded like an explosion. The explosions he'd battled through in Iraq. The thunder echoed through his chest, into his head until he couldn't think. His heart felt as if it was going to erupt into his throat. Squeezing his eyes shut he focused on his breathing exercises. It seemed ridiculous to try them out here in the middle of a storm, but it was all he had left.

Somewhere in the storm was a frightened young woman and her mother. Callie.

He didn't have a clue what had spooked Frida, and it was none of his business, but it must have been something serious. Callie might, at this very moment, be putting herself into danger hunting for her daughter. Yet here he was, frozen. This was why he'd left his job. Not so much knowing he wouldn't cope in a situation like this, or where flashbacks made any kind of movement or rational thought impossible; it was the fear of letting someone down.

The baby's body, broken and lifeless, swam into his vision. He'd been too late to get her out. It hadn't been a bomb which had brought the building down on top of her, it had been an earthquake, but the end results had been the same. Death. Destruction. Sorrow. He'd seen too much. The recent long conversations with Verity had helped a little. She wasn't a trained counsellor, she'd explained, but a good ear. It had been good to talk. Just talk. Drink endless cups of tea and get it out of his system. Verity had made him promise to book some sessions with a specialist. Had encouraged the breathing exercises. She'd been right. They were calming him down, allowing him to think more clearly.

A spike of lightning daggering across the churning black sea brought him back to the present. Talking to Verity had eased some of his worries but he still wasn't sure he could do this. Maybe he should have listened to Jamie? He owed the guy an apology. Best leave it to the emergency services.

A man shouldered past him carrying an enormous cool box. 'I'd get out of here if I was you, my friend,' he yelled over another thunderclap. 'Reckon the retaining wall's got a good chance of coming down. Right on top of the end beach huts. Weight of all the water that's draining down. Once the services are here, they'll block off access, I reckon.' He shook rain out of his eyes. 'Tis a tragedy. All folks' stuff.'

Johnny squinted through the rain, in the direction of where the man had come. The white lights strung along the seafront were swinging wildly, disorientating him. He needed to find Frida and Callie. Get them to safety. ‘Have you seen a woman?’ He grabbed the bloke by the arm, gesturing with his hand. ‘About so high. Wearing a yellow waterproof.’

The man shook his head, impatient to go.

‘Or a girl in her twenties.’ Johnny fought his memory. What had Frida been wearing? ‘Red dress. Dark hair. Pretty.’

‘Oh yes. Seen her all right. Up at the end. Last but one beach hut. The white striped one. Careful of that wall, mate. When the coastguard arrives, I’ll tell him where you’ve gone.’ More thunder made them flinch. ‘Never seen a summer storm like this one.’ A hut caught a gust of wind and slid, toppling over the low wall and onto the sand, splintering like matchsticks. The man dropped his cool box and ran, shielding his face as a part of a roof headed his way.

Johnny pressed against the hut which seemed to be surviving. Then he saw why. It had been blown into the supporting wall separating the two levels of the promenade. It had crumpled into half its size. If anyone had been in there they would have been crushed. And, if the wall collapsed on top, they’d have no chance of getting out.

If Frida and Callie were sheltering in a similar position, he had to do something before it was too late. Sirens penetrated the noise of the storm. The emergency services were on their way. But he was here. Now. On the scene. He could do something. He hadn’t been able to save that little girl in the earthquake, but he had a chance of rescuing Frida. And Callie. His heart wrenched. She’d drawn away from him lately and he didn’t know why. But if he stayed here any longer, he may never find out.

Forcing his feet, one in front of another, he clung close to the remaining huts, narrowly escaping another which shot off onto the beach. Once the wind got underneath the join of flimsy wall and base they lifted up and took

off. Thunder and lightning crashed over him. The storm must be right over them. It wasn't moving off. Inching along, he reached the tallest part of the wall and three huts still miraculously remaining. He just hoped the wall would stay in place a little longer.

What had that bloke said? He thought he'd seen Frida near the hut with the white stripes. And where Frida was, Callie must be too. As he approached the striped hut, the door blew open slamming into his face and chest, winding him. He felt the hot trickle of blood run down his chin. Clinging onto what was left of the door frame, he staggered past.

'Johnny!'

He wheeled round. It was Callie. Where had her voice come from? In all the chaos of the storm and rain, his senses were confused.

'Johnny. Come back. We're in here!'

Falling into the hut, now missing its door, he tripped over her, landing against the wooden wall. In a snag of lightning he took in that Callie was crouched against a cupboard in its far corner, clutching onto Frida. The girl was ashen and a dark stain of blood ran freely from her thigh.

'You've found us!' Callie said. Her voice held the edge of panic, but she was holding it together for her daughter. 'Frida's hurt her leg. I didn't want to move her. Was waiting for the ambulance.' She waved her phone. 'I rang 999 but I think they were coming anyway.'

He crouched beside her. Resisting the urge to fling his arms around her in relief, he went with putting a hand on her arm. 'Think something's on the way. I heard sirens a minute ago. But, Callie–'

'What?'

'I need to get you both out of here.'

'I don't think we should move Frida. It looks as if she's already lost a lot of blood.'

Johnny glanced at Frida and then back to Callie. Shuffling nearer he said urgently, 'There's a chance the wall behind these huts will come

down.'

'No time to wait for the ambulance?'

He shook his head. 'I'll lift Frida from the right; you put her arm around your shoulder and grab her around the waist.' Was it his imagination or could he hear a sludgy slipperiness. A slipping of earth? The image of the broken child flashed back. 'We need to get out now.'

Callie nodded and stood up. 'Frida, darling girl, we're going to get you moving now.'

Frida's head lolled loosely to one side, but her eyes focused on her mother. 'Okay,' she slurred.

Johnny went to the other side of Frida, lifting her under the shoulders and taking most of her weight. 'Come on, Frida. Just a few steps if you can manage it. I know it's wet and horrible outside–'

'It hurts.'

'I know, my lovely but we'll get you into a nice warm ambulance and you'll feel all better.'

Frida flinched violently as she tried to bear weight.

'Lean on me and try to hop if you can. That's a girl.'

As Frida leaned all her weight on him, he slipped on the sopping wooden floor. An ominous creaking sounded. 'Now or never!'

Together they levered Frida out into weeping gale. A blast of rain hit them square in the face, stinging the skin and Callie gave an involuntary cry. Johnny saw she'd given her waterproof to Frida and so was exposed to the elements in her silky vest and thin trousers. In an agony of indecision he didn't know whether to keep them near the shelter of the huts or force them back along the prom to where, hopefully, there would be help.

In a great sliding, splintering roar, the decision was made for him. Just beyond where they were standing a section of the wall came down. Half picking Frida up he grabbed Callie with his other arm and threw them over

the low wall and onto the sand below. The last thing he remembered was something large and hard hitting the back of his head.

Thirty-Three

THURSDAY MORNING 22ND AUGUST

Vincent van Gogh 1853–1890
Dutch Post-Impressionist. Hugely talented and influential artist, wracked with self-doubt. Discussion point: how does a lack of confidence affect our potential?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'You saved our lives.' Callie reached for Johnny's hand. Against the hospital bedding he looked alarmingly white-faced but she'd never been more grateful to see anyone in her life.

It was early in the morning. The other men in the four-bed ward were asleep. After what seemed like an eternity waiting in A&E with Frida, Callie had left her with Sunil. Frida, still a little groggy from the painkillers, was recovering remarkably quickly. The blessing of the young and fit.

Callie knew they'd have to have a conversation; there was some explaining to do, but that would have to wait. She couldn't imagine what had been going through her daughter's mind. When she'd found her bloodied and soaked through in the beach hut it hadn't been the time for a heart-to-heart. Frida had a nasty leg wound made worse by the nail embedded in her thigh. She'd been lucky, the doctors had said. When the

plank Frida had stepped on flipped up and hit her, the nail had missed the major artery. The wound would heal quickly.

Sunil had taken her to the hospital café to get hot coffee and some breakfast. They would drive home soon but Callie had insisted she check on Johnny first. It was no wonder he was so pale. An angry gash on the bridge of his nose was dressed in Steri-Strips, and two black eyes were beginning to bloom.

'Are you okay?' He grasped her hand and hung on. 'And Frida?'

'I'm absolutely fine,' she reassured him. 'Nothing but a few cuts and bruises. Frida's leg has been bandaged, she's been given an anti-tetanus and we have to attend a walk-in clinic to have the wound checked in two days.'

'Are you sure you're okay?'

'Nothing that a hot coffee won't cure.'

He sank back onto the pillows, still gripping her hand. 'Thank God.'

'Never mind me. And Frida's got youth on her side, she'll be fine in a couple of days. It's you I'm worried about. How are you, Johnny? Why are they keeping you in?'

'Got bashed on the head but I'll be okay. They wanted to keep me in for observation for an hour or so. Think it was a lump of tree branch that walloped me.' He tapped gently at his forehead. 'Not sure what has more wood in it. My parents will be along at some point. I'm being allowed home later today, once the doc has given me the all-clear.'

'Home? Sea Haven House?'

'No. According to the nurse, Mum phoned up and insisted she take me to the family house in Exeter. She can't quite contain her excitement at the thought of having me as a victim… I mean, invalid for a few days. Not to mention The Aunts.'

'You have my sympathy.'

'I'm going to need it.' He attempted a grin and then winced at the pain from the injury on his nose. 'You'll have Frida to look after so I don't want

to add to your nursing burden.'

Callie wanted to say she'd be happy to look after him but stayed silent. There was so much to say and she couldn't utter a word.

'Think Jamie deserves an apology,' Johnny added, breaking the awkwardness.

'Poor Jamie.' Callie bit her lip in shame. 'We all ignored him, and he was only trying to do his job. All I could think about was finding Frida.'

'And the only thing I wanted to do was find you.'

'We should have left it to the emergency services,' Callie said, not quite meeting his eyes. She rubbed the beginning of a tear away. 'But then it might have been too late for Frida.'

'It might have been too late for both of you.' Johnny's grip tightened.

Callie screwed her eyes shut, sucking in a deep breath. 'Let's not dwell on it. We're all okay, more or less. And probably owe Jamie an unfeasibly huge donation to the lifeboat fund.'

A commotion sounded in the corridor.

'Young lady, I don't care if it's not visiting hours.' Dorrie's unmistakeable voice carried ringingly. 'You have my son in there and I insist on seeing him. He's been badly injured.'

'And he's a hero, you know,' a deeper voice put in, which must be Sidney. 'He saved two lives last night.'

'He saved lives,' someone boomed. It could only be Sybil.

'Yes, he saved lives,' echoed another.

'Two lives!' said yet another.

'Do let us pop in and see him,' Jessica beseeched. 'We promise to only stay for a teeny mo and then we'll all leave you in peace.'

'Sounds like everyone's here.' Callie smiled wistfully. 'I might disappear. Shouldn't be here anyway. It's not visiting hours. Besides, I look awful, I'm in last night's clothes, they're sodden and I'm in desperate need

of coffee and a bacon roll.' She bent and kissed his cheek. 'Thank you,' she breathed. It seemed all too inadequate.

'For what? Shoving you both a foot down onto hard sand?' Johnny still hadn't relinquished her hand, despite her standing up.

'You saved our lives, Johnny. If you hadn't insisted on getting us all out of that beach hut, we would have been covered by the wall collapsing. We got out in the nick of time. I'll never be able to thank you enough. It's not just Jamie I owe a huge debt to.'

'Calliope?'

'Yes?'

The voice from the corridor got louder. 'Nurse, if you won't allow us all in, then kindly show me, as his *mother,* which bed my son is in.'

'Nothing.' He grimaced in frustration.

Callie stared longingly into his eyes, wondering if she'd ever see him again. 'Thank you, Johnny. For everything.' She slipped out, sneaking past the Starling clan who were so busy haranguing at the nurses' station that they did not see her.

Turning into the main corridor, she went in search of Frida and Sunil.



Sunil drove them all back to Sea Haven House, with Frida stretching her injured leg out along the back seat. He helped Callie get her up the cottage's steep stairs to bed and then Callie undressed her daughter and cleaned her up as best she could with a flannel. Stripping off her own, still damp clothes, she pulled on a warm, comforting tracksuit. The beautiful red dress with the sequinned embroidery and her silk vest and jeans would never be the same. That they'd been the only casualties, Callie was immensely grateful. Tucking Frida in tenderly and leaving her to sleep, she returned downstairs.

She took a deep breath and addressed Sunil. He was standing at the French windows staring at the garden. Apart from a few branches down and raindrops jewelling the leaves in the sunshine, it was as if last night's storm had never happened. 'Sunil, I'm sorry.'

He turned and came to her reaching out for her hands. 'You have nothing to be sorry for. We were children, Callie. You were trying to escape a difficult upbringing. I wanted to please my parents more than be there for you and my…' he paused and swallowed painfully, '…baby.'

'I'm so sorry that you think I lied to you. I didn't. At that time. I was certain I'd go through with the termination. It was only later, when you'd disappeared, I don't know, something inside me felt as if my baby was all I had left in the world. I suspected Mum and Dad wouldn't go as far as throw me out and they didn't – but as I began to get bigger and they couldn't ignore it any longer I think the reality of the situation dawned on them. How could they ever face the neighbours with an illegitimate grandchild?' Callie said sarcastically. 'And even worse in their eyes, a mixed heritage child.'

Sunil led her to the sofa and they sat down. 'What did they do?'

Callie pulled a face and then went on, matter-of-factly. 'They gave me a sum of money. Made it clear it was my share of the inheritance and I should expect nothing more. I put a deposit down on a house. In St John's. You probably remember it? Nice part of Worcester. Bit studenty but okay. Donna's dad guaranteed the mortgage, for which I'll be forever grateful.'

He nodded.

'My parents said if I took the money and kept the baby instead of letting her go for adoption, it was the end of any relationship we had. It was too late by then for any other choice; I couldn't go through with it anyway, and I knew I could never give Frida up for adoption so I chose to go it alone.'

'It must have been hard.'

Callie nodded. ‘It was at first. But I had good friends. I kept in touch with Donna and she’s been amazing.’

Sunil smiled. ‘Vivek always said she was too bossy. And he was too bossy too.’ He chuckled. ‘It would never have worked out between them.’

‘Possibly.’ Callie gave him a searching look. ‘What about you and me? If life had taken us another path, do you think we could have made a go of it?’

‘I think part of me will always love you, Callie. As, indeed, I love Frida.’

‘I think that too.’ She paused, too overcome by emotion to speak. ‘Thank you for loving her.’ Clearing her throat, she continued. ‘And I’m so sorry about being such a mardy cow to you last night. I was,’ she screwed up her face, ‘a bit stressed.’

He shook his head, dismissing her apology. ‘It’s nothing. Don’t worry. I fully deserved everything you said to me. Vivek always says I’m like a headless chicken in a crisis. You should have seen me when my children were born. Didn’t know what to do. There was Lina lying on the couch doing her breathing exercises and I went into complete panic mode. All three times!’

‘Your family!’ Callie exclaimed, putting a hand to her mouth. ‘You’d better get back to them. They’ll be wondering where you are.’

‘I rang Lina. She understands. She’s a good woman. I’ve been lucky. I hope, when you feel the time is right, that you’ll meet her. She wants to get to know Frida, as do the children. But we’ll take it slowly. Feel our way. It’s uncharted territory for all of us.’

‘It is. But I’d like that.’

‘Then we’ll do it. When the time is right.’ He paused, and then went on, choosing his words carefully. ‘And, Callie, I’d like to help Frida out. With university fees. She mentioned a course she’s interested in.’

‘Sunil, I–’

‘Please let me. Vivek is the one who’s made the millions, but I’ve not done too badly myself. I can afford it and Lina agrees. It’s right that I help my daughter. *Our* daughter. I plan to put the other children through university. And if they don’t want to go, I’ll have strict words with them as to why not.’ He laughed. ‘So, what I do for them, I do for *all* of them.’

Guilt warred with gratitude. It was hard, when you’d been the only one who had had responsibility for so long, to relinquish that role. But the freedom that beckoned was dizzying. Selfishly the thought occurred that, if Frida’s fees were paid, maybe she could drop some teaching hours, or even do something else? ‘Sunil, are you sure?’

He leaned back. ‘I’m absolutely sure. I wouldn’t offer otherwise.’

‘And it’s all agreed with your wife? With Lina?’

‘It is.’

Callie blew out a tiny breath. ‘Then I accept. Thank you, Sunil. If Frida agrees, then I’m happy too. As long as it really is okay with your wife?’

Sunil laughed. ‘I can assure you it is.’ He stood up. ‘And now, I really must go.’ Yawning, he stretched. ‘A shower is calling, if I can get near the bathroom, that is. Who’d have two daughters, eh?’ He caught her look. *‘Three* daughters. And a fine son. I am blessed.’ Reaching for her hands again he pulled her up. ‘I hope you will be blessed in the same way.’

‘I don’t want another three children,’ she replied, horrified.

He smiled. ‘Then I hope you’ll be as lucky as I am in your life partner.’

‘Well, maybe. I’m actually quite happy being on my own.’ As she said the words, she wondered if they were still the truth.

‘No one should be on their own. Find a good man, Callie.’

She laughed, seeing him to the door. ‘Goodbye, Sunil. And thank you. For everything.’

Kissing her cheek softly, he said, ‘And thank you, Callie. For everything, but most of all for Frida.’

Thirty-Four

THURSDAY AFTERNOON 22ND AUGUST

Fidelia Bridges 1834–1923
American artist known for her delicate and detailed watercolours of flowers and birds.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Callie dozed on the sofa for the rest of the morning, emotionally and physically battered. Rallying, she heated up some soup for lunch and ate it with a hunk of bread and cheese. She considered waking Frida but thought it better the girl slept.

Her bruises had made her stiff and sore so she sought the warmth of the garden. A pale watery sun had mopped up any signs of the storm so, with the grass now dry, she set up her painting kit and settled to half-heartedly painting some quick watercolour sketches of the Japanese anemones. She missed Vinny pottering about; he'd been good company. She missed Johnny too, wondering if he'd been given the all-clear from hospital. With a wry smile she hoped he was surviving at his parents' home. She'd ring Jessica later but there was someone else she needed to ring first.

Staring at her phone, her heart thumping and her thumb hovering over the number, she made an impulsive decision and clicked. She'd give them

one last chance.

The phone picked up on the third ring. ‘Mum?’

‘Who is this?’

‘It’s Callie.’ The words strangled in her throat.

‘Who?’

‘Callie. Calliope. Your daughter.’

‘Oh.’

‘I was ringing…’ Callie tailed off. Just why *was* she ringing? ‘I was ringing to see how you and Dad are.’

‘I see.’

Come on, Mum, throw me a bone. ‘So, are you both well?’

‘Perfectly. Thank you.’

‘We’re both okay. Frida and me. Frida’s going to university. She wants to study journalism.’ The need to please, to impress, was ever present and Callie hated herself for it.

‘Oh. Does she?’

‘Actually, I said we’re both well, but we were in a bit of an accident last night.’

‘An accident? What happened?’

Callie heard her mother’s interest quicken. She always liked a bit of drama. Callie wondered why she was bothering to do this but soldiered on. When she’d finished telling her mother about the storm and the collapsing beach huts, she’d exhausted her words and herself. The tale was met with silence. She was just about to end the call, thinking how pointless it was, when her mother spoke.

‘Where did you say you were again?’

‘Lullbury Bay. It’s in Dorset.’

‘Near Bournemouth?’

‘No, the other side of the county. Not far from the Devon border.’

‘Samuel and the family went to Lyme Regis last year.’

‘That’s not far away.’ Callie let out a breath. This was almost like a conversation. ‘I’ve heard it’s beautiful but haven’t had a chance to visit yet.’

‘Yes, well, he said it was nice. The children enjoyed it.’

It was now or never. ‘It would be good to get together with Sam,’ Callie began cautiously. ‘I haven’t seen big bro for ages.’

‘His girls are doing so well at school,’ her mother preened. ‘Top grades in their exams this summer.’

‘That’s good.’ *Ask after your other granddaughter. Ask!* She’d almost given up when, miracle of miracles, her mother spoke again.

‘And your… Frida. She wants to be a journalist?’

‘Looks that way.’

‘Newspapers?’

‘Not sure she’s made up her mind yet. Early days. I can see her on television. She’s grown up a lot recently. Got a lot more confident.’ *Understatement of the year.*

‘Oh.’

‘Maybe, if Sam and the family are visiting one afternoon, we’ll come round too? See you and Dad. See Sam and Jill and the kids.’ Callie held her breath, a pulse beating in her throat. She had no intention of seeing her parents without the diluting presence of her brother, his wife and children to buffer the tension. That’s if her mother agreed. She waited for the angry explosion, for the vitriolic rejection. To her astonishment it didn’t come.

‘That would be… nice. Your dad’s not been well.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘He’s been diagnosed diabetic. He’s not too bad as long as he sticks to the diet, but it’s made him think on about stuff. Family. You know, I think… I think he’d like to see you.’

Bloody hell. Callie let it go that her mother stressed it was her father who wanted to see them. Baby steps. ‘Then I’ll ring Sam and we’ll arrange it. Hope Dad’s okay. Bye, Mum.’

‘Bye, Calliope. Erm… for now.’

Callie clicked off the call and lay back in the deck chair. She had no idea where the relationship with her parents would go, or even if she wanted it to happen but, after last night, it had felt the right thing to do. Clamping her hands to her mouth to stifle the sound so as not to wake Frida, she sobbed. She cried out the stress and fear of the storm, of Sunil arriving back into their lives, the loss of Johnny and the last twenty-three years of her parents’ absence.



When she’d made a pot of tea, a calmness washed over her. She felt utterly spent. Ignoring her painting, she lay back, sipped tea and stared at the sky. The afternoon was sunny and bright. Cooler though. It was as if August had given up any pretence to still being summer and was relaxing into autumn. The air felt fresher and so did Callie. She’d go along to meet her parents, spend some time with them and her brother and his family. Test the waters. For one thing she was curious to see if they’d changed at all.

At the first sign of anything critical directed towards Frida, she’d be off. She’d give them all one chance, but boundaries were important. Maybe they’d mellowed? She’d never have the overbearing needy closeness of the Starlings, and she didn’t want that, but there may be room for some sort of relationship.

She breathed the salty air in deep. It held the hint of the next season approaching. September was always a new beginning for her. Another academic year, new pupils, a different tutor group. Part of her was looking forward to getting back to it all. And part of her wondered if she should go back at all. Maybe she should seek a beginning somewhere new? Somewhere else?

Her phone rang making her jump. It was Donna. Callie filled her in on all the drama, including the call to her mother, at which her friend squealed and demanded all the grisly details. When Donna mentioned possibly coming down to camp nearby and to see them, Callie made her mind up. She'd stick to her decision to go home early. It no longer had anything to do with avoiding Johnny, she just simply wanted to be surrounded by her own stuff, be in her own house. Donna rang off after promising to put a bottle of Chablis in the fridge with their names on it.

When the phone went again, she assumed it was her friend ringing back, having forgotten something, but it was Dave Wiscombe from the Art School. 'Just wanted to congratulate you again on winning,' he said.

'Thanks, Dave. It still hasn't sunk in. Quite a lot's happened since then.'

'And thought I'd check you're all right after all that palaver last night. How's Frida?'

'We're both fine. Frida's leg was cut quite badly but it's been dressed and we're home after not too long a stint in A&E. I've just got a few bruises.' Callie shuddered. 'It could have been so much worse.'

'Tell me about it,' Dave said warmly. 'Have you been down to the front to see the damage?'

'I haven't.'

'It's a right old mess. Tons of soil and rubble came down at the far end of the prom. They're taking what's left of the huts away today.'

'It's very sad. I haven't had a chance to tell Austin how sorry we are we couldn't get his stuff out. There must be so many precious things lost.'

'Oh, he's fine and dandy. Saw him this morning down at the front. When he saw what was left of the wall he understood. Besides, it's stuff that's lost, not memories and most gear people keep in a beach hut is fairly disposable. Couldn't understand why folk rushed down there, to be honest. He said to ask after "young Frida". Still, it's been a rare old shock. Town'll

rally round though. We've got a great community here. Now, my friend, I want to ask you something.'

'What's that, Dave?'

'I want you to consider, very seriously, this job offer. I wasn't joking when I mentioned it, you know. I could do with someone like you to take the Art School teaching of fine art forward. If you don't wanna do full time that's cool with me. We can discuss terms and stuff and all the nitty-gritty nonsense. Happy to be flexible with what you want. The one thing I can't be flexible on is starting time. Would have to be January next year.'

'Oh, Dave. I don't know what to tell you. I think I've almost certainly decided to go home and back to my teaching there. Whatever happens I have to give at least a term's notice.'

Dave was silent for a moment. 'Perhaps I figured this out wrong, then. Seems to me you were making friends down here, settling into the town.'

'I have and I was but…' She paused. 'My home and Frida's home is in Worcester. It's where I'm settled.'

'I hear you. Not that I'm not disappointed, mind. But home is important. You wouldn't find me living anywhere else apart from Lullbury Bay – but then I'm from a local family and there are hundreds of us buggers here. Can't shake a stick in the Bay and not hit a Wiscombe.'

You wouldn't find me living anywhere else. How many times had she heard that since coming here, to this little seaside town? She looked around at the beautiful garden, heard the sea crash and roar in the distance, smelled the saline slick in the breeze. She sighed.

'I heard that, babe. Are you tempted?'

'Of course I'm tempted but there's so much to think about.'

'And, seeing as you'll be off up to that there London to visit Adya in her gallery, I correct myself, *your* gallery, it's worth a mention we have a direct train line to Waterloo. Runs from Axminster and that ain't that far away.'

Callie smiled. ‘It’s been mentioned. I have a direct line from Worcester too, Dave.’

‘Yeah well. It was worth a try. Might just be me being idle. This whole malarkey of interviewing and vetting candidates gets me right down. And then, half the time, you end up with someone who either doesn’t fit in or thinks running off to the seaside will solve all their problems and leaves after half a minute. You strike me as being someone who would fit in round here. And, didn’t you say young Frida is off to South West in Exeter?’

‘She’s thinking about it.’

‘Be nice to have her mum nearby.’

Callie laughed. ‘Dave. Stop it. I’m heading back to Worcester. Might go back early in fact. I’m waiting for Frida to wake up to see how she feels.’

‘Okay, my friend. Give her my best. And, whatever happens, keep in touch, you hear?’

‘Will do.’ Callie clicked off the call and gazed at the palm tree, its leaves outlined sharply against the sky. She knew someone like Johnny or Jessica would jump at this opportunity, at changing their lives.

A seagull wheeled overhead and glided out to sea against a sky so vividly blue it hurt the eyes. This could be her home if Grace had been serious about her renting it. She could have a part-time dog if she agreed to look after Vinny or even have one of her own. She’d have this garden to relax in, the superb views from the bedroom to enjoy through the changing seasons.

How she’d love to paint that view at different times throughout the year. Her painter’s fingers flexed at the very thought. She’d be near Frida if she got in at South West.

Her thoughts meandered. Would it be possible to rent somewhere cheap for weekends, live in Worcester but visit Lullbury Bay more often? She immediately dismissed the idea as impractical. The weekends were for catching up on sleep and planning the following week. The thought of

Friday evening trips down the M5 after a heavy week at school made her wince.

With a sigh, she accepted she wasn't a Johnny or a Jessica. She hadn't been endowed with middle-class confidence and a moneyed background. She was just Calliope Thorne, a middle-aged schoolteacher with the remainder of a mortgage to pay, a daughter to support and a demanding and increasingly stressful job to return to.

With a grim smile she recognised her mother's genes lying heavily in her. Her mother had never left the city in which she'd been born, had lived in the same house bought as a newlywed. Had rejected change as a deliberate and forceful habit. Callie feared that reigniting a relationship with her parents would see her content to live as quietly and unadventurously as they did.

Shoving herself determinedly up the deck chair, Callie's resolve hardened. Whatever happened with her parents, she was determined to learn from their lifestyle; it was one she wholeheartedly rejected. Maybe she should take that leap and embrace an exciting opportunity to change?

'Hello, Mum,' Frida yawned from the French doors. 'What are you thinking about? You looked miles away. Any chance of a brew?'

Thirty-Five

Helen Frankenthaler 1928–2011
American abstract expressionist painter and colourist. Activity: colour block work.

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

Having made another pot of tea Callie took it into the garden. The afternoon was easing away but it was still warm enough to sit outside. The low sun slid blocks of mellow orange and gold light over the walls and the blackbird returned, ever optimistic.

Frida lowered herself into the deck chair and straightened her leg, wincing. 'It's well cool here, isn't it?'

'Sea Haven House or Lullbury Bay?' Callie passed her a mug of tea.

'Both I suppose.'

'We have a nice enough garden at home.'

'Yeah, but we don't ever sit in it.'

Well, we're not on holiday at home.' Callie adopted a sensible tone. 'Let's make a promise to use it more often. Buy a barbeque or something.'

Frida rolled her eyes. 'Mum, neither of us are the barbequing sort.'

‘True. What about some new garden furniture then? Might pick up some bargains now the summer’s nearly over.’ The instant the words were out, Callie regretted them. It had been exactly the penny-pinching thing her mother would have said. ‘Scratch that,’ she amended hurriedly, ‘why the hell wait until the good weather’s over and they’ll sit getting musty in the shed all winter. We’ll hit the garden centre as soon as we get home.’

Frida saluted her with her mug. ‘Way to go, Mum. A trip to the garden centre. You know how to live.’

‘Less of the sarcasm, young lady. How are you feeling now?’

‘Bit stiff. Feel better for all the sleep.’ She yawned.

‘Are you still going for the journalism degree?’

‘Are we having that conversation now?’

‘Are you up to it?’

Frida shrugged. She put her mug down on the grass and lay back, closing her eyes and lifting her face to what was left of the day’s sun. ‘Suppose.’

‘Because, if that’s really what you want to do, then it’s fine by me. Not that you need my approval.’

‘I don’t.’ Frida opened her eyes and stared at her mother. ‘But it would mean a lot if I did.’ She reached out a hand. ‘I don’t want to fight.’

Callie took it. ‘Neither do I, lovey.’ She took a breath. ‘There’s something else. Sunil suggested he fund your degree and I agreed. But only if that’s all right with you?’

Frida slid back up the deck chair, eyes wide. ‘What? Ouch. Shouldn’t have moved that quickly.’

‘Are you all right?’ Callie asked in alarm. ‘The doctor said you need to take it easy until the wound heals.’

‘Yeah, yeah, it’s all good, don’t fuss, Mum. I just jarred it. The painkillers are wearing off.’ Frida pulled a face. ‘Sunil’s going to fund my

course? That's amazing! Mind you, he can afford it, he's never paid any child support so it's the least he can do.'

'Frida, that's uncharitable!'

Frida put up her hands. 'Joke!'

'Sunil has been nothing but understanding and supportive since he came back into our lives. He paid for you to change your flight too, didn't he?'

'He did. Sorry, Mum. I really was just joking. And I've offered to repay him for the flight but he refused. Oh, but if he could pay my uni fees that would be such a load off.' She turned to her mother, questioningly. 'Are you sure he said that?'

Callie nodded.

'And it's okay with his other kids? His oldest daughter is about to start her A-levels. It's one reason they moved back. They want to get her into the English education system to get her prepped for uni.'

'You're his oldest daughter, Fri,' Callie pointed out.

'Yeah. Suppose I am.' Frida gave a nervous giggle. 'Still getting used to the whole having sisters and a brother thing.' She pulled an anxious face, her nose wrinkling. 'Will they like me, do you think?'

Frida had made such great strides in confidence and sense of purpose this summer but her insecurity lurked not far beneath the surface. Callie gave her daughter a warm smile. 'Of course they will, love. Who wouldn't?'

Frida looked suddenly vulnerable. 'I just don't want them to get jealous or anything.'

'It'll be a big change for them, as it will be for us, but we'll take it slowly. Might not be plain sailing but I'm sure Sunil and Lina will be supportive, as will I. I've got your back, baby girl. Always. Besides, Lina sounds amazing so I can't imagine the children being anything but nice.'

'She sounds well cool.' Frida nodded vigorously and picked up her mug, looking reassured.

‘When we get back, we can get things moving.’

‘Okay.’ Frida sounded uncertain again. ‘So, you want to go back to Worcester, Mum? Might be nice to see the old homestead, I suppose,’ she added slowly. ‘And I’m getting bored of wearing Ibiza clothes.’

‘I’d like to. I’d actually like to go back early if possible. Would like to see Donna for a catch-up and get some school prep done.’

‘Okay.’

‘Tomorrow then? Do you think you’ll be up to it? You can sit across the backseat if you like. Stretch out. And we can stop as often as you want. Maybe at Gloucester Services? You like it there.’

‘Gloucester Services *and* a garden centre. Must remember to get spiked on a rusty nail more often.’ Frida grinned cheekily and then slapped a hand to her forehead. ‘Austin!’

‘Don’t worry, he understands you couldn’t rescue his stuff and hopes you’re okay.’

‘He’s a nice man. A real character. Got to know him quite well in the caff.’ She groaned. ‘I’ve let Tracey down too, Mum.’

‘You haven’t let anyone down, love. Everyone knows what happened and that you’re injured.’

Frida flexed her leg. ‘It’s not too bad though. Reckon I could put in a shift.’

‘Don’t be daft. Working in the café means being on your feet all day. I’ve obviously got to take you home to force you to rest.’

‘Point taken.’ Frida slurped tea. ‘Ugh,’ she grimaced. ‘It’s gone cold. Any more in the pot?’

‘Thought you were strictly a herbal girl?’

‘Just fancied some proper builders’. Must be the shock.’

‘Pass your mug over then and I’ll top you up. Frida,’ Callie said, as she refilled it. ‘Can I talk to you about something?’

‘Sure. But we’ve talked uni courses and you’ve green-lighted that. You’re cool with me and the Patel fam. Can’t we just relax and chill?’ Frida affected a dramatically pathetic tone. ‘I am wounded you know and have been through a traumatic experience.’

‘Have your tea,’ Callie retorted. ‘That’ll cure you.’

‘Okay. Spill.’ Frida sounded casual but her eyes remained guarded.

‘I know what you and Sunil argued about.’

Frida pressed her lips together.

‘And I’d like to talk to you about it.’

‘I don’t want to.’ This time the tone was mutinous.

‘But I do. Hear me out, will you?’

Frida let her chin drop to her chest so her hair fell over her face, obscuring her expression.

Callie pressed on doggedly. They needed to have this discussion, however painful. ‘I was nineteen when I became pregnant with you. I loved Sunil and he was my only boyfriend, the only person I’d ever slept with.’

‘God, Mum,’ Frida said, her voice muffled by hair. ‘Do you have to? This is sooo grim.’

Callie went on, determined. This needed to be said. ‘I lived with parents who weren’t cruel exactly, not in any conventional sense, but they were, and still are, lacking in any warmth, love or imagination. I was stifled. I only realised how dysfunctional my upbringing was when I began to hang out with Donna and her family. They became my proxy family. She became my sister. But I can’t tell you how much it hurt seeing how wonderful and generous and *normal* her family was. In comparison to mine.’

Frida looked up, hooking a long black lock of hair behind her ear.

‘I was longing to find love. *Craving* it. I suppose that’s why I tried to find love with Sunil. And I did, in a studenty way. I was a very young nineteen, very naïve, and determined to cram in as much life as I could. I’d missed out on so much growing up in that house. I’d been fed, had a roof

over my head but that was about it. I ate dull food of which there was never enough, had hardly any books to read and the ones I had access to were strictly regulated by my mother. I was never allowed any friends round. Was encouraged not to make friends, to keep myself to myself as, "People can't be trusted. They're a bad lot, Calliope." There was no life, no colour. Certainly no fun. I've often wondered why my mother named me Calliope,' Callie continued, almost talking to herself. 'It was the one and only imaginative and non-conformist thing she ever did. I have no idea what my parents thought would happen when I got to college and saw there was a whole new way to live. I thank whatever god is around up there that I had Donna.'

'You met at school?' Frida interrupted.

'Yes, primary school. She joined when she was ten. Her family moved to Worcester because of her dad's job. She got me through the worst of the years before I could escape. Sounds awful but I used to go to bed praying something would happen to my parents. Nothing *too* dreadful, just enough to let me choose where I could live. And then I could go to live with Donna and her mum and dad.'

'Oh, Mum! I knew you had it bad, but I had no idea it was like that!'

'Well, I've purposely and deliberately put it behind me. Found out people *could* be trusted, that they *weren't* all a bad lot. And that some could be very loveable indeed.' Callie smiled over at her daughter. 'I didn't see much point in going on and on about it.' She wondered how Frida was going to react to the news that she'd just had a stilted phone conversation with her mother but didn't think now was the time to tell her. 'I don't think either Sunil or I had much idea of birth control.'

'Which you've always hammered into me.'

'With just reason,' Callie said, crisply. 'So when I found out I was pregnant, I panicked.'

'You would.' Frida nodded. 'So would I.'

Callie swallowed. This bit was going to be hard. ‘My first thought was–’

‘That you couldn’t go through with it.’ Frida was silent for a moment. ‘So,’ she said slowly, ‘what Sunil said was true?’

Callie reached over and grasped her daughter’s hand. ‘I’m so sorry but yes, I told him I’d booked into a clinic. The next thing I knew he and Vivek had gone. I was on my own, in a panic.’

Frida bit her lip. ‘How far did you get? Did you get to the clinic, get on the table?’ she demanded.

Callie shook her head so hard her auburn curls flew. ‘No.’ She couldn’t decipher her daughter’s emotion. ‘I didn’t even get as far as the clinic. When Sunil left I knew, I just knew I wanted the baby. It was all completely illogical. But that’s what I felt. I’m so sorry, Fri. I’m so very sorry you had to find out I considered having–’

‘Having me aborted?’

Callie covered her face with her hands. She didn’t think she had any left in her, but tears began to flow again. Her shoulders heaved. ‘Yes,’ she said brokenly. ‘But I couldn’t do it. I’m so sorry I even considered it, but I was desperate. You should never have had to deal with all this.’ She sobbed, heaved herself out of the deck chair and ran indoors.

Sometime later Callie sat at the kitchen work surface nursing a glass of water in shaking hands. She felt wrung out and fearful about how Frida would be. She heard her daughter murmur something and then felt arms around her. Frida smelled fusty and in need of a shower but she didn’t care.

‘Tea?’ Frida asked.

‘Sod tea. I need something stronger.’

Frida gave a tiny smile and opened the fridge. Pouring a generous glass of white wine she pushed it over to her mother.

Callie drank half of it, wiped her mouth and then said, ‘That hit the spot. What a day. I’m so sorry, Frida, that you found out in the way you did. It

was information you never needed to know. You must realise–'

'Ssh. It's okay.'

'It's okay?' Callie asked, amazed. 'You've found out that your own mother once considered getting rid of you and it's okay?'

Frida perched on the other kitchen stool as best she could with her injured leg. 'Got to admit,' she began slowly, 'it was a helluva shock when Sunil mentioned it, especially as he seemed to think I knew all about it. It came out all casual when I was asking why he hadn't found me before. Up to then I sort of assumed it was because he was busy with his own family.'

She looked down, twisting a lock of hair around her finger. 'I even thought maybe you'd kept him away from me. I mean, I didn't know anything about you two or how it had been between you or why you'd split up. Maybe you'd been protecting me from him. Then I wondered if it was because he didn't care about me.' She grimaced. 'That was hard. Being rejected by your dad. It was driving me loco. Then, when he did get in touch I was made up. It answered so many questions. Except one. The big one. Why he didn't know anything about me. It was hard thinking you'd lied to him, but I sort of understood. I mean, you were guarding yourself and me. Maybe he was the Big Bad. But he didn't seem like that. Sunil's always been so great. It was doing my head in. I tell you, Mum, my mental health's been crazy.'

'Don't you want wine?'

'Better not. Not with the painkillers.'

'Sensible girl.' Callie reached out and stroked a strand of hair off her daughter's beautiful face. 'But then you've always been my sensible girl. Were you angry with me because you thought I'd lied to Sunil? Or that I considered an abortion?'

'Oh, I don't know. Both, I suppose. Oh, Mum, it all got on top of me, so I ran off. Stupidly got in the car. Sorry. Got to the café and then heard about

the beach huts so thought I'd try to get Austin's gear for him. Didn't mean to put you and Johnny in danger coming to find me.'

'Forget that. We're all okay, aren't we?'

'Mostly.' Frida rubbed her leg.

'I didn't lie to Sunil, lovey. We agreed I should have a termination and he knew I'd booked an appointment before he went away. Don't think the worse of him, Frida. Please don't. He was young too and, in his way, had expectations from his own family.' She pulled a face. 'I don't think they took kindly to the idea of their student son getting a girl pregnant so they sent him off to the States, along with Vivek. He went abroad and, as far as he knew, thought the problem, that was you, had been sorted.'

Frida gasped. 'So that's why he didn't come to look for me?'

Callie nodded. 'Only when he'd gone, I couldn't go through with it and didn't have any way of contacting him. I didn't lie to him; I changed my mind but–'

'He never knew!'

'He never knew,' Callie echoed. 'And I had no way of telling him he had a beautiful, funny, clever daughter. What a mess, eh?'

'Yeah, maybe.'

The two women sat in silence, processing.

'But we've been all right though, haven't we?' Frida said eventually. 'Without a bloke around? Just the two of us? I mean it's great I can get to know my dad now but, if I'm really honest, I don't feel I've missed out on anything.' She grinned. 'Apart from his child maintenance.' She held up her hands to stave off Callie's reaction. 'Joking again!'

'I suppose we've muddled along.' Callie mustered a smile. 'I'm very proud of you, you know. And the way you're handling all this. You've grown up so much lately.'

'Thanks, Mum.' Frida scuffed her shoe, embarrassed. 'You're pretty cool yourself.'

‘Promise me something, Fri.’

‘What?’

‘That, whatever’s going on, you’ll talk to me.’

‘Course.’

‘Can I give you a hug now?’

‘Oh yes please. And then can we eat something, Mum? I’m starving!’

Thirty-Six

FRIDAY LATE MORNING 23RD AUGUST

Gwen John 1876–1939
Welsh born portraitist based in France and much overlooked during her lifetime. Activity: painting portraits. What do we want to convey?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'Is that the last of it?' Frida asked as Callie squeezed a carrier bag of shoes into the last remaining corner of the boot.

'It is. This car is rammed. I've even had to shove stuff into the footwell of the front seat.' Callie blew out a breath and lifted her hair from the back of her neck. 'Phew. I'm hot.'

'Sorry you had to do all the carting stuff down to the car.'

'Couldn't be helped. You couldn't do it, not with your leg.'

Frida grinned. 'Not with my leg! You make me sound about forty!'

Callie put her hands on her hips and stared her daughter down. 'Oh, and that's old, is it?'

'Geriatric.'

'Well, get in the car then and your geriatric mother will haul her ancient and groaning body back up the track and lock up. It's the only thing I'm not

going to miss about this place, this steep hill. At least at home we're on the flat.'

'Yeah, and usually two streets away cos we can't find a parking space.'

Callie groaned. 'Don't remind me. And I'm not looking forward to the M5 on a Friday in August either.'

'Mum?' Frida hadn't moved; she was still sitting on the ledge of the tailgate, her injured leg stretched out.

Callie gave the shoe bag another shove so there was a remote chance the boot would close. Glancing at her watch, she reined in her impatience; the sooner they hit the M5 the better. The traffic would only get worse. As if to taunt her, the scent of the white roses around the front door of the cottage drifted down, reminding her of the day she'd arrived at Sea Haven House. She'd had to battle the traffic that day too. It seemed in another lifetime, so much had happened. Looking up the track at the white gate and the pretty front garden she wasn't sure she wanted to leave but Frida seemed keen to get back. 'Yes, Fri.'

'Have you seen Johnny since the accident?'

'I popped into his ward after we'd cleared A&E to check he was okay. He said they'd kept him in for obs and I managed to escape before his mad family came to collect him. Said he was being kidnapped and taken to the family house in Exeter.'

'Did you thank him?' Frida examined her nails intently, her voice casual but Callie wasn't deceived.

'Yes, course I did.'

'He was pretty awesome.'

Callie nodded. The relief when Johnny had been blown into the beach hut and had taken control had been amazing. Not a very feminist or independent-thinking notion but true. 'It must have been hard for him.'

Frida looked up. 'What do you mean?' She lurched to her feet and tried slamming the boot shut. It closed on the third attempt. 'You mean the rain?'

She pulled a face. ‘It was a pretty major storm.’

‘It was more than that. He’s got some trauma from his days as a correspondent. He’s spent his working life reporting from wars and earthquakes. It’s left its mark.’

‘Wow. That’s awful. He was dead brave then. I mean, he knew the wall was in danger of coming down and he still came looking for you.’

‘Us. He came looking for us.’

‘No, Mum. He came to rescue you. He battled his mental health and came for *you.* Are you sure you thanked him? Seems to me it’s a lot to be thankful for.’

‘You can thank me now, if you like.’

Callie wheeled round. ‘Johnny!’ He was standing on God Almighty Hill’s pavement with Verity, the vicar.

He walked slowly up to stand in the parking space. ‘Hi, Callie.’ He nodded to Frida. ‘Hello, Frida. Hope you’re okay?’

Frida gestured to the bandage revealed by her denim cut-offs. ‘Yeah, I’m good. How are you though?’

Johnny rubbed a self-conscious hand over his head. ‘Absolutely fine. No ill effects. Not from the bang on the head that is.’ He grinned. ‘Can’t say the same about being looked after by my mother and her sisters. I rang Verity and she rescued me.’

‘I bet they loved having you at home,’ Callie put in.

‘Possibly a bit too much. They send their love.’ He gazed penetratingly at her. An awkward silence dropped.

Verity puffed up the track to join them. She looked from Johnny to Callie and back again. ‘Tell you what, Frida, I really fancy an ice cream.’ She nodded to the girl’s leg. ‘I have it on very good authority that it has miraculous healing properties. Especially when you have two scoops, a flake and sprinkles. Do you think you can make it down the hill?’

Frida also flicked a glance to her mother, to Johnny and then back again. ‘Great idea,’ she said, far too enthusiastically. ‘One more ice cream from The Ice Cream Dream Kiosk before we go.’

Johnny looked stricken. ‘You’re leaving?’

Callie nodded. ‘Frida wants to get home.’

‘Actually, Mum, I thought it was you busting a gut to get back. I’m not that bothered. Would rather chill here in Lullbury Bay than in Worcester. At least here I can sit on the beach.’

Callie’s mouth dropped open. ‘Oh. So you don’t want to go home, then?’

‘Nah.’ Frida shrugged. ‘Not really. I only agreed as it seemed you wanted to. And now,’ Frida said meaningfully, ‘I’m going to take myself out of this little scene of unresolved sexual tension and go get one of the kiosk’s magical portions of chocolatey yumminess. Sort yourself out, kiddos, and I’ll be back later.’ She turned to go.

‘Frida,’ Callie protested. ‘Be careful.’

‘Mum, I’m twenty-three not twelve. I’m all grown up. The doc said it’s okay to do some gentle exercise.’ Relenting, she twisted back to her mother. ‘It’s time to stop worrying.’

‘I’ll always worry.’

‘I know. That’s why I love you.’ She gave Callie a brief, hard hug.

‘Don’t worry, Callie, I’ll look after her,’ Verity said, holding out an arm to Frida. ‘We can always use my car if it proves too much.’ Frida took Verity’s outstretched arm and began making her way tentatively down the track.

‘Be careful walking down the hill,’ Callie repeated. ‘Don’t hurt your leg!’ The only reply she received was an airy wave. A lump formed in her throat. It felt as if she was saying goodbye to her little girl forever. And maybe she was. The events of the last few days had changed them both. It

was time to ease into a new relationship with her, less mother and daughter, more friends. She'd still worry though.

'She'll be fine, Callie,' Johnny said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. 'She's taking it slow and not limping.'

'She's supposed to be resting.' Callie peered after Frida and Verity, checking their progress.

'With the size of the kiosk's ice creams, she'll have to sit down for at least thirty minutes to eat one.' Turning her to him, he took her hands. 'Callie, now we have this opportunity, can we talk?'

Callie ripped her focus away from her daughter and stared up at him. He looked pale and drawn. Skin was stretched thinly over his cheekbones, making his nose seem more prominent, the black eyes developing dramatically either side of the Steri-Strips. Either he'd been economical with the truth about his injury or staying at his parents really had been stressful.

She panicked. What good would talking to him do? She was as much at risk of falling under his spell as before. More so. And she couldn't see how they could have any kind of a future. Even so, she owed him big time, as her daughter would put it.

'Frida's right. I didn't thank you properly. You risked your life getting us out of that hut and only minutes before the wall came down.' Shuddering slightly, she added, 'I dread to think what would have happened had you not found us. I didn't know about the wall. I thought staying put, with Frida bleeding so much, was the right thing to do. I was waiting for the ambulance. And, it must have been awful for you. It must have brought so much trauma back–'

He put a finger on her lips. 'I had no choice. I had to come for you.' He caressed her cheek softly.

'For both of us.'

He nodded. ‘For both of you, of course and I’m delighted Frida isn’t too badly hurt. But I came for you. I had to come for you. I had no choice. I love you, Calliope.’ He kissed her gently.

Callie wasn’t proud of her reaction. For weeks afterwards she deliberated over why she did what she did.

Maybe it was the stress of the last few days, the realisation that Frida was growing up and away from her, the relief that Johnny was standing, unhurt, in front of her and looking gorgeous in a bright blue shirt, and linen shorts.

Maybe even the knowledge that, actually, Frida wasn’t all that desperate to go home. Mainly, she concluded, it was the fact that, whatever happened, she loved the man kissing her. She loved him body and soul.

‘And I love you, Johnny Starling. I love you so much.’ And, with that declaration, she burst into a fine display of ugly, noisy, very wet sobs.

Thirty-Seven

Jean-Honore Fragonard 1732–1806
French painter of intimate and subtly erotic scenes. What is the story of the painting?

(Taken from Calliope Thorne's teaching notes.)

'Sorry,' Callie said. They were sitting on the sofa, close together, arms wrapped tightly around one another, the open French windows letting a gentle sea breeze drift the scents and sounds of the beach in.

'For what? For quite frankly ruining one of my favourite shirts by sobbing inconsolably onto it, for declaring undying love, or for running out of milk?' He grinned and kissed her temple. 'Just as well I don't mind black coffee.'

'We'd packed everything up in the car,' Callie protested. 'You're lucky the coffee was on top of one of the last bags I squashed into the boot otherwise it would have been a mug of hot water. And your shirt will dry.' She trailed a finger down its buttons, longing to stroke the skin beneath. The thought made her go hot.

Capturing it, he brought it to his mouth and kissed the tip. 'So, what are you sorry for? Loving me?'

Callie sat up in indignation. ‘No!’ She shook her head, curls flying. ‘Never that. I’ve no idea how all of this, whatever *this* is, is going to work, but I’ll never be sorry for being in love with you.’

‘Excellent news. And, as to whatever this is, let’s clear that up.’ His expression became serious. ‘I want to build a life with you, Calliope. I want to marry you. I want to love you and live with you.’

Breath hitched in her throat. She took his face in her hands and kissed him. ‘I’ve been an idiot.’

‘Tell me, my delightful idiot. How so?’

‘Think I was running away.’

‘From me?’ Johnny looked startled. ‘Am I that scary?’

‘Yes. You were making me feel things I hadn’t felt for years, maybe not ever. It was seriously messing with my head, as Frida would say. I was too scared to give in to it all, think around how it would all work out.’ She bit her lip and looked down, concentrating on a tear in the knee of her jeans. ‘I was worried it was just a holiday fling. That when we got back to the reality of our lives, you’d see the real me.’

Johnny put a gentle hand under her chin and lifted it. ‘The real you?’

She met his eyes. ‘An overworked, stressed-out teacher, who had no time to breathe let alone put effort into making a new relationship work. That’s if you wanted a relationship,’ she amended hurriedly. ‘I didn’t know. Couldn’t read you.’

Johnny wound a curl of bright hair around his finger. ‘Oh I want a relationship.’ He nuzzled her neck, the sensitive part just beneath her ear. ‘I want lots of relationships!’

For a moment she sank into the pleasure, then pushed him off, giggling. ‘Be serious. There’s nothing more I’d like than to take you to my bed, but you were the one who wanted to talk. And there are things we need to talk about. I was worried, am *still* worried you’ll end up thinking I’m boring.’

He looked incredulous. ‘Boring?’

‘We’re very different, Johnny.’

‘True, in some ways. In others we’re remarkably alike. But neither makes you boring.’

‘It does in comparison to your family.’

‘My family?’

‘They’re all so…’ She struggled for the right words. ‘…glamorous and show-bizzy.’

‘They’re a pain in the neck,’ he replied, basely.

Callie giggled again. She toyed with a button on his shirt and it came loose revealing his chest. Bending to kiss it, she felt his breath hitch and wondered if she was that boring after all. She seemed to be having quite a dramatic effect on him. Running her hand down his side, she felt his larger one stop her.

‘Oh no, if you won’t take me to your bed, which by the way I think is a splendid phrase and one I intend on using often, you can stop making me go cross-eyed with desire, and talk. Why on earth did you think I’d think you were boring? Have I ever said that?’

Callie shook her head again. ‘No, you haven’t.’

‘You must know I think you’re amazing. Your art talent, the way you’ve brought up Frida on your own. The way you battle for her. How can that possibly be boring?’

‘We’re from such different backgrounds.’

‘Which is good in my eyes.’

‘I’m not like you.’

He trailed a hand over her breast. ‘For which I am exceedingly grateful,’ he murmured, his eyes glazing.

She put her hand over his, loving how it cupped her breast and feeling her nipple stiffen against his palm. She needed to concentrate. This was important. But she was losing the ability to recognise why. ‘Johnny, you’ve never had to struggle for money, worry about feeding your child. You’ve

never been so exhausted by the stress from work that you lose all power of thought but aren't in a position to give it up. Have you?'

This sobered him up. He slid back up the sofa, slightly further away from her. 'I can't say that I have. There have been other stresses of course but nothing like that.'

'I suppose, when a situation was untenable you just changed it?'

He nodded. 'True. Sometimes that was imposed on me though. For a long time I had a contract whereby I had to change location every three years. It was both a stress and a benefit.'

'But you always had a job. A salary.'

'Yes. Of course I did. Where's this going, Callie?'

'You see, I've never had the courage, even when life seemed impossible, to change things.'

'This is different though, surely? You had a child you had sole responsibility for.'

'It's more than that. The way I was brought up meant I didn't have the confidence you and your family have. When I talk to Jessica or your mother, or even your Aunt Sybil, I feel so…' She paused, flailing for the right words, '…inadequate. And yes, boring!'

Johnny put his head on one side, pondering her words. 'Well, Jessica's always had enough confidence for the whole of the family, Mum's one on her own – a completely unique being, and Sybs is possibly certifiably insane. Not having as much confidence as them doesn't make you a bore. It makes you delightfully relaxing to be around.'

Callie took an enormous breath. 'I'm scared of change, Johnny. But I'm even more scared of turning into my mother who never ever changed. Just did the same thing day in, day out. I've been so muddle headed about all this. I think I'd decided you and me wouldn't work even before I gave us a chance. I'm so sorry about that.'

'Don't be.'

‘And then the Frida-Sunil stuff kicked off so I had to deal with all that. I pushed you away as it was too much to deal with. I’m sorry.’

‘Stop saying you’re sorry, my love.’ He ruffled her hair. ‘There’s nothing to be sorry about.’

‘I’m petrified of change, you see, and risking losing what I’ve fought so hard to achieve.’ She braced herself for him to belittle her, to say how ridiculous her fears were but he didn’t. Instead, he gathered her up in his arms.

‘Of course you are. But, Callie, I’ve had to embrace change recently too. And scary change. Don’t you think I can understand your fear? I decided I couldn’t be relied upon to do the job I’d been doing for nearly a quarter of a century so went freelance. And, trust me, freelancing is very scary indeed.’

‘Is this to do with your post-traumatic stress?’

He nodded against her head. ‘I’ve booked in with a counsellor. Had a chat with someone at the hospital yesterday in fact. He didn’t think it’s full-blown PTSD but I’ve definitely got some things to process. Verity’s been marvellous too.’

‘Verity?’ Callie said, startled and not a little jealous.

‘She’s been talking me through things. She’s an amazing woman.’

‘Ah.’ Callie remembered all the murmured phone calls she’d heard through Johnny’s bedroom door.

His arms tightened around her. ‘I’ve got some stuff to work through, but I honestly believe us being together shouldn’t mean all that much has to change, not for you. Me and change are old buddies, so that’s not a problem.’

‘I want to be around for you to talk to. I’m a good listener.’

‘You’re the best. It was you who helped me sort out a lot of things these past few weeks.’

Callie did a quick calculation. ‘It’s not been quite two weeks.’

‘Only two weeks? Time flies when you’re having fun. And I don’t want to waste any more of it. Don’t throw what this might be away due to fear. You’re not on your own anymore, Callie. You’ve got me. Whatever life throws at us, however we do this, we’ll be together. It’s time you let someone else in.’ He kissed the top of her head. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

For a delicious moment Callie let herself be held by a pair of strong arms belonging to the man she loved. Could she let her guard down after all these years and let him take some of the strain? The idea was so intoxicating she forgot why she’d begun the conversation in the first place. ‘Oh!’ She sat up with a jolt as she remembered. ‘I need to tell you something.’

‘Fire away.’ Johnny gazed at her, deadly serious. ‘You’ve won the Lottery? You’re running as Lullbury Bay’s next member of parliament? You’ve decided to open a goat farm?’ He pulled a scandalised face and slapped his thigh. ‘I’ve got it. Grace Grosvenor is pregnant and Austin Ruddick is the father!’

Callie giggled. ‘No, nothing like that. I’ve got a decision to make. An enormous one.’

‘Okay. Let’s hear it.’

She filled him in. About the job. About moving to Lullbury Bay. About everything. She’d claimed she was the good listener, but Johnny was even better.

‘And have you made up your mind?’ he said, when she’d finished speaking.

She nodded, eyes shining. ‘I think so.’ She hadn’t decided until this precise second but suddenly felt as if she could achieve whatever she set her mind to, face the fear and change her life.

‘Whatever you’ve decided, I’ll back you.’

‘But I won’t be an hour’s drive from you, Johnny.’

‘Then I’ll move.’ He took her hand, studying it intently. ‘When Dad had his fall in the car park at the Art School it made me realise how old he was getting. I’d like to be nearer my parents. Maybe it’s time this boy of the sea came back to his roots? I’d like to have the scent of the tide in my nostrils again.’

‘Oh, Johnny. Would you really do that for me?’

‘Callie, when are you going to realise I’d do anything for you? And,’ he shrugged, ‘after all, it’s only another house move. One of many.’

She gazed at him, tears beginning yet again. She hadn’t cried for years but, over the last day or so hadn’t been able to stop. Shaking her head slightly, she said, ‘I’ll never get used to how casually you treat moving house.’

Holding her hand tightly he kissed her. ‘One move I won’t make is away from you.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

They kissed. Lingeringly. And then broke away as Callie’s phone vibrated.

Reading the text she said, on a laugh, ‘It’s from Frida. She says she and Verity have got talking to Austin and Lucie in the Sea Spray and they’re all going to watch the RNLI Raft Race. Does it matter if they don’t come home for a couple of hours?’

Johnny’s eyes twinkled. ‘Fine with me.’ Standing, he pulled Callie up to meet him. ‘Shall we, *finally,* take this upstairs?’

Callie threw her arms around him. ‘Oh yes. I think that’s one move I can do! I love you, Johnny Starling.’

‘I love you right back, my Calliope.’

And, with that, he took her by the hand and led her to the steep stairs.

Thirty-Eight

FEBRUARY THE FOLLOWING YEAR

Calliope Thorne
Contemporary and award-winning multi-media artist based in the south-west.

(Taken from *South West Art and Cultural Life Magazine*, 'Top Ten Creatives: Ones to Watch')

Callie sat in her new office in the Art School. Happiness and contentment filled her until she felt like a helium balloon about to float away.

After giving her notice at school, everything had sprung into action at a speed which took her breath away. Frida started at university and was loving it. The little Victorian house in Worcester was under offer from a student landlord and she and Johnny had found as much time as they could to spend together, either in Worcester or Stratford.

At the end of the autumn term, she'd moved into Sea Haven House. Frida decided to spend the holidays with Sunil so Callie and Johnny had spent Christmas closeted together. In the new year, Johnny hadn't moved out.

Callie thought it should seem too early to commit to living together but it had actually seemed the most natural thing in the world. They were

careful to give each other space and she'd adjusted with remarkable speed to having a man around. Frida's time with Sunil's family, although fraught at times, was developing positively.

Frida had accepted a possible reconciliation with Callie's parents and brother with aplomb. 'We can go-see and if we hate them all, we don't have to have anything to do with them, do we?' she'd said. 'Chill out, Mum. We've managed without them all this time, it's no biggie if they're still horrible.' Her eyes had gleamed. 'But I'm dead nosey to see what they're like!'

It had turned out to be a testing afternoon and not one Callie wanted to repeat too soon. But they were back on speaking terms at least. Sam had even suggested they all get together when he was next on holiday in Dorset.

Donna had taken news of the move badly. Callie had been wracked with guilt when telling her. Her friend had sulked for weeks but there were signs she was gradually coming round. She'd even admitted, grudgingly, it could be handy having friends living in a gorgeous seaside town.

Once Donna had met Johnny, she'd warmed up a little. Callie assured her that, despite her new friends in Lullbury Bay and Johnny's sister and baby nearby, Donna would always be her bestie.

In between all the change, Callie had managed several visits to Adya's gallery and was trying very hard to lose the imposter syndrome every time she saw her work displayed. Two paintings had already sold and for eye-watering amounts.

And this afternoon she was about to give her first class in abstract multi-media painting in the Art School. She couldn't wait. At the knock on her office door, she looked up to see Johnny's face peering round.

'Won't stay. Don't want to get in your hair.' He brandished a bunch of daffodils. 'These are to wish you good luck. Not that you need it.' Coming over, he kissed her soundly. 'Good luck, Calliope, my darling. The card's from the clan Starling.' He grinned. 'They all insisted on signing it.'

‘Oh, they’re lovely. And so is your family.’ Putting the flowers and card gently on her desk, she rose and slipped her arms around his waist, kissing him. ‘Thank you. How’s the book going?’ Johnny had begun a memoir based on his experiences as a foreign correspondent.

‘Had a really good morning,’ he said. ‘What we discussed last night helped, my Calliope muse.’ He kissed her again. ‘Oh, and I’ve booked a table at The Old School Kitchen for tonight.’ Keeping her close, he added, ‘Thought we’d celebrate you selling another painting. Adya left a message on the answerphone. Said she couldn’t get through to your mobile.’

‘I’ve sold another?’ Callie tried not to sound smug and failed. ‘I’ve been working in the studio all morning. I switched my phone off so I could concentrate.’

Johnny rubbed noses with her. ‘I’m so proud of you.’

‘I know. Listen to myself. Painting in a studio, selling work in a London gallery. Get me!’

He laughed. ‘I think you’re working harder than ever.’

She pushed him away a little so as to see his face better. ‘I am – but the difference is I’m doing it for myself and loving it.’ Tenderly, she traced the fading scar on the bridge of his nose and gazed into his eyes.

‘You know you can do anything you want, don’t you?’ He said it often.

‘I can, with you at my side.’

‘You don’t need me.’

‘I don’t need you, but I want you. I don’t want to do it all by myself anymore.’

‘Neither do I. And we don’t have to. We’re a team, my love.’

‘We make a *great* team.’ She nodded to the flowers. ‘And thank you for the luck, but with you in my life, I’m not sure I need it. I’ve got everything I want right here. Right now. I feel I can do anything.’ She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. ‘Oh, Johnny, it took a while to find

you but I'm so glad I have. I love you, Johnny Starling.' She kissed him with all the love she had.

'Right back at you, Calliope. I love you, too. With all my heart.' And, with that, he kissed her back.

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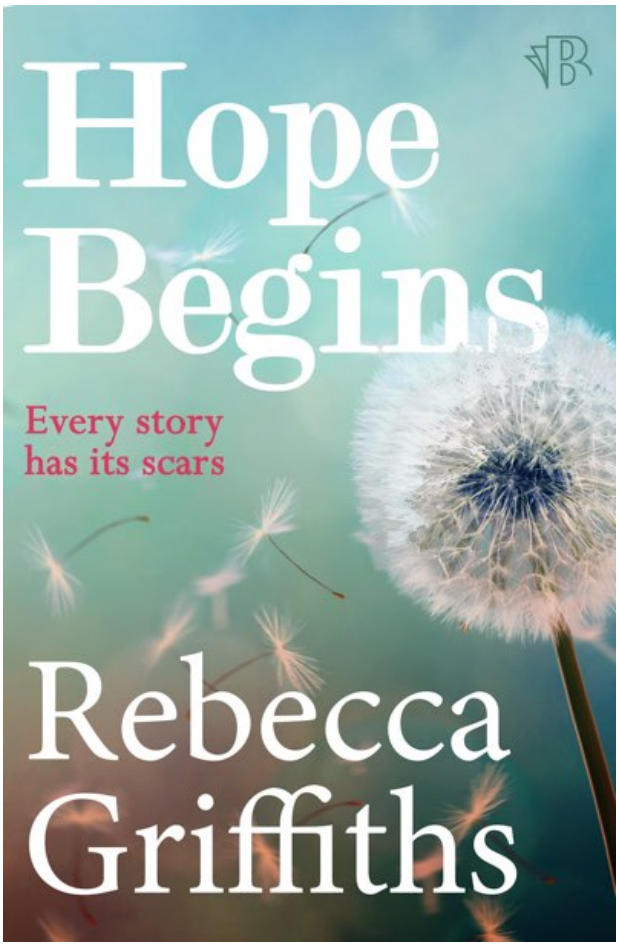
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Acknowledgements

Thank you for returning to Lullbury Bay. I love writing about this little seaside town in Dorset. This story began as a chapter entered into the Elizabeth Goudge competition run by the Romantic Novelists' Association. Originally called *Room for Two at Rose Cottage*, I reworked it and it became *Sunny New Beginnings*. Thank you to the RNA for granting it second place and giving me a much-needed writing boost. My thanks also go to the wonderful Debbie Flint at Retreats for You in Devon where I rediscovered my writing mojo. Jane Bheemah and Natalie Normann – thank you for your help with all things Hindi - all mistakes are mine. Thank you to the incredible team at Bloodhound for all their hard work. And a huge thank you to you Dear Reader. I hope you've enjoyed your stay at the Dorset seaside, that the sun shone, that your chips were hot and your ice-cream enormous.

A note from the publisher



Thank you for reading this book. If you enjoyed it, please do consider leaving a review on Amazon to help others find it too.

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About the Author

Georgia Hill writes up-lifting contemporary and historical romances about love, the power and joy in being an eccentric oldie and finding yourself and your community. There's always a dog. It's usually a naughty spaniel of which, unfortunately, she has had much experience. She lives near the sea with her beloved dogs and husband (also beloved) and loves the books of Jane Austen, collecting elephants and *Strictly Come Dancing*. She's also a complete museum geek and finds inspiration for her books in the folklore and history of the many places in which she's lived.

She's worked in the theatre, for a charity and as a teacher and educational consultant before finally acknowledging that making things up was what she really wanted to do. She's been happily creating believable heroines, intriguing men and page-turning stories ever since.

Find her at www.georgiahill.co.uk