

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



This Little World

Imogen Parker

Imogen Parker lives on the South Coast with her husband and son. She is the author of several novels published by Transworld. *This Little World* is the third novel in a trilogy about the last fifty years in the life of Kingshaven, a fictional South Coast resort. It follows the highly acclaimed *The Time of Our Lives* and *The Things We Do For Love*, both also available in Corgi paperback.

Praise for Imogen Parker:

‘As addictive as a good soap opera – a perfect beach read’
Sunday Times

‘A heartbreaking love story and a sweeping narrative that captivates from first page to last. Destined to become a classic’

Kate Mosse, author of *Labyrinth*

‘An original and absorbing look at post-war history and divinely readable ... I wish I’d saved it for my holidays’
The Times

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Isabel Wolff

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Sainsburys Magazine

'Imogen Parker revels in the interplay she weaves between the insular inhabitants of Kingshaven and the outsiders who have appeared in their midst. She creates a fascinatingly complex story which, as it observes the fashions and fads of the fifties and sixties, also finds something to say about 21st century life'
Yorkshire Post

Also by Imogen Parker

MORE INNOCENT TIMES
THESE FOOLISH THINGS
THE MEN IN HER LIFE

WHAT BECAME OF US
PERFECT DAY
MY SECRET LOVER
THE TIME OF OUR LIVES
THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE

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THIS LITTLE WORLD

IMOGEN PARKER



CORGI BOOKS

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In loving memory
of my consistently unpredictable father
John Parker
who always believed in me

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone, set in the silver sea

William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

Principal characters

In Kingshaven

Michael Quinn, author of two novels published in the sixties, now owner of The Bookshop on the Quay. Father of Iris and Anthony by his former wife Sylvia, and twins Bruno and Fiammetta Dearchild by his lover, Claudia, who died tragically young.

Liliana King, ancient matriarch at the Palace Hotel.

Ruby Farmer, Liliana's friend since childhood, now in permanent residence at the Palace.

Libby King, dutiful daughter of Liliana, and currently manager of the Palace Hotel.

Eddie King, Libby's husband.

Christopher King, their eldest son.

Bertie and Archie, children of Christopher and his wife Julia.

Sir James Allsop, recent heir to his family's ancestral home the Castle.

Fiammetta Dearchild, his girlfriend, an artist.

Julia King, sister of James Allsop, just separated from her husband, Christopher King.

Pearl Snow, Libby's scandal-prone sister.

Millicent Balls, landlady of the Ship Inn and Christopher King's long-term mistress.

Dr Ferry, Kingshaven's GP.

In the outside world

Iris Quinn, Michael Quinn's older daughter, who ran away from Kingshaven as a teenager, now living in self-imposed exile in Rome.

Anthony Quinn, a recently elected New Labour MP.

Bruno Dearchild, young chef at London's Compton Club.

Cat Brown, a recent graduate and bookshop assistant.

Esther Stone, granddaughter of publisher Roman Stone, and Cat's old schoolfriend.

Mr Patel, originally a refugee from Uganda, now millionaire owner of retail chain, Sunny Stores.

Sonny Patel, his older son, a property developer.

Nikhil Patel, his younger son, now a doctor and Bruno's friend since childhood.

Winston Allsop, one of Britain's most successful media entrepreneurs and once teenage soulmate of Iris Quinn.

THIS LITTLE WORLD



Prologue



February 1993

It was one of those beautiful English seaside days, with sparkling sunshine and a vivid, cloudless sky, the kind of day that made strangers smile at one another as their paths crossed on the promenade, or exchange a few friendly words - 'Nowhere better on a day like this!' - tilting their faces happily heavenwards, as if to thank a beneficent God for shining good fortune upon them.

It was the sort of day recorded on the picture postcards racked in the spinner outside the Beach Stores: a line of white surf separating the deep-blue sea from yellow sand; a couple of fishing boats in the harbour beyond adding bright splashes of red and green. It was still too early for the blur of small yachts that arrived with the summer, bobbing like a flock of seagulls on the surface, or for even the most intrepid of holidaymakers - 'foreigners' as they were known in Kingshaven - to brave the inky water.

February half-term was not a school holiday favoured by visitors, because of the generally poor weather conditions, but this year the faces of those who had elected to make the journey down beamed smiles of satisfaction as they watched their children exploring rock pools, until the cold began to seep up through the boulders they were sitting on into their bones, signalling time for a hot chocolate in the Espresso Café.

It was such a family that caught the attention of the photographer who was standing on the harbour wall. A confident, well-to-do middle-class family, the mother and father both in their early forties, her shoulder-length hair blowing round her face as she turned to say something, his hand reaching fondly for hers. Even from a distance of a hundred yards, an observer could tell that they were still interested in each other by the shape their bodies made. Some distance along the beach their three sons ambled – the oldest at that lanky stage between boy and man, the middle one a head shorter, still compact, and, between them, a small determined bundle of toddler exactly mimicking his brothers' actions as they stooped to pick up a ribbon of seaweed, or to skim a smooth oval stone across the flat, silver water. Silhouetted against the pale cliffs, in almost white winter sunshine, the three children were a shining triptych of boyhood, a radiant image of the innocent pleasures of seaside holidays.

It was the image that would link Kingshaven, briefly, with the rest of the world.

The lens of the camera stretched out like a telescope as the photographer zoomed in. The shutter clicked.

Now, the older boy was pointing at something, his brother leaning to get a closer look. Determined not to be left out, the toddler struggled up the bank of shingle. The photographer zoomed in closer, clearly able to see the redness of the little boy's nose and the concentration on his face as he reached a mittened hand towards the object.

'No!'

The photographer opened her mouth to shout, but the air was sucked from her throat as a cloud of darkness suddenly obliterated the sky, a thump of explosion ricocheting round the bay, and shingle rained down like torrential hail.

Through the cloud of dust, the photographer could just see three black shapes on the ground, two juddering, one

very still. The parents were running now, their silhouettes all jagged and disharmonious.

* * *

The publication of Michael Quinn's collection of short stories entitled *Foreigners*, his first book for thirty years, had, as his publisher Roman Stone had warned, passed almost unnoticed, apart from one perceptive review in the *Financial Times*. There had been only brief mentions in the other papers; a particularly galling one in the *Guardian*, under the heading 'Angry Young Man Grows Middle-Aged in Middle England', compared the work unfavourably with his two novels published in the sixties. Although the excitable publicity girl at Portico Books assured Michael there was a lot of interest that she was actively chasing up, the only interview he had been offered so far was with the *Lowhampton Echo*, the newspaper group that owned and supplied editorial content for most of the free local papers along the South Coast, including Kingshaven's own *Chronicle*.

Michael was serving a customer in his second-hand bookshop, The Bookshop on the Quay, when the reporter arrived. He noticed him pick up a battered Wilbur Smith on the 10p table, read the back cover and put it down again. When the shop was empty, Michael put the 'Closed' sign up, showed him upstairs to the living room of the converted warehouse and made them both a cup of tea. The reporter's face was smooth, as if he had yet to start shaving, and his rather large teeth gave him the look of a schoolboy, but, somewhat to Michael's surprise, he had read the book.

'I'm wondering why you chose to set it in a "fictional",' the journalist raised both hands to indicate the intended quotation marks round his choice of word, 'South Coast town.'

Michael thought for a moment. 'There's something about English seaside resorts that epitomizes the decline of Empire,' he offered.

The reporter started scribbling.

Encouraged, Michael tried to elaborate. 'There's the shabbiness of it all coupled with this misplaced pride ... you know, every resort has to be best of something - Britain in Bloom Winner, the English Riviera, the Biggest Rollercoaster, Award-Winning Fish and Chips ... Doesn't matter whether it's Scarborough or Bognor Regis, there's a kind of lingering nostalgia ... I suppose there was a time when these places were the best in the world—'

'Until people saw the world ...?' the reporter interrupted, making Michael feel he had spoken for too long. 'You're originally from the North, but you've lived in Kingshaven since ...?'

'Nineteen fifty-two,' Michael replied.

'Are you still a "foreigner"?'

Michael laughed, but it was a slightly more penetrating question than he had been expecting. 'I think a writer is always, to a certain degree, an outsider,' he said, unwilling to get into the specifics of his life.

'The town in the stories is unnamed, but it's clearly somewhere very like Kingshaven ...'

Michael said nothing.

'There's an intriguing piece about the discovery of an erotic Roman mosaic under the garden of a grand hotel ... What was your inspiration for that?' asked the journalist.

'I rather liked the idea of a solid Victorian edifice with a seething sexual orgy in its foundations ...'

'Just another metaphor, then?' the journalist said.

Michael said nothing.

'Several of the stories are set in the war and its aftermath,' the journalist went on. 'Does that era particularly interest you?'

Michael winced at the word era, which made it sound like ancient history, which, he supposed, to the young man, it was.

'I think the character of my generation, if it has one, was to a greater or lesser extent formed by the war,' he offered, standing up and looking out of the window.

It was a lovely day, one of those days when the air was so clear it almost looked blue. There were one or two weekenders strolling along the quay in sleeveless Puffa jackets. Across the water, standing up on the harbour wall, he was startled to see the petite, distinctive silhouette of his daughter Fiammetta. He'd heard she was back in Kingshaven, staying at the Castle, but seeing her unexpectedly, just the distance of the harbour away, seemed to underline their estrangement.

'Are any of the stories autobiographical?' the reporter asked.

Michael sighed. It was the question every writer was asked, sooner or later. He had recently read a sentence in Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* which contained the perfect response. He turned away from the window to face the reporter.

'The novelist destroys the house of his life and uses the stones to build the house of his fiction,' he said.

As the reporter began to write it down, an ear-splitting bang rocked the whole building, as if it had been hit by a demolition ball, or a bomb, Michael thought, rushing to the window again. Fiammetta was still standing there, but beyond her billowed an enormous cloud of dust. For a moment there was silence, then the terrible sound of pebbles thrown up by the explosion falling back to earth.

For some reason, it made Michael think of *Chicken Licken*, which he had read often to his children when they were little.

'The sky is falling down,' he said.

But the reporter had already rushed out to investigate.

* * *

'What on earth was that?'

In the breakfast room of the Palace Hotel, Libby King, the proprietor, snapped down her newspaper.

'Sounded like a bomb,' said her husband, Eddie.

'Perhaps it's a landslip,' offered Christopher, Libby's oldest son.

'What possible reason could there be for a landslip?' demanded Lilitana King, her ninety-three-year-old mother.

'Granny, they're naturally occurring events, they don't have to have a reason,' Christopher explained.

'I'm perfectly aware of that!' Lilitana's fork clattered against her plate.

Libby wasn't sure if it was the slow, loud voice Christopher adopted these days when speaking to Lilitana that had so upset her, or mention of the landslip. There were very few moments she could recall her mother flustered, but the landslip of 1956, in which Libby's sister Pearl had almost died, was certainly one of them.

'Landslip!'

Nine-year-old Archie tipped off his chair, dropping his napkin to the floor, and rushed to the French window to get a better view of the exciting event he had heard people talking about.

'There's a cloud of smoke on the beach on the other side of the harbour,' he reported.

'Perhaps it's a barbecue?' his older brother Bertie suggested.

'In February! At breakfast!' Archie screeched with derision. 'Can we go and see, Dad? Dad? Can we go and see?'

Her older grandson, Bertie, noticed Libby, was shaping into a handsome, thoughtful boy, even though he looked so disconcertingly like his mother, Julia, but the younger one, Archie, was beginning to display a few worrying tendencies.

Automatically, Christopher glanced at Libby.

One of the more irritating aspects of the breakdown of her son's marriage to the boys' mother was his habit of checking with Libby before making any decision. There were only three years to go before her seventieth birthday and she'd had quite enough childrearing for one life, thank you very much. In any case, judging by her own children's complicated lives, she didn't think she'd been much good at it.

'Ring Adrian. See if he knows what's going on,' she advised.

Libby's second son, Adrian - her favourite, although she knew that these days parents were not supposed to have favourites - now lived at the Harbour End, in what had been, in more elegant times, the Yacht Club, where only a certain class of person had been permitted on to the terrace to sip Pimms and watch the regattas, a civilized tradition that, like so many others, had disappeared. Adrian had converted the upstairs room into a flat, and the cavernous boatroom below now housed racks of kayaks and windsurf boards, and a children's area called Jolly Roger's, which reeked of damp wetsuits and cheap hamburgers.

'Probably a bit of unexploded ordnance.' Eddie King was now standing at the window beside his grandson. 'Left over from the war,' he told Archie.

'On the beach?'

'Maybe it was washed up, or maybe it's been lurking there for years, waiting for its moment ...' said Eddie in his salty sea-dog voice.

For some reason, Libby shivered, even though the room was quite warm with the unusually bright spring sunshine pouring in.

'I'm going to sit with Ruby,' said Liliana King, rising slowly but steadily to her feet.

Unlike her friend and companion Ruby Farmer, Liliana enjoyed a healthy appetite for someone her age, but Libby couldn't help noticing that her mother had left most of her

bacon. For some reason, that only added to the insistent feeling of disquiet.

* * *

In the gatehouse at the bottom of the drive up to the Castle, where she had been living since her separation from her husband, Julia awoke from her doze with a start. There had been a bang and a rumble that sounded not unlike thunder, but now she thought she must have dreamt it because she could tell from the blade of light falling across the middle of the bed that it was a beautiful day. Without her sons, without a job, without a man, there wasn't much reason to get out of bed in the mornings. Julia pulled the coverlet up over her head and tried to go back to sleep, but however tightly she squeezed her eyelids shut she couldn't persuade her mind to drift away from the room with its extravagant, fussy furnishings.

Since the death of her father the previous year, the Castle, her family's ancestral home, had passed to Julia's brother James. When their father had still been alive, the house had been a hotel, designed and run by their stepmother, Sylvia. Now James, who came down most weekends with his girlfriend, was determined to rid the main building of all traces of Sylvia's influence, but the gatehouse, which had been the honeymoon suite, was still decorated in their stepmother's taste. The curtains were ivory silk damask with coral piping on the swags and tails, as was the canopy suspended over the headboard of the bed. There were heart motifs everywhere. Some were easy enough to get rid of - such as the heart-shaped coral silk scatter cushions Julia had stuffed in the cupboard, and the heart-shaped ashtray, which she'd put in a drawer with the hairdryer - but others, like the heart-shaped back of the padded dressing-table chair, would still suddenly manifest themselves as if to mock her.

Julia became aware of a distant and elusive wail magnifying so quickly she almost felt it was coming into the room. Jumping out of bed, she raced to the window just in time to see three police cars and two ambulances speeding past. There must be an emergency at the Harbour End. Was the bang she had heard earlier the flare going up for the lifeboat? It had sounded louder, more like an explosion. Julia leapt across to her bedside table and picked up her watch. It was after ten o'clock in the morning. Late enough for her boys to be out and about. Little drips of panic became a flood of fear.

She picked up the phone. 'It's Julia!' she said, glad that her mother-in-law, Libby, had answered, rather than her husband. 'I heard sirens. Do you know what's happening?'

'Adrian says there's been a bomb. Some boys were playing on the beach—'

'My boys?' Julia shrieked.

'No.'

'Where are they?'

'They're here,' Libby said crisply.

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure.'

Now Julia felt foolish. The Kings were always insinuating that it was her erratic temperament as much as her husband's indiscretion that had led to the breakdown of their marriage, and now she'd given them further cause to dismiss her as hysterical.

'Could I just speak to Bertie?' she asked, but Libby King had already put down the phone.

* * *

Liliana King's best friend, Ruby Farmer, was fading like a single pink rose in a vase: once proud, pretty and perfumed, now her head was drooping and she was beginning to smell slightly. She'd fallen asleep in the middle of her breakfast,

and there was a blob of scrambled egg on her nightgown. Liliana gently removed the fork from Ruby's hand, and gave it a stroke; then, repelled by the bruise-like colour of the veins, which stuck out like bones, she dropped her friend's hand back down on the bedspread.

'What are you going to wear today?' Liliana asked.

Ruby's eyes immediately opened.

It was important to keep up the normal routines. In Liliana's opinion, the helpers who came each morning to give Ruby a wash were far too casual with her. Of course, it was less work for them to pull a dressing gown over her nightie and plonk her in a chair for the day, but Liliana knew that if there was one thing guaranteed to perk Ruby up it was talk of clothes.

'I haven't worn the broderie-anglaise blouse for a while,' Ruby said. 'Is it pressed?'

It had certainly been a while since Ruby wore the broderie-anglaise blouse, Liliana estimated with a slight smirk: at least seventy years. She wondered why Ruby's brain - which Liliana imagined as an old, frayed bath sponge - had selected that particular garment.

The broderie-anglaise blouse had been one of the samples Ruby had most struggled with at the domestic science college she had attended in Lowhampton.

After the Great War and the epidemic of Spanish flu straight after, there was such a shortage of men that girls whose parents weren't wealthy enough to support them had been obliged to learn a trade. Ruby had made the journey to Lowhampton once a week for tailoring classes, but the cutting and sewing of garments had suited her better than the intricate white-on-white embroidery. When Ruby washed the finished article, she'd let the water get too hot and the stitches had shrunk, bunching up the scalloped neckline. How strange, Liliana thought, that a memory so old was still as bright and detailed as the finished garment had been. One of the unexpected benefits of Ruby's decline was her

random recall of long-forgotten episodes, which returned both of them briefly to times gone by – happier times, mostly.

‘I’m not sure the broderie anglaise would fit you any more,’ said Liliana, glancing at her friend’s sagging body. Instinctively, Liliana pulled her own tummy in as she stood up and walked stiffly across to Ruby’s wardrobe. ‘How about a nice blue cardigan with this pleated wool skirt? You don’t want to get a draught on your legs.’

Ruby squinted across the room.

‘Jaeger,’ she said.

There were some faculties that appeared perfectly undiminished, like Ruby’s ability to spot a label at fifty paces.

Liliana spread the clothes she selected at the foot of Ruby’s bed, then picked up the breakfast tray, carried it across the room and put it on the floor outside the door for collection, then returned to the bedside to sit with her friend.

Ruby’s wedding ring was still on her finger, in a deep groove the years had made. Liliana couldn’t see how they’d ever get it off when she eventually died. Perhaps undertakers had their methods.

‘Did you hear the bomb, Ruby?’ Liliana asked.

‘They’re not going to drop a bomb on Kingshaven – they wouldn’t dare!’ said Ruby, opening one eye.

The word bomb had taken her back to the war and the senseless mantras that people had relied on to keep their spirits up. Even then, Liliana had found it ridiculously optimistic to believe that the Germans would flinch from bombing Kingshaven. It was luck and German incompetence rather than the deterrent of the town’s resolve that had seen the many bombs rain down into the waters of the bay; only one was a direct hit, from a doodlebug, which had damaged the church and shattered a few windows, but caused no injury to the living.

‘Apparently, a little boy is dead and two others are fighting for their lives,’ Liliana informed her friend.

‘Our boys will be all right, won’t they?’

Another cheery wartime platitude.

Liliana gazed out of the window of Ruby’s bedroom, at the wintry skeletons of trees on the land that stretched back from the hotel. The sky was a particular clear light blue.

‘Won’t they, Lil?’

The abbreviation of Liliana’s name, which she had never encouraged because it sounded so common, brought Liliana’s attention back to the bed.

‘I’m sure they’ll be fine,’ Liliana replied, relieved to see her friend’s eyelids closing again.

* * *

‘Kingshaven? Didn’t we go to Kingshaven once?’ Cat’s father asked, as they sat watching the news in the front room.

‘Nineteen seventy-six. When we had the caravan,’ said Cat’s mother. ‘We didn’t stay. There was no water at the site. Would anyone like a cup of tea?’

Without waiting for a response, she got up and left the room to put the kettle on. It was the usual nightly ritual. Cat’s parents would wait dutifully for the evening news, then almost before the headlines were read her mother would go to make the tea. If Cat ever went to help, she would find her mother wiping surfaces that were already spotless, or arranging a flower shape of Rich Tea finger biscuits on a plate, as if she was trying to keep a distance from the contagion of the outside world.

‘There’s never any good news, is there?’ she would say.

In contrast, Cat’s father always seemed to want to try to find a connection with events.

‘Wasn’t that where Torvill and Dean won their gold medal?’ he had asked, when harrowing scenes from the

siege of Sarajevo were relayed to their screen in suburban North Harrow.

'I expect you can see that from the M4,' he'd commented, when Windsor Castle was ablaze.

In the hall of the semi-detached house, the phone began to ring. Cat and her father continued to concentrate on the screen.

A reporter was standing in front of police tape on a dark and blustery beach.

'... It's a quiet spot, the sort of place you'd come to get away from it all, but that peacefulness was shattered this morning ...'

The caption beneath him said 'Live from Kingshaven'.

'It was a pretty little place,' Cat's father was remembering.

Cat had no memory of it.

'But there was no water, so we moved on to the Chesil Beach.'

Chesil Beach was a name Cat did recall because the golden beach had stretched as far as the eye could see, with delicious blue sea on one side and a lagoon behind. But, close up, it had turned out to be pebbles not sand, and there had been red notices forbidding bathing, because of dangerous currents.

On the television screen, the reporter was now talking to an eyewitness, and then a photograph of three children silhouetted in the sunshine flashed up on the screen.

'Just this morning, they were playing on the beach. Now ...'

Cat's mother put her head round the door, the telephone receiver in her hand. 'It's Esther Stone for you,' she said, with a frown. Cat's mother had never approved of Esther.

Cat leapt up. The last time she'd heard from Esther was a postcard from New York, where she was staying with one of her many relations on what she referred to as her 'world tour'.

By the time they'd got through catching up, the news was long over, and Cat never did find out what had happened to the boys on the beach.

* * *

News from England rarely made the Italian news bulletins, but the story of the *bambini inglesi* featured several times, not just on the day it happened, but also at the funeral of the toddler, and then again when the two surviving brothers left hospital on crutches. Italians adored children, but children died every day. Perhaps it was simply the photo that had lodged itself in the popular consciousness. The soft-focus, black-and-white image of children on a beach, apparently taken just before the explosion, appeared again and again, a portrait of innocence about to be lost that spoke to everyone, whatever their nationality.

Each time Iris heard the newsreaders struggling with the word 'Kingshaven' it felt almost as if the town where she had grown up was calling her back. She'd run away from Kingshaven as a rebellious teenager when her parents, Michael and Sylvia, split up, and she'd run away again as a young woman in her twenties, to seek a career for herself in London. Six years ago, she'd run away from London to start a new life in Italy, but it didn't seem as far away now as it had then.

Nobody took the train any more. There had been something magical about falling asleep in a chilly, dark couchette compartment, with the snowy Alps outside, then waking up and seeing the Mediterranean out of one window, palm trees and terracotta roofs out of the other, and feeling the soft, warm kiss of foreign heat on her skin.

Now, a cheap two-hour flight meant people could come for weekends, like Iris's friend Josie, who'd visited recently. It had been good to talk to someone in proper English, and yet the familiarity had been bittersweet, as Josie had

relentlessly probed Iris's life choices, making her feel anxious about things she had not questioned, like what she was doing drifting along teaching English as a Foreign Language, and why she was in a relationship with a man half her age. Iris had always tried to keep the different areas of her life separate, but as she grew older it seemed to be increasingly difficult to stop one bit from running into another. Since Josie's visit, she hadn't been able to stop asking herself whether this life was really making her happy.

Sometimes Iris thought she should run away again and do something worthwhile, such as work for Amnesty International, or train to be a nurse. At nearly forty-three she was probably too old, she thought. Too old and way too bolshy. She wouldn't be able to tolerate doctors ordering her about. She wouldn't last five minutes.

Perhaps she should travel for a while - maybe go to India, learn yoga, as Josie advocated? Or perhaps America would suit her better now that the Democrats were back in power? What was to stop her getting a convertible and driving down Route 66, or whichever road it was, like in the film *Thelma and Louise*, except with a different ending? But, of course, she couldn't drive, thought Iris, and if she was Thelma who would be Louise? Her sister Fiammetta was now hooked up with James Allsop, of all people! Her brother Bruno was the best travelling companion, but he had a job in London now. Not Josie. With Josie's constant interrogation, anyone would want to drive straight over the edge of a canyon.

Was this what people called a mid-life crisis, Iris wondered, as she gathered up a pile of books to take to her next lesson.

Chapter One



Spring 1993

'I took that photograph!' said Fiammetta, pointing at the front page of the newspaper James was sitting up in bed reading.

'What?' James looked over the top of the paper with bleary eyes.

Strangely, Fiammetta didn't feel like repeating what she'd just said, some sixth sense telling her that she'd just created a problem by mentioning it.

'Nothing,' she said.

'You took this photograph?' he asked. 'And that one?' He pointed at the front page of the *Guardian* that was lying on top of the duvet.

'It's the same photo,' she said.

'And you syndicated it to all the newspapers?'

She couldn't be sure whether James's reaction was admiring or annoyed.

'I think the reporter must have done that,' she said.

'What reporter?'

Reporter was a dirty word in the Allsop household after the one who'd tricked James's sister Julia into revealing the intimate secrets of her marriage.

'I was down at the Harbour End when the bomb went off, and a reporter from the *Echo* rushed up and asked if he could borrow my camera.'

'Where's your camera now?'