

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS LATE SUMMER WHEN THE angel first manifested himself to Ursula Buchanan in the village shop, beside the notice board and just along the aisle from the bacon slicing machine.

The only reason Ursula paused in that particular spot was so that she could hitch up her shopping bag into a more comfortable position; looking at the poster was incidental.

A club? The advert was vague and all-embracing, suggesting as it did a mix of socialising – all ages welcome – mutual sharing of skills, for example art lessons in exchange, say, for advice on car maintenance; a little cooking to be paid for by a spot of gardening; any other ideas welcome, so how about it?

I used to be rather good at drawing, Ursula thought, tilting her chin proudly at the memory of those school reports with the annual comment: ‘In spite of her difficulties Ursula tries hard. She is a quiet, unassuming girl whose art work shows promise.’

I wouldn’t mind some lessons but I don’t think I could teach car maintenance, she mused. Wouldn’t you need to be able to drive? She read on. Oh, I see, it’s the two of them suggesting it. Julia Fitzgerald at Forge Cottage. Isn’t she the lovely, big Irish lady with a younger sister who works abroad? And the other one, Rosemary Clavering? Of course, the teacher, pleasant woman, dotty mother?

A hesitant smile transformed, for a moment, Ursula’s pudgy, currant-bun face with its dusting of fluff, into a living,

breathing individuality. Dotty? Who am I calling dotty, she grimaced. I who have difficulty carrying out Henrietta's simplest command, who have barely any idea what time of day it is? Or even what day it is, sometimes.

It was at that moment that the angel chose to make his first appearance to Ursula. In a radiant shimmer of light he materialised beside her, just downwind of a stack of home-cured Wiltshire streaky bacon.

'*Go on,*' he urged, pointing a glowing golden finger at the notice. '*Join the group, Ursula, it'll change your life.*'

And then he was gone, leaving the aisle empty and Ursula staring and startled. But not afraid, she realised. Why shouldn't she see an angel after all? For he had to be an angel, no question. She had read somewhere or seen on television maybe, that angels were big business in America; along with little grey men with oval heads and big eyes boring into you and impregnating you, angels were prone to drop in now and then on the most unlikely people. And not just in present day America either, what about Joan of Arc and her voices?

I wonder where he went? She peeked shyly round the stack of tinned apricots, stood on tiptoe to look over the bread stand and ducked back down towards the post office counter. No, nothing; no sighting of anyone seven feet tall and glowing with a heavenly radiance, no voice like a golden trumpet, no touch of a gentle feather on the cheek. I hope he'll come back, she thought wistfully, nodding goodbye to the woman at the check-out, oblivious of eyebrows raised in commiseration with poor, daft, old Miss Buchanan.

I don't really think I'd like to be impregnated, pondered Ursula as she headed home to where Henrietta would be waiting impatiently for the chocolate digestives to go with

her coffee. Or is that only aliens? Still, you don't have to be a saintly teenage virgin to have a heavenly visitation these days, you might just as easily be a seventy-four-year-old one.

'Julia, come and look! Are you there? There's a naked woman in the garden. Ju?'

Finn looked at her watch. Seven o'clock in the morning? Her sister was usually awake and reading, though not an early riser as such. She tapped quietly on Julia's door. 'Ju? Are you all right?'

Odd, Julia's bed had been slept in but there was no sign of her, upstairs or downstairs. Surely she hadn't gone out already? It would be very unlike her if she had.

Finn drew back the curtains, yawning. What am I doing awake at this hour she groaned, looking blearily out at the back garden, mysterious and shadowed but for a shaft of light where the early sun broke through. At least she had slept for an hour or two last night, though her eyes were still tired from where she had lain awake in the small hours going over and over her performance at the office. How did I have the nerve, she marvelled. Luc was right, I acted like a complete, hard-boiled bitch, no wonder he was amazed. I was amazed myself! But it worked, didn't it? The thought insinuated itself into her mind, coming from nowhere as she recalled yesterday morning's nasty little scene.

'You're asking me to make you redundant?' Her boss gave Finn a puzzled stare. 'But why?'

'My mobile, *her* text message,' Finn replied through gritted teeth. 'Ring any bells? It obviously slipped your mind that I share a flat *and* an office with *her*!'

'Ah...' Luc pursed his lips and avoided her accusing stare, fiddling with some paperclips for a moment or so. 'Yes, hmm. Well, I'm sorry about that, Finn, but that still doesn't explain this redundancy thing. And what's this?' His eyes flicked down the page and he looked up at her in astonishment. 'You want a year's salary as a package? But that's preposterous, you've only been with this department for just over two years!'

He was quite right, Finn agreed now as she stared unseeing at her sister's garden. It *was* preposterous. But, as she'd pointed out to him, somehow managing to retain her cool and not collapse into the sodden misery that had kept her awake all the previous night, *he* had been in his post for nearly twenty years, and what with the strict 'no-fraternising' rules his anticipated promotion might be in jeopardy.

'But that's *blackmail!*' His eyes were round with shock. As he took in her set, white face he shifted his stance. 'Oh, come on, Finn. We had a good time, didn't we? I'm sorry it had to end like this, but hey! That's how it goes.'

'I *know* it's blackmail,' she hissed angrily, forgetting her resolution. 'Do you think I *like* doing this? I'm going to have to leave my job and the flat, and I'll have to pay *her* my share of the rent till next month. No way am I going to be in her debt. I'll go back to England and crash at my sister's – if she'll have me – till I get a job and somewhere to live, and I won't get the same kind of money outside Brussels.' Her voice cracked slightly. 'How could you? I never made any fuss about your wife. I knew being your bit on the side wouldn't lead to anything, but I never expected you to have another bit on the side of *me!*'

‘Oh, all right.’ He took another look at her carefully prepared paperwork and gave a martyred sigh. ‘I’ll go along with you to the tune of six months’ salary, even though it’ll have to come out of my own bonus.’

‘My heart bleeds.’ Finn marched off to wipe her eyes and redo the page which he signed with a sulky ill grace. That was when he’d said it.

‘I had no idea you could be such a tough bitch.’

‘No,’ she had replied with a tired travesty of a smile. ‘Neither had I. But I’m tired of fitting in with other people’s idea of me – Finn won’t mind, Finn’s easy-going, Finn won’t make a fuss – I’m forty-five, for God’s sake. It’s about time I took control of my own life.’

A movement at the bottom of her sister’s garden caught her attention. Fairies? Surely not. Julia would have mentioned them, wouldn’t she, if not six months ago when she moved to her new house, then at least last night when Finn had tumbled exhausted out of the taxi from the station.

The bizarre figure moved towards the dazzle of sunlight and started dancing on the lawn.

Finn stared. Dipping a toe into the garden pond the woman glanced up, spotted Finn and waved.

‘Come on down,’ she called. ‘The water’s lovely.’

Pulling on some clothes Finn ran downstairs twisting an elastic band round her long, thick blonde hair. She put the kettle on and unlocked the back door, grabbing an old raincoat from the hook as she did so. Already it was very warm this morning but still no time to be skinny dipping in the garden pond, at any age.

‘Good morning,’ the naked woman greeted her with great social aplomb, waving Finn to a seat beside her on the garden bench and turning away to admire the dappled sunlight on the pond.

‘Good morning,’ Finn began politely. ‘Would you like to come indoors and have a cup of tea?’

The naked woman swung round and broke into a delighted smile.

‘How truly kind,’ she exclaimed, sounding exactly like the Queen on a walkabout. ‘I was just thinking there was something I’d forgotten.’

Finn blinked at this statement of the obvious but they weren’t thinking along the same lines.

The old lady beamed and continued. ‘Yes, I quite forgot to make myself a cup of tea this morning before I went out for my morning stroll.’

‘Oh.’ Finn was at a loss for words, then she pulled herself together. ‘Would you like to borrow this coat just for now?’ she suggested.

‘How very generous,’ her mystery visitor nodded. ‘So thoughtful. I seem to have mislaid my own clothes.’ She cast a casual eye down at her nakedness and grinned cheerfully as she shrugged into the old raincoat. ‘What a hoot!’

She frowned for a moment then extended her hand graciously. ‘Where are my manners? How do you do, my dear, I’m Margot Delaney, but do call me Margot. And you are...?’

Feeling surreal Finn shook the proffered hand. ‘Finn Fitzgerald, how do you do?’

Social niceties attended to Margot Delaney suddenly nodded off and Finn sat wondering what to do next. She

stared at her companion; she was really old, very old, Finn discovered. The extravagantly curly orange hair had the matte deadness of an amateur dyeing session, an inch of scanty white at the parting, pink skin showing through. The body, though slim verging on emaciated, had the indefinable softness of old age, the skin on the arms sagging and the breasts wrinkled flaps. Her face was a mass of fine wrinkles though her cheerful insouciance gave her a kind of liveliness now as she jerked awake and looked round, smiling, through the bright green Dame Edna glasses perched on her elegant bony nose.

‘I put the kettle on when I came down,’ ventured Finn, wondering what to do. ‘Shall we have that cup of tea now?’

‘That would be delightful,’ announced the old woman rising and gathering her raincoat round her. ‘Someone offered me some tea not long ago, did I drink it? I don’t think I’ve had a drink this morning, Rosemary must have forgotten.’

‘Rosemary?’ Finn ushered her towards the kitchen, installed her in a chair and made the tea.

‘My daughter, Rosemary,’ was the answer. ‘She’s a good enough girl but she can be rather forgetful. Of course, she never married.’

Finn blinked at the non sequitur. She poured the tea, obediently adding milk and two sugars as her guest demanded.

‘Should I ring Rosemary and tell her where you are?’ she suggested, wondering if Rosemary would really want to know. Finn had a sudden glimmer of how she would feel herself if Julia were gallivanting about the place stark naked. I think I’d leave town, she told herself, grinning at the thought

of her generously voluptuous sister in such a scenario. She felt a pang of sympathy for poor, forgetful, unmarried Rosemary. Although her naked visitor was charming at the moment an underlying granite toughness was apparent.

To her surprise the old woman, 'call me Margot, dear,' she said again, obviously forgetting her earlier introduction, meekly agreed and dictated the number with no argument.

The voice at the other end of the line was middle-aged, pleasant and tired.

'Oh Lord, how on earth did she get out? I thought I'd locked up last night and I certainly haven't opened up yet this morning. How wretched for you. Oh well, thank you for letting me know and thank you for looking after her. I'll be there in five minutes, just let me get dressed.' She hesitated a moment before adding, 'Um... look this may sound strange, but you don't... you don't have any men in the house do you?'

Bemused, Finn said no, she was alone.

'Oh that's all right then,' the voice sounded heartfelt with relief. 'I'll explain when I get there, it's just that she can't be trusted with men any more. See you in a minute.'

Less than ten minutes later Finn thankfully opened the door. Rosemary Clavering was a little below medium height, attractive, middle-to-late fiftyish, gunmetal grey hair in a tousled but stylish bob. Her smile was friendly, her grey eyes tired. She glanced shrewdly at the younger woman who greeted her with relief.

'Being difficult is she? I'm so sorry she's caused you such a lot of trouble.' She hefted a bag in her hand. 'I've brought some clothes for her so as soon as she's decent I'll take her off your hands. I've brought the car though it's only across the

green; Margot's legs give way as she's liable to run out of steam without warning.'

Finn smiled and waved her into the sitting room where Margot sat in state mumbling incoherent obscenities. In the last ten minutes her unwanted guest had shed the initial charm and become petulant and imperious by turns, demanding vodka or champagne and insisting that she must have a full English breakfast at once.

'Do you like men, my dear?' she'd enquired, a cheerful moment shining through.

'Not a lot,' Finn scowled. 'At least, I'm off them just now.'

'I used not to like men much,' Margot was still aboard the same train of thought. 'But something must have happened because, do you know, my dear? I really rather like them at the moment!'

Dr Jekyll was soon obscured again by Mrs Hyde and Margot's final demand had been for a taxi to take her to town, accompanied by a threat that left Finn gasping.

'What did she do?' asked Rosemary bleakly as she thrust her mother's suddenly obedient limbs into her clothes. 'I can see you've had a shock. She's been pretty good lately,' she added wearily.

'She was fine at first then, um... she threatened to... do something if I didn't get her a taxi,' admitted Finn, watching in horrified sympathy as Rosemary tugged, tweaked, zipped and buttoned, all with firm kindness, but with detachment too as though she had long ago hit on this as the only way to struggle through it all.

'What? Oh no, you mean she threatened to pee on the furniture?' As Finn nodded awkwardly, Rosemary turned

angrily on her mother. 'You wretched old horror, apologise at once.'

To Finn's surprise Margot turned to her obediently.

'I'm so sorry, my dear,' she whispered in quiet distress. 'I seem to have been embarrassing. Please forgive me.'

Rosemary Clavering's face twisted suddenly and Finn felt an instant gush of sympathy. The contrast between the arrogant, rambling old miscreant and the suddenly contrite ancient child was heartbreaking even to a stranger. What must it be like for a daughter?

At the front gate Rosemary turned to Finn for another word of thanks. Margot was safely stowed away in the car and Finn saw that Rosemary was looking utterly exhausted.

'I can't tell you...' she began and smiled her gratitude as Finn shook her head wordlessly. 'It was so good of you not to call the police, too. Sometimes I wish I could just let her get on with it; maybe if the police did pick her up they'd put her in a home and I could get some peace.' She shrugged and grinned. 'Still, you can't choose your family, can you? I certainly wouldn't have chosen this, but then, neither would she.'

She changed the subject. 'I imagine she was looking for your sister. Julia doesn't mind if I have to bring her along to our meetings sometimes, depends if I can get a sitter.'

'Meetings?' Finn was intrigued. 'I didn't think Ju was much of a joiner. What kind of meetings?'

Rosemary looked slightly shifty for a moment then shrugged. 'I expect she'll tell you sometime. Are you staying long? I saw Julia yesterday and she didn't mention that you were coming down.'

It was Finn's turn to look furtive. 'Bit of a long story,' she confessed. 'I didn't know myself till yesterday, it was all a big mess. You know... man trouble, job, flat...'

Rosemary shot her a sympathetic smile but made no effort to pry. 'You're going to stay for a while? So you'll be looking for a job down here now?'

Finn made a face. 'Depends how Julia feels about it, but yes, that's the plan. I don't imagine you...?'

'Sorry,' Rosemary smiled ruefully. 'Not unless you fancy a spot of unpaid babysitting.' Reminded, she turned back to the car. 'Drop in sometime for a coffee? I promise to keep Margot under control. It's the bungalow opposite the church. Julia will tell you, come with or without her.'

As Rosemary Clavering started to pull away from the kerb Finn waved her to a halt as a thought struck her.

'Um... I don't suppose you've any idea where my sister might be, have you? I know it sounds mad but she seems to have gone out already. She's always loved her bed in the mornings. Do you think I ought to worry?'

She was taken aback at the other woman's peal of laughter.

'Oh honestly, listen to yourself! How long have you known Julia? She'll be fine, your sister's a big girl after all. She's just on a healthy kick at the moment, I expect she's gone jogging. She was OK at the meeting last night, maybe she's dropped in on one of the others.'

Meeting, there it was again, Finn was intrigued. And the others? What others? What was her sister up to? And what did Rosemary mean, jogging? Julia had always been vociferous on the topic of exercise, fine for other people but not, definitely not, for her.

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After a belated shower and a bowl of cereal Finn was shoving some clothes into the washing machine when she heard a key in the front door. Straightening up, she wiped her hands on a towel and strolled into the hall.

‘Well, young lady? What have you got to say for yourself?’

‘Coming home at this hour, do you mean?’ Julia grinned and gave her sister an enveloping hug. ‘Didn’t you forget the bit about using the house as a hotel? Is the kettle not on? I’m gasping for a cup of tea.’

‘It’s all very well,’ Finn said severely as she handed her a mug of tea. ‘But this hour of the morning? Suppose there’d been an emergency? I wouldn’t have known where to – Oh!’ she broke off and shot Julia a shamefaced grin. ‘Oh all right, I know what I sound like. But jogging? You?’

Julia gave an enigmatic smile and sipped her tea ‘Bully! Why shouldn’t I take up jogging? You think I’m slim enough already?’

Finn surveyed her sister’s ample curves and conceded defeat. ‘I had a visitor while you were out,’ she volunteered. ‘Two visitors, in fact.’

She gave Julia a description of her early morning social activities and asked about Rosemary Clavering.

‘She’s a sweetie,’ Julia said warmly. ‘She moved here a week or two after I did and we’ve become really good friends. She taught art in a big school in the Midlands and bought the bungalow by the church when she retired. She had great plans for setting up as a freelance artist and making a bit on top of her pension, but she’s not got it off the ground yet.’

‘Why not, if she’s had six months?’ Finn was intrigued, Rosemary Clavering hadn’t struck her as idle or indecisive.

‘That bloody mother of hers, of course,’ Julia said bitterly. ‘No, that’s hardly fair, Margot can’t help how she is. It’s the early stages of dementia, of course, though there’s been no official diagnosis yet. She and Rosemary’s father retired to Spain years ago and she remarried out there a year or so after he died, around five years ago I think. About twelve months ago Margot’s second husband died but she stayed where she was. She seemed settled, apparently, and Rosemary used to go out occasionally to see her.’

Julia shrugged and fumbled in her bag for a cigarette. ‘Oh feck, I forgot I’d given up – again, this damned health kick! Anyway, about a month or two after Rosemary moved here Margot turned up on her doorstep in a terrible state. The second husband had put all his financial affairs in the hands of some so-called broker who operated on the Costa Whatsit and he, surprise, surprise, turned out to be a crook. He sold the villa without asking her, cashed in all the securities and bunked off somewhere with no extradition treaty.’

‘Didn’t Rosemary check him out?’ asked Finn aghast.

‘Didn’t get a chance,’ was the reply. ‘Neither of them mentioned it to her. The stepfather apparently presented Margot with a *fait accompli* and as both her husbands had always dealt with the money side and she was the Little Woman, she didn’t query his judgement. Well, what could Rosemary do? I gather Margot’s eligible for some kind of pension, but not much, the husband had opted out of all sorts of schemes, so now Rosemary’s left holding the baby.’

She patted Finn’s cheek affectionately. ‘It’s not just the money, though that’s a major nuisance of course, the main

thing is the constant vigilance, and to make matters even more bleak Margot's changed from being rather mousey and prim into a man-eating exhibitionist so Rosemary's always having to haul her off some poor man or other. Rosemary says they were never close anyway and when Margot remarried things got worse, or at least more distant, happier when they were miles apart – bit like you and me!

'Poor Rosemary,' Finn ignored the provocation. 'And poor Margot, too, being conned like that.' She wrinkled her brow as a memory chimed. 'Changing the subject, do I gather you've got a new boyfriend, Ju? That's usually the reason for your sporadic healthy fits.'

'Sure, I'd hardly call him a boyfriend, Finn,' remonstrated Julia. 'He's just turned seventy.' She laughed at Finn's expression, and went on. 'He's charming, all he wants is to go out somewhere nice for dinner once a week, an occasional dance, the odd drive out and about to a stately home or something and for somebody to listen to him. He's a tad eccentric but very good company, been a widower for a couple of years and no nonsense about wanting another wife. He only moved here a few months back, thought he'd better not live completely alone after he had a fall and broke his hip, I believe. He's staying with his son over the other side of the village at the moment but they're in the throes of sorting out accommodation for him. Also in Bychurch, as it happens; the old Parsonage here has been turned into rather charming flats.'

She looked at Finn under her lashes. 'I know you've never really approved of all my men friends, but what do you expect me to do? Sit at home and knit? I'd wait a long time if I waited for you to keep me company, wouldn't I!'

Finn gave her a guilty grin. 'Oh I don't know,' she said. 'I'm here now, aren't I? And when did I ever say anything about it? Besides, I haven't hated *all* your boyfriends, be fair, and they didn't *all* end in disaster, did they? I liked that one when I was eighteen, with the shop in Southampton, *and* the one with the dark glasses.'

'Yes,' Julia's tone was dry. 'Ron Davis had a sweetshop, didn't he? And let you – allegedly an adult! – run loose in there every Saturday afternoon until he and I broke up. And as for Giannini, you only liked him because you thought he was a Mafia Don.'

'Uh huh,' agreed Finn reminiscently. 'He was scary, and that boy who came to visit next door made me watch the video of *The Godfather* so we were convinced Giannini was going to start leaving horses' heads in the beds.'

'Nonsense, he was a perfect darling and he was a partner in the Italian restaurant in town. We ate out a lot that summer I remember.'

'Didn't you ever think about getting married again, Julia, instead of, you know...?' Finn asked tentatively. They were on good terms but some things you just don't ask.

'Not really. After Colin walked out I was too down, then Mum died and Dad gave up on life and I was landed with a miserable, stropky fifteen-year old sister on my hands. Not,' she threw a laughing look at Finn. 'Not that I ever regretted that for a moment, having you to look after saved my sanity. I just went on working and having my morale-boosting flings now and then. Dumping Colin's name and going back to Fitzgerald helped, I never did cotton on to Watson.'

Julia opened the kitchen window and leaned out, breathing in extravagant gusts of wood-smoke-scented air.

‘Mmm, somebody’s got a bonfire somewhere. As for my men-friends, well... I don’t expect you to believe me but I didn’t actually sleep with all of them, specially nowadays – particularly nowadays. Some of them just want company, like I said, someone to go out and about with, a dinner date, somebody next to them at the theatre. There’s a surprising number of men around who aren’t that bothered about sex, you know, once they get older. And when I was younger, well, it sometimes worked in our favour, didn’t it? Remember when I took you home to Ireland, to look after that castle for the whole of one summer? I don’t think the fellow’s wife ever realised I wasn’t just a housekeeper – and you’d a wonderful holiday after all.’

She turned to look at her sister, a long, appraising stare, noting a little puffiness round the eyes but no other sign of misery. Hurt pride, that was the problem, rather than a hurt heart.

‘Feeling better?’ she asked gently. ‘Want to talk about it?’

‘Not really,’ Finn shook her head. ‘But thanks anyway, Ju. I’ve had it with Brussels, I’ve been getting restless for a year or two. The most important thing to do is start looking for a job, then I need to find somewhere to live. If you really don’t mind me crashing for a few days it’ll be a great help. I’ll get out of your hair as soon as possible.’

She looked up as Julia didn’t answer at once and saw a speculative look in her sister’s eyes.

‘Um, well, I was wondering about that, Finn.’ Julia seemed uncharacteristically diffident. ‘I thought we might give it a go if you’d like.’ She held her hand up as Finn opened her mouth. ‘Hang on, let me finish. I know what you’re going to say, we couldn’t possibly live together and

you're probably quite right, two women in a kitchen and all that and this is a small house. But when you rang from Heathrow yesterday I sat down and thought hard about it. We could turn the house into two unofficial flats, if you liked; you upstairs, me down.'

Finn shook her head.

'That's sweet of you,' she said firmly. 'But I'm *not* dumping myself on you permanently. Grabbing a bed for a few nights is one thing, but why on earth should you turn your life upside down, just because I've messed up?'

'I'm your big sister,' Julia grinned. 'That's what we're for. Are you sure you – What is it?' Finn was staring at her with a very thoughtful expression on her face.

'On the other hand,' Finn said slowly. 'You *do* have that old brick store-room built on to the back of the garage. Do you use it? Could it be turned into a tiny flat, do you think? Or is it completely uninhabitable?'

'But that's brilliant,' Julia exclaimed. 'Of course it could. Think about it,' she warmed to her theme, ever the optimist. 'There's electricity in there already, and water laid on. Come to think of it you might as well have the garage too; I'm sure something could be done.'

Finn was looking doubtful again as she leaned forward to make her point. 'I want to make a completely new start,' she said, resolutely. 'I've been a wimp for years and it's time I got off my backside and did something about it, took control of my life. It would certainly save me a lot of bother, if we *could* convert the garage, but it just strikes me as wimpy old Finn letting somebody else take the strain – as usual!'

'Oh, come *on*,' Julia laughed at her, nodding as the tension began to seep away from Finn's face. 'You're allowed

to accept *some* help, surely? And to be honest, it *would* be a lot more satisfactory from my point of view. You're right, I'm happily settled and this is a small house, but the garage... When have you ever known me put my car away? Also, don't forget, there's another shed in the garden, plenty of room for lawnmowers and things. Think it over, there's no panic. Look on this as a short holiday. Now, why don't we go and check it out? I really think it might work, you know. The door opens into the hall, so we'd share the front door, but that's all. For the rest, we could be quite self-contained.'

'That's right,' Finn told the middle-aged woman interviewing her that afternoon. 'It's spelled Fionnuala, pronounced Finola, my parents were Irish. I'm quite happy to do anything for a while, secretarial, work in a shop, whatever, I know I can't expect anything like what I've been earning. I've come back to England because my elder sister needs me nearer at hand. She's not an invalid,' she added hastily, seeing the woman's frown. 'It wouldn't make any difference to my work, but she... she's suffered a bereavement recently, so that's why...'

She tailed off as the woman nodded sympathetically. Well, it's true enough, she thought guiltily. Julia's ancient Labrador had died only last year and Julia had been devastated, only the bustle and interest of moving house had kept her going.

By the time she got to the interview with the third agency Finn had her story off pat and almost believed it herself, though the image of a frail and elderly Julia pulled her up short, compared to the vibrant reality of her sister.

It was gone half past five when she made her weary way back towards Julia's car, parked in Bridge Street. Mulling over the interviews with their constant of frowns, pursed lips and shaken heads – can't promise anything, dear, not this time of year, certainly not what you're used to, the power station's just laid off people – Finn started to feel depressed. Hang on a minute, she exhorted herself. Get a grip, you didn't burn your boats so comprehensively just to slip back into your wimpy ways. Don't be so pathetic, try and act your age for once.

She straightened her shoulders and grinned, suddenly in Scarlett O'Hara mood. 'After all,' she proclaimed aloud, to the surprise of a passing pedestrian. 'Tomorrow *is* another day!'