

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A House By The Sea

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

Ever since the death of her beloved husband Peter, Caroline's life in Bath has not been the same. Friends, though sympathetic, have moved on, her daughter seems so far away and life just seems to be passing her by.

An impulsive moment sees her buying a dilapidated house in Brighton, a place that holds happy memories for her, and soon she is ensconced in a new life in her house by the sea.

But these things are never that simple. Caroline's decision is met with outrage and incredulity from those who care about her and at times there seem to be insurmountable obstacles ahead. Can she overcome these difficulties, find happiness in her new life and even leave a little room for love?

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A HOUSE BY THE SEA

ELVI RHODES

This book is for my great-granddaughter, Hermia Rhodes,
and her parents, Paul and Netty, with much love

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PART ONE

ONE

THE AFTERNOON SURGERY was almost over. It had been a particularly busy one, not only with those who really needed to see one of the three doctors but with individuals with the most minor of ailments who would have been much better off seeing the practice nurse. It was the duty of Caroline, or whichever receptionists were on duty, politely to try to keep such patients away from the doctors dealing with life and death and divert them to the nurse's kind, knowledgeable, even if sometimes brisk, ministrations.

Eventually the surgery slowly began to empty until the only patient left was Mrs Fawcett, one of Doctor Meadows's most faithful regulars.

The buzzer sounded.

'There you are, Mrs Fawcett,' Caroline said. 'Doctor Meadows is free.'

She hoped the lady wouldn't be too long-winded, but it was probably a vain hope. Caroline couldn't leave until the last patient was off the premises, and this afternoon she had shopping to do.

It was almost fifteen minutes before Mrs Fawcett emerged, smiling and satisfied. How could she possibly take so long, Caroline asked herself? Staff were not encouraged to peruse patients' notes but Mrs Fawcett

looked the picture of health. 'Good-bye, dear!' she said amicably to Caroline. 'Take care!'

'Good-bye, Mrs Fawcett,' Caroline said. She saw her to the door and locked it firmly behind her. She gathered her things together then picked up the phone and buzzed Doctor Meadows. 'Unless there's anything else,' she said, 'I'm just off.'

The heat hit her as she stepped out of the surgery. She turned the corner and walked along Great Pulteney Street, crossed the bridge, busy with visitors looking into the windows of the small shops which were built on it. There was never a month in the year when Bath didn't have visitors, but now, in September, they were thick on the ground. At the end of the Pulteney bridge she turned left into Grand Parade. The river, on her left, looked cool and inviting. She would have liked to have sat there, watching the world go by, or if Peter had been with her perhaps to have taken a boat out, but this afternoon she had more pressing things to do. And Peter was not with her, and never would be again. It was a year ago now, and it still hurt, she thought about him so often.

She walked the streets quickly, cutting through to Marks & Spencer's. She had persuaded herself she wanted a new dress. Wanted, rather than needed, she reminded herself. She had a wardrobe full of clothes, she wasn't going anywhere special, she didn't have a date on the horizon: in fact she wasn't going anywhere at all except to the Sales to buy a dress she didn't need.

She found the dress within the first few minutes in the store. She was a quick shopper, partly because she was usually able to make up her mind almost at once about what she didn't like, or what wasn't suitable. For instance, she never even looked at anything sleeveless; her arms were not her best point, being, to her way of thinking, too thin. She was too thin in most ways, she thought. She could eat like a horse, eat anything - cream cakes, fried potatoes,

chocolate - and never put on an ounce, let alone the few pounds she would have welcomed. Peter, however, she thought sadly, had maintained that thin was elegant.

She wished, oh, so much, that Peter was with her right now, that he was here to help her to choose. Not that he would have been. On a Monday afternoon he would have been beavering away in the legal practice twelve miles away in Bristol, where he was a solicitor. And when, later, he'd arrived home she would have poured them both a gin and tonic with lots of ice and they would have sat down to drink it, and talk about how the day had gone. But, she reminded herself now, he had never taken much part in helping her to choose clothes. He appreciated what she wore, he liked her to be well dressed, but shopping for clothes, especially, as now, among crowds of women, he hated. On the rare occasions when he had accompanied her, he had always stood apart, as if not belonging to any of it. But he himself had always been well turned out. He had had a natural affinity with clothes, and with his height, an inch or two over six feet, and his slender figure, he had looked good in anything. Oh, Peter, she thought, why did you leave me?

She managed not to say the words out loud, though if she had been at home, she thought, she would have done so, and not for the first time in the year since he had died. She had been so full of anger, anger at what Peter had suffered as the cancer took over everything. Anger that he had died; left her alone. Anger, even, at her own anger, with which she didn't know how to deal and had found her, in the first few months, shouting at the walls. It was quite normal, Doctor Meadows had said. And better out than in.

The dress she had found on the rail was a pale lilac colour, of fine, soft cotton, with a deep V-neck. It was a colour she was fond of. It went well with her fair skin and her dark blond hair. 'I could turn you into a redhead,' her hairdresser had said. More than once. 'It would suit you!'

She had so far refused his offer, but as a few grey hairs were now beginning to show through the dark blond, who knew? She was directed to a cubicle and put on the dress then surveyed herself in the long mirror. She was frowning slightly. Not a suitable expression for one buying new clothes, she thought, trying to look more pleased. There was no reason not to be pleased with the dress. It fitted well over her shoulders and breasts and the softness of the material, slightly draped, somehow camouflaged the fact that her waist wasn't as slim as the rest of her. The skirt flared gently to mid-calf length, which suited her long legs and slender ankles. Would Peter have liked it, she thought with a stab of pain? Probably he would. The colour certainly suited her, she thought.

She queued at the cash point to pay then, remembering that she'd not planned anything for her supper, she picked up some soup in the Food Hall. It would do very well: no cooking. She had fallen out with cooking since Peter had died; it was no fun cooking for one and she had actually lost her appetite for a while. Still, she knew it was high time to make an effort to start again. She promised herself she would do so when the weather cooled down.

She left the store and began the walk home. She never minded walking anywhere in Bath, it was such a pleasant city, in whatever direction one looked, and the pale stone of which much of the city had been built had now turned to gold in the afternoon sun. Less than fifteen minutes' walking brought her back to the house she had shared with Peter for more than twenty years. It held so many memories: of Peter playing the piano, which he did most evenings after they had had their gin and tonic, and before they ate; of Rosie's childhood. Rosie had been a rumbustious child, she had made the house come alive, but now that her daughter was grown-up and lived and worked in London - though she came to Bath when she could spare the time - all that was gone too. She had tried to get out of

the habit of half-listening for Peter's key in the door, though she still sometimes found herself doing so. Now she went into the kitchen, made herself a mug of tea, no milk, no sugar, and sat at the kitchen table with it. Peter would not have done that. He was a china teapot man; Earl Grey tea left to brew for five minutes before being poured. I am turning into a slob, she thought as she ate and drank.

What would she do with the evening? It stretched before her endlessly. There was no housework to be done, and she didn't want to be alone with her thoughts.

I could ring Marion, she thought. Marion was a good friend. On the other hand, she was the half of Marion and Nicholas. That was the case with most of her friends. They had husbands or partners, or children still at home. She had developed a dislike of breaking in on them, though she knew that that was her fault, not theirs. They would have made her welcome. And of course if she were in any real trouble or difficulty, she *would* turn to them and they would help; but would any of them want to hear that she had just returned from buying a dress in Marks & Spencer's, together with a description of it?

She switched on the television, quickly grew tired of it, and turned it off again. Yet another programme on how to transform an entire garden in a matter of five hours while the lady of the house had gone to visit her mother in the next town. She knew exactly what would happen. The team would move in, they would spend an inordinate amount of money on mature plants, containers, garden furniture, trellising and ceramic slabs (decking seemed mercifully to have gone out of fashion). Towards the end there would be moments of panic because the wife was due to walk in at the door in precisely seven minutes' time. And indeed she would arrive on the dot, seconds after the last shrub had been planted. No late trains, no hold-ups of any kind, ever delayed her. She would take one look at the scene before

her, then scream with surprise and delight - after which they would all have a glass of champagne.

She concluded that it would have to be an early night, and shortly afterwards - it was still light - went to bed. But bed, she decided, was even now where she missed Peter most of all. She still wanted his arms around her, his body against hers and to see his kind, smiling face first thing in the morning.

She chose a book from the small untidy heap on the bedside table, tried to read, and failed, then switched off the light and willed herself to go to sleep. It didn't work. Sleep eluded her. Even covered by a thin cotton sheet and with the window wide open, the room was too hot. She switched on the light again and turned on the television.

It was in the middle of a programme which featured Brighton. There, filling the screen, was the pier - now called Brighton Pier but to her it would always be Palace Pier, since she had known it as a small child, from the time when she had wondered if she might fall through the spaces between the wooden planks of which the pier was fashioned. And if she did, if the tide was high, she would fall straight into the sea and her father would have to jump over the side and rescue her because she couldn't swim. And of course he would have done so. She had no doubt at all about that. Her father would save her from anything.

Her memories of Brighton were all happy ones: collecting pebbles, paddling near the edge of the sea, visiting the mysteriously dark aquarium where strange-looking fishes swam in tanks. She had continued to live in Brighton, the only child of loving parents, until she had gone away to university, and there she had met Peter, whom, after they had both graduated, she had married in St Peter's church in Brighton. Peter had been her first serious boyfriend. And my last, she thought now. And if his job had not taken him to Bath, and from there to Bristol, they most likely would be in Brighton still.

They had gone back regularly to visit her parents until, two years ago, both her mother and her father died within a few months of each other. Caroline had inherited their house of which, over the last few years, and to augment their pensions, her parents had let the upper floor to students. There were always students in Brighton, looking for somewhere to live in term time. Her mother had enjoyed having them coming and going, and her father hadn't minded much except for their choice of music, played at full blast.

When she had inherited the house Peter's idea had been to sell it, but she hadn't wanted to do that. It was not because of the house itself; it was not the one she had grown up in, her parents had moved since then. It was, she admitted to Peter, because it was in Brighton. It was a little bit of the place from which she had never quite torn herself away.

'Let's not sell it just yet,' she'd said. 'The rents from the students pay the expenses, and you and I have a place to go when we want a change. And Rosie might well like to use it from time to time. She could take her friends there.'

Peter had been persuaded, not only because he, too, liked Brighton, but because of George Clarke, a good neighbour to Caroline's parents, who kept an eye on the house, and on the students in term time.

They hadn't gone down to Brighton nearly as often as she'd wanted to and when Peter was ill it had become nigh on impossible. Since he had died Caroline had only been down twice. Perhaps now was the time to rectify that.

Caroline lay awake a long time, thinking about Brighton and her childhood there, thinking about Peter, thinking about her parents, whom she had loved, and still missed. The thoughts went round and round in her head and she fell asleep with all these things jumbled in her mind. When she awakened it was still dark. She looked at the clock. Half past four. She had slept little more than an hour and

her head was as full of thoughts as it had been before she slept. The truth was, she was not happy. Her life was not working for her.

She got up, and went into the kitchen. She made herself a mug of tea, then sat at the kitchen table with it, watching the early light filtering through the blind. 'What am I going to do?' She was astonished to hear herself express it out loud. Am I going potty, she thought, talking to myself? And why am I feeling like this a year on, when I should at least be starting to get over things? But if there was an answer, she didn't know what it was.

She finished her tea, and told herself that she must go back to bed, try to get a little more sleep. She was on duty at the morning surgery and she must be there at eight for an eight-thirty start. She went back to bed, set the alarm for seven, then slept fitfully for a while before falling into a deep sleep just fifteen minutes before the alarm woke her.

It started off as one of those days when things didn't go well. The surgery was crowded, which was nothing new, though hayfever had taken the place of coughs and colds. Two fractious toddlers squabbled loudly over a small wooden truck from the toy box: a small baby screamed and wouldn't be pacified. Worst of all, to Caroline's mind, she sent the wrong notes in for a patient. Doctor Meadows marched into the surgery and demanded the correct ones, which were lying on Caroline's desk. She felt harassed and stressed and perilously close to tears. He looked at her keenly, raising his eyebrows but saying nothing. But in the end everyone was seen to and the waiting room emptied.

Doctor Meadows buzzed her. 'Can you come in for a minute?' he said.

She went at once, apologizing the minute she set foot in his room. 'I'm very sorry ...' she began.

He waved away her apologies. 'Sit down, Caroline,' he said. As she did so, he gave her a long look. 'Are you all

right?' he asked. 'Is there anything wrong?'

'I'm sorry about the notes ... And the baby.'

'Caroline, we all know you're the best receptionist this practice has had in years but I sense there's something wrong,' he said. 'Am I right? Is there anything I can do?'

Caroline shook her head. 'Not really. I didn't sleep much last night, I haven't for a week or two. That's all.'

'We can do something about the sleeping,' Doctor Meadows said. 'It's *why* you're not sleeping that's the question.' Naturally, he knew about her bereavement, but until the last week or two she'd seemed to be progressing normally, whatever 'normally' meant in the circumstances. Whatever difficulties she had, she didn't bring them to her job. 'So do you know why? Is there anything special?'

Caroline shook her head. 'Too much thinking,' she said. 'I thought I'd more or less done all my thinking, but it seems not. It comes back at me. And then last night I watched a programme about Brighton. That unsettled me.'

'Why Brighton?' he asked.

'I was born and brought up there,' she told him.

'I didn't know that. But you've lived in Bath a long time now?'

'Twenty years,' she said. 'And happily. But now it's not the same, for obvious reasons. But in any case I've always loved Brighton. I kept in close touch with my parents when they were alive, and I go back to what was their house, and which now belongs to me - though I don't go as often as I should; I've hardly been at all in the last few months. And I miss it.'

'So what was it about, the TV programme?' he asked.

'It showed all the places I've known since I was a small child,' Caroline answered. 'I felt I was living there.'

He looked at her for a long moment, without speaking. In the end he said, 'Are you telling me you're homesick for Brighton? Would you put it as strongly as that?'

Caroline also hesitated, for several seconds, then she said, 'I don't know. It sounds ridiculous, but I think I might be. Oh, I do love Bath and I've been so happy here. But it's different now, especially without Peter.'

'It's bound to be,' Doctor Meadows said sensibly. 'It stands to reason. But may I make a suggestion?'

'Please do.'

'Why not take a few days off ...' He waved away her protests. 'We'll manage. Take yourself to Brighton, spend a few days there. See how it goes. It might have been just the programme which upset you, caught you at a bad time when you hadn't been sleeping. But seeing the places again might settle you. So relax; take your time.'

'I will,' she said. 'You're very kind.'

'Not at all,' he replied. 'So just do as I say. Doctor's orders!'

TWO

I WILL DO as Doctor Meadows suggested, Caroline thought as she walked home after the surgery was over. I will spend a few days in Brighton, relax, take things as they come. She still had the whole of her three-week holiday to come; she had taken none of it so far, partly because she hadn't been able to decide what to do with it, and a trip to Brighton would work perfectly.

Back at home, she phoned George Clarke. 'How are you, George?' she asked. 'How's Emmie?' His wife had recently returned from hospital after a hip replacement.

'She's fine,' George said. 'She had a little walk along the road earlier on.'

'Good. But don't let her overdo it. You know what she's like!'

'I do! And I won't,' George promised. 'But thank you for asking. Is everything all right with you?'

'Yes,' Caroline said. 'In fact, I'm calling to tell you I'm coming down to Brighton for a few days. Tomorrow, actually.'

'Fine!' George answered. 'One thing is sure, you won't want me to turn the heat on. It's real hot here!'

'And probably hotter still here,' Caroline told him. Bath was in a hollow, surrounded by hills, which kept the temperature reasonable in the winter months but sometimes too hot in the summer. In Brighton, hopefully,

there would be a sea breeze. 'I'll be down around lunch time. Don't bother to get anything in. I'll do a shop here before I leave. See you, then!'

She phoned Marion to tell her. 'I'll be away about a week,' she said. 'I felt like a change. In any case, there'll be some clearing up to do. All the students left at the end of June. They've finished their courses, so they won't be back.'

'Very well, but don't work too hard,' Marion said. 'And you must come to supper when you get back. It's been ages!'

It had, Caroline thought. And she hadn't particularly enjoyed it last time. Everyone in couples - though by now she should be used to that.

Most of the journey to Brighton was on the motorway. She stopped mid-morning at a service station for petrol, coffee and a doughnut, and was in Brighton before lunch. It looked clean and bright and busy, as in her mind it always did. She parked in front of her parents' house, which was one of a terrace of identical houses solidly built in mid-Victorian times. It was not close to the sea, which was a pity, but a mile or so inland and adjacent to the park. When her parents decided to move house - it was after she had left Brighton and she never quite understood why they wanted to do that - they had elected to be somewhere near to Preston Park. From one point of view it was a good choice since her father, especially after he had retired, had been an inveterate bowler and the greens were close at hand.

'Far *too* close,' her mother sometimes said, though that was before she herself was inveigled into the game and took to it in a big way, joining the ladies' section, and soon becoming as addicted as her husband. In no time at all she was in the team, travelling, in her pleated skirt, trim blouse, blazer and her white panama hat with a ribbon band, to compete with other clubs in Sussex.

When Caroline reached the house George was already there, waiting for her. 'I've laid in the basics,' he said, 'bread, butter, tea, milk. I know you said you might get them, but just in case. And I won't stay, in case Emmie might need me. But I'll be round tomorrow, first thing.'

As soon as he had left she went over the whole house, top to bottom, with the exception of the loft, as its ladder was very rickety. Also, she felt sure, it would be full of all kinds of junk. Her parents had been great hoarders. She and Peter had meant to do something about the loft, but there had always been more urgent things to see to, so the loft, they reckoned, could wait for another day: a day which had so far not dawned. Right now, she felt unable to face the task, and did it really matter? The rooms on the first floor, two large ones and a small one, had been the students' domain. She had expected, as she went into them now, to find them untidy, perhaps messy, but she was wrong. They had been left in quite reasonable order, even the rugs vacuumed and, as far as she could see, nothing left behind. So, apart from the fact that I could let the rooms to students again, what should I do with them now, she asked herself? It depended, of course, what she wanted to do with the rest of the house. Did she want to live in it herself, or didn't she? She didn't know. It was all in the air. The bigger question was, was there anywhere at all, anywhere in the world, she wanted to live, without Peter? And the sad but inevitable answer was that she would have to do so. She had no choice.

After lunch - no more than a sandwich, it was too hot - she took a walk in the park, which went a little way towards clearing her head.

Back at the house, she made up the bed and then sat for a while in the garden, which was in a fairly neglected state. She couldn't however shake off a restless desire to be down by the sea. It was not even visible from her parents' house, indeed it was a longish walk, but it was a nice day so she

set off, crossing Preston Circus, continuing down the road, passing St Peter's church, through the Steine gardens and across two roads to the pier, the pier of beloved memory. Nevertheless, she decided not to go on the pier at the moment. She would save that for another day, perhaps tomorrow. Instead she turned left and walked eastward towards the marina.

It was almost high tide now, but a calm and gentle tide on this autumn day. She had always preferred the tides in winter when they thumped against the sea wall, or occasionally dashed over on to the promenade. As a small child she had run away from the waves, shouting, running ostensibly to keep dry, but always hoping that the wave would catch up with her and she would get slightly wet.

A leisurely walk half an hour later found her at the marina. She remembered this place before anything had been built on it. When she was young her father had taken her as a special treat to the rock pools there, pointing out all the little, and sometimes strange, creatures which dwelt in them. He knew the names of each one of them and when the plans were mooted to build the marina his was one of the many voices which had protested loudly at what was feared would be the wildlife irrevocably lost to nature if the marina were to be built. But in spite of the protests, built it had been, and in many other ways a great asset it had become. And not only commercially. There was beauty, as well as interest, she thought, in the craft, large and small, which came from near and far-flung places, and which at this moment were gently bobbing about on the water, their sails furled, while outside the marina other craft waited to come in.

She sat in the warmth of the sun, sipping a coffee in a pavement café: for longer than she had intended. All around her it was a busy scene, alive with holidaymakers – parents, small children, a not surprising number of foreign students: Brighton was a Mecca for them. There was no

traffic since the place she had chosen to sit was in a pedestrian area. It was not until the waitress stopped by her table and asked was there anything else she would like that she became aware how much time had passed. It was a long way from being dark, but the light had changed.

'No thank you,' she said. 'I must be going.' Not that time mattered to her; she had nowhere particular to go, no place where she had to be by a certain time. She had the blessing of being as free as the air, though with the drawback of no one waiting for her to arrive anywhere. She wondered what Rosie was doing. She had intended to phone her, before she left Bath, tell her she planned to go to Brighton for a few days, but in the end she hadn't done so. She would, though, this evening.

She left the marina and walked back towards the pier. The sun was dipping over the horizon and there were the beginnings of one of those wonderful Brighton sunsets she remembered so well; the sky, and a wide path across the sea, turning to red-gold. So, a fine day tomorrow, she thought. She walked back to the pier, then crossed to the Steine and took a bus back to Preston Park. In fact, she got off the bus before it reached the park. Walking down earlier she had passed an Italian restaurant which, she'd noted, did takeaways. It would be just the thing for her supper - she enjoyed Italian food - and after that she'd have an early night.

True to her plan, she was in bed by nine o'clock. As she went to draw her bedroom curtains she looked out. It was amazing how the flowers stood out, sharp and clear in the light from the street. And as she stood there she saw a fox crossing the lawn. He stopped in his tracks, and stared at her, his ears alert, his eyes wide and shining. He was not in the least abashed that she was there in his territory. She stared back at him; he was rather beautiful, such a delicately formed face, red and white, and his tail a long, thick brush, white-tipped. He held her gaze until, suddenly,

he turned, and disappeared into the bushes at the far end. He had seemed very much at home: she wondered if he was a regular visitor, though she had never seen him on any previous occasion. She drew the curtains reluctantly, leaving only a small gap through which she might catch sight of the fox if he returned, though common sense told her she wouldn't see him; it was almost dark already.

In bed sleep once again didn't come. She lay awake, wondering what she would do with her life. At the moment, she was drifting and drifting was not in her nature; never had been. She thought about her grandmother, her mother's mother. She was a woman who always knew where she was going. On her dining-room wall she had had a framed motto, 'Home is where the heart is.' Caroline had been a small girl then, not long able to read. She didn't altogether understand it. 'It means,' her grandmother had said, 'that your heart will always speak to you. It will tell you where you belong.' I wish my heart *would* speak to me, Caroline thought desperately. She pummelled her pillow into subjugation, and finally fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

George arrived just after nine o'clock in the morning. Caroline was up and dressed, feeling better and more focused than she had done for ages. She made a cup of coffee for herself and George and they sipped together in the sunny kitchen.

'The house seems empty without the students here,' George observed. 'A month before they come back.'

'They won't be back,' Caroline reminded him. 'Not the same ones, anyway. They've finished with university; they'll be out in the big wide world now, looking for jobs.'

'I know,' George said, 'but you'll easily get others to take their place, won't you? I could keep an eye on them in between your visits.'

It was probably as he spoke that she realized she didn't want students again. Not that she had anything against them in principle, and this year's had been good enough, but if she wanted to make the best use of the house, and if she needed some extra income, which now she did, then an arrangement which meant that for ten weeks or so in the year she was without them made no sense. She said as much to George. 'I'm not sure. I could divide the house into two flats and let them both, though not to students. Or ...' she heard herself saying the words as if it were another person '... or, I could live in the bottom one myself and let the top one.'

George looked at her open-mouthed. 'You mean you'd leave Bath, come to live in Brighton?'

'Well,' she said. 'That's what I *could* do. It's not that there's anything wrong with Bath, but it's just not the same now.'

'It can't be,' George said. 'Not without your husband. I'm very sorry about that, and so is Emmie. He liked coming to Brighton, didn't he?'

Caroline nodded, swallowing hard. She still found it quite difficult to talk about Peter. 'He did. Though never as much as I did. But then I was born here. Not in this house, as you know, but in Brighton. And I do love it.'

'I understand that. Me and Emmie came here when we were first married. We wouldn't want to be anywhere else. But do you really think you could be happy here?'

'I really believe I might be,' Caroline said. 'I wouldn't want the whole house to myself. In fact, I couldn't afford it. But there'd be quite a lot to be done to it first.'

'You're right,' George said. 'Proper kitchen, new bathroom and all that.'

'And perhaps a separate entrance,' Caroline said. 'It would be a good idea to look out for someone who could advise me. Do you happen to know of anyone?'

‘Well, there’s been quite a few conversions of houses into flats around here. People don’t want a big house unless they’ve got a family.’

‘So who do you know?’

‘There’s Stanley Merritt. He’s a builder, he’s done a few jobs locally. I don’t know him personally but I’ve not heard of any complaints. I could get his number. And then there’s Alec Barker. He started up for himself not long ago. It might be worthwhile talking to one of them. You could give them an idea of what you had in mind. See what they come up with. But are you serious about this?’

‘I reckon so,’ Caroline said. And where was the harm in seeing one of them, or preferably both? She wouldn’t be committing herself to anything by talking to them: not even to leaving Bath. ‘So, if you can arrange it, I’ll start with Mr Merritt, since you mentioned him first, and after that I’ll see Mr Barker. Best to consult two people. Will you ask if they can come this week? I have to go back to Bath at the end of the week.’

‘I’ve got Stanley Merritt’s number at home so I can call him this morning,’ George said. ‘And I know how to get hold of Alec Barker, too. Leave it to me!’

‘George,’ she said, giving him an impulsive hug, ‘what would I do without you!’

THREE

GEORGE RANG CAROLINE later that morning. 'I've had a word with Stanley Merritt,' he said. 'He can come this afternoon if that's convenient.'

'Super, thank you, George,' Caroline said. 'And did you speak to Mr Barker?'

'I didn't get to speak to him, but I left a message. I gave your phone number.'

He phoned around midday. 'Alec Barker,' he said. 'I hope this isn't an inconvenient time. I've been out on a job and only just got back.'

'Not at all,' answered Caroline, then told him, briefly, what she had in mind. 'Though,' she added, 'it's a fairly new idea to me and it might come to nothing. I'd just like to know if what I'm thinking of is feasible - I think it is - and then of course how long it would take and what it would cost.'

'Of course!' he agreed. 'And once I know what you want I'll tell you what I think. I'd like to have your ideas. I'm sure you will have some. Also, it would be useful for me to know if there's something you actually don't want or like. You might like to give some thought to that.'

'Oh, I will!' Caroline assured him.

'Right!' he said. 'Would this evening suit you? It would have to be around seven; I'm working on another job but I should be through by then.'

'That's fine,' Caroline said.

He had a pleasant voice, she thought. Deep yet clear, and with an accent which wasn't from any part of the south of England, certainly not Sussex. The difference was in the vowels, which she thought were northern, and probably seemed accentuated because he was speaking over the phone and not face to face. She couldn't place which part of the North.

That afternoon she phoned Rosie. 'Hi!' she said. 'I'm in Brighton. How are you?'

'I'm fine,' Rosie said. 'Except that it's too hot in London. It must be cooler in Brighton. But why are you there?'

'I thought I'd like a change,' Caroline said. 'Get a few sea breezes.' She wasn't going to tell Rosie what she had suddenly decided, not yet, not until she'd taken it a step or two further - and perhaps never if the whole idea came to nothing. Perhaps she shouldn't have phoned her. She'd done so on an impulse. Impulsiveness was a fault she was prone to. Peter used to say she acted first and thought later, but she was trying, really trying, to remedy that.

'Well, lucky you!' Rosie said. 'And I'd love to say I'll come down for the day tomorrow, but I can't. We're unspeakably busy. Too many people away on holiday, of course!'

'Yes, and quite a few of them in Brighton.' But Caroline liked that. She liked the buzz it gave to the place.

For once, she was glad Rosie couldn't make it, even though being so made her feel guilty. She didn't usually keep things from Rosie - and nor would she the minute she herself was certain what she was going to do.

'I'm going back to Bath tomorrow,' she said. 'I'll ring you from there.'

* * *

Caroline spent some time before Stanley Merritt was due to arrive walking around the house, in and out of every room, notebook in hand. Peering into every cupboard. There were a lot of those, some of them still containing odds and ends of no particular value which had belonged to her parents and she'd not so far managed to deal with, though she knew she must eventually. It was one of the worst parts of loved ones dying. She had found it almost unbearable dealing with Peter's things, especially his clothes, of which there were a great many. He had been a dressy man. His suits had smelled of the expensive cologne he'd used - one of his small extravagances. Was anything more evocative than smell?

If I were to take the plunge, she thought as she moved around looking at everything with new eyes, if I *were* to leave Bath and move to Brighton, and if I *were* to divide this house into two flats, then I would definitely keep the ground floor one for myself. The rooms were slightly bigger and it would mean that she would have the garden.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, a long, persistent ring on the doorbell heralded Mr Merritt's arrival, forty minutes late, she noted with slight annoyance. He stood on the top step, a short, plump, balding man with a red face. He wore a white T-shirt which strained over his ample belly and paint-splashed grey flannels.

'Do come in!' Caroline said, but he was already over the doorstep. 'Shall we sit down and talk over what I have in mind before I show you round? Basically, I want to make the house into two self-contained flats.'

He shook his head. 'No need to tell me more, love!' he said confidently. 'I know these houses like the back of my hand. If I've done one I've done a dozen in my time. All the houses in this terrace were put up by the same builder. We'll start at the top, shall we?' He led the way up the stairs. They were halfway up when his mobile phone rang. He came to a stop, Caroline on the stair behind him, took it

out of his pocket and answered it. 'Hello, mate!' he said. 'How's everything? Good! Oh yes, busy, busy busy! Been at it all day!' He paused briefly to listen. 'Well, if I were you, chum, I'd not do it that way! You'll meet yourself coming back. Oh, I can get the paint for you, no prob. But I thought you were going on holiday? No, not me! No time, no peace for the wicked, eh? Ethel's not pleased, I can tell you! Might get away for a day or two at the end of the month. No, we'll go to Spain. How's Joan? And the kids? They all right?'

There was more to come. Caroline ostentatiously looked at her watch but he was too engrossed to notice. Eventually, the conversation ended and Mr Merritt put the phone back in his pocket. 'Well, now,' he said to her, 'on we go!'

'I do have some ideas I'd like to tell you about,' Caroline said, by now extremely irritated with Mr Merritt. 'I've jotted down a few notes. One or two must-haves.'

The words were hardly out of her mouth, they had reached the top of the flight, when his phone rang again. He took it out of his pocket and gave it his full attention. While still listening attentively he lowered his voice and spoke to Caroline. 'It's the wife! She wants me to do a bit of shopping on the way home. You ladies! You're all the same.' He fished through his pockets, found a scrap of paper, and as his wife dictated, made out the shopping list.

That done, he put his phone away and turned to Caroline. 'Now where were we?' he asked.

'Actually, nowhere!' Caroline said. 'I'd just told you I had some ideas and I'd made a few notes.'

'Well, let's take a quick look around,' he said. 'Then if you've any questions ... It won't take long,' he added. 'As I said before, I know the inside of these houses like the back of my hand. I reckon I can more or less guess what you want.'