

Chapter One

Today was Saskia's birthday.

She was thirty-two years old and it would be true to say she was thoroughly out of step with most other thirty-two-year-olds. It would also be true to say that this was partly an inevitable consequence of still living at home with her father and two elderly grandfathers. But while the set-up would strike a lot of people as odd and far from ideal, Saskia never felt the need to defend or justify the situation. Besides, their domestic arrangements had been in place for so long now it was difficult to imagine living any other way: it was just the way it was.

From the cushioned window seat in her bedroom Saskia watched Grandpa O – wicker basket in hand and wearing an old gardening coat over his pyjamas – set off down the frosty garden at an unhurried pace on his recently replaced knee. It was a familiar sight: every morning, apart from a few weeks back in November when he had gone into hospital to have his arthritic knee sorted, he visited the chicken coop to relieve the hens of their eggs. Back in the kitchen he would place his plunder on the worktop next to the Aga and Grandpa Harvey would tut and mutter about him always leaving the basket in his way. His complaint made, Grandpa Harvey would then take what he needed to make breakfast. Scrambled or poached eggs on toast was their favourite way to start the day although Saskia and her father, more mindful of their cholesterol levels, rang the changes by opting for porridge or cereal. The kitchen was where Grandpa Harvey ruled supreme, just as Oliver was in charge of the garden. They each had their point of command, and each had their well-honed routine. It was the way it was.

Maintaining her vigilant watch over the tall and slightly stooping figure of her eighty-six-year-old grandfather steadily making his way back up the garden towards the house, his breath forming

in the wintry February air, Saskia could see it was going to be one of those magical days of bitter cold, when the whitened ground would be as hard as iron underfoot and the low sun would shine weakly from a pale sky but provide no warmth. Beyond the garden, the fields were also covered in frost and from the top of one of the nearby oak trees, a pair of rooks rose into the sky, cawing loudly.

When her grandfather had disappeared from view, she knew that meant he was safely back inside the house and so she stepped away from the window and continued dressing.

The day might have started just as any other, but today was different, and not just because it was Saskia's birthday. It was also the anniversary of the tragic accident that had thrown their lives into disarray and brought them here to Ashcombe. Twenty-two years ago her mother and both grandmothers went out shopping together and never came home, their lives brutally cut short in a horrific car crash.

Saskia was ten at the time, old enough to be grief-stricken but not old enough to deal with the trauma of so much loss. It was weeks before she could let her father leave the house without becoming hysterical with terror that he wouldn't return.

It had been Harvey – her mother's father – who had put forward the suggestion that it would help them all if they set up home together, that her father shouldn't be left to cope on his own, that actually *none* of them should be left to cope alone. Within eight months they had pooled their resources and moved here.

The moment Saskia had set eyes on Ashcombe she had fallen in love with it. It was the most beautiful house she had ever seen, a rambling Suffolk Pink cottage on the edge of the village of Melbury Green, flanked by open fields and the River Stour to the rear of the two-acre garden, and a minor road that twisted and turned through the softly undulating Suffolk countryside. To the west, the road took you towards Cambridge, and to the east, to the beaches of Southwold and Aldeburgh.

With its immaculate thatched roof and ornate ridge, its sloping pink walls covered with climbing roses and an orchard filled with apple, pear and damson trees, it was fairy-tale perfect. From the day they moved in, the house beguiled them and became their sanctuary, an enchanting and secluded oasis in which, very slowly, the healing process could begin.

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‘There you are!’ her father greeted her when she pushed open the door to the kitchen and instantly felt the warmth from the Aga. ‘We were thinking of sending a search party to find you. Happy birthday!’

‘Yes, dear girl, happy birthday,’ chimed in Grandpa O, taking her by the arm and steering her towards the table where a small pile of presents and cards had been laid out in front of her usual seat.

‘Thirty-two,’ Grandpa Harvey said with a chuckle, kissing her on the cheek, ‘that sounds like a properly grown-up age to me.’

‘It sounds worryingly ancient to me,’ Saskia said with a grimace.

‘What nonsense! Now sit down and your every birthday whim and desire shall be attended to. What can I make you for breakfast?’

‘You know, I think I’ll risk some scrambled eggs this morning.’

‘Good choice, even if I say so myself. Would that be with toast? Maybe with a rasher or two of bacon on the side? Look lively, Oliver, don’t just stand there, pour the girl some tea!’

‘All right, all right,’ Grandpa O said with a roll of his eyes, ‘no need to nag.’

Saskia smiled fondly at the pair of them as they flapped and bustled and bickered around her in their pyjamas and dressing gowns in what she called their Laurel and Hardy routine. They were, she knew, giving an exaggerated performance for her birthday, in the hope it would distract her from the unavoidable shadow cast over the day. Despite their own loss – their wives and a daughter – they had always tried their best to make sure her birthday wasn’t lost in the sadness of their collective grief. But in reality her birthday could not be anything but complicit in forcing them to look back and remember.

However, for Saskia the passing of another year was a reminder that the future was more of a concern to her than the past. Her grandfathers, though in reasonably good health, were not getting any younger, and the thought of one day losing them caused her immeasurable sadness. She looked at her father and could see from Ralph’s expression that he knew what she was thinking. He usually did.

When she had been studying for her A levels she had announced

one Saturday, while she'd been working in the family-run antiquarian bookshop, that she had no interest in going to university. 'Three years of pointless study would bore me rigid,' she'd said.

'And what exactly do you plan to do instead?' her father had asked, barely looking up from the catalogue he was preparing.

'I'll work here with you, of course,' she'd responded, 'and when I'm not doing that I'm going to learn how to restore books so you won't have to pay the exorbitant fees Franklin Reed charges you.'

Giving her his full attention, he'd said, 'How long have you been cooking up this little scheme?'

'Long enough to know it's what I want to do. Please, Dad, don't make me to go university just for the sake of it, I won't fit in and I'll be as miserable as hell. It would also be a shameful waste of money.'

With hindsight it hadn't been that difficult for her father to guess at what was really uppermost in her mind – after all, fitting in had never been a priority for her, not since the accident that had wiped out half her family.

The immediate shock of what had happened that winter's day, when a driver at the wheel of his lorry had fallen asleep and ploughed straight into her mother's car, had left her terrified of going to school. Overnight she became paralysed with fear and the irrational conviction that while she was away from home something awful could happen to what was left of her family, for she'd been at school when disaster had struck in the first place. To solve the problem of continuing her education, her grandfathers took on the job of home-schooling her, but when it came to A levels they said they were out of their depth and she reluctantly agreed to go to the local sixth-form college. She had enjoyed it more than she had anticipated, but at the same time she had accepted she didn't really fit in, not socially; she was too self-contained and too introverted to make any kind of an impact.

'So this has nothing to do with you worrying how your grandfathers and I will cope when you're not here?' Ralph had asked when she'd explained her plan to be a book restorer. He had gone straight to the heart of the matter, knowing precisely what was on her mind. She had denied it, of course.

In the days that followed he'd pestered her to reconsider, telling

her that she mustn't make the mistake of living her life through him or Oliver and Harvey, or worse, sacrificing her future for their sakes. 'You're your own person with your own life to live,' he'd said. 'We'd never forgive ourselves if we believed we were responsible for denying you the opportunity to live your life to the full.' To hammer his point home, he'd finished by saying, 'You are not responsible for us, Saskia. That's not what your mother would have wanted or expected from you.'

She hadn't needed to reconsider, not for a single second. Keeping to herself that it was unthinkable for her to leave her family when they had done so much to provide her with a loving and stable childhood, she had waved goodbye to her small circle of friends as they set off for their universities of choice that autumn. She enjoyed hearing from them once term was under way, but didn't envy them or regret her choice to stay behind. She was exactly where she wanted to be and doing exactly what she wanted to do. Ashcombe was where she belonged, and restoring books was what she was meant to do.

Just as old and rare books had become a passion for her father, so they had for Saskia. She loved to hold one in her hands and breathe in the musty age of it, feeling through her fingers a sense of history, and of placing herself within the life of the book. How many people before her had turned its pages and lost themselves in the wonder of its words and pictures? What had their lives been like? What happiness had they experienced? What sadness had they suffered?

More often than not she preferred the company of a room full of books to a room full of people. Books were quiet and constant companions that brought nothing but solace. But best of all, she preferred the company of a book she was restoring and bringing tenderly back to life. And there was no need for anyone to point out that devoting herself to such a vocation – and she did see it as a vocation – was some sort of metaphor for being unable to bring her mother and grandmothers back to life.

It was something her ex-boyfriend had thrown at her at the beginning of last month when he'd called in unexpectedly one evening after work to share his good news with her: he'd been promoted. 'Fifteen other applicants, and I was the one they selected!' he'd said proudly. 'A brilliant way to start the New Year, don't you think?'

She had been genuinely pleased for him, but when Philip had gone on to say the new job meant transferring from the Ipswich office of the software company he worked for to Newcastle, and he wanted her to go with him – they could find a place of their own and set up home together – the conversation had taken a dramatic turn for the worst.

Amazed that he'd been secretly planning this without so much as a word to her, she'd said, 'But Philip, Newcastle is hundreds of miles away and you know I can't leave my family. I couldn't live that far away from them. I'm sorry, it's out of the question.'

'You could at least think about it,' he'd said, his face wreathed in disappointment. 'I thought you'd be pleased. I thought you'd see it as a way to escape.'

'*Escape?*' she'd repeated, stunned. 'Why on earth do I need to escape?'

'Perhaps escape is the wrong word,' he'd said, suddenly avoiding her gaze and looking around her workshop. 'I just meant this would give you ... give *us* ... the chance to be together properly.'

Conscious that she'd comprehensively ruined his surprise, not to say his moment of glory, she'd tried to placate him. 'I'm really happy for you, Philip, it's just that this has come out of nowhere for me.' But while she was saying the words, she was thinking that surely in the eight months they'd been seeing each other he'd come to realise what life at Ashcombe meant to her?

'You know how it is,' she went on, trying to appease him, and wondering if a long-distance relationship might actually be better – it would have all the convenience of having a boyfriend, but without the inconvenience of being forced to change her life. 'I can't drop everything at a moment's notice,' she explained, 'and leave Dad on his own when Oliver and Harvey are likely to need ... well, you understand, I'm sure.'

That had been too much for Philip. 'Your bloody family!' he'd snapped. 'It's all you ever think about! I thought we were—' He stopped himself abruptly and pursed his lips hard, causing them to whiten into an ugly hard line.

'You thought we were what?' she'd prompted, suddenly angry. *Bloody family*. Is that how he viewed Dad and her grandfathers? And after they'd always treated him so well. How dare he!

'I thought we were a *couple*,' he said sullenly. 'A couple that did things jointly, who planned things jointly.'

‘Is that what you did when you applied for a job that would be in Newcastle?’ she fired back, her patience gone. ‘Or did you just think you’d present it as a *fait accompli* and expect me to tag along in your wake?’

‘I expected you to accept that it’s time you grew up and left home and joined the real world. You’re thirty-one, Saskia, not twenty-one!’

Thirty-two as of today, Saskia thought glumly, recalling the childish way in which Philip had vented yet more of his angry disappointment before storming out of her workshop. He’d slammed the door behind him so hard it had bounced back open, giving her a perfect view of him stomping down the path to his car and then driving off with a gratuitous roar of engine. Transfixed, and reflecting how easily life could change, she had watched him go, the freezing cold air swirling in at her feet.

He hadn’t spoken to her since. She imagined he was now fully absorbed in either planning his new life in Newcastle, or already enjoying it. Realistically, she doubted they’d had much more left in the tank of their relationship. Moreover, he’d begun to show worrying signs that he couldn’t accept that there were certain conditions she came with. Conditions that might just as well have been carved in stone tablets and carried down from the mountaintop by Moses himself.

‘Come on, Saskia, why don’t you open your cards?’

Her father’s voice put an end to her thoughts and returned her to the kitchen and those she loved most in the world.

Looking up at her father, she saw that he was staring at her with one of his characteristically intuitive smiles. She smiled back at him, and at her grandfathers who so badly wanted her to enjoy her birthday.

Chapter Two

Later that day, standing in line at the post office, Ralph stared out of the window at the passing traffic. Car headlamps glowed in the fading afternoon light and people, bundled up in coats, gloves, hats and scarves, hurried past in the cold.

By stepping to his right and craning his neck, he had a clear view of the church and Granger's Rare and Antiquarian Book Shop across the road. Observing the three-storey building from this vantage point, he reminded himself that when spring arrived, hopefully bringing some warmer and drier weather with it, he really must arrange for Will Swinton to come and redecorate the shop front. Wouldn't do let things slide, not when the town had such an illustrious reputation to maintain. Not only was Chelstead one of Suffolk's smallest and prettiest towns, it frequently made it on to the list of most desirable places to live in the county. An historic wool town on the south bank of the River Stour, it attracted a steady flow of tourists with its picturesque colour-washed and timber-framed buildings, along with an impressive medieval church, admittedly not on a par with the churches of Long Melford or Lavenham, but perfectly in keeping with the size and character of the town.

The woman at the front of the queue moved away, her business complete, and with three other customers ahead of him, Ralph inched forwards and switched the Jiffy bag he was holding from his right to his left hand – inside was a first edition of G.K. Chesterton's *Father Brown Selected Stories* which he was sending to one of his regular online customers. The Internet had transformed the nature of the business and accounted for a high percentage of what he sold. The time would come when he might well do away with the shop, but not yet. For now his market street position gave him an excellent footfall amongst locals and tourists alike, and owning the premises meant he had no worries

about the rent being hiked into the stratosphere by a greedy landlord, as was too often the case these days.

The man immediately in front of him had resorted to passing the time by holding an intrusively loud conversation on his mobile. Ralph tried not to listen, but it was impossible not to be drawn into the one-sided exchange that revolved around a head office meeting in Colchester tomorrow morning, which apparently nobody was looking forward to. It was extraordinary how uninhibited people could be with that small device pressed against their head.

With the clock on the wall behind the counter helpfully informing Ralph that he'd so far been held captive here for fourteen minutes, he watched the second hand judder inexorably around the face of the timepiece; it seemed to say, 'I feel your pain, but here's another minute of your life gone forever.' Did the post office deliberately provide a clock to taunt its customers?

In common with anyone who had better things to do, Ralph hated to be kept waiting, but on the days when Pat, his long-standing part-time helper, didn't come in he had no choice but to put a 'Back-in-Ten-Minutes' note on the door of the shop and stand in line and patiently wait his turn. Oliver and Harvey used to help out on a regular basis, and occasionally still liked to lend a hand, as did Saskia when she had the time to spare.

He shuffled his feet for something to do and thought of Saskia opening her birthday presents that morning. He'd been pleased and relieved that she'd been so delighted with the bluey-grey cashmere cardigan he'd given her. He'd spotted it in the window of a new clothes shop in Long Melford some weeks ago and had been struck how similar it was to the colour of her eyes. She had the same colour of eyes as her mother, but whereas Evie's had all too often sparked with humour and mischief, Saskia's were more prone to a solemnity that quite belied her age. That difference aside, she was most assuredly her mother's daughter and had inherited the same wide cheekbones, the same chin that could rise with a defiance that told him in no uncertain terms to back off, and the same dark hair that curled when damp. Slightly taller than her mother had been, she had the same slim, long-legged build that never seemed to gain a pound in weight.

Whenever he thought of these similarities, he was filled with sad regret that Evie had never known her daughter as an adult.

At once the image of his wife wagging her finger at him popped into his head. ‘Ralph,’ he imagined her saying, ‘stop it! No regrets and no living in the past because it’s the safer option. You never used to be like that. You used to take matters into your own hands and make things happen!’

Whether or not it was Evie’s stern voice chastising him, or merely the voice of his subconscious, he knew without a shred of doubt that the criticism was justified. But the simple fact was he wasn’t the same man he’d once been. As clichéd as it was, when Evie died a part of him died as well.

They’d met in the time-honoured way at a party, a party that had taken place in London in the flat below his in Wandsworth. At the time Evie had been engaged to be married to someone called Magnus, but before that had been made known to Ralph, and after he’d introduced himself as their host’s neighbour, he had believed himself to be more or less home and dry, having made her laugh with a self-effacing story about some disastrous faux pas he’d committed at work. But when he’d asked her if she’d like to risk an evening out with him sometime, she’d said that Magnus, her fiancé, probably wouldn’t like that. She’d pointed across the room to where said fiancé was deep in conversation with a trio of men who were dressed as if they’d come straight from the office.

‘So what’s wrong with your fiancé?’ Ralph had asked a few minutes later when she’d gone into more detail about the man who had just ruined his evening.

‘What do you mean, what’s wrong with him?’ she’d replied with a frown and a distinct lifting of her chin.

‘You’ve just told me you’ve been together for two years,’ he replied, ‘and despite being engaged, you’ve yet to set the date.’

The frown deepened. ‘And from that you discern a problem? How about the old adage, marry in haste and repent at leisure?’

‘If he truly loved you he’d have whisked you off to the altar by now, he’d have snapped you up fast before someone better came along.’ He then indicated the ring on her finger. ‘He would also have given you a decent ring, not fobbed you off with some shabby little thing he found in a cracker.’

Her eyes widened even more. ‘Wow! You’ve got some nerve, haven’t you?’

‘I like to think so, yes. How about you? Or are you the type

to settle for second best because you don't have the courage to expect better? And from where I'm standing, you absolutely deserve better.'

She stared back at him, her face ablaze with anger. 'I'll tell you the type of person I am. I'm the sort who doesn't waste her breath on a jerk like you. Have a nice life, why don't you? And good luck with finding someone mad enough to take on you and your colossal ego. Maybe they'll be able to teach you some manners!'

He'd had to admit that her description of him was fully deserved; he *had* behaved like an egotistical jerk. But for some bizarre reason something had got into him. Jealousy, perhaps. A need to impress her. A need to sweep her off her feet. Whatever it was, it was a new experience for him and left him baffled long after she had left the party with her fiancé.

A week later he heard through his neighbour, the host of the party, that his old school friend, Magnus, had just been dumped by his long-term girlfriend. Which presented Ralph with a dilemma – without seeming insensitive, how could he get the necessary information from his neighbour so he could contact Evie?

In the end, he didn't need to; *she* contacted him. He came home from work one evening and found her huddled on the front doorstep. It was the middle of winter and she looked frozen half to death.

'You were right about Magnus,' she said simply. 'I've left him.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, getting down and sitting on the step with her.

She turned her head. 'Are you?'

'No, not really. You were too good for him. And without doubt you're too good for me, but I'd like the opportunity to see if I could raise my game.'

She smiled. 'I don't think anyone's ever had the same effect on me as you have.'

'You mean, annoyed you so much? I'm sorry for being such a cocky big-mouth who could learn some manners.'

'No, I meant someone who makes me feel the way I do. I haven't stopped thinking about you since that night.'

'That makes two of us; I've thought of nothing else but how I could get in touch with you.' Taking his gloves off, he held out

his hand to her. 'How about we start over and pretend we're meeting for the first time?'

Her smile increased and she took off her woollen mitten. 'Evie Milner, pleased to meet you.'

He wrapped his warm hand around her slender, icy fingers. 'Ralph Granger,' he said, feeling as though he was jumping off a cliff straight in the unknown, 'I'm exceptionally pleased to meet you. But before you die of cold, let's get you inside and warmed up, and you can tell me all about yourself.'

'No,' she said, 'let's walk. I don't care where.'

That's how it always was with Evie. She could always find a better way of doing things. Hand in hand, they walked the dark streets hardly aware of their surroundings. He discovered she was exactly the same age as he was and that their birthdays were a week apart. 'I've never met a stylist before,' he said when she told him what job she did, 'what does one actually do?'

'Basically I help people to make the most of themselves.'

'Could you do that with me?' he'd asked.

She'd stepped away from him, tilted her head to one side and pressed her lips together while slowly raking him from top to toe with alarming scrutiny, taking in the new suit he'd treated himself to last week and which he vainly thought gave him an air of grown-up gravitas as a City accountant, along with the woollen overcoat his parents had bought him for Christmas last year. 'Hmmm ... I think I like you just the way you are,' she said finally.

'Really?'

'You seem surprised?'

'In my experience girls always want to change something about a man.'

'Then you've been mixing with the wrong kind of girls.'

It turned out her work as a stylist was a lot more involved and specialised than she'd implied and it made him doubly anxious about his appearance when they were together. Her clients weren't middle-aged housewives in need of a revamp, as he'd pictured, but included an up-and-coming pop star as well as a TV presenter. Her real love was designing clothes, but mostly she sourced outfits for photo shoots for magazines and television appearances.

Five months after meeting her, he blew his savings on the

biggest diamond he could afford. Evie was furious that he'd gone to such expense. 'You're not trying to prove something, are you?' she'd asked.

'Only the extent of my love for you,' he'd replied, slipping the ring on to her finger.

They married three months later – a week before the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana – and in contrast to the ceremony that took place at St Paul's Cathedral, they tied the knot without any fuss or bother in the church where Evie had been baptised as a baby, along with their immediate family and a couple of close friends. The following year they were back in the same church, this time standing at the font having Saskia baptised.

To this day he couldn't say exactly what it was that had made him fall in love with Evie. It could have been the way she looked at him so intently. Or the way her body was a natural fit with his, whether they were slouched on the sofa together or lying in bed. Or it could have been her laugh, the way it could magically flick a switch inside of him and make him feel like nothing would ever matter more to him than to hear that happy sound. Whatever the reason, the result had been that he'd been deeply and profoundly in love with Evie and knew that, by some incredible fluke of chance, he had found the one person in the world he was meant to be with.

So that was the man he'd once been. A man who saw what he wanted and went all out for it. Had Evie not been waiting for him on the doorstep that evening, he would have found her, even if it meant scouring the whole of London.

Now he was almost sixty, a man who spent his life taking the path of least resistance, a man who frequently capitulated and stood in line at the post office patiently waiting his turn.

At long last the wait was over and he'd made it to the front of the queue where he exchanged a few pleasantries with the woman behind the counter – a woman who had only started working there a few weeks ago and who seemed to have a permanently red and runny nose. The parcel safely delivered into the hands of the Royal Mail, he hurried out into the street and crossed the road.

His mobile started to ring in his pocket as he let himself in at the shop.

'Hi, Gil,' he said, shutting the door and removing the note he'd

stuck on it before he'd been trapped in Chelstead's equivalent of Purgatory. 'What can I do for you?'

'Always a matter of what I can do for you, old son. I've another load of books you might like to have a rummage through.'

Ralph shrugged off his coat. Gilbert Ross's line of work was house clearance and he often gave Ralph the opportunity to have first dibs on the books that came his way. 'You mean you've got a ton of books you don't know what to do with?' he said.

'Don't be like that, Ralph – I've been good to you over the years and you've had a fair few nice little earners through me.'

It was true and in return Ralph had always given Gil a cut of anything that turned out to be of real value. 'The trouble is, I'm a bit stuck for space,' he said. Again this was true. He was way behind with sorting through Gil's previous deliveries. Much to Saskia's disapproval, after there'd been a small flood in the basement caused by a leaking pipe, he'd had to store some in her workshop. Actually 'some' was an understatement. There were about twenty boxes of books waiting to be sifted through.

'You know what you need,' Gil said, 'you need a lock-up.'

'I need that like a hole in the head,' Ralph said.

'So what's your answer, yes or no?'

As always Ralph couldn't say no, not when there was the chance that in amongst the mundane, there could be that elusive rarity that would give him the kind of thrill his job as an accountant all those years ago never had. He was a great believer in the theory that, more often than not, books, the special ones, found their way to the serious book lover.

Opening an antiquarian bookshop had been a secret ambition of his when he'd been a teenager, but unsurprisingly it didn't feature as an option on the school's career list. Evie was the first person to whom he'd confessed this harboured ambition – there were many things he shared with her that he'd never shared with anyone else – and her reaction was to tell him to get on and do it. 'What, ditch my job, just like that?' he'd responded, shocked.

'Why not?' she'd answered him.

'Money for starters. And stability. And a good pension. And—'

'All excuses stopping you from doing something daring and exciting.'

'Would it be exciting if we didn't have enough money to put food on the table?'

She'd tutted. 'Don't be so boringly bourgeois. And if it's slipped your mind, I'm capable of earning a decent wage. Come on, where's that cocky man I met who accused me of settling for second best?'

He was almost convinced he should do as she said when they discovered she was pregnant. Children had been a part of the equation, eventually, just not yet. Inevitably, the unplanned pregnancy had the accountant in him rising to the fore and he was forcibly reminded that money and stability and a good pension were of even greater importance now. Without a backward glance, all thoughts of the new life he'd begun to imagine were swept away in their combined excitement and trepidation at becoming parents.

His love of books – particularly old books – came from his mother's parents who'd lived in the Cotswolds and owned exactly the kind of establishment Ralph wanted for himself. The shop had been a home from home for him and he'd loved nothing more than to stay with his grandparents during the school holidays and be allowed to browse the walls of shelves that were chaotically packed tight with all manner of books. Through those dusty old books he travelled the world and filled his head with dreams and adventures. He went with explorers to Egypt to discover the tombs and pyramids; he lived with revolutionaries in Russia; fought the Greeks in the Trojan War in ancient Anatolia – and all without ever leaving the comfort of the chair in the corner of the shop. But then his grandparents retired and sold up to go and live by the sea in Devon.

The shop might have gone, but its smell, redolent of aged books and everything they stood for, had worked its way into his system where it lay dormant, biding its time until it could be ignored no longer.

Evie's death taught him many things, primarily that he could never love anyone else in the way he'd loved her, but also to face up to the knowledge that working in the City for a large accountancy firm was never going to satisfy him. Yes, it would give him and his daughter financial security, but with the long hours expected of him it would mean he would never see Saskia; she would be in the constant care of a nanny. Then Harvey had suggested they combine forces and buy a house large enough to accommodate them all and thereby do away with a nanny. It

opened their eyes to a radical change in lifestyle and, after careful consideration, they decided Suffolk would give them more for their money – it was actually the only county the three of them could agree upon as somewhere they thought they could live. So Oliver moved across from Bishop's Stortford, Harvey from Chelmsford and Ralph and Saskia up from London. It was a convergence of four heartbroken people desperately in need of support and a new start.

An hour later and Ralph had locked up and was on his way home. Arriving back at Ashcombe in the dark, he saw that the light was still on in Saskia's workshop. The studio had originally been a tumbledown collection of outhouses, which he'd had converted into one large, airy space for Saskia to work in.

Respecting that it was her private domain, he knocked on the door and waited to be granted permission to enter. He caught a vague response and turned the handle.

'Dad's just walked in,' Saskia said into the screen of her laptop and waving him over. 'Do you want to have a word with him?'

'Sure, birthday girl, put him on.'

There was no need to ask who Saskia was talking to: Ralph's sister's voice was so recognisable and loud it could travel without the aid of Skype or FaceTime all the way from Calgary in Canada where she and her husband Bob had lived for the best part of thirty years.

'Hi, Jo,' he said, looking at the comically pixelated image of his sister. 'How's tricks?'

'We're freezing our butts off here. We've got three feet of snow and have resorted to drinking de-icer to keep warm. How do you think I am?'

Ralph laughed. Always the same Jo. No matter what, she never changed. It was one of the things he loved about her. That and the fact that she might live thousands of miles away, but she never forgot them, or Saskia's birthday.

Chapter Three

Harvey slung the tea towel over his shoulder, took an appreciative and, in his opinion, well-earned slurp of wine and looked about him with satisfaction: everything was coming together very nicely.

With the main lights dimmed, the table set with plates of smoked salmon blinis – some sprinkled with chopped chives, others with dill – was ready and waiting. Their main course of lamb shank casserole was in the bottom oven of the Aga where it had been for most of the afternoon, filling the house with the appetising aroma of garlic and rosemary. Pudding could only be one thing, Saskia's favourite chocolate cake, a cake he made for her every birthday, and always in a pantomime of secrecy – he never let on that he'd made it and in turn she never let on that she knew he'd make it for her.

Harvey liked to think that his wife was looking down and smiling to herself, and was maybe even proud of him. 'Who'd have thought it,' he imagined Ester saying, 'Harvey Milner knowing his way round a kitchen? Whatever next!'

Who'd have thought it indeed? Time was when Ester had only trusted him to help with the washing-up, and even then he'd put things away in the wrong place. It had been a different time back then, especially when they'd been newly-weds and their roles had been clearly defined into very much his and hers – he went to work, she stayed at home; that was how it was. It was better these days, he reckoned. Fairer, although not necessarily easier.

Their marriage had been a good one. It had been rock solid with a strong, loving bond between them. It was that bond that had seen them through some pretty tough times – a series of miscarriages before Evie was born, and another one two years later. They had then resigned themselves to the fact that there would be no more children and, as anyone might expect, their

one and only precious child became the centre of their marriage and their love for each other.

Did they spoil her? Perhaps they did. But so what? She grew up to be a wonderful young woman, vibrant and funny, a loving daughter and an adoring wife and mother. And how he still missed her. Ester, too. He breathed in deeply and let his breath out slowly. Twenty-two years on and he could still feel the pain of losing his wife and daughter.

It was hardly surprising that today of all days he would be more vulnerable to that loss, a day that brought into sharp focus the terrible memories. It had been one of those arranged-at-the-last-minute days out that Ester and Nell and Evie often did – lunch together and, in this instance, a few last things to shop for in readiness for Saskia's party at the weekend. Taking the train into London, Ester had met with Evie who had then driven them to Hertford to pick up Nell. But they never made it to lunch. Ralph had been the first to be told the news and, poor devil, he'd been the one to break it to him and Oliver. They were two phone calls no one should ever have to make.

Selecting a vegetable knife from the wooden block, Harvey began chopping the carrots he'd just peeled. No maudlin thoughts, he told himself firmly. Not tonight. Not for Saskia's birthday dinner.

By rights she should be out celebrating with friends, but she always said she would spend this evening no other way. It pained him that her small circle of friends had become dispersed in recent years; they had either moved away, or had married and were now preoccupied with the demands of small children. In short, their lives had moved on and sadly Saskia's hadn't. Which meant, as anybody in the same situation would know, with increasingly less in common, friendship becomes harder to maintain.

Harvey knew from personal experience how easily that happened. In the aftermath of the accident, a few people who he had counted as friends suddenly didn't know how to be around him anymore, and before too long they stopped ringing or visiting. He had understood their reluctance to be around him, for what could you possibly say to a man who had lost so much?

Two more minutes and then he'd call everyone for supper. Harvey had heard Ralph's car earlier but not having heard him come in, he assumed his son-in-law was with Saskia in her

workshop. The last he'd seen of Oliver was an hour ago when he'd gone for a bath after his usual fifteen-minute session in the garden, rounding up the hens and putting them to bed for the night.

Routine. It was all about routine and tradition at Ashcombe. That's how it had been from the day they moved in. Knowing what they were all doing at a certain time in the day had represented stability, not just for Saskia, but for the rest of them; it was a way to cope, a means to battle their way through the minefield of grief.

Friends had thought he'd been so brave to suggest they all live together – brave because what would they do if the plan went horribly wrong? But really it had been selfish cowardice on his part that had made him come up with the idea; he simply couldn't bear to be alone in the house where he and Ester had lived for the last twenty-eight years, the house that was crammed full of memories of their life together. He had badly wanted it to be a comfort to be surrounded by the familiarity of their home, but it had been the opposite. Everywhere he looked he was reminded of all that was gone and the awful silence and emptiness filled him with unrelenting sorrow.

Perhaps if the accident hadn't coincided with his recent retirement he might have coped better. But there was nothing to distract him, and with the deepening awareness that Ralph was in a worse state than he was, he saw a way to be of use and to feel needed.

With his days as a regional building society manager with a dozen branches under his control behind him, at Ashcombe he had a new role to adjust to, that of Domestic Technician, and he threw himself into it with gusto. Cooking was the Everest of his learning curve, but he eventually mastered it and came to find relief in the process. Chopping, grinding, kneading, mixing, stirring – it was all a way to keep busy, and to pour his love into taking care of what was left of his shattered family. United we stand, he would often murmur to himself as he stood at the sink looking out of the window and watching Oliver tending to the vegetable patch.

The carrots now chopped, it was time to rally the troops for supper. First he called up the stairs to Oliver and then went to the back door where there was a ship's brass bell hanging in the

porch. He gave it a vigorous tug and watched in the darkness for a response over in the brightly lit workshop where he could see Ralph and Saskia talking. They turned simultaneously and gave him an acknowledging wave.

Back in the warmth of the kitchen, he uncovered the plates of smoked salmon blinis and took out a bottle of champagne from the fridge. Removing the cork, he carefully filled four flutes. This was another Ashcombe tradition to which they rigidly held. Saskia had been sixteen when she'd suggested they should drink a toast to Evie, Ester and Nell on her birthday, and that it should be champagne they drank. It was one of the many things Harvey loved about his granddaughter, her absolute understanding of what mattered, of what was important to them as a family. Some people wanted to forget; they didn't. They wanted to remember.

Chapter Four

A week after his granddaughter's birthday and with March now upon them, Oliver was looking forward to getting cracking in the garden. But before then, he was helping Saskia sort through the boxes of books in the workshop. They had been at it for over two hours and apart from a couple of attractive clothbound Conon Doyle's they had found little of real interest. The reject boxes were mostly full of paperbacks and the ubiquitous assortment of Reader's Digest anthologies.

It was a job that was long overdue and one Oliver knew Saskia was keen to tackle now that she had some free time. Since December she had been absorbed in the painstaking task of restoring a collection of valuable leather-bound atlases dating from the mid-1700s to the nineteenth century. Some of the books had required no more than a cursory amount of restoration, such as mending split spines or the reattachment of boards, but others had been in need of a lot more specialised care. The client, a serious collector, had bought the atlases at an auction and yesterday, when he came to collect them, he'd been so delighted with the miracle Saskia had wrought that he'd returned an hour later with a large bouquet of flowers for her.

Oliver didn't know how Saskia had the patience to do what she did, but then, as Ralph was only too quick to point out, living with the three of them had taught her to have the patience of not just one saint, but a whole host of them.

Spooning coffee into two mugs while he waited for the kettle to boil, Oliver thought that increasingly there were days when he felt he could do with a bit of restoration himself. Having a new knee was just the start, he supposed. There again, at his age, and compared to a lot of folk, he was lucky to have got away with only an arthritic knee. It was amazing what the quacks could do

nowadays. Although they still couldn't do anything for a common cold.

'There are biscuits in the tin, if you fancy one,' Saskia said to him as he bent down with a creak of bones in the cramped space to find the milk in the small fridge.

'Right you are,' he replied. He liked being in the workshop with Saskia; he liked the sense of containment it gave. He suspected Saskia did too; it was her private space, her little oasis away from the house. In their own way, they each had their special place – Ralph had the shop, Harvey had the kitchen, he had the garden, and Saskia had her workshop.

From the very start of living here they had agreed that the situation would only work if they knew when to keep out of each other's way and had somewhere to be alone. He would be the first to admit that he needed time alone occasionally as he could be a thoroughly miserable bugger when the mood took him, unlike Harvey who had an inherently upbeat personality. Harvey was their very own Pollyanna and could always be relied upon to find the positive in a situation; in contrast, Oliver's default setting was more inclined to the pessimistic leaning of the dial. His daughter said his problem wasn't so much thinking his glass was half empty as believing it would slip out of his hands and shatter into lethally sharp shards.

Jo was full of pithy remarks like that. She was one of those people who always spoke her mind. All of it. You were never in any doubt where you stood with Jo. You also knew you could rely on her one hundred per cent in a crisis. He'd never been prouder of her than when she had flown over twenty-two years ago in response to the news of the accident and her mother's death. Somehow putting her own grief to one side, she had taken control of the situation and organised everything that needed to be done. Whereas the rest of them had been all but catatonic with shock she had been a tower of strength, an absolute god-send. Some weeks later, when she was back in Canada, Oliver had asked for her advice about Harvey's suggestion that they all live together. She was the only person he trusted to be completely honest and objective with him. 'What do you think?' he'd asked her on the phone. 'Good idea or not?'

'Misery loves company,' she'd said, 'so the danger is you'll all go under together.'

‘So it’s a bad idea?’

‘On the other hand,’ she had continued as if he hadn’t spoken, ‘it could be the best thing you could do. Best for Saskia as well. She needs people around her. She needs routine and stability. By helping her, you’ll be helping yourselves. It’s perfect. You have my full approval. Go ahead.’

She had been right; it had been the perfect solution. But much as Oliver loved Ashcombe – much as he knew it had saved them – he worried that it could be Saskia’s undoing. She needed a life beyond Ashcombe, but stuck here with them she was never going to have that. He suspected she had secretly signed up for the job of official carer for them now, which she would see as a way to repay them for what they had done for her as a child. He wished there was a way to disabuse her of this sense of sacrificial duty, but he couldn’t for the life of him think how to go about it, other than for them all rather conveniently to die. But even he could see that was a somewhat drastic solution.

‘Kettle’s boiling, Grandpa O.’

He turned round, startled, to see Saskia standing a few feet away from him with a concerned look on her face. Then he realised the kettle must have been boiling for some time because she was staring at him through a cloud of steam.

‘I thought it switched off automatically,’ he said, embarrassed, while wafting the steam away with his hand.

‘It’s started playing up,’ she said, reaching over to flick the switch herself. ‘You looked like you were miles away.’

‘I was.’

‘Anything you want to share?’

Mindful that she was still watching him, he paid extra care and attention to pouring the boiling water into the mugs. The last thing she needed was the worry that he was losing his marbles. ‘I was thinking about you, if you must know, Miss Parker.’ Miss Parker, as in nosy parker, was the nickname he’d given her when she’d been about four years old and had constantly bombarded him with questions – Where are you going, Grandpa O ... why do cats purr ... what’s for tea ... why don’t we have fingers all the same size ... where does the wind go when it’s not windy?

‘Me?’ she said. ‘Why should you be thinking about me?’

He stirred the coffee and passed a mug to her. ‘I was wondering about that boyfriend of yours,’ he improvised, making a

quantum leap and grasping at the first plausible thing that came into his head.

Surprise flickered across her face. Then it was eclipsed by another expression, and one he didn't like the look of.

'I don't have a boyfriend,' she said, her voice measured.

'I know you don't,' he said quickly, feeling her eyes lasering the face off him. Damn, now she really would be worried that his mind was on the way out. 'What I meant was, I was wondering about ...' Oh hell, what was his name? Peter? No, that wasn't right. It was ... it was Philip, that was it! 'I was wondering if you'd heard from Philip recently. Perhaps a text message or maybe an email last week to wish you a happy birthday.' Dear Lord, dragging up an ex-boyfriend! Could he dig himself into a deeper hole? And why couldn't he just be honest and say what he'd really been thinking? Because he knew that as far as Saskia was concerned, there was no discussion to be had. He'd tried it before and had been given two very clear shades of short shrift. She could be scarily stern when she wanted to be.

He watched her help herself to a chocolate digestive and, as she held it poised to dunk into her coffee, she said, 'No, Philip didn't get in touch and I really wouldn't have expected him to.'

Realising that he'd established himself on less than secure ground – Saskia had never gone into details why she'd stopped seeing Philip, other than to say they'd run their course – Oliver grunted. 'I never really took to that chap,' he said, 'he was rubbish at playing board games with us. Harvey and I could tell he did it under sufferance.'

The biscuit duly dunked and chewed on, Saskia gave him one of her unnervingly inscrutable stares and then she suddenly smiled. 'I don't think we can really hold that against Philip, can we? Not everyone enjoys that sort of thing.'

That was where Oliver wisely left it, respecting that Saskia was entitled to her privacy. But behind her back, it had not gone unnoticed amongst the rest of them that too many of her relationships apparently ran their course and ground to a halt. When pressed she would claim that she was choosy or bored easily, but Oliver reckoned that she was lying, that the truth was if a boyfriend got too serious and began to be a threat to the stability of life here at Ashcombe, she hit the ejector button.

Regarding his granddaughter now as he helped himself to a

biscuit, Oliver made a sudden promise to himself. The next boyfriend who came along, and if he met with universal Ashcombe approval, Oliver would make damn sure Saskia didn't ditch him just as things began to get serious between them.

Which was easier said than done, he could see that, but he would make Saskia see sense if it was the last thing he did.