

Palmerstone

Book 1

The Friendship Diaries

By

Sarah Bevan Fischer

Smashwords Edition

Copyright 2012 Sarah Bevan Fischer

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

1963

### **St Hilda's - September 1963**

'Noo!' Rebecca aimed a half-hearted kick at Caitlin and pulled her pillow more firmly over her head. Suzanne folded her arms in exasperation and glanced across at Penny whose face was creased with worry. Rebecca was forever getting into trouble for being late into breakfast. Caitlin shrugged her shoulders in defeat and rolled her eyes up,

'Well don't say we didn't try' she huffed.

'Please Becca' Penny pleaded near to tears, 'you'll get detention again and that's so terrible...'

Rebecca hated school, Caitlin was inured to it and Suzanne and Penny quite enjoyed the life. The most fortuitous of circumstances at St Hilda's was the chance that put the four all together in the schoolhouse dorm. As adults they had all had occasion to wonder, why? Why it had happened and why it had worked. On paper the four were an unlikely group. The logical pairing of Caitlin and Rebecca notwithstanding it seemed rather arbitrary that the relationship had cemented between all four of them. In fact the synergy of the four was based on mutual respect tempered with humour and the resilience that they had all needed to survive.

As 11 year olds they were all awestricken by Caitlin who behaved as though she were from a different planet, not just a different continent. Rebecca was cool. Suzanne was so clever that they all admired her ability. Whenever there was any hint of a personality clash between the friends Penny would look so upset and near to tears that they would all forget their differences in an effort to reassure her.

As their school years passed by each of the girls developed their own coping mechanisms and amassed the survival kits that they needed. Caitlin carried her own loo paper and sprayed her mother's favourite Chanel No 5 in advance of any foray to the bathroom. Rebecca checked herself into sickbay whenever rice pudding appeared on the lunch menu. Penny's dislike and fear of competitive sports was so great that she succumbed to subterfuge, which was foreign to her nature, allowing Suzanne to forge excuse notes from an absent parent. Suzanne developed a thick skin and a stoic constitution. She underplayed her ferocious intelligence and maximised her gift for humour.

Throughout their school years the major solace had always been the early friendship that they had formed. As is the usual case the teenagers grew and developed physically, mentally and emotionally. The patterns of their futures showing early signs like seedlings emerging from the earth.

Suzanne, though good at everything, loved and therefore excelled at languages ancient and modern. Encouraged largely by her father's intellectual curiosity her interest in current affairs and politics developed and grew.

Rebecca's solace away from academic classroom teaching was in practical and aesthetic pursuits. She loved art classes and dressmaking in particular. The fashion magazines that Caitlin smuggled became a constant source of stimulation for her friend who spent every spare moment sketching designs and dreaming of being a famous fashion designer like Mary Quant, Bill Gibb or Zandra Rhodes.

Penny's gentle nature turned towards teaching. She thought she would like to nurture other women's children until she had her own to cherish. Her real dream was that she would meet a man and be swept off her feet in a fairy tale romance. Her husband to be would pronounce undying love and down on bended knee would beg her to be his. They would have a traditional white wedding and settle down in a country cottage with roses around the door where they would have four beautiful and clever children and live happily ever after.

Caitlin's future was pre-ordained; she would go to finishing school in Switzerland and then to the Sorbonne in Paris to brush up her French. She would attend the best parties and social events in Manhattan and in London; she would ski in Gstaad, holiday on yachts, in Cap de Ferrat, Sardinia and St Lucia as well as her native Long Island. She would be, in short, everywhere that she would meet eligible young men from the best families and she would, of course, have the pick of the crop.

## **1970s**

### **Rebecca - September 1970**

An A Grade in her 'A' Level Art secured Rebecca a place at Manchester College of Art. She was thrilled to be following in the footsteps of one of her design heroes: Ossie Clarke. She had studied the combined creations of Clarke's cut and Celia Birtwell's fabric design with something close to adulation. She had long been itching to get out of school and dive into the world of fashion. It was Rebecca's cherished ambition to complete her Diploma in Art and Design at Manchester and follow her hero to the RCA; she knew instinctively that to have a successful career in fashion she needed to be in the capital city.

This ambition seemed rather daunting during her first few weeks in Manchester where she realised how sheltered her life as a farmer's daughter in rural Cheshire and as a pupil at an all girls boarding school had been. Not one to be intimidated for long however, Rebecca threw herself into the maelstrom of LIFE.

Her sense of style had been developing over the last few years and she started to add her own handmade and styled pieces to her favourites; drainpipe jeans inherited from her much older brother Rob, abandoned by him after a brief rebellious spell as a would be Teddy Boy, and a khaki shirt from his pre-pubescent days as a Boy Scout.

Rebecca had a knack for stacking on just the right amount of accessories to personalise her look. She made jewellery from leather thongs and old buttons and beads, turned vintage tea dresses into tunics or scarves. She bought off-cuts of material from market stalls and made kaftans, hot pants, midriff baring tops, a long sleeveless coat, a cloak and many other items all of which attracted attention from boys as well as the admiring glances of her own sex.

It took a little while for her to adjust to her new associates. Most came from very different backgrounds from her own and no one that she met had been a boarder at a select girls' school. Rebecca, chameleon like, adjusted her accent to sound more like the others, as she didn't want to appear to be a snob. Her efforts to fit in soon paid off and she gained popularity. Rebecca looked cool and interesting and she found herself the centre of an influential clique that dominated the social scene in Manchester.

She mixed with students from across the college and an array of young musicians and writers who hung around the peripherals. There was never a day that she was not invited to some 'happening' or to party at someone's pad. She took to burning the candle at both ends, as her mother called it, but Rebecca was also disciplined and focussed on what she wanted to achieve so she was never distracted for long.

There were plenty of males in her circle of friends and Rebecca found herself to be admired by several of them. Aware by this time of the necessity to lose her virginity (it seemed embarrassing to admit to the condition amongst her far more worldly associates) as soon as possible she embarked on the first of a number of unsuccessful relationships.

The chosen one to do the deed was in the third year of a fine arts course. Stan Rivers was pale of skin and dark of hair and had a very soulful poetic way of looking at her through his lashes. Rebecca took to sitting at a table near him if she spied him in the college refectory. Despite initial shyness on both sides they gravitated together and often hung around in the refectory after most had drifted back to classes. It was on one of these occasions that Stan had slipped his arm casually across the back of Rebecca's chair and let his hand rest for a second on her shoulder. Rebecca felt a lurch of passion, or perhaps it was apprehension, but she leaned her body slightly towards him. He moved closer and dipping his head inside the curtain of her hair grazed his lips against hers. This time she was sure it was passion, it struck like a bolt between her legs and she felt her whole insides melt with molten desire.

The desire she felt had to be repressed for some time as the opportunity of fulfilling it was difficult to plan. In fact this circumstance added to the charm of the affair. When at last they consummated their lust in the rather seedy surroundings of Stan's shared flat in Salford they were both desperate for it. They had sat uncomfortably together on the side of Stan's single

bed filled with desire and trepidation. Then turning to each other had locked into an endless kiss, tongues pressing into each other.

Embarrassment fled and soon they were fumbling and dragging clothes off each other and off themselves until semi naked on the bed Stan entered Rebecca with a groan. He thrust deeply a couple of times and fell onto her naked breasts with a shudder. For Rebecca the experience was much less satisfactory. She felt the ooze of his seed on her thigh and her throbbing unsatisfied core. If this was what all the fuss was about you can keep it Rebecca thought, she had enjoyed the thrill of expectation a hundred times more than the actual event.

They continued to see each other for a few more weeks but although Stan managed to prolong his erection for longer than the first time he got no nearer to satisfying Rebecca's needs. Rebecca had no experience to draw on and was far too reticent to ask for what she needed, which she didn't actually know, and she was too polite to wound his feelings. So their relationship drifted apart towards the end of the summer term when Stan left College to get a job.

Rebecca had packed her bags to go home for the summer holiday. She sat on her trunk amid a sea of carrier bags in her cramped bedroom study in the girl's hall of residence with a sense of déjà vu waiting for her parents to fetch her. It felt so like the end of term at school that she felt quite sad and thought nostalgically of her school friends. She would definitely give them all a call and have a catch up as soon as she got home.

Rebecca reminisced about the visit she had made to the States in 1968 when she was sixteen. Caitlin's parents had paid for her to fly out BA first class (amazing!) and she had transferred at JFK to a helicopter to fly her out to Easthampton. The family mansion, although very grand, was a disappointment for Rebecca. It and its neighbours were clearly modelled on English country houses that weren't that different from her parent's Georgian redbrick farmhouse except that Caitlin's family home was bigger and more imposing.

She had loved her trip into New York although Caitlin complained of the heat and told her that only tourists shopped in the summer. Rebecca's argument that she was a tourist prevailed and she had a great time trawling Barney's, Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue amazed at the variety of styles and labels she had never heard of. French designers like Balenciaga, Yves St Laurent and Sonia Rykiel hanging adjacent to the American designer, Halston, Geoffrey Beene, Perry Ellis and Bill Blass. The Americans, Rebecca noticed, did not appear to have heard of any British designers.

The rest of their days were spent sunning themselves beside a vast swimming pool (definitely a big improvement on home) and attending barbeques and hog roasts around the

neighbouring mansions. Rebecca fell in love for the first time. The recipient however, hardly noticed her having recently graduated from Yale he was bent on the pursuit of more likely pleasures than those he would get from an English schoolgirl. Rebecca jerked her mind back to the present she glanced at her watch, almost twelve. She decided to go out to the entrance to greet her Dad.

To Rebecca's delight the summer holiday at home proved to be much more interesting than she had expected. Her parents had decided that it was time for them to retire and leave the running of the farm to Rob now aged 28, almost ten years Rebecca's senior. Their plan was to renovate one of the farm cottages that had lain idle for some time. This was where Rebecca's artistic skills were requisitioned and she was delighted to oblige. The building work had been well under way when Rebecca walked over the field with her mother to take a look.

A modern extension was under construction with plans for a large picture window to take in the impressive pastoral panorama of the Cheshire countryside. They walked around the building site, picking their way through rubble and builder's materials, as Rebecca's mother Mary explained the plans. For the first time in her life Rebecca felt grown up, her mother had never consulted her or asked her opinion about anything before.

Rebecca's innate ability to see in her mind how an idea could look enabled her to add to her parents' plans. She suggested that they could use patio doors instead of the planned window that would open up the house straight onto the garden. Rebecca enthused,

'You could put the new kitchen in here, a big open plan one with room for a dining table and a couple of sofas. Open up the side wall too and maybe even add a sky light so that this room is bathed in light and is surrounded by these lovely views.' Rebecca's mother was looking around her taking in the new ideas and nodding her head,

'Darling, that's such a good idea',

'You could use the old kitchen for a snug or TV room and library for all of the books.' Rebecca continued, seeing the whole place in her mind's eye. The stripped wood floors covered in Persian rugs and Turkish kelims, the big squashy sofas, simple cream painted units. 'Oh, Mum it's going to look brilliant. I could do some sketches for you when we get home, if you'd like me to'.

That summer brought Mary and her daughter closer than they'd ever been. They planned colours and layouts, chose kitchen units, furniture and curtain material. Together they made several forays into Chester to shop and each time had lunch together. By the time the holiday

was over Rebecca felt like she belonged in the family again but in a subtly different way. She felt accepted as an individual.

## **Caitlin - September 1970**

Caitlin spent the first weeks of the summer in the family home in Easthampton, Long Island which was always fun. She had enjoyed the couple of days that Penny spent with her laughing at her friend's astonished and admiring response to the splendours of Caitlin's palatial home. Penny was so innocent of any kind of envy that her reaction was pleasing to Caitlin who was not unaware of her own good fortune and she was more than happy to share it with others.

The whole neighbourhood was full of families like her own. Rich people with big estates. Often women and children only during the week as the men were still working in the city. The men would come out and join their families at the weekend. The days were filled with tennis parties and pool parties, the evenings with cocktail parties and dinner parties, the weekends with hog roasts and barbeques. There were plenty of young people her own age that Caitlin had known for years, the sons and daughters of the 'right' people, the people who her parents expected her to mix with and eventually select one to marry.

Caitlin spent more time with her mother during the holidays in Long Island as Sophia relaxed and eased up away from all the charity committees and lunches that kept her endlessly busy in the city. This summer Sophia had made plans to take her daughter out to Italy to visit her parents the Conte Alessandro and Contessa Maria Elisa Santononi dei Barraresi at their summer Palazzo near to Sorrento on the Amalfi Coast.

Sophia's parents were getting elderly, her father now in his early eighties; they had not seen their grand-daughter for several years, Sophia having made transient visits usually to their main residence in Venice. The Conte and Contessa did not like to travel abroad and Sophia knew that she had been neglecting her parents recently for no real reason other than feigned industry. Once the plans had been concocted Sophia was relishing the visit for she loved her parents dearly and the thought of the holiday had her yearning for the taste of the Mediterranean food that had filled her childhood.

Built high above the town of Sorrento enjoying breathtaking views across the azure blue of the sea to the islands of Ischia, Capri and beyond, the family Palazzo was a gem of Romanesque architecture. Stone porticos and columns surrounded a courtyard featuring a central fountain where water gently played a peaceful lullaby. The whole structure built to

create shady private seating areas from where one could enjoy the stunning vistas. Caitlin, who had last visited the Palazzo aged six had no real recollection of the place.

Caitlin was completely bowled over by the beauty of the building and its surroundings and could understand her mother's attachment to the place. Caitlin's grandfather, the Conte, took special pride in showing his teenage granddaughter around the palazzo and through the steeply terraced gardens. The winding paths lead down to patios and terraces cut into the hillside each with its sumptuous view across the distant rooftops of Sorrento framed by the brilliant blue of the sky and the sea beyond.

Caitlin spent the days drifting around soaking up the peace and beauty of the place. She would read for a while and then just sit and stare, she had rarely been so content. The four of them lunched together chatting about family and friends and neighbours sometimes in English and sometimes Italian in which Caitlin was not as fluent as her elders.

Sometimes they sat in the courtyard enjoying the shade in the heat of the day sometimes they would be driven into Sorrento to dine at one of the hidden delights that tourist rarely stumbled on. The best of the local restaurants were behind unprepossessing doors off side streets, once you entered and climbed a flight of stairs they opened out into wonderful, miraculously tiled rooms and patios where fountains played and orange trees grew. Here tables laid with bright white linen were shaded with grapevines trained over lattices to shade the diners.

The food was divine capturing the flavours of just picked fruit and vegetables, fish and shellfish straight out of the sea, the best ice cream in the world, the best coffee. Caitlin thought she had found herself in paradise. Mealtimes would fill the afternoons, and often friends of her grandparents would pass by their table and chat for a while as they wandered to or from their own seats. Her Italian was improving quickly and she understood much of what was being said; always she noted smiles and glances at herself as the Italian men said:

*'Bella, bella ragazza!'* to her grandfather, who responded with pride.

One day Sophia decided to enjoy a day out with Caitlin, just the two of them, she arranged for a boat to taken then out to the Island of Capri. They would do some shopping and have lunch together. The motor launch dropped them off in the harbour at the foot of the steeply winding road up to Capri town. They undertook to walk the short, but very steep, way up to the top rather than take a taxi along the snaking road. The path climbed, breaking into winding steps and through high-sided cuttings affording glimpses of house roofs and gardens as they looked down. Reaching the top they paused for breath and admired the view back over the way they had traversed.



‘We have definitely earned ourselves a coffee and gelato’ smiled Sophia to Caitlin; ‘I haven’t had so much exercise since I left New York.’

They headed to the Piazzetta and sat at a table well positioned to watch the world go by. It was a colourful sight as tourists of all shapes and sizes, ages and races dawdled through the square stopping to admire shop windows and peruse restaurant menus as they passed. Fortified by an espresso and chocolate gelato they joined the shifting throngs pausing to admire jewellery in Desiderio’s long established shop window before heading off down Via Camerelle where all the top designers were represented in the up-market boutiques that attracted the well heeled to Capri.

They stopped at Canfora and browsed the array of decorative leather sandals, Sophia telling Caitlin of the different pairs that she had purchased there over the years. Caitlin chose a pair of simple flats in soft aqua leather decorated with matching square cut jewels and Sofia selected a pair of richly beaded ruby coloured toe-peg sandals. They stopped and bought a bottle of Limoncello to take back to London for Caitlin’s father Frank and bought some local bread, olive oil and cheeses for the evening.

Ready to escape from the fierce heat of the early afternoon sun and eager for their lunch they headed to La Capannina, just off the Piazzetta. The restaurant was a long time favourite of Sophia’s family as well as the haunt of many well-known holidaymakers past and present. Caitlin and her mother admired their purchases while they ordered a glass of Prosecco and perused the menu before settling on the unbeatable Ravioli Capresi with a simple side-salad to eat. The day had been a great success for them both, Caitlin felt grown-up and accepted as an equal by her mother. *Almost as though I was out with a friend for lunch* thought Sophia, pleased with her plan to bond with her daughter.

The holiday had been a great success all round and it was with regret that they packed up ready to leave for London to join Caitlin’s father.

Caitlin held special memories of the time she spent in Sorrento but did not return to the Palazzo for several years. Her mother never did. She was killed in a car crash only two months later.

## **Suzanne - September 1970**

Suzanne’s outstanding ‘A’ Level results came as no surprise to her or anyone else. She would take up her place at Somerville College in September. Obviously as her parents were in Oxford anyway she would live at home. This arrangement didn’t present any difficulties for Suzanne; her parents had treated her as an adult almost since she could walk. She was

used therefore to having her independence within the rambling Victorian semi set in a pretty side street off the Banbury Road, which made it a fifteen-minute walk from college.

Suzanne enjoyed being in Oxford; she had loved it as a child and now went about exploring it anew. Oxford had a different feel in the summer months as the students went down (home to their parents) to be replaced by gangs of tourists who descended on the city from all corners of the world. The crowds remained fairly constant but the content changed; the percentage of bicycles reduced considerably.

Suzanne spent the summer joining the flocks of tourists visiting some of the colleges, Magdalan, Keble, Merton, Christ Church where she marvelled at their history and wondered about the great scholars who had walked the corridors and halls before her. She explored the Ashmolean and attended a couple of concerts at the Sheldonian. She was perfectly happy going about her activities alone and got into the habit of jotting down her observations in a notebook. Occasionally she would bump into a parent as she entered or left the house or foraged in the kitchen at the same time, which would engender a short exchange of affable greetings.

Starting at Somerville was stimulating and Suzanne was glad to be back in academia again. Politics was easy but she was stretched, for perhaps the first time in her life, by Economics. For Suzanne this was a plus, she responded to the challenge by reading everything that she could lay her hands on about economists and their theories past and present from Adam Smith through John Maynard Keynes to modern schools of thought. She was fascinated by the inexactness of the science and wondered how it had reached such a pre-eminent position underpinning the social and political structures of modern society.

Suzanne liked the way that students were expected to contribute to debate rather than sit and listen to the teachers expounding as she had been expected to do at school. She participated fully in the cut and thrust of political and economic debates relishing the arguments presented and rebutted by many clever and incisive minds, she felt in her element. Many of her tutors were impressed with her progress and several thought that she might follow in her father's footsteps as an Oxford Don.

Suzanne found her academic life very fulfilling but was aware that the social side of her university life was practically non-existent. As she was acutely analytical this condition pre-occupied her thoughts for a while. Was there something about her that was unattractive to others she wondered? As she attended a women's college her opportunities to mix with males were limited. Did she mind? She wondered for the first time if she regretted not being popular and even questioned herself about her decision to attend a women's college. Was it

because she was unconfident mixing with men? She certainly had not gained much experience of the opposite sex, in fact almost entirely limited to ‘audiences’ with her father and the odd meeting with other girls’ fathers and brothers.

She was aware that most of the girls with whom she studied had more than a passing interest in young men from other colleges. Even highly intelligent women could spend an inordinate amount of time and energy pursuing ‘chance’ meetings with members of the opposite sex in the hope that they would get a date, she noted. On retrospection Suzanne found herself to be fairly indifferent to popularity, friendship and men after which she shrugged off the whole conundrum and got on with her work.

Suzanne settled into a routine of attending lectures and seminars, studying in the Bodleian library and writing essays, papers and dissertations on her typewriter at home. She walked everywhere in and around Oxford always conscious of the history of the place. Her grades were always in the top percentile and by the third year she was widely considered to be heading for a double first.

Still not sure what she wanted to do for a career she set about researching opportunities. She realised quite quickly that she did not want to settle into life as an academic and that she was ready to move on from Oxford to a less cloistered world. She toyed with the idea of the financial sector because of her passion for economics. She wondered about politics but discounted any public facing role, as she was quite shy and a very private person.

Gradually she narrowed down her opportunities until the favourite was to join the civil service. She would have variety of choice in terms of different government departments and types of work. There would be a clear career structure that would allow her to progress through the ranks. She may get to travel, or at least use her languages, in departments such as the Foreign Office or Department of Trade. The pay was relatively good and the pension terms the best available.

Suzanne set about pursuing her options and through an introduction from one of her tutors was called for an interview at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. After a successful interview she sat her Civil Service exams and passed with flying colours. It only remained for her to sit her finals and she would be ready to start work.

Suzanne travelled by train for the first few weeks of her new working life at the Foreign office. This took close to two hours at the beginning and end of every day. Although the journey passed quite quickly she really thought it was time to establish her independence. Suzanne started to trawl through the rental section of ‘The Evening Standard’ she thought she may be able to afford to rent a bed-sit fairly central for work on her modest salary.

Eventually she found a third storey bed-sit in Earls Court that was quite light and had been sensitively converted to provide a kitchenette in the corner of a spacious unfurnished living room. Best of all it had its own tiny bathroom.

Over the next few days she made trips to Habitat from where she ordered a new bed, table and chairs, a couple of lamps, some colourful rugs, and a throw and some squashy cushions to convert the bed into a sofa for day-time. She also spotted a big comfortable armchair that she would have next to the window that let in a lot of light – perfect for reading. Finally she bought glasses, china, cutlery and pots and pans for the kitchen and fluffy towels for the bathroom. Her savings exhausted she said her goodbyes to Oxford and moved in to her new ‘pad’ over the weekend. She wondered how long it would be before her parents noticed that she had moved out.

Organising her new surroundings gave Suzanne a lot of pleasure. She had picked several items that were shades of red and orange which gave the place a warm, cosy feeling. She organised her reading space with her new chair and reading lamp. Some of her books piled up next to the chair in the window, the arrangement a stopgap until she could afford book shelves. The bed was comfy for sleeping and made a useful and attractive sofa for guests, if she ever had any she thought wryly. She positioned her table next to the kitchen area with the four modern dining chairs, with much the same thought.

At the end of the day Suzanne tired but triumphant sat for a moment to admire her handiwork. It was a success, she thought, *I will be happy here*. Her last chore for the day was to run around to the local mini market and stock up on food, and to get a bottle of wine for a celebratory treat. She spent Sunday pottering enjoying her independence; she spread The Sunday Times and The Observer around the room as she tried out different reading positions.

In the afternoon she sat at the table, as she had planned, and wrote change of address cards. On the top of her list were Rebecca, Caitlin and Penny. Suzanne wrote her new address with a flourish and then added a note about her new job. As she wrote the cards she thought of each of her friends with nostalgia. On each of the cards she requested news up-dates and hopes that she would see them soon.

## **Penny - September 1970**

Penny had spent her last year at St Hilda’s researching into Teacher Training colleges to find the best course for her to train as an infant teacher. She was sure that she wanted to teach very young children and thought that reception class age would be the best as this age

would be old enough to be out of nappies but young enough to need lots of love and cuddles. Penny had to get her future plans sorted out well before the summer. For the last couple of years her father had been stationed out in Belize so at the end of the summer term she would be heading out to visit her parents in the Caribbean, hurray!

Having decided on the course quite easily Penny had to give much more thought to where in the country she would like to be. Her life up until now had been very unsettled. With a father in the army she had moved house and school every couple of years until she was sent to St Hilda's.

In her short life she had lived in Essex, Cyprus, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Germany, Scotland and Yorkshire with her parents as well as Buckinghamshire (Aunt Geraldine) and Sussex (St Hilda's). It was no point planning her college years to be near her parents, as nobody knew where they might be next. Her school friends, who seemed as close as her real family, would be flung to all corners of the UK and beyond. The teacher training she would receive at each college seemed similar to each other. The reality was that Penny must decide where to go based on her personal preferences.

Penny thought carefully. She liked to walk and she realised that the vagaries of the British climate suited her; she actually enjoyed wind and rain as well as sunshine. She had loved paddling in the sea and skipping pebbles on the beach at Brighton and striding along the towpath of the river Thames. She was a country girl at heart. Penny dreamed of coming home to a snug, pretty country cottage with an Aga in the kitchen and the smell of baking bread in the air. The sounds of children, and laughter, curling up with a book next to a roaring log fire, these were the things of her dreams; and her husband of course, the man of her fantasies.

Lincoln was eventually the choice she made. It had everything she aspired to, river walks, not far from the sea and a pretty town (or City, more correctly) straggling down the hill from the stunningly beautiful cathedral sat on its apex. The college, named after an ancient Bishop of Lincoln, was centrally positioned for all that the tiny City could provide. There was a lovely Arboretum, mellow yellow stone houses, fascinating antique and curios shops and tiny tearooms dotted around.

Everything settled for September Penny was able to look forward to seeing her mother and father after nearly a year's separation. She would have to fly from Heathrow to Miami and stay there overnight then fly on to Belize where her father, as a Colonel, was commanding officer of the Army base. She had visited there the previous summer with Suzanne in tow so she knew what to expect.

It had been towards the end of the girls' last summer term together that Caitlin heard from her parents that they planned to go home to Long Island for a couple of weeks as soon as Caitlin finished school. Her eyes sparkling with excitement, as she said to Penny

'Come stay with me for a few days on the way to Latin America. It'll be such fun to have you. I'm sure your parents won't mind because you'll be with us and the flight from NYC to Miami is much easier. Becca and I had a brilliant time last year.' So it was, with not much persuasion, that Penny had agreed and consequently experienced a slice of what she later called Caitlin's own Disneyland.

After the 'Cinderella' experience with Caitlin Penny's final destination of Belize seemed rather calm and very unpretentious. Penny was delighted to see her mother and father and spent many a happy hour over the summer holiday talking to them about her hopes and dreams. The climate was hot and humid most of the time, which did not encourage industry. She lazed in the sun and snorkelled in the warm blue seas off the coast, protected by the barrier reef from the wilder ocean. Her mother took her on a trip to see some of the ancient Mayan ruins telling Penny about the early civilisation that she had been avidly studying.

Penny's mother, Gwen, had grown accustomed to being up-rooted from her friends and family and had learned to be resourceful entertaining herself with new hobbies and interests. Penny was used to hearing her enthuse about the history of any new place she had fetched up in, or hearing that she was learning to speak German or Spanish, or that she was making curtains or painting and decorating. She admired her mother's application and unstinting support for her husband's career having been denied the opportunity to pursue her own. Penny's mother had started a degree in History of Art but had abandoned it part way having met her father, Lieutenant Jonathon Morgan, and fallen in love. His imminent posting had sealed their early decision to marry and Gwen soon found that she was not only married to her husband but to the Army as well.

With August nearing its close Penny had received her 'A' Level results. With two Bs and a C, better than she had dared to hope and more than securing her place at college. Thoughts of the next chapter of her life intruded into the Caribbean ideal. Penny received a letter from the college giving her details of the start date and timetables for the year along with the address that she would stay for at least the first year of her course. Her 'digs' were with one Mrs Donaldson in the Cathedral Close, which sounded very impressive as an address. Gwen was very excited to have a new subject to research.

Penny travelled back to England and arrived tired but excited. She made a telephone call to her new landlady confirming it would be all right and arrived in Lincoln about three hours

later. She was dog tired by the time she reached the house on Eastgate Street and rang the bell. Mrs Donaldson greeted her arrival with quiet kindness and showed her to her bedroom cum study that she hoped would serve her well. Taking in her new lodger's exhausted state with the practiced eye of a mother of four, Mrs Donaldson suggested that Penny took a hot bath and had a lie down.

'I'll bring you up a nice cup of tea in a while, my dear' she said, leaving Penny to gratefully follow her advice.

Penny soon settled into life at Eastgate Street. She was indeed based in the Cathedral Close and found that Mrs Jane Donaldson was married to Canon Peter Donaldson who was Precentor of the Cathedral and Head teacher of the Cathedral choir school. The Donaldson's had four children, Charles, aged 20 and Joanne, 18 both students and away from home. Agnes, aged ten and Daniel, aged nine both at home and very much in evidence! Penny loved the younger children and spent a lot of time with them helping with homework, reading stories and playing games. When Jane thanked her for her help Penny just laughed and said that it was good practice for her.

For Jane her first experience of providing digs for a student couldn't have worked better. As she told her husband Peter one evening,

'It's almost as though I've swapped one daughter for another! Of course I miss Jo but having Penny here fills the space she leaves, she is such a help with Agie and Dan.' Peter too was pleased with their decision to offer a home to a student while their own child was away studying to teach. Although he was a very busy man he was also very much a family man and missed his two elder children. Charles was at theological college in Cambridge training for the church, having decided to follow in his father's footsteps and Jo had started at Bedford at the same time as Penny had begun at Lincoln.

Teacher training absorbed Penny's time during the day and she soon made friends with other students in her year. However she often wondered what was happening in her friends' lives and hoped that they were all as happy as she was.

## **Caitlin - October 1970**

Caitlin had weathered her mother's sudden death and her funeral as if she was sleepwalking. Each day she and her father received calls and flowers and condolences. She thanked people for their kindness going through the motions of politeness. Each time she

saw someone she would unconsciously grit her teeth ready for them to offer their sympathy, steeling herself for the words, willing herself not to cry.

When the day of the funeral arrived Caitlin was numb from grief and the inability to cry. The funeral director mercifully managed the whole process instructing her on what to do and where to go. She walked next to her father behind her mother's coffin eyes blank, trying not to focus on anyone. She couldn't bear the thought of people being kind to her or seeing their looks of pity. She held her father's arm and felt a swell of empathy for his pain. She dreaded seeing her grandparents who she knew would be devastated by the loss of their only child. Mostly she dreaded seeing her friends, she suddenly felt a million years older than they.

Once the funeral was over there was a hiatus of raw grief that Caitlin and her father shared. Then slowly they began to fill their days with distractions. For Caitlin's father Frank this was work. He decided to close the London house. He and Caitlin would return to New York. Here he threw himself into managing his company, leaving the house early in the morning and returning late in the evening.

Caitlin was lonely and lost without her mother and her closest friends. She also had no direction in her life. The idea of Switzerland and a finishing school held no appeal. Nor did New York with an absentee father hold much charm. Her life had been so sure but now everything was built on shifting sand. She decided she would go to Paris; she would get a place at the Sorbonne and study the history of art or archaeology. Her 'A' Level results hadn't been too bad and she felt sure that her father could pull some strings to get her in immediately.

Her mind made up Caitlin lost no time putting her plan in train. She arrived in Paris two weeks later, mid-way through the first term. Caitlin's father had arranged for her to stay at the Ritz hotel on the Place Vendome when she first arrived. She would then look for an apartment to rent or buy whichever she wanted. She spent the first couple of days looking around the city trying not to think of shopping trips and gallery visits with her mother. She decided that the area of Saint-Germain-des-Pres suited her purpose; after practicing her French on a couple of real estate agents she arranged to view some rental apartments. The idea of buying anywhere did not appeal at the moment she felt much too transient.

Caitlin chose a pretty apartment on the first floor of a mansion house. She walked up a splendid curved staircase to reach the first floor landing where her flat was off the left side landing. The door was huge and swung open to reveal a large lobby with three doors one leading to a spacious panelled room to the front of the building with three tall almost floor length windows letting in slants of sunlight across the parquet floor. Off this room was a



smallish kitchen newly converted; the other doors led to a large bedroom and a bathroom with a grand freestanding bath in the middle of the room. The flat was let unfurnished. Caitlin made up her mind immediately.

Caitlin filled the next few days with what she did best, shopping. She arranged to stay at the Ritz for another few days and availed herself of the best furniture and fittings that the Champs Elysees and its illustrious neighbouring streets could afford. She chose two large Chesterfield style sofas upholstered in cream linen to face each other across a huge coffee table. An antique dining table and eight chairs caught her eye for the kitchen end of her spacious living room, with a matching sideboard. She chose a typically French inlaid bed and a huge armoire for her bedroom. She bought sumptuous bed linen from Frette and spotting a bolt of moiré silk ordered curtains and blinds for all the windows in the same chalk white fabric. Finishing touches and a splash of colour were accomplished with some aqua and sapphire silk covered cushions that reminded her of the Mediterranean in a bittersweet way.

Finally finished with the distraction tactics she went to the Sorbonne to enrol. Once she had completed the formalities she was taken to join her chosen course in the history of art. Her fellow students, of whom there were many, had started more than two months earlier. The tutor, prior to the start of his lecture, made it very clear to Caitlin that she would have a lot to do to catch up. For once Caitlin was bereft of the ability to charm her way. She took a seat near the front of the class and aware of the stir of interest she was creating, unpacked her bag and laid out her notebook and pen ready to take notes.

Caitlin found the subject interesting but she was struggling with the language and with her ability to concentrate. Her mind was constantly pulled back to the harrowing events of the last few months. She soon found however that she could be distracted very easily. As she drifted along with the crowd of students from lecture to refectory, to seminar, to the library she observed that there were many attractive, hunky males around. It wasn't long before Caitlin was in receipt of a plethora of invitations to parties, for drinks, to the cinema, to bed.

A combination of champagne, French endearments whispered in her ear and a hot Frenchman between her legs was the best distraction of all. Jean-Pierre Desbois was her first. He had asked her on a date soon after she arrived. The two had gone to a bar in the Latin Quarter not far from Caitlin's apartment. They drank coffee and cognac, which scorched Caitlin's throat and made her cough. Jean-Pierre had moved swiftly to wipe the tears brought to Caitlin's eyes, draping his arm around her shoulder and whispered

'*Mon pauvre bebe*' into her neck. Caitlin felt the heat of the cognac spreading through her limbs and her mind went into free fall. She found herself inviting Jean-Pierre back to her apartment,

*J'ai un peu de champagne sur la glace*' although they both knew that champagne was not the first thing that was on their minds.

Caitlin and Jean-Pierre had almost run up the stairs to her apartment. Reaching the top she fumbled for her keys while he fumbled for her breasts. They fell through the door into her spacious living room where Caitlin made pretence of extracting the promised champagne from the fridge.

'*Plus tard, chere*' he whispered pressing himself into her body as she leaned forwards. She could feel his cock bulging in his pants as he ran his hands up under her jumper and expertly freed her breast from the confines of her bra. Her nipples hardened under his touch and she felt herself melt and open inside ready for him. He guided her to the sofa and reached up inside of her skirt. Feeling inside he rubbed against her clitoris until she was wet and hot. Caitlin could hear herself whimpering slightly almost begging him to enter her, which he now did, impatiently pushing the silk of her panties to one side he unzipped and revealed his huge hard penis. Caitlin gasped with pleasure as he eased inside and with a strong push of his hips began to pump with a hypnotic rhythm. She felt her body arch and squeeze around him as the movement of their bodies frantically enmeshed greedily seeking their climax, which came in an ever-escalating pulsating throb and gush of relief.

Caitlin dedicated the next few weeks to the study of pleasure ably coached by Jean-Pierre. They hardly left her apartment. Caitlin was unaware of her luck in encountering such a careful and tender lover for her first encounter until their *liaison amoureuse* was over and she moved on. It had ended for her one evening when they had spent the day together in rapt lovemaking. They had decided to go out and get something to eat. Caitlin had dressed carefully in a wrap dress and knee high boots, brushed her hair until it shone and slicked her lips with gloss. She was looking forward to a being out with Jean-Pierre, keen to be seen in public with him. She was surprised and disappointed when he led her into a small and dingy cafe near the apartment. The food was ordinary and the place lacked ambience. Caitlin struggled to converse with Jean-Pierre.

When they returned Jean-Pierre took her hands in his and sat her on the sofa. 'Caitlin, my dear one', he had said, 'I am not rich like you. I must return to my studies and get my degree so that I may have a successful career and future. If I were a rich man I would want to marry you, but I am not wealthy and may never be.'

It was much too soon for Caitlin to think of loving anyone. She felt herself shutting him out of her life, knowing that he was right and that she could never marry a poor French student. They split with dignity and Jean-Pierre disappeared back to his studies in politics and law. Caitlin not able to settle to her studies drifted from party to party and from man to man never truly happy or sure of what she wanted.

## **Penny - December 1970**

The Christmas holiday was fast approaching and Penny felt like she was part of the Donaldson family. It amazed her that she had only known them for a term, maybe ten weeks. When Jane asked Penny what she was doing for Christmas Penny recalled that she had not been in touch with her Aunt Geraldine, nor had her Aunt invited her to go to Marlow. When Jane found that Penny had no plans she insisted immediately that Penny should stay with them in Lincoln.

‘Peter and I and Dan and Agie will love having you, and Jo’s looking forward to meeting you and Charles too.’ Penny was overwhelmed by their kindness to her and was much too pleased with the idea to dissemble.

The following week was the end of term for Penny in Lincoln and for Joanne in Bedford. Charles would be a couple of days later returning as he was singing in a Cambridge carol concert before returning to take up his old place in the Lincoln choir for their carol service. The Donaldson family were much in demand for their musical skills.

Jo and Penny hit it off immediately comparing notes on their teacher training courses and college in general. There were a couple of girls from Jo’s old school in Penny’s college group of whom Penny was able to give Jo an update. The two younger children were really excited to see their sister again and the whole house was now buzzing with expectation of Charles’s return and all the looming Christmas festivities.

Over an animated family supper Jo and Penny decided that they would spend the following day decorating the large Christmas tree that was currently in the garden.

‘We always have it in the hall at the bottom of the staircase because it’s so tall’ Jo told Penny, ‘we leave the sitting and dining room doors open so that you can see it from every room.’

‘Letting all the heat escape and costing me a fortune’ grumbled Peter with a smile. ‘Then after we’ve done the tree we can put all the holly and ivy up the stairs and over

the mantles and make streamers and string the cards, and...’ Jo continued ignoring her father’s interjection. Penny could tell that Jo was perfect for an infant teacher, she was so full

of enthusiasm as she organised everyone. ‘Agie, you can string some cards on some pretty red ribbon I got specially; Dan, you can carry all the presents down and help us put them under the tree, but you mustn’t prod, shake or sniff anything!’

By Friday morning, when Charles was expected, the house on the Cathedral Close was looking like a picture on a Christmas card. Daniel and Agnes were breaking up from school in the afternoon and they were both taking part in the end of term nativity play and school concert. Jo and Penny would take the car down to the station to collect Charles and then come on to the school in time for the performance.

Penny hung back outside the station letting Jo race up to her brother and watched her hurl herself on him with hugs and kisses and exclamations of happiness. From her vantage point Penny saw a tall, strongly built young man with a mop of blond hair that fell over his forehead and into his eyes. Hair that he now pushed back with a careless gesture as he walked forward to meet Penny with his hand held out and a wide smile spreading across his angelic features. Penny felt a bolt like electricity leap through her as their hands touched and when she smiled shyly up at him her eyes met and locked with his in an immediate connection.

The three joined with the parents to applaud Agnes’s solemn performance as a wise man and Dan’s totally un-self conscious rendition of ‘While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night’ as he and three other shepherds herded some smaller children in the guise of sheep. The evening was spent convivially as they all ate together, their idle conversation interspersed with easy banter and unanimous laughter at some family anecdotes. To Penny the atmosphere of the large and happy family was the stuff of dreams. She knew that this was what she had always longed for, this sense of belonging. She wondered if it were possible to be any happier or luckier than she felt in the midst of the Donaldson clan.

The next morning at breakfast Charles announced his plan to do some last minute shopping in Lincoln and asked if anyone would like to accompany him. It was soon decided that Penny and Jo would, with a list of errands from her mother. They all wrapped up in coats and scarves and gloves before embarking, as the air was chill. As they walked down the hill Charles linked his arms through the girls’ and they chatted and browsed their way companionably until they split up to undertake their respective purchases.

Charles shopped thoughtfully and had soon filled the gaps in his present list, but what for Penny he wondered. He had known instinctively that she was the girl for him. He had wondered if she just liked him because of his family but sensed that there was something deeper than that between them. Could he ask her to spend her life as a clergyman’s wife

though? He shook his head and smiled to himself, *you only met yesterday* he reminded. His feet carried him into one of the many bookshops that lined the narrow streets of Lincoln's backwaters. After browsing for a while he hit on exactly the right purchase for Penny. Pleased with himself he walked briskly up the hill humming carols looking forward to the lunch that he knew his mother would have ready for the returning hoards. He almost cannoned into Penny as he turned the corner into the close. Penny was standing stock still staring up at the cathedral spire silhouetted by the darkening sky. Tiny flakes of snow drifted across the close as she held her breath in awe. Charles stood next to her and watched her delighted face as the snowfall quickened. They smiled at each other and turning towards the house their hands un-consciously joined.

'We're going to have a white Christmas! Look outside Ma, Dan, Agie, it's snowing! Is Jo back?' The children ran to the window to look out and they heard the front door slam as Jo burst in, cheeks rosy from the walk. She capered around the hall laughing,

'There's no business like snow business!'

'What's all the noise about' called their father in mock rage, emerging from his study. 'Snow!'

'Come and look',

'A white Christmas Pa',

'It looks so beautiful' they all cried in unison.

It was indeed beautiful. The snow continued to fall thick and fast so after a lunch of shepherd's pie the youngsters shrugged their coats on and wrapped scarves around their faces pulled on warm gloves and descended on the back garden to begin the serious business of building a snowman, interrupted periodically by a cheerful snowball fight.

Tired out with their fingers tingling they invaded the kitchen and congregated by the Aga for warmth. Jane handed out mugs of mulled wine from a huge jam kettle warming in readiness for the carol singers who would call this evening on their way around the Close.

'Beware the Donaldson Christmas intake of grog' intoned Charles with mock seriousness to Penny, taking a glug of the wine, 'our parents who survive the year on a sip or two of communion wine, provide us with enough wine to drink to flatten a rugby team! Not to mention the brandy in mince-pies, Christmas cake and Christmas pudding, Oh and if you ever think to be sober again, approach the trifle with utmost caution'. They all laughed and Jo provided a mock 'hic' to underline his point. They all laced their fingers around the steaming mugs and sipped the warming liquor gratefully, nevertheless.

After super the 'boys' went out into the cold, crisp night air and crunched their way across the snow to join the Cathedral Close carol singers. The girls busied themselves with clearing up and warming mince pies for the annual ritual of hosting the Close carol singers who sung on each of the doorsteps, followed by drinks and mince pies in several of the houses culminating at the Donaldson's. The evening was great fun and Penny went to bed that night thinking that life could not be more perfect.

Christmas Eve heralded the main Christmas Carol Concert in the Cathedral. Peter, Charles and Daniel were all to sing in the choir, Dan taking the solo in 'Once in Royal David's City', so departed early to prepare. Jane, Jo and Penny followed soon after dressed in their best warm winter clothing looking incongruous with their wellington boots proof against the six inches of snow. The Cloisters held a magic of their own; the women's footfalls echoing the steps of bygone years that had worn the paving stones to a soft patina. Entering the Cathedral was magical, the whole vast vaulted place seemingly lowered and focussed around the soft glow of candle light that lit the choir stalls and the altar beyond.

Penny unsure of her Christian faith was at that moment filled with belief she had not yet experienced in her young life. Jane's heart was suffused with pride when her youngest child stood alone in the vast cathedral and lifted his angelic voice to fill the air with the sweetest purest voice that any person could imagine. All the sweeter she thought with the poignancy that it would not last for much longer. The girls smiled at each other and at her, all feeling pride and some relief when the swell of a thousand voices joined and drowned Daniel's solo.

Christmas day dawned clear and cold. Penny woke to the sound of muffled footsteps, giggles and voices shushing each other. The younger children, too excited to sleep, were up and about playing with the Christmas stocking gifts that Santa had kindly distributed in the night. Penny was astonished to find that she too had received an overnight delivery. An over-stuffed sock had mysteriously appeared at the bottom of her bed. She couldn't remember ever having had a stocking before and felt rather emotional as she retrieved and un-wrapped an array of small gifts from a bean-stuffed frog to a bar of chocolate. Hearing the increasing crescendos of a wakening house Penny jumped out of bed eager to join the fun. The whole family were up and congregated in the kitchen admiring each other's spoils.

Breakfast over, the boys prepared to go to Matins while Jane, Jo and Penny were to get the turkey in the oven and prepare the vegetables for Christmas lunch. Presents would be opened after church. With most of the preparations complete, Jo and Penny persuaded Jane to take Agie and go to join the morning service, which was a very social family time, they would take care that the turkey didn't spoil. The cathedral goers returned with a couple of friends

invited for a glass of sherry and a mince pie. Festive greetings were given and received repeatedly. Their visitors removed to their own home for lunch, Peter donned a Father Christmas hat and announced the names of the recipients as he passed parcels from under the tree.

Penny was amazed and delighted to have so many brightly coloured parcels accumulating in her pile as she watched everyone stockpiling their own. Then to a chorus of 'Happy Christmas', everyone was ripping off the paper and squealing with surprise and gratification as they opened their gifts. Hugs, kisses and thanks were exchanged throughout. Jane had knitted for Penny a roll neck jumper in a soft pink angora and Jo had bought a bobble hat and mittens in a pink and white snowflake pattern, collusion apparent in the perfect match. Amidst the sea of noise Penny opened her last present, a book. She knew it was from Charles. She unwrapped it very carefully and found inside an old leather bound copy of 'Alice in Wonderland' magically illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Penny opened the book to see that he had written on the flyleaf 'Christmas 1971. To Penny with love from Charles on our first Christmas,' Penny felt tears prickle the back of her eyes as she rose to thank him. Neither of them noticed the smiling glance exchanged between Jane and Peter as they hugged each other and Penny breathed her 'thank you' into Charles's neck.

## **Rebecca - June 1973**

Rebecca completed her Diploma in the summer of 1973 with a successful graduate show, which her tutors dubbed 'commercial' in a way that meant that she would never make the grade as a top-flight fashion designer. In fact Rebecca had no delusions about her ability and had already decided that she wanted to have her own shop. She had heard through the fashion grapevine about a couple of pioneering women retailers who had started up. A Yorkshire woman had opened an independent called Pollyanna in, surprisingly, Barnsley and was really making a name, as was Joan Burstein with Browns in South Molton Street, London. Rebecca made browsing trips to these and other small boutiques that were starting to spring up.

Her parents were supportive of her plan but concerned that she should get some retail and business experience under her belt before setting up her own venture. It was with this advice in mind that Rebecca approached some of the London department stores for a job as a trainee manager. She was accepted by Liberty, which had a reputation for stocking an eclectic and exotic mix of merchandise as well as for their in-house print designs.

Rebecca and her mother, Mary made a trip down to London to find a suitable place to rent eventually finding a one bed-roomed flat in the Shepherds Bush area that was clean and bright and, most importantly, affordable. Rebecca was very excited about having her own space after sharing for so long in Manchester. The flat was furnished, though sparsely, so Rebecca set about buying some bits and pieces to make her own mark. She used her design skills to produce some bold abstracts that she had inexpensively framed. She hung these pictures on a newly painted deep cerise wall, which added a dash of bravura to the otherwise white space that she preferred. She bought a whole bolt of natural calico from the Shepherds Bush market and made long curtains that swept the floor, hooking them back to the window frame with some cheap rope tiebacks. A couple of Indian printed cotton throws in shades of pink and lilac added some pizzazz to the sofa and arm chair and she invested in some large white plates, simple modern cutlery and wine glasses from Habitat.

Life at Liberty was completely absorbing. The store management had established an excellent training programme to give their trainees a rounded understanding of the business. Rebecca moved frequently between departments learning the ropes. Although fashion was her primary interest she was fascinated by everything from the exotic jewellery department to the priceless antique rugs and furniture.

Rebecca spent time in the scarf department learning dozens of ways to tie a square or rectangle of material to create different looks. She learnt about shoes, lingerie, bags, fabrics, everything from incredibly experienced and passionate sales assistants some of whom had worked for Liberty for many years. She grew to understand the importance of attention to detail and customer service. How to display goods to attract the customer, folding, wrapping, hanging, draping, dressing a mannequin, shop window design and dressing. She learnt about shop layout and display and the rudiments of buying and merchandising the stock. Rebecca lived and breathed it!

Soon after Rebecca had settled into life in London she received a letter from Suzanne forwarded by her parents from home. They were actually only living fifteen minutes away from each other she discovered. Rebecca immediately sent her new address to Suzanne and gave her a work phone number to call. They must meet up immediately! The next Saturday they did. Suzanne had called Rebecca at work and invited her over to her place in Earls Court for supper.

'I'm learning Mediterranean cooking at night school' she told Rebecca 'and sometimes it's even edible!'



‘Well that’s one step further than I’ve got so yours it is’ countered Rebecca, ‘I’ll bring some wine.’

Rebecca wasn’t working on Saturday so she spent a leisurely day shopping for some wine and a little present for Suzanne’s new place. She decided to walk over to Kensington High Street and have a browse around; she could always get something for Annie at Habitat. First off Rebecca headed for Biba, a fashion Mecca; a visit to which, obviously, counted as research for her own future shop Rebecca justified. She soon found that she was not the only young woman to have headed there. Biba was packed with shoppers plundering the piles of tees and print dresses, boots and shoes, cardigans and coats all in the sumptuous tones of old sepia photographs or rich fruit compote colours dusted with age. Everything looked antique and modern all at once.

The shop fittings were as unusual as the clothes; Egyptian columns, marble floors, stained glass and wood panels formed the backdrop. Clothes were draped casually on old hat-stands and lamp-bases topped by fringed shades. There were areas of floor cushions where shoppers could sit and hangout with their friends. Biba was truly a shopping ‘experience’ a lesson that Rebecca understood, and never forgot.

Having sated her fashion appetite in Biba, Rebecca continued browsing along the street with her eyes seeking out unusual shop windows and displays. She found a wine merchant and bought a decent bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and one of Burgundy, fairly confident of her purchases as her father had imparted some of his knowledge. Habitat was her next and final stop. She browsed the kitchen and dining displays until her eye settled on a deep red earthenware platter. Perfect, she thought, remembering that red was Annie’s favourite colour. She bought the dish, some wrapping paper and a card and turned for home. She would have plenty of time to have a bath and get ready.

Rebecca rang the bell for flat 9, clearly labelled Suzanne Harrison in black typeface, and stood back waiting expectantly. She heard steps thundering down the stairs and across the hall. Suzanne flung the door open and Rebecca propelled herself into Suzanne’s waiting bear hug. Cries of:

‘Annie’

‘Becca’ accompanied their meeting along with excited platitudes:

‘It’s so good to see you’ and

‘How are you’ failing to capture the pleasure of the meeting that was told by the tearful smiles. Rebecca cooed enthusiastically at Suzanne’s neat and cosy flat and presented her

house-warming gift with the certainty that she had chosen well for her friend. While Suzanne unwrapped Rebecca indicated the wine and asked,

‘I bought one of each; shall I shove the white in the fridge? I did chill it for a couple of hours this afternoon so it’s not bad.’

‘Great thanks Becca. There’s a bottle in there already cold, pour some for us; glasses are here on the table’. Rebecca obediently splashed the chilled wine into the long stemmed glasses set on the small dining table,

‘Are these Habitat’, she asked, ‘they look like the ones I just bought,’

‘Um, yes’ responded Suzanne, tearing off the last piece of wrapping and revealing the red platter that clearly fitted perfectly with her decor, ‘Oh wow! Its fab thank you Becca, it’s a lovely colour and goes with everything I’ve picked. You’re so clever.’ She hugged her friend again then raised her glass of wine,

‘To us, and to absent friends’, Rebecca echoed the sentiment and they chinked their glasses together and drank.

They had a brilliant evening eating Suzanne’s not half bad dinner, drinking wine, laughing a lot and exchanging a non-stop stream of information about their lives since they’d most recently seen each other. The last time they remembered had been on the desperately sad occasion of Caitlin’s mother’s memorial in London. They had all attended wearing dark clothes and sad expressions. All of them wondered what it would feel like to be Caitlin and ached for their friend’s pain.

‘Have you heard from her?’ Suzanne asked Rebecca, filling the silence that had descended momentarily.

‘No, nothing; I wrote to her a couple of times and didn’t hear anything back. I don’t even know where she went after. I sent the letters to the New York address thinking that they would have left London’ she tailed off, ‘Did you hear?’

Suzanne shook her head sadly. After a moment she brightened and said,

‘I just heard from Penny though. She’s in love! We may be meeting at a wedding soon! Let me show you her letter.’ Rebecca read Penny’s letter, breaking off now and then to smile at Suzanne and examine a phrase aloud or offer an opinion on their friend’s news. Finally, folding the letter and handing it back to Suzanne, Rebecca smiled

‘I do believe you’re right Annie, we may indeed be going to a wedding!’

## Penny - May 1974

Charles and Penny became engaged to be married the summer after they first met much to the delight of both sets of parents and Charles's siblings. Penny's father and mother had been stationed back in Wiltshire after her father's stint in Belize. The Donaldson's had suggested to Penny that she invited them to stay with them for a few days over the Easter holidays.

'It's such a nice big house for having guests', Jane had said, 'a shame to waste the space and the opportunity.'

The stay had gone particularly well. It was impossible not to like the Donaldson family and Penny's parents had led such an interesting life that their tales of different part of the world entertained them all. Gwen was in raptures over Lincoln, particularly the Cathedral and the Close. She had researched much of the history and couldn't wait for Peter to show them around even prepared to climb the 300 steps to see the unsurpassed view of Lincoln and its surroundings from the Cathedral tower.

Penny was in heaven surrounded by all the people that she loved best. Since Christmas she and Charles had met up almost every weekend, either he came home or she travelled to Cambridge to see him there. The two of them were so close that they seemed to read each other's thoughts. They had their lives together mapped out soon after they had met. They would get engaged in the summer but would not marry until Charles had been ordained and had a parish to go to. She would finish her teacher training in the summer of 1973 and hope to get a teaching job in Lincoln so that she could continue to live with his family. He would finish the following year and hope to get a decent living where they could settle into the vicarage as a young married couple. They would start a family as soon as possible and they wanted at least four children.

Although their goal was something to look forward to they both threw themselves into their everyday lives enjoying the present and the people around them. Penny was so happy that she wanted to share her felicity with everyone. She wrote regular letters to Rebecca and Suzanne telling all her news and sending occasional photos. Sadly all of them had lost touch with Caitlin.

It was decided that Penny and Charles would marry in Lincoln Cathedral and Peter would conduct their marriage ceremony. The reception would be at the Donaldson's home where they would erect a marquee in the walled garden and hire caterers to do a buffet for the guests. The date was set for July 14<sup>th</sup> 1974. As for bridesmaids what Penny wanted above

anything was for her three best friends and Charles's sister Jo who had become a close friend too, to be her attendants and Agnes and Dan to be flower girl and pageboy respectively.

Penny wasn't sure if Rebecca, or Suzanne for that matter, would want to be a bridesmaid. She would have to choose very un-embarrassing outfits to have any chance of Becca agreeing she realised. Caitlin though had always wanted to be her bridesmaid and Penny would be very upset if her friend were not with her on her big day.

Penny sent her invitations out to each of her three friends weeks before the rest were mailed. With each she sent a letter. With her invitation to Rebecca she asked if she could come up to London and stay so that Rebecca could help her to choose her dress. To Suzanne in hope that they would meet up when she came to London to stay with Rebecca, giving the reason for her mission. To Catlin she wrote a letter begging her to make contact as she wanted so much for her to be there for her wedding and that she really wanted her to be a bridesmaid.

The trip to London was organised for the first week in March. Rebecca would meet Penny at Kings Cross and the two of them would head to Liberty's to reconnoitre the bridal department. Rebecca knew all the staff and was sure that Penny would find a wonderful dress. Suzanne would meet them in the afternoon and they would go to Bertorelli's for a treat, as they both liked the food and the family atmosphere of the Italian restaurant. The plan was then to go back to Rebecca's flat and partake of copious amounts of wine while they caught up with all of the news.

Penny and Rebecca flew into each other's arms on the station platform, absolutely delighted to see each other after so long. Penny looked softly pretty in a flower print smock dress and Mary Jane shoes. Her blonde hair curled down her back and around her shoulders framing her heart shaped face with the serious grey eyes that crinkled delightfully into soft smiley lines. Rebecca, taller and slimmer than her friend, with her straight dark hair sliced into an asymmetric bob looked altogether more sophisticated thought Penny.

Rebecca was dressed in dusty pink cord jeans tucked into long boots and wore over it what looked like Penny's father's army greatcoat. The look was completed with a bag swung across her body that looked very like a binocular case from the same dressing-up box. Breathless with excitement, Penny enthused,

'It's so lovely to see you. You look amazing, so stylish! I have so much to tell you and I'm so looking forward to seeing your flat and hearing all about your life and seeing Annie and everything...' she declared. They linked arms and Rebecca steered Penny toward the tube as they chatted away as only old friends can.

Rebecca loved showing Penny around Liberty where everyone greeted her by name as she swung through the store browsing the eclectic merchandise, Rebecca seeing things anew through the delighted eyes of her friend. They made their way through to the bridal room, which housed everything that a bride would need for her big day. The idea was that Rebecca would help Penny pick out two or three dresses that she liked and then her mother Gwen would come up for the day and help her to make her final choice. Penny was awestruck by the beauty and the detail and workmanship as the assistants picked out dresses from the racks and slipped them out from under their protective covers to show her.

Penny who thought that she was short and quite dumpy (not) had a reasonably good idea of what suited. Having worked in fashion for some time now Rebecca had become very good at picking out the right shapes for customers. She used this ability now to steer Penny towards a very simple shaped sleeveless dress that fitted the body and then softly flowed out into a small fishtail train. The simple bodice was made from a heavy guipure lace lined with soft silk which extended to hip length from where the silk flowed to form the skirt. A matching short sleeve bolero of the lace material lined with the same silk completed the outfit.

Rebecca could tell at a glance that this would help to emphasise Penny's tiny waist.

There was general agreement from all the assembled that Penny should try this ensemble. While Penny went into the fitting room to get started Rebecca flitted around the room selecting shoes, bags, veils and flowered head-pieces for Penny to try, she was enjoying this. She poked her head into the fitting room to lend a hand with the fastenings and passed a pair of white beaded court shoes to slip on. When Penny emerged Rebecca and the two assistants gasped audibly. Penny looked amazing. She took a look at herself in the mirror and Rebecca caught the look she remembered from school. When Penny was trying not to burst in to tears her lip would wobble. Rebecca went over and threw her arms around her friend

'You look wonderful Pen, don't cry!'

'I'm only crying because it's so perfect', she sniffed, 'this is the one, I'm sure of it.'

'Brilliant', teased Rebecca, 'I see you're as quick to choose the right dress as you were to choose the right man!' They all laughed at this and set to trying different headdresses to go with the outfit.

Suzanne was waiting for them outside the designated pub. Penny and Suzanne exchanged hugs and whoops of delight as they greeted each other. Penny full of admiration for Rebecca's skills in helping her to find the perfect dress,

‘Even though I know she wouldn’t be seen dead in anything like it herself!’ Penny laughed. They piled into the pub, which was snug if rather smoky inside, and found a table in the corner with a window seat.

‘I’ll get a bottle of wine, shall I? White?’ Suzanne asked, heading for the bar. The three girls sat and chatted for over an hour sipping their wine. Their conversations veered from news of each other’s lives, nostalgic recollections and back again with frequent references to and speculative wonderings about Caitlin. Penny was closely questioned about Charles, what was he like? Looks, personality, his family were all examined with no hesitation from Penny who could talk on this subject forever.

‘So you’re going to be a vicar’s wife Pen’, said Suzanne thoughtfully, ‘you’ll be a little like your mother, taking a back seat to your man’s career. Will you mind that do you think?’

‘I’ve obviously thought it through’ Penny answered seriously, ‘It’s not what I had in mind, not the moving anyway. I’m not nearly so career minded as either of you two as I’m sure you will remember. Once we’re married we want to start a family and have at least four children, and a dog, and a cat and maybe some chickens....’

‘Oh well in that case you’ve chosen really well as you’ll need the big house that goes with the job’ remarked Rebecca, smiling. Then she added looking serious, ‘What about the religious part though Pen? I never thought you were that...’ she searched for a word, ‘pious’. Penny laughed as she replied,

‘Definitely not pious! I think that I am quite spiritual though, and I like people and want to help them. Charles and his whole family are good people’ she emphasised, ‘Not at all pious, in fact they are a riot most of the time.’

It wasn’t until much later in the evening when they were sharing a Knickerbocker Glory contentedly that Penny broached the subject of bridesmaids. She tentatively out-lined her plan and then asked directly,

‘How do you two feel about being bridesmaids for me?’

‘I’m really honoured that you have asked’ replied Rebecca carefully, ‘But would you mind awfully if I wasn’t? I’d love to be there for you of course, and do whatever you need but I’m not really cut out for bridesmaid gear.’

‘I thought you might say that’ answered Penny, ‘and no, I don’t mind awfully as long as you’re there with me for at least a day or two before. What about you Annie?’

‘Well if Becca is not cut out for bridesmaid gear I’m definitely not’ responded Suzanne, ‘can I do the same deal? I promise to be with you.’ She leaned over and squeezed Penny around the shoulders, ‘Think of the money you’ll save in frilly dresses!’

## Rebecca - June 1974

Not long after Penny's visit Rebecca had started to think more about her business plans, she'd been with Liberty now for over a year and much as she enjoyed it she was itching for a new challenge. Rebecca had recently started to trawl The Evening Standard for commercial properties to get a feel for the going rate for retail outlets. She had also visited a few of the wealthier suburbs looking at potential sites; she needed an area where rich women congregated that was outside of central London. She would discuss her ideas with Suzanne, as she knew that her friend's logical and sensible advice would be helpful.

After the first successful evening that they had enjoyed at Suzanne's flat they had settled into a routine of inviting each other alternately. Rebecca was expecting Suzanne to come around for supper this Saturday evening. It was her Saturday off from Liberty so she had plenty of time to prepare for what had become a friendly competition to see who could create the best meal.

Suzanne arrived in time to smell burning and to hear a barrage of loud swearwords emitting from behind Rebecca's flat door.

'Come in' yelled Becca, 'It's not quite as bad as it smells! Sorry' she grinned contritely as she hugged Suzanne hello, 'I forgot I'd put some bread rolls in the oven to warm and turned the bloody grill on! Nothing vital, I have more'.

'I'll pour the wine, you open the windows', Suzanne advised, practical as ever.

They settled down companionably to eat a Spaghetti Carbonara, which Suzanne declared not half bad, with a side salad and fresh rolls washed down with a bottle of Valpolicella. As they ate, Rebecca started to tell Suzanne about her dream. She planned to own and run her own fashion boutique. Which in time, she hoped could become several shops. She explained her idea in minute detail to Suzanne, concentrating on the business projections that she knew her friend would understand and emphasise with more than with the fashion content of the plan.

As Rebecca had known, Suzanne's comments were very useful. She suggested that Rebecca should brush up on her business skills before plunging into the enterprise, particularly market research to make sure that she pinpointed the residential areas with the closest demographics. Also, she suggested that Rebecca should take a course in book keeping ensuring that robust financial management underpinned the business.

‘More businesses fail through poor cash flow management than any other reason’ Suzanne elaborated. ‘You’ll see all the courses advertised in the paper soon as the Colleges will be recruiting for the summer term’.

‘You don’t think that it’s a mad idea then?’ Rebecca asked.

‘No, not at all, you’ve obviously given it a lot of thought and I think that your ideas make sense as long as the figures stack up. I can also see that you have a gift for clothes and knowing what people like, a skill that could be harnessed to make your business a great success. The experience that you’ve gained from working all this time in Liberty should stand you in good stead too.’

‘Thanks Suzanne, I really appreciate your advice and support.’

By the time spring had turned to summer Rebecca was on track to realise her ambition. She had done her market research very carefully and decided on one of two suburbs in which she could just about afford the cost of entry. These two locations also had the right demographics for her business to succeed: Wimbledon and Hampstead. Having narrowed her search she spent every available minute looking for the right property. One Sunday in early June she knew she had it. She had travelled out to Wimbledon on the tube after a lie-in and a late breakfast. It was a lovely sunny morning and Rebecca was sauntering along dressed in casual blue jeans and tee shirt, her feet comfortable in red Converse baseball boots. ‘SHOP for LEASE’ sign caught her eye; the location was perfect on the village end of Wimbledon High Street. She skipped across the road to take a closer look. The premises appeared to be newly emptied with only a few letters and leaflets stuffed through the mailbox lying on the floor.

Peering through the window with difficulty in the bright sunlight she could detect signs of a wooden floor and dark painted walls with scars of white in places where something, shelves perhaps, had been ripped from the wall. It looked to Rebecca like a blank canvas waiting to be filled with colour and pattern. She rooted in her capacious suede bag and pulled out her Filofax to make a note of the agent’s number to call. Her fingers were trembling slightly with excitement.

For the next few weeks Rebecca spent every available minute on her business plan. Her Filofax was filled with ‘to do’ lists. She needed to secure the lease for which she would have to borrow money, she had some savings and knew that her parents would help out but that she would still need money to invest in stock for the shop as well as in the fixtures and fittings. She knew she had to write a really detailed business plan to take to the bank and for her parents to see before asking them to guarantee the shop lease. She was grateful to



Suzanne for her advice as she was now equipped to present figures with detailed cash flow and profit and loss spread sheets.

Rebecca had been assiduously making notes of designers that performed well in Liberty, noticing the demographics of the shoppers. She also took note of high street brands that were popular to help her buy well for the less affluent customer. She had a clear idea of her target market and the labels that she wanted to stock, she had also made good contacts with wholesalers whilst learning with the Liberty buyers.

Gradually her plans started to come together. The bank loan was agreed and the first instalment of cash landed into her new business bank account. The shop would be called Palmerstone. The ground floor comprised three interconnecting rooms amounting to just over 1200 square feet. There were steps down to a basement that was dry so it would be suitable for use as a stock room.

Rebecca then had a stroke of luck, the tenants from the flat above the shop gave notice to quit and the agents contacted her for first refusal. The rent for the two bedrooms flat was the same as she had been paying in Shepherds Bush. Without hesitation she signed the tenancy agreement for the flat as well as for the shop.

She would take over in late July and could allow less than a week to get the shop ready for trading. She sourced all the shop fittings, hired a local builder to strip and polish the floors and paint the walls, and a sign writer to paint her name over the door. She found a long scrubbed pine table in a junk shop and painted the legs in her signature duck egg blue; this would serve as a display table. She bought cheap bookshelves and painted it the same colour for displaying shoes and bags. An old linen cupboard would stand at the back of the shop and with the doors and drawers standing open would display rolled and folded jeans, tees and scarves with some hooks on the side for hanging beads and bangles.

Everything mapped out with military precision for the final assault on her return Rebecca was able to put Palmerstone to the back of her mind and concentrate on Penny's wedding.

## **Caitlin - July 1974**

Suzanne and Rebecca had arranged to travel to Lincoln together and duly met on the station platform. Greeting each other affectionately, Suzanne said

‘You won't believe the great news!’

‘Nobel prize for peace keeping in the foreign office stationary cupboard?’ hazarded Rebecca with a wicked grin

‘Aw, you guessed, but actually for the judicious distribution of rich tea biscuits on a Friday morning’ countered Suzanne deadpan, ‘no. Caitlin’s coming to the wedding’ she burst out, unable to contain herself any longer.

‘Oh, that’s brilliant! I can’t wait to see her; I bet Penny is beside herself with happiness!’

‘Yes, I think you’re right. Caitlin’s being there is the icing on the cake for Pen, she’s been really worried that we’d lost touch completely.’

‘When will she arrive?’

‘Penny wasn’t sure in her letter, but she hopes tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest so we should have a whole day together before the big day.’

Suzanne asked Rebecca how her plans for the business were shaping up and listened to her friend’s enthusiastic answers with great pleasure.

‘I have some more news too, not exactly the Nobel Prize but I have been promoted. I’m going to lead a team in a new department of the Foreign Office.’

‘Congratulations! Annie I’m so pleased for you.’ Rebecca leaned over to hug her friend; ‘You shouldn’t have let me yap on about Palmerstone for hours with that news up your sleeve!’

‘Once started it’s difficult to get you off the subject’ remarked Suzanne drily.

The rest of the journey was spent speculating about Caitlin’s doings, the impending wedding day, and meeting Charles and his family, particularly Jo.

As the train pulled in to Lincoln station the two girls were already scrambling to get their bags down from the overhead rack, keen to get out into the fresh air and to see Penny. Rebecca reached her hand out through the window to open the heavy door from the outside. She saw hurtling along the platform racing towards them not just Penny but Caitlin as well. They were both whooping with excitement, causing some other passengers to pause and look on with interested smiles, as the two reached the train in time for Rebecca and Suzanne to jump down to the platform into outstretched arms.

The four were overjoyed and over excited at seeing each other again, their wild shrieking and dancing around more fitting to eleven year old behaviour than to sophisticated young women, perhaps. There were one or two pointed ‘tuts’ that made the girls laugh, but realise that they were getting in the way of other passengers.

‘Come on’ Penny said, ‘Let’s get all your bags in the car and we’ll head up to the Close. Jo and Jane are dying to meet you and Jane will have tea ready, and we’ve got all the beds made up. Jane thinks we should go out together tonight just the four of us for old time’s sake’ she rattled on.

Everyone immediately liked the house in the Cathedral Close and felt very welcome by all the family. They were showed upstairs where with considerable effort three single beds had been squashed into Penny's usual room for Caitlin, Rebecca and Suzanne. Penny was moving in with Jo next door.

'Just like old times in the dorm' reminisced Caitlin, 'shame you're not in here as well Pen.'

'Oh, I'll be in here on the end of someone's bed until well after midnight I expect' laughed Penny, 'you're not going to leave me out of the fun.'

They all unpacked and hung their wedding outfits in Penny's wardrobe, taking it in turns to use the bathroom to freshen up.

'Just like school' remarked Caitlin, 'only it smells nice!'

They trooped downstairs following Penny to the big family kitchen where Jane produced tea and scones and cake for the ravening hoards, as she put it. The women all chatted together easily, discussing the wedding plans, hopes for the weather, plans for the evening, the Donaldson's home that they liked, and thanks for the hospitality that had been extended to them.

'Nonsense' replied Jane, 'we're delighted to have you here; Penny has talked about you all for so long now that we consider you as family too.'

'Where are you planning to take them tonight Penny?' asked Jo, 'I heard that there's a new chef at the Crown and the food's much better than it used to be.'

'Brilliant thanks Jo; I was going to ask you where you thought would be best.'

'Wouldn't you like to come out with us Jo' asked Rebecca, she caught a smile from Penny, 'It seems mean to leave you out.'

'Thanks, that's nice of you to ask but I get to see Penny a lot in the holidays and she hardly ever sees you guys. Also I've got a date.' She added, mysteriously.

There was an instant chorus of:

'Who with?'

'Since when?'

'How come I didn't know?'

'You dark horse!'

'Well I shan't be telling any of you anything until I've actually been out with him. It might be a complete disaster, in fact knowing my luck with men make that probable.' Rejoined Jo, laughing at the furore she had caused.

The meal at the Crown was a great success though less for the food than the camaraderie. Each of the girls updated the others on their main events to supportive and congratulatory

responses. Caitlin was grilled about her life, where she had been, what she was doing, how she was and how much she had been missed. Caitlin felt a bit choked by their concern for her and apologised for having disappeared for so long.

‘I’m really sorry, I often thought about you all and wondered what you were doing but after my mother died I needed space. I couldn’t really think straight for a long time and frankly I’m still not sure what I’m doing with my life, just drifting I guess’ she smiled ruefully, ‘you guys make me feel ashamed with all your future plans...’ she tailed off.

‘Don’t think that Caitlin. None of us have had to go through what you had to; I think I would have gone completely to pieces if it had happened to me’ Penny empathised, the others nodding gravely in agreement.

‘The important thing to us is that you’re here now’ Suzanne stated.

‘And we don’t want you to disappear again, ever’ added Rebecca.

‘Thank you all, I really missed you’, sniffed Caitlin, suddenly overcome with emotion.

‘Anyway Penny’ Caitlin said keen to change the subject, ‘when are we going to meet this delectable man of yours?’

‘Well I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you there’ confessed Penny, ‘Charles has moved out from the Close to make room for my parents who are arriving tomorrow morning in time for lunch. He’s staying with his friend Martin, who’s going to be the best man, at his parent’s place over in Nottingham. Charles and Martin and another friend from junior school days, Dylan, are all out on the town tonight, much as we are I suppose. We won’t see him now until Saturday at the church!’

The girls talked long into the night until one by one they dropped off to sleep.

## **Penny - July 1974**

The day of the wedding dawned with promise and by breakfast time the sun was shining brightly in a clear blue sky. Jane breathed a sigh of relief that they would not have to enact Plan B or C. Their guests would be able to stroll around the garden and enjoy a perfect summer’s day. The morning passed by in a flurry of activity.

Caitlin had volunteered to do make-up for the bride and for Jo who was to be a bridesmaid with her; Agnes was to be flower girl that just left Penny with three attendants as Daniel had joined the mutiny along with Rebecca and Suzanne. Penny had chosen perfect Laura Ashley pink sprigged dresses in an empire line style with puff sleeves which looked cute on Agnes and fresh and pretty on Caitlin and Jo who with their blonde colouring looked as though they may be sisters.

Suzanne had chosen a simple linen shift dress in a striking hot pink colour accessorised with navy courts and bag, Rebecca thought that her friend had never looked so stylish. Suzanne, she knew, usually wore dark colours and shapeless styles, as she was self conscious of her sturdy shape.

‘You look great Annie the colour really suits you. You should wear bright striking colours more often’ endorsed Rebecca.

‘Thanks Becca, your seal of approval means a lot. I would have asked you to help me but you’ve been so busy with the business plans that I didn’t want to distract. You of course look stunning as you always do.’

Rebecca wrinkled her nose as she gazed at her reflection critically,

‘Thanks Annie, though I don’t really like myself in dresses, but I couldn’t really attend Penny’s wedding in my usual style!’ She was wearing a vintage tea dress in navy blue paisley printed silk, which she had chopped short. She had on a pair of high-heeled suede sandals that added to the effect of endless long legs. She had made a matching choker out of blue suede off-cuts, plaited and finished off with some small wooden beads that added the finishing touch to her outfit.

Penny, of course, was the real star of the show. The girls all gasped with admiration when she was finally ready. The ivory dress and bolero were perfect on her petite figure. She had chosen to wear her hair natural, loose and wavy, with the simple addition of a floral circlet fashioned from anemones and lilies of the valley. Her matching bouquet was made up of long trails of blooms tied with pink ribbon.

They all made their way in a small procession across the Close and through the cloisters to the side door of the cathedral all becoming aware of the solemnity of the occasion. Penny gave Becca and Annie a hug and thanks before they walked together down to the front of the cathedral and positioned themselves next to Penny’s mother. They both knelt for a moment and then sat and looked around at the many guests in all their finery and especially to note Charles in his morning coat.

The organ struck up playing Mendelssohn’s wedding march and the congregation stood craning their necks to see Penny walking down the aisle holding her father’s arm, Colonel Jonathon Morgan resplendent in his dress uniform guiding his beautiful daughter. It was one of those exceptional weddings where everyone’s heart is gladdened by the sight of two well loved individuals being joined together in a marriage much more likely to be lasting than most.

Her three friends all had to stifle a tear as they watched Penny make her vows and receive his from a young man that none of them had yet met. Although it was obvious from his expression as he gazed at Penny that he believed himself to be the luckiest man in the world. Rebecca wondered if she would ever marry, probably not she decided. Suzanne hoped that Penny would be as happy as she deserved to be; but felt no disquiet that she herself would always be single. Caitlin inexplicably thought about Jean-Pierre with a catch in her throat.

The ceremony over, guests all spilled out of the shady cathedral into the hot sunny afternoon. The cathedral bells pealed merrily and well-wishers crowded the Close to add their congratulations to the couple as the photographer herded the main protagonists into formal groups to record the event for posterity. Guest stood chatting in the sunshine, greeting friends and family not encountered for a while, making introductions, admiring the bride and her entourage, and taking snaps with their own cameras. Gradually people were cajoled or drifted of their own volition across the Close to the house where the marquee stood resplendent in the walled garden.

Decked with white flowers and pink ribbons, white table linen and pink seat covers the marquee looked a picture. All the sides were lifted so that guests could amble inside and out, to admire the garden and exchanging news and views as they sipped champagne. Penny and Charles circulated amongst their guests greeting everyone, both of them at ease and radiating happiness.

‘Isn’t he yummy’ smiled Caitlin to Rebecca, as they both observed the couple. Charles looked very handsome in the dark formal morning coat, his blonde hair falling into his eyes as he bent forward to listen carefully to what was said.

‘Yes, and he obviously adores her’ replied Rebecca. The friends felt confident that Penny had made the right choice and would be happy with Charles.

The afternoon drifted by, the buffet was perfect; lots of salads were served with cold meats, fresh salmon, and crusty bread followed by fresh strawberries and cream. The speeches were kept to a minimum at the couple’s request; they had wanted the day to be as informal as possible.

As the day was drawing to a close and dusk was descending, washed with the reds and pinks that herald another hot day, Rebecca strolled from the marquee onto the garden to admire the sunset and inhale the scent of the garden in the evening warmth.

‘Great legs’ complimented a deep voice from the shadow of the wall, making Rebecca start.

‘You made me jump, I didn’t see you there’ she could see now that the voice had come from Charles’s childhood friend Dylan who was standing smoking a sneaky cigarette.

‘Sorry. I’ve wanted to speak to you all day’ he continued, ‘you’re Penny’s friend Rebecca aren’t you?’ he asked and without pausing, ‘I’m Dylan’. He stepped forward and held out his hand toward Rebecca. She automatically extended her hand thinking he intended to shake it; instead he took her hand in his and held it for a second before lifting it to his lips and gently kissing the back. He raised his head from her hand and looked closely into her face, ‘Delighted to meet you Rebecca’ he teased in a soft Irish drawl, his eyes dancing with suppressed amusement, ‘perhaps you’d honour me with a turn around this delightful garden.’ Dylan proffered his arm, which she took laughing at his formal mien, allowing him to lead her around the borders taking in the scent of the blooms and listening to the tinkling of glasses and voices raising and falling in conversations that they couldn’t hear.

Rebecca who had eyed him during the course of the day found him devastatingly attractive at close quarters. She could feel her heart hammering and wondered if Dylan could hear it pounding away, the nearness of him made her feel weak at the knees. She found the timbre of his voice and the mellifluous Irish lilt a complete turn-on.

‘Perhaps we should return to the party and I’ll get you a drink’ offered Dylan, ‘but before we do, if you’ll excuse me.’ He deftly drew Rebecca into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers languorously grazing his lips against hers, then releasing her just as suddenly. ‘I couldn’t resist doing that’ he apologised with a wicked grin, ‘shall we?’ he proffered his arm once more. The two walked together back into the marquee and he escorted her back to the table where there were a few raised eyebrows. Dylan, totally unabashed, held a chair for Rebecca to sit and asked, ‘Champagne, Madam?’

‘Thanks, that would be lovely’ responded Rebecca trying to keep her face straight and avoid the eyes of Caitlin, Jo and Suzanne, all levelled at her in lively curiosity.

Dylan shortly returned to the table armed with a bottle of champagne and glasses gallantly poured for all the girls. He settled himself next to Rebecca and proceeded to regale them with stories of his and Charles’s childhood escapades making them all roar with laughter. Rebecca watched him under lowered lashes as he held court. Dylan wore his hair long, the dark glossy curls giving him a raffish air, his face was darkly handsome with chiselled cheekbones and a deep cleft in the centre of his chin. The mouth that had brushed against hers was strongly defined with a full sensuous lower lip. His eyes were almond in shape; she wasn’t sure how to describe the colour, possibly sea green, set under straight black brows. He was gorgeous she decided.

Darkness descended around the marquee and guest drifted away from the party in dribs and drabs through the evening leaving just a few of the younger people grouped around the tables or standing at the 'bar'. Martin, who had dispatched his duties as Best Man sometime before, made his way over to join Dylan and the girls signalling the end of the evening. Smilingly he apologised for breaking up the party for he was about to remove Dylan from their company. Dylan, knowing that persuasion would be of no avail got to his feet.

'My chauffeur awaits' he declared with a mock bow, 'Ladies I must bid you farewell.' He bent forward and took each of the girls' hands in his by turn saying his goodbyes. Lastly he turned to Rebecca and holding out both of his hands for hers he pulled her to her feet. With a smile and lingering eye contact he kissed her first on one cheek and then the other murmuring in her ear as he bent forward, 'Adieu, until the next time, ma belle.' Dropping her hands he turned and flung his arm across Martin's shoulders, 'Away, mon ami, away!' he commanded as they turned and left.

Dylan's departure seemed to put a full stop to the end of the wedding party. The few revellers still remaining took their cue to depart, the girls yawning widely decided it was time for bed. A combination of champagne and a felicitous day had made everyone pleurably exhausted and ready to turn in. As she was settling herself to sleep Suzanne remarked almost to herself,

'I think that Penny just had the fairy tale wedding she always dreamed of.' As the others murmured assent she thought to herself; *I wonder if Rebecca will be the next?*

## **Caitlin - July 1974**

Caitlin was as good as her word making an effort to correspond with her friends though bemoaning the fact that none of them had their own phone. She had returned to Paris via New York having decided it was time that she saw her father.

The Park Avenue house looked subtly different Caitlin thought as she dumped her bag and called for Hughes to announce her arrival.

'Miss Caitlin', beamed the old man, trotting briskly across the hall to greet her and rescue her bag.

'Hello' returned Caitlin with a wide smile; she had known him since she was a toddler, 'how are you? And how is Juan?'

'We are both well thank you, Miss Caitlin. It is lovely to see you, if I may say so.' Caitlin was always a little embarrassed by the formality of the relationship but was aware that



Hughes preferred this mode of communication, she had overstepped the line once as a child and been politely rebuffed.

‘Is this your only bag Miss Caitlin?’ he asked with some surprise.

‘I travelled light’ Caitlin laughed, ‘I’ve been in England for my friend Penny’s wedding. I think I may have to do some shopping whilst I’m here. When do you expect Papa home?’

‘He’s usually in by 7.00 these days Miss Caitlin. Does he expect you?’

‘Oh yes, I left a message with his office this morning.’ She turned as footsteps minced towards them; breaking into a delighted smile she greeted Juan,

‘Juan, hello, it’s been a long time.’ Juan, who was openly gay, had none of the reservations of his partner in greeting Caitlin,

‘Miss Caitlin, you get more beautiful every day’ he lisped taking her hand, ‘Let me take a look at you’ he twirled Caitlin around to admire her, Caitlin obliging with an exaggerated pirouette; ‘So grown up and so *French, bebe*’ he pronounced with approval. Hughes cleared his throat, not approving of his gay partner’s familiarity with the boss’s daughter,

‘Perhaps, Juan, you may oblige us by taking Miss Caitlin’s bag up to her room?’ Juan pulled a face behind his partner’s back, trying to make Caitlin giggle.

‘The house looks different somehow’ Caitlin mused aloud. Hughes glanced around. ‘Would you like to wait for your father in the library Miss Caitlin? I usually lay out a tray of drinks around now; white wine for you?’ He smiled, remembering her preference.

‘Good idea’ Caitlin responded, wandering across to the library door, ‘A nice chilled glass of Sauterne would go down nicely thank you.’

Caitlin settled herself in a blissfully comfortable sofa upholstered in pale aqua linen. She kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up neatly, leaning into the sofa back and took a long look around as she waited. *This room is much lighter and fresher, in fact very much as I would have decorated* it she thought to herself. As she mused she heard the front door bang and her father’s voice calling to Hughes,

‘Is she here yet? Has Caitlin arrived?’ Caitlin leapt to her feet and sped towards the door. Father and daughter met on the threshold, her father greeting her with a bear hug, easily swinging her small frame around. ‘It’s so good to see you sweetheart. You look well.’

‘So do you Papa’ she replied. It was true, her father looked altogether different from the last few times she’d seen him, when his face had been tired and harrowed with grief. He’d gained some of the weight that he’d lost and looked tanned and healthy as if he’d been spending time away from the office.

Hughes coughed discreetly as he crossed the room and laid out the drinks tray,

‘I’ll pour; thank you Hughes’ Frank dismissed him with a smile. He poured wine for Caitlin and a whisky sour for himself. Chinking glasses he repeated, ‘My, it is good to see my little girl!’

‘And you too, Papa’ she responded, ‘Tell me what’s new?’ Caitlin’s intuition was working overtime since she’d been home; she knew that there was a change in her father and in the house.

Frank paced across the room, wondering anew how to break his news to her. Finally he sat down next to Caitlin and reaching his hand out to take hers, he told all.

‘I’ve met someone Caitlin. She makes me very happy and we are planning to be married.’ He squeezed her hand gently, continuing, ‘I’ll always love and remember your mother and I will always love you sweetheart. I hope that you won’t mind too much?’ Caitlin felt a gamut of different emotions flood her, she realised that she had known there was another woman since she entered the house. *Had she tried to ignore it, block it out? Maybe yes. Did she mind? Yes she did, but also she wanted to see her father happy again. Would she like this other woman? Would the woman like her? How would it affect her life?* All these thoughts rushed through her mind. She realised above all that she must be brave and grown up. With an effort to appear composed, and really trying to mean it, she congratulated her father and lifting her chin with a determined smile she requested,

‘You must tell me all about her Papa, who is she, how you met, everything.’

Caitlin soon learned that her father had met Ariel at a dinner party at one of his business partners’ houses in the fall. Ariel was a model, born and raised in Texas. She had been scouted for modelling while studying at Brown for a degree in English Literature. She was 29 years old, only seven years older than Caitlin. She was beautiful and bright and they were in love.

‘I would like you to meet tomorrow and very much hope that you will like each other’ Frank told Caitlin, both father and daughter still slightly uncomfortable with the situation and its impact on their own relationship, ‘but before you meet I want to talk to you about financial matters.’ Caitlin made as though to change the subject, protesting softly, but her father waived away her objection, ‘It’s important that you know where you stand, and also that Ariel and I have a fresh start.’ Her father explained.

‘Your mother left everything to me in my lifetime which would then revert to you on my death, as is usual between husband and wife. The London house was in your mother’s name and many other investments.’ He paused and smiled at Caitlin, ‘What I’m proposing to do is transfer all your mother’s investments into your name and also to transfer the Pelham

Crescent property to you. This will make you an independently wealthy young woman.’ He held his hand up to deflect any response, ‘I want you to think about it and I believe it’s for the best. If Ariel and I have children together, which we would like to do, this arrangement will be best for everyone.’

Caitlin, Frank could see, was very tired after her journey and, obviously, had a lot to think about. He suggested that she they should have a light supper together and then she should get an early night.

‘Why don’t you go and freshen up and I’ll arrange a snack for us,’ he kissed her lightly on the forehead as she passed to go upstairs. Caitlin drew a bath in her en-suite, adding some Chanel 19 bath oil. She stripped off her clothes and slipped into the silk robe from the back of her bedroom door. She rifled through the rails of her walk-in closet for something suitable to wear. Her father hated her wearing jeans so she chose a simple Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress. A search for footwear turned up the aqua sandals she had bought with her mother in Capri four years ago. Caitlin felt her heart jerk and tears sprang to her eyes.

She lay and soaked in the bath feeling the tension seep from her body even while her mind raced. She understood her father’s need to move on from his grief. She loved her father and it had hurt her to see and feel his pain. She must put a brave face on the situation and do her best to like this Ariel who was usurping her mother’s place. She grimaced to herself for being melodramatic at the same time as thinking, *Ariel, what a stupid name*. After half an hour in the tub she had made peace with the situation. Her father was being very generous to her she appreciated. With a mental shake she climbed out of the tub and towelled herself dry. In five minutes she was ready to spend the evening with her father, prepared to be her usual convivial self.

The evening passed easily between them as they exchanged all the news that they thought the other would like to hear. Caitlin was full of Penny’s recent wedding and the wonderful time she’d had with her friends. Her father expressed a lively interest as he had met them all and heard much about them over the years.

Frank concentrated his conversation around family friends who Caitlin had lost touch with, giving her tasty snippets of news about the social scene in Manhattan and Easthampton. Caitlin avoided mention of the Sorbonne as she had barely been there in the last year. Frank avoided talk of Ariel; tomorrow would be soon enough, when he intended that they should meet.

The next evening Frank had arranged for Ariel to be at the house for drinks before all three went out for dinner. Caitlin dressed herself carefully. Aiming for youthful elegance she

wore a chic Halston silk shift dress accessorised with a beaded clutch in sapphire blue and sling-backs to match. Caitlin brushed her hair so it fell loose around her shoulders; she checked her appearance in the mirror. She looked young but not childlike. Taking a deep breath she went down to the library fixing a smile to her face as she entered.

Frank stepped forward to kiss his daughter on both cheeks, 'Caitlin, may I present my fiancé, Ariel. Ariel meet my daughter, Caitlin' he introduced in the old fashioned way. Nothing could have prepared Caitlin for Ariel. She was an Amazon, at least six feet tall, with a mane of blonde hair swept to one side. Her beauty was astonishing. She was dressed in a striking red low cut halter necked jump suit. The outfit skimmed her slender model body. Caitlin immediately registered the designer as Halston.

Ariel held out her hand to Caitlin saying in her Texan drawl,

'Hi Caitlin, I'm pleased to meet you at last. Your father has told me so much about you. I hope that we will be friends.' For the first time Caitlin thought how nervous Ariel must be, she appeared calm but there was a look in her eye that almost pleaded with Caitlin to like her. Caitlin responded by exhibiting her well-known charm,

'Well if our taste is anything to go by we should be friends in no time, I love your outfit, and the way you've redesigned this room, and obviously we both love the same man,' she laughing dimpling at her father. Frank smiled back at her, pleased and proud that she was reacting so positively. Caitlin was pleased that he was pleased. Frank poured wine for the women and whisky for himself and they made small talk.

Caitlin watched Ariel carefully observing how she reacted around her father; he was obviously besotted and hardly took his eyes off her. As they chatted, all trying to keep the momentum going equally, she saw that her father's feelings were reciprocated fully. Ariel's face softened as she eyed him and there was no pretence in the way that she invoked his approval as she talked about the decorations that they had had done to the house and some minor alterations in the Easthampton house. Ariel looked Caitlin squarely in the face and explained,

'I don't want you to think that I've tried to remove your mother from here. There were things that needed doing that's all. I'm going to be his new wife not a replacement for his first one. Things will be different but I don't want to come between you and your father in any way.'

Caitlin liked Ariel for her simple honesty and the seeds of a good relationship were planted between them.

## Rebecca - August 1974

Fortunately for Rebecca she had no time to dwell on her meeting with the rather delectable Dylan. She returned to London to be hurled headlong into preparations for the shop opening and for her move to Wimbledon. Her to-do list never seemed to get any shorter. As soon as she ticked something off another task appeared.

Rebecca had given in her notice at Liberty before Penny's wedding. Her visit to the personnel department had been quite emotional as her employers were not keen on letting such a promising young retailer leave them. She agreed to work an additional week more than she had planned to, as she didn't want to let them down. This would leave her with only one clear week to finish the preparations at Palmerstone ready to open on the last Saturday of July.

Rebecca was so fired up with enthusiasm for her new venture that she hardly regretted moving on from Liberty. Her colleagues though were keen to give her a good send off. Rebecca was treated to a farewell presentation of a very striking heavy turquoise and silver pendant of Indian origin from the jewellery department. It was a really special piece that Rebecca would treasure forever.

In the last week of July Rebecca managed to move her things from her flat in Shepherds Bush to the flat above the business. The move made things simpler for her as she was on the premises to start receiving deliveries of stock. Decoration of the flat would have to wait as her energies were entirely taken up with preparing the shop for her opening night. Rebecca's time was spent painting, cleaning, varnishing floors, overseeing the shop fitters, receiving stock, unpacking and hanging it in the stock room ready for display, and finally delivering fliers around the neighbourhood. She rolled into bed and slept the sleep of the exhausted every night.

On the Saturday afternoon just before she was due to open the doors for her launch Rebecca stood on the opposite side of the high street making a final appraisal of her shop. Palmerstone had been sign written in bold black simple print on a background of duck egg blue, which was to be the signature colour of her brand. Three mannequins stood in the window. Palmerstone's style was to be projected by the window display and the merchandising of the shop and was the culmination of many hours of planning. Although Rebecca had bought from the Autumn/Winter collections she had created her window display with lighter weight pieces that would be suitable for the warmer weather.

The three mannequins projected the Palmerstone style along with strategically placed pieces: a pair of striking platform shoes by Terry de Havilland, a belt, an embroidered bag, a bikini and some beads to show the range of stock that the shop carried. By each of the mannequins Rebecca had placed a crisp white card with the designer, item and price clearly marked in italic print.

Inside the shop everything was carefully organised so that it was easy for customers to view. Clothes were displayed in 'stories' so that it was easy to see which pieces would go together to make an outfit. Items from different labels were mixed so that expensive and much more affordable items hung together. Shoes were placed on the floor, beads and scarves draped across hangers to compliment a look.

The old linen press looked great with colour-coded piles of tees, fine-knit jumpers and cardis displayed within its shelves and opened drawers. The refurbished old table that she'd found looked resplendent with a tray of glasses and champagne at one end and an antique till, tissue paper and a stack of her beautiful new carrier bags at the other.

Rebecca had bought from Missoni in Italy, Calvin Klein and Betsey Johnson from the States, Ossie Clarke and a new more affordable label, French Connection from the UK. She had also sourced a good supplier for vintage clothes and an importer of Indian silks and jewellery. There were many other labels she would have liked to stock but time and mostly financial restrictions had limited her ambition. This would have to do for now.

Two of her colleagues from Liberty had volunteered to help her for the evening; Nicky and Juliet arrived as promised at 3.30. They hugged Rebecca and exclaimed happily over the shop as Rebecca showed them the ropes.

'There are other sizes and a lot more stock downstairs as I didn't want to crowd the shop floor' she explained, 'come down and have a look so you know where everything is if we get busy.'

'I'm sure we will' remarked Juliet, 'we saw quite a few girls eying up the shop as we arrived.'

'I wondered if you would wear some of the clothes for tonight,' Rebecca asked, 'it really helps to sell things if people can see how to wear them.'

'Brilliant idea, yes please' Nicky agreed.

Rebecca showed the two what she was planning to wear and waved her hand at hangers she'd set up for the others. For Nicky she had chosen a ditsy flower print shirt and blue jeans dressed up with a bold beaded necklace and platform shoes.

‘Cool!’ Nicky knew that the outfit was well chosen, what she would have picked for herself. *Rebecca has a great eye* she thought. Juliet was very petite and pretty not unlike Caitlin. Rebecca had chosen a very simple shift dress in pistachio green from the Calvin Klein label with a classic high-heeled pump. Again it was a good choice that suited the wearer.

Rebecca got herself ready in a narrow long sleeved tee in a sludgy purple colour, a short skirt over a slightly longer Victorian pin-tucked petticoat, she strapped on a pair of platform shoes in purple and lilac and accessorised the outfit with the pendant that her colleagues had given to her. The effect was stunning.

It was nearly time to open. The girls trooped up to the sales floor to be met by the sight of a large group, a dozen or so shoppers waiting on the doorstep. Rebecca took a deep breath to steady her nerves,

‘Let’s open up then, no point keeping them waiting!’

The launch was a great success. Rebecca and her helpers were kept busy constantly, pouring drinks, talking customers through the looks, finding the right sizes and combinations, helping in the fitting rooms, wrapping purchases and, best of all, ringing up the sales.

Towards the end of the evening Rebecca looked up as the doorbell rang to see Suzanne entering the shop clutching a bouquet of flowers and a card. She had come she said to take Rebecca out for supper when she’d finished for the evening.

‘Have a glass of champagne while you’re waiting, we won’t be long now’ smiled Rebecca, thinking how lucky she was to have such a loyal and lovely friend.

Nicky and Juliet turned down the offer of joining them saying that they needed to get back to their respective families. Rebecca gave them each a present to thank them for their help, as neither would accept payment. All that remained was to tidy the shop floor, cash up, lock the door and set the alarm. Rebecca counted her takings with a sense of achievement. They had made enough that evening to pay her rent and bills for the week with some left over. She felt ebullient.

‘Come up and see the flat Annie, it’s in a mess still I’m afraid. I’m so pleased you came, I think I need some R&R after this last week, and a celebration!’

‘That’s what I thought’ responded Suzanne as they climbed the stairs up to the flat, ‘apart from wanting to see the shop, after all I’ve heard about it.’

‘What did you think?’ asked Rebecca, her friend’s opinion important to her even though Suzanne wasn’t that into fashion.

‘I think it looks great’ Suzanne responded honestly, ‘It looks classy and bohemian at the same time. The window makes you want to come in and look and I love the signage. You should be really proud Becca.’

‘Thank you Annie’ responded Rebecca, giving her a hug, ‘and thank you for the lovely flowers they’ll brighten this place up until I get the chance to decorate.’

‘I like it’ Suzanne approved, taking a good look around, ‘much bigger than your last place, and enormous compared to mine’ she laughed, ‘It has lots of potential, as an estate agent would put it, and you are just the person to realise that potential.’

‘There’s a really nice looking pub that does food just along the road, shall we head there?’ asked Rebecca, suddenly absolutely starving.

‘Yeah, let’s.’

The two wandered out into the mild evening air and ambled a few yards down to the Rose and Crown for a well-earned bottle of wine, pie and chips.

## **Suzanne - October 1974**

Suzanne had settled into her new role at work and was enjoying the additional responsibility she held for leading a specialist team. She was due to have a performance review and felt confident that she would receive good feedback and may even be re-graded. Even so she was very surprised to receive a summons for a one-to-one with one of the foreign office bigwigs. The internal memo requested her attendance in his office the following week at 11.30 on Thursday. Although sure she hadn’t done anything untoward Suzanne spent an anxious few days wondering what the meeting was about, it was very unusual for the senior people to bother with her level.

Mr Lewis was one of the director generals, second in command only to the permanent under-secretary. Suzanne tapped on his door at 11.29 precisely on the appointed day. She had made an effort with her appearance and looked professional, wearing a neat, navy skirt suit and white blouse. She entered the outer sanctum of Mr Lewis’s office and was waved to take a seat by a monosyllabic personal assistant, who proceeded to buzz through and announce her arrival. She didn’t have to wait long. Mr Lewis appeared in the doorway, and with a pleasant smile, indicated that she should come in.

Suzanne followed him across a wide expanse of polished floor, covered by a rather good looking Turkish rug, and sat down in a big mahogany and leather desk chair as indicated. He took his seat at the opposite side of a vast mahogany desk that you could have played table tennis on, Suzanne thought irrelevantly. She held her breath determined not to pre-empt his



address. Mr Lewis, she guessed, was in his late 50s. He was tall and thin with sparse grey hair cut very short and he sported a neat moustache. He spoke very clearly in a rather clipped accent. The gist of his summons astonished her to the extent that she was almost lost for words.

Suzanne's progress had been watched by her superiors with interest, and had recently been brought to his attention.

'I have taken it upon myself to review your background' he indicated a manila folder on his desk as he spoke, 'I see that you graduated from Oxford with a double first in Politics and Economics and that you have some aptitude with foreign languages.' He glanced at her file to refresh his memory, 'I see that you speak both French and German, are you reasonably fluent still?' he asked.

'I'm a bit rusty in German but I have practiced my French recently and I'm currently learning Spanish' replied Suzanne, beginning to understand the thrust of the conversation.

'We need young people of your calibre to join the Diplomatic Service' continued Mr Lewis, 'I wonder if you would consider a career that would involve some travel and possibly to undertake postings overseas?'

'It is something that I considered when I was planning my career' responded Suzanne, 'and yes, I had hoped that my language skills could be used in the workplace, so I would certainly be interested in opportunities overseas. Is there something specific you had in mind?'

'No' he replied, 'I wanted to sound you out first. We haven't got any suitable opportunities just now and also I would like you to undergo some preparation prior to any new appointment.' He smiled, this time engaging his eyes, 'what I have in mind is to arrange some shadowing opportunities in the department. That way you'll get to network and meet some of the key people. Are you prepared to do that on top of your not inconsiderable current duties?'

'Yes, I would' replied Suzanne without hesitation for she was delighted, 'and thank you for giving me the opportunity Mr Lewis.'

'Not at all' he replied standing and walking around the desk towards her. Suzanne, seeing that the interview was over, jumped to her feet. He held out his hand and shook hers warmly; 'I'll be taking an interest in your career young lady' he finished, with a charming smile.

Suzanne could barely contain her excitement for the rest of the day. She decided to go home for the weekend as she was bursting to share her news and thought that her parents would be proud of her success. She would go straight from work tomorrow, no point trying to call them as they were impossible to get hold of at their work places.

As Suzanne approached the house she was pleased to see a chink of light shining between the curtains of the living room. Someone must be home she thought, smiling as she inserted her key into the latch. She pushed the door open calling out,

‘Hello, I’m home!’ A blast of Bach could be heard coming from the direction of the study. Suzanne made for that room expecting to see her father. He was seated with his back to the door and obviously did not hear her enter, as he didn’t turn around. Suzanne tiptoed over to his chair and put her arms around to cover his eyes,

‘Guess who?’ she cried, her smile freezing as she felt the tears that were rolling down her father’s face. ‘Whatever’s the matter Daddy?’ she asked, a lump in her throat making it difficult to speak. Her father got to his feet swiftly wiping his eyes; he reached out to give her a hug.

‘I’m sorry, darling, I wasn’t expecting you.’

‘No, but what’s wrong?’ she insisted.

‘Let’s go to the kitchen and get a glass of something’ he suggested, ‘then I’ll tell you.’

‘Is it Mum? Is there something wrong with her?’ Suzanne asked, really concerned as in the bright light of the kitchen she could see that her father had aged dramatically in the last couple of months. Her father passed her a glass of red wine and poured one for himself, his hand trembling slightly.

‘Yes Annie, it’s your mother’ his face seemed to cave in as he spoke, ‘she’s not been well for sometime but she wouldn’t see anybody even though she works in the bloody hospital’ he sounded bitter, ‘she finally saw one of her colleagues, a cancer specialist. She has cancer of the colon, and it’s in quite an advanced state.’

Suzanne’s heart clenched in fear and in the anguish of seeing her father so distressed. She made as though to embrace him but he waved her away and turned to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. At that moment the front door slammed and they both started as though they had been caught out in a conspiracy. Doreen could be heard crossing the hall with her usual quick, determined step. She entered the kitchen beaming a hello to Suzanne.

‘What a lovely surprise darling’ she embraced her daughter, ‘Ah, I see that your father has told you how things are with me’ she continued, feeling the tension in the room. ‘Well, you’d better pour me a glass as you two have both started’ she continued, indicating the as yet untouched wine.

Suzanne was amazed and awed by her mother’s brisk sangfroid as she smiled warmly at them both and announced,

‘I’ll get us some super. I’m sure there’s something edible in the freezer. It’ll be nice to all sit down together for once.’ She proceeded to busy herself around the kitchen as though nothing in the world was wrong. Suzanne and her father obediently took her lead, Jack pouring her a glass of red and Suzanne by laying up the big old kitchen table. They were soon sitting together eating spaghetti bolognaise that Suzanne couldn’t help but notice that her mother barely touched even though she kept up a stream of lively conversation.

It was not the time to mention the possibility of an overseas posting. Suzanne filled in all the details of Penny’s wedding and Rebecca’s new shop to keep up her side of the pretence. When they’d finished their meal, none of them having done it justice, Doreen told her daughter the prognosis for her cancer as though she were the Doctor not the patient. She had quite an aggressive case of colorectal cancer. She was going into the Radcliffe on Monday and would undergo surgery and radiotherapy treatment which may alleviate the symptoms and slow the degenerative process but would not be a cure.

‘This means my darling that I may have a month to live maybe three. I’ve had a full and happy life. A happy marriage to your father and then blessed with you when we least expected to have a child. I’ve also had an interesting and successful career. I want you to remember me in this way, not as I will be over the next however long it takes’ she smiled at her daughter with love shining from her eyes. ‘It’s harder for you and Daddy than it is for me. I know that my life is finite and I’ve made my peace with that’ she paused and closed her eyes briefly, ‘I’m tired now and I think I’ll go to bed’ she hugged and kissed Suzanne goodnight, and held her hand out to Jack to go up with her, ‘we’ll do something nice tomorrow. I’m so glad you came home’ she finished.

In fact Doreen struggled on for just over four months, finely giving in on the second day of January 1975, she was just 65. It was a harrowing process for Jack and Suzanne, the only positive that her illness had brought them closer together as a family. In stark contrast to the last time that the four friends had been together, they all attended Doreen’s funeral in Oxford, sombrely dressed and low in spirits. Suzanne was comforted by her friends’ support and tried her best to be as strong as her mother had been right to the last.

## **Penny - June 1975**

Penny and Charles slipped with ease into their married life; they were both best friends and lovers always sharing their thoughts and experiences at the end of each day. Charles had been allocated to a parish in Bedfordshire in a charming small town, Amptchill. The rectory was a lovely Georgian redbrick house standing next to the old church. The space that they

were afforded would in time make an excellent family home for their intended children, it meanwhile made a great place to have their friends and family about them.

With a stroke of good fortune Charles's sister Jo, having completed her teacher training at Bedford College, landed her first teaching post in a village school in Houghton Conquest, a mere stone's throw from Ampthill. The couple asked her immediately if she would like to lodge with them. The idea was quickly agreed to as it suited all their purposes.

Jo moved in at the end of the summer ready to start the September term. She chose her own two bedrooms next to each other so that she could have space and privacy when needed. Penny helped Jo decorate the rooms and choose pieces of furniture from about the house to make her space homely. When the revamp was completed Jo had a fresh light bedroom painted in white and pale pink with a flowery Laura Ashley border and matching curtains at the back window overlooking the pretty garden.

They reconfigured the adjoining room as a study cum sitting room. The fireplace was blacked and polished, the surround and mantle painted cream. Charles and one of the parishioners carried a small sofa up from the drawing room and the girls covered it with a cream cotton throw. Some cushion covers and matching curtains were made from another Laura Ashley print and the walls painted in a warm pink. An unused table was sourced from another downstairs room to be used as a desk. Finally finished, Penny and Jo gave Charles a conducted tour of their handiwork with Jo enthusing about her good fortune,

'I'm so lucky to have such lovely rooms! Thank you both so much for making me so welcome. I have absolutely everything that I need now except for the car I'm going to buy. I'll be able to afford one as I'm going to be saving so much money on lodgings' she laughed, 'I'll let you drive it sometimes Charles dear in exchange for the largesse!'

'Actually little sis I expect to be chauffeur driven' responded Charles deadpan.

'Then I'm afraid your expectations will not be met big bro as I shall be far too busy with my new career. I recommend a bike.' So the banter continued as the rooms were inspected and pronounced very grand.

'How about we tackle the rest of the house now?' asked Charles, 'You two have made such a fine job of these rooms I'm confident that I could let you lose!'

'Oh dear!' remarked Jo to Penny, 'now look what we've let ourselves in for. If we'd have done a bad job we would have been let off!'

'Yes indeed' smiled Penny, appreciating the sibling's banter, 'Seriously though when you two are at work it's something that I can be getting on with. I have some ideas for several of the other rooms if we can afford it?' she glanced at Charles with smile and a raised eyebrow.

‘I expect we can a bit at a time, my love’ Charles responded, squeezing Penny’s waist fondly.

Penny therefore shared her time between decorating, parish duties supporting her husband’s work, and other voluntary pursuits including helping out in the local school. She borrowed some cookery books from the library and began to concoct interesting meals for the evenings. She shopped for food at the butcher and baker in the town and visited the market each week for fresh fruit and vegetables. She soon got to know all the villagers as she went to and fro with her shopping baskets, stopping to exchange a word here and there and always with a smile and an enquiry about a husband, a parent or a child.

Penny attended church every Sunday and sat in the front pew to listen to her husband’s sermon, usually for the second time as he had already practiced it on her. She helped with the church flowers, learning to tend the rectory garden to provide blooms for this purpose. She helped Charles to entertain parishioners and host charity events, often catering, baking and serving drinks much as her mother-in-law Jane had done. Penny loved her life married to Charles the man and as helpmate to Charles the parish priest. She had always longed for a family and a sense of belonging and counted herself extremely lucky that she had realised her dream.

Naturally Penny wanted to share her good fortune with everyone so she loved to fill the house with guests and to see them enjoy themselves. Her parents came to stay for weekend fairly frequently now that her father was stationed at home in Wiltshire. For Peter and Jane, Charles’s and Jo’s parents, weekends were almost impossible but they managed to visit once in a while during the week for an overnight stay. Suzanne managed to visit occasionally for a weekend but since her mother’s death had spent most of her weekends with her father in Oxford.

One of these longed for weekends was in late June of 1975. Suzanne had called Penny to see if the weekend would be convenient as her father was tied up with College business and wouldn’t miss her visit. Penny was delighted and set about making everything perfect for Suzanne’s arrival on the Friday night. Penny had decorated a guest bedroom at the back of the rectory overlooking the garden. The room was rather like stepping into an old fashioned rose bower, the effect magnified by the accompanying rose scent provided by the cut flowers from the garden. The walls were papered with huge swags of overblown rose blooms in shades of pink. The curtains and bedspread were made from thick woven cotton in a deep fuchsia pink contrasting with the white painted woodwork. Penny laid out thick white cotton

fluffy towels, a bathmat and a set of perfumed soap, bubble bath and body lotion for her friend in the next-door guest bathroom.

Dinner for the evening was all prepared in advance so that she could sit and chatter with Suzanne all evening. Her best treat was a picnic that she planned for the Saturday. Penny could barely contain herself waiting for her friend to arrive; when finally she heard the sound of a car drawing up outside she ran to the door to greet her friend. Suzanne looked tired and Penny was all solicitous concern for her.

‘I’m fine Pen, don’t worry’, responded Suzanne, ‘Nothing that a nice chilled glass of wine and a hot bath won’t fix!’

‘Of course Annie, darling’ responded Penny with a hug, ‘everything’s laid out upstairs for the bath, same room as last time. As soon as you’re out drinks are ready in the garden as it’s such a balmy evening.’

‘Wonderful’ responded Suzanne, ‘I’ll head up to the rose bower and dump my stuff. I think the bath can wait for later. I’ll be right down.’

Charles poured drinks and replenished nibbles while the two girls chatted easily together in the warmth of the summer evening. Charles left the two girls alone for their catch up with the excuse of parish work that needed his attention. Penny asked Suzanne about her father and how he was coping on his own, her kind heart touched by his circumstances.

‘Mostly he’s burying himself in College work. But he isn’t looking after himself very well, or the house. Actually Pen I am really worried about him and the worst of it is that he is expected to retire from Merton now he’s 65. He just seems to be ignoring the fact and carrying on as normal at the moment, but come next term he won’t have a job to go to.’

‘Oh Annie, That must be a worry. What will you do?’

‘Well I don’t really know, but what I do know is that I’ve got to make him sit down with me and face all the facts because until he’s done that we can’t really move forward.’

‘How are you coping with all the anxiety about your father on top of your career as well? You look tired and thin.’ Penny’s voice went up at the end of her sentence in a little bleat of concern.

‘Well then it’s true that every cloud has a silver lining’ Suzanne laughing, nodding a yes and smiling at Charles as he reappeared to replenish her glass, Penny gesticulated no as Suzanne continued drily, ‘though I can’t really recommend losing one parent and looking after another semi-senile one as the ideal diet.’ Penny shook her head, laughing despite herself.

‘I am fine, really Pen’ Suzanne continued, in a more serious vein, ‘the people at work have been really supportive and allowed me to work flexible hours when necessary and I’ve put my bigger ambitions on hold for the time being. Now tell me about what you’ve been up to.’

Penny recounted how she passed her days feeling almost guilty that she was so content, though she knew Suzanne so well that she was assured of her good will.

‘And best of all’, she finished taking hold of Suzanne’s hand and squeezing it, ‘I’m pregnant! Charles and I are going to be parents. I’m so unbelievably happy Annie, I can’t believe it sometimes and I have to pinch myself!’ Suzanne hugged her friend with unequivocal delight,

‘I’m so happy for you and you do so deserve to be happy.’ At that moment Charles appeared and was hugged and congratulated in his turn.

They spent the rest of the evening sitting at the kitchen table eating super and talking late into the night.

## **Caitlin - August 1975**

Caitlin returned to Paris from her trip to visit her father. She had spent a few days in New York and in that time established a rapport with Ariel that boded well for their future relationship. They had embarked on a shopping expedition together that had been fun but held bittersweet memories for Caitlin. It was obvious from the start that Ariel and her father were living together and that they were happy in each other’s company. Although Caitlin occasionally experienced pangs of what could only be described as jealousy, she was adult enough to recognise the symptoms and squash any tendency to petulance.

Once back in Paris she took a long hard look at her lifestyle and decided that she needed to move on. She had been seeing Sebastian, son of a minor French aristocrat, for some time and although he was potentially ‘suitable’ she knew that the *affaire* was going nowhere for her. Her problem was that she had no real notion of what she did want to do; only what she did not. She sometimes envied the certainty with which her friends had made their choices.

Her father had unwittingly thrown her another distraction in the form of the London house in Chelsea. It was this distraction that Caitlin now decided to pursue. She would move to London. It would be fun. She would see much more of Rebecca and Suzanne both based there. She also had many other contacts through her parents and from school.

Her father had put in train all the legal processes that they had discussed in New York. Within a month of her visit home Caitlin owned a Regency town house and had inherited

sufficient funds to ensure that she would never want for anything. She was undecided about the Paris apartment so decided to keep it for the present.

Sebastian, she would have to let down gently. She called him to advise that she was back in Paris and arranged to have dinner with him at the Ritz; she loved it for the happy times she had spent there. Once Caitlin had broken the news that she was intending to move to London imminently the conversation was stilted between them. The possibility of one last coupling for old time's sake receding to the impossible as Sebastian struggled to remain civil. *No loss* thought Caitlin to herself, as the sex had never been that great anyway.

As Caitlin locked up her apartment to leave for London the one thought that invaded her memory was of Jean-Pierre. She wondered briefly what he was doing now and pushed a thought away that he may be married. She took a car out to Charles de Gaulle and travelled first class to Heathrow where she was met and driven to Pelham Crescent. She stood outside for a few moments smiling at the white painted façade with the wrought iron railings and small balconies that she had always loved. She must have been about nine or ten when she had first been brought here she recollected fondly.

The house was just as she remembered it; she stepped into the black and white checkerboard tiled hall and admired the polished curve of the stair rail ascending to the first floor landing. Although the house had been un-lived in for some time it had been aired and maintained regularly and appeared to Caitlin just as they had left it as she strolled around the house inspecting all the rooms.

The house had four bedrooms and a small room that the English call a box room. Her parents had completely renovated the house before they had moved in, adding the bathrooms that Americans always feel are necessary. There were now three upstairs plus a shower room and a cloakroom on the ground floor. Caitlin assessed the potential for her using the master suite, she couldn't move in as it was; it would feel odd sleeping in her parent's bedroom. She decided to sleep in her old room until she had refurbished and decorated everywhere.

Caitlin was daunted by embarking on the refurbishment project single handed so enlisted the help of an interior design business which had been recommended by a friend and was conveniently close for consultations in the King's Road. She wanted to create a look somewhere between an English country house and a Long Island home. She briefed the company to produce designs that were fresh and light, would remind her of the sea and the garden and be simple, modern and comfortable. Caitlin was delighted with the results and decided to have a house warming party to show off her new abode.



The first of her friends to be invited were of course Rebecca, Suzanne and Penny, and with Penny, Charles must be invited. *How about inviting that delectable friend of his that had the hots for Rebecca?* Caitlin pondered. Then there were school friends from Hill House and others from St Hilda's. She would also invite a few offspring of her father and mother's; friends who she had met quite often in her teenage years. She organised caterers to do cocktails and canapés and to provide dinner for a select few afterwards. She sent out the invitations for a Saturday evening at the beginning of November, her best friends she invited to stay over.

Caitlin organised the guest rooms, for Penny and Charles a large double en-suite next to her own room, and Rebecca and Suzanne on the second floor. Rebecca could have Caitlin's old room and Suzanne next door with a bathroom and shower room between them. She had flowers delivered for the drawing and dining rooms as well as delightful posies for each of the guest bedrooms.

The house looked beautiful and she couldn't wait to see everyone again. Caitlin bathed and dressed carefully in a Halston jump suit that she'd picked out in New York when she'd been shopping with Ariel a few months before. In sapphire blue crepe de chine the halter neck backless top flowed into wide legged pants that draped beautifully around the hips and legs. Caitlin had thought that she would look short in the type of garment that had looked so stunning on Ariel's model body but she had been delighted by the way it flattered her figure. The effect was enhanced by the illusion of height that the Manolo Blahnik stilettos afforded. She turned in front of her bedroom mirror admiring the effect anew as she completed her hair and make-up. A final squirt of Chanel 19 completed her toilette and she wafted downstairs to greet her guests.

The party was soon in full swing; drinks and canapés being circulated regularly by the catering staff. Caitlin moved through the crowded reception rooms of her house mingling with her guests chatting animatedly. Her friends she greeted with undisguised affection, others were greeted with air kisses and protestations of delight, and she flirted disarmingly with all the men.

Penny was radiating beauty in that inexplicable way that pregnant women do. She looked happy and chatted easily with friends old and new, as did Charles, though Caitlin observed that he never spent long away from Penny's side, returning frequently to make sure she had everything that she needed and wasn't too tired. They were a happy couple.

Rebecca looked cool and interesting in that inimitable style she projected. She was wearing a long, but somehow casual, chiffon dress awash with swirls and checks in a riot of

colours which were softened by the sheerness of the fabric through which you could see the outline of her lithe figure. She had accessorised the Ossie Clarke dress with a bead and feather head band loosely tied around her dark hair and trailing to her shoulder; on her feet a pair of Indian made toe-peg sandals.

It was as Caitlin was observing Rebecca that Dylan entered the room. She saw the momentary flush as she caught sight of him followed by an immediate swing of her head and renewed engagement in the conversation she had been having with a neighbour. I think she really likes him noted Caitlin with slightly mixed feelings as she thought he was rather tasty herself. She moved to greet him with a smile just as he attached himself to his old friend Charles and the noticeably pregnant Penny, who he now proceeded to greet and kiss with genuine pleasure exclaiming as he did,

‘Congratulations to you both for I see that the patter of a new pair of Donaldson clogs will not be far off!’ Dylan grinned and shock hands with Charles, patting him on the back. He then turned to greet Caitlin as she approached the group, holding out his hands to hers he stooped to kiss her on both cheeks, ‘Hey great to see you Caitlin, you look good enough to eat’ he flirted outrageously with her for a few seconds but she could tell he was scanning the room for someone else the while. Dylan found who he was looking for and took in her appearance with a frisson of desire. Sure that she was there he reasserted himself in conversation with his hostess and his oldest friend. *Rebecca could wait till later.*

Guests started to depart in dribs and drabs and then, as usually happen when the crowd starts to thin out, the remaining few said their farewells and departed. Caitlin was very pleased with her soiree, she had renewed contact with many old associates who were well connected and she had already received several verbal invitations to society events, which would be confirmed in writing. She had taken the precaution of inviting Dylan to dine with them under the guise of being some male company for Charles, in reality she thought the opportunity was too good to miss; she planned to set him up with Rebecca.

The caterers had provided a spread of cold cuts and salads and a host of delectable looking puddings. Suzanne laughed and pointed out that Caitlin sounded like the mother figure scolding everyone into eating up their main course before they were allowed any pudding. Caitlin smiling at herself agreed as she fended off marauders,

‘I think you’re quite right Annie, I do. However, I don’t want to eat rabbit food for a week so I expect co-operation in this matter!’ she asserted in mock censure. They all obediently filled their plates with the actually delicious poached salmon, coronation chicken, ham, coleslaw, potato salad and more. Settled at the kitchen table they ate contentedly discussing

the party, the guests, what the women were wearing, and of course Caitlin's newly decorated house and the mutual excitement that she was going to be living so near. A conducted tour of the house was demanded by the girls and Caitlin was more than happy to oblige, though with a severe finger wave at Charles and Dylan, she instructed, 'No pudding until we return!'

'No Miss!' they responded in unison.

Each of the friends genuinely liked the decor that Caitlin had chosen so coos of appreciation marked each stop of the tour. They had all had a chance to admire the reception rooms during the party, the interconnecting rooms all cool and elegant in shades of white with accents of aqua and flower strewn curtains and cushions introducing shades of pink and green. The floors were of polished parquet covered with some expensive looking rugs.

The upstairs rooms were equally restrained, the floors covered with thick cream wool carpets and the heavy silk curtains all hung from giant wooden poles with rings bigger than an average bangle. The front bedrooms had French doors onto tiny wrought iron balconies looking over the crescent; the back rooms overlooked a tiny paved and terraced garden. The friends were all used to Caitlin's lifestyle and there was no malice in the passing envy they felt for her budget or lack of it more like. The house was pronounced a huge success as they trooped back to join the men.

An hour later replete with chocolate gateau, trifle, ice cream and strawberries Charles took hold of his yawning wife's hand and remarked that he must take her off to bed before she fell asleep at the table. All administered hugs and goodnight kisses and Penny was towed upstairs. Dylan then announced that he must be off and proceeded to thank his hostess profusely. Kissing her on both cheeks he declared,

'Truly the best house warming party, best house, best hostess and best guests.'

'Thank you kind Sir' responded Caitlin smiling 'now be gone as Annie and I are going to clear the decks. Becca will see you off the premises!' she shooed him away laughing.

Rebecca obediently accompanied Dylan to the door appreciating the opportunity that Caitlin had created for them to have a private word. Dawdling by the front door the two exchanged hesitant farewells, Dylan took hold of her hand and lifted it to his lips as though to kiss it, then with a deft step he moved in and she found herself in his arms. He lowered his face and pressed his mouth against hers his tongue gently parting her lips and kissed her with intensity and passion, one hand slipped to the small of her back and pressed her body into his so that she could feel the bulge in his trousers pressing against her.

Rebecca responded with all the pent up frustration that she had felt all evening watching him and listening to his voice. Her heart was beating so fast that she felt sure that he could

hear it and her body was melting into his, the feel of his hard cock against her was unbearably tantalising. He groaned softly as he eventually lifted his head from hers, he held her face in his hands and whispered huskily in her ear,

‘I must see you soon *mon amour* for I cannot bear to be without you.’ His hand brushed against her breast as he moved reluctantly to the door, ‘I must go, farewell!’ he smiled his faintly mocking smile at Rebecca and left.

Rebecca stood alone in the hallway collecting her thoughts before she returned to the others in the kitchen. She felt wildly giddy with passion but confused at the same time. He said he must see her but hadn’t made a date, not even asked her for her phone number. Again he had turned her world upside down and then walked away leaving her desperate for him. But he had called her his love. She shook her head and not able to face an enquiry poked her head around the kitchen door and announced she was so shattered that she had to go to bed. The girls exchanged fond goodnights.

Rebecca disappeared upstairs to spend a sleepless night her body on fire with desire.

## **Rebecca - November 1975**

Again Rebecca’s solace was the shop. She threw all her time and energy into making Palmerstone a success. Christmas was fast approaching and she needed more stock for partygoers. The business was doing very well but she would have to start paying for the Spring/Summer collections that would be delivered soon after Christmas as well as start buying the Autumn/Winter collections.

Still she decided she must have new stock for the party season, the Ossie Clark had sold out as soon as it had hit the shop floor. She decided to order more and to call in favours to get designs from Zandra Rhodes and Bill Gibb, as she felt sure that her customers would go for their labels in a big way. She also approached Manolo Blahnik for shoes having admired Caitlin’s sapphire stilettos. She was also expecting a delivery any day from her Indian supplier.

Palmerstone now had a staff of five, one full-time assistant manager and four part-timers. All were also good customers when they weren’t working. Carole was the same age as Rebecca and had worked in department stores in the past. She was reliable and honest and Rebecca felt comfortable leaving her in charge of the shop when she had to attend shows and make buying trips. Over time Carole had developed her skills and had become adept at understanding and fulfilling customer’s expectations, she was meticulous at keeping records

and introduced systems into Palmerstone, which helped the business to flourish. She was a real asset to the business and became a confidante for Rebecca.

Rebecca was constantly busy. She re-merchandised the shop every week so everything looked fresh and interesting, always mixing new pieces in with older ones and showing different quirky ways of wearing pieces together. The window became quite a talking point for Wimbledon residents as Palmerstone constantly pushed the boundaries with the labels that they stocked and in the way that they were styled.

Rebecca also insisted on having regular staff training sessions so that her team were au fey with all the new trends, were confident in assessing body types and personal requirements, and were able to make appropriate recommendations to their customers. Rebecca also planned ahead with military precision. She constantly looked at fashion magazines and visited the competition looking for ideas. She had a knack for spotting labels that would sell and now that she had a strong stable she found it easier to buy from the more elite designers. She not only knew what she would buy for next year but the year after and for her new branch which would be opening in Spring 1976.

One crisp December morning Caitlin breezed into the shop holding a huge bouquet of white roses out to Rebecca,

‘Hi Becca, how are you? The shop looks simply divine, show me everything’ she hugged and kissed her friend, already heading for the rails and riffling through. ‘Oh! These are beautiful, like the dress you wore for my party?’ she asked without pausing, ‘and these!’ with a shriek as she came to the Bill Gibb collection of long dresses resplendent with wide puff sleeves set into tight bodices in rich colours and bold patterns. ‘Let me try this on, and this and this’ she proceeded around the rails like a child in a sweet shop. Rebecca indicated to Carole which of Caitlin’s choices she should put ready in the changing room, as she knew her friend’s shape and which dresses would suit her.

Soon Caitlin had amassed a dozen outfits to try. Not long after she had selected three pairs of Manolos, two Bill Gibb dresses and an Ossie Clarke to take her through the Christmas party season. She then proceeded to plunder the accessories collection selecting a silk cummerbund, several patterned Indian silk scarves, silver jewellery, beads and bangles for presents all the while chattering excitedly to Rebecca and the other girls.

‘I wondered if you could do lunch Becca?’ she asked, ‘Please do!’ she followed when Rebecca hesitated. ‘Can you get these wrapped and ready for me to pick up after?’ she asked turning to Carole, ‘Here’ she held out her credit card, ‘put everything on this.’ Carole took the credit card and very business-like confirmed with Caitlin each of the purchases she

required from the melee of items tossed around the changing room. 'All of these' confirmed Caitlin airily, 'Becca took away the things that didn't work so well. She wouldn't let me have that gorgeous Zandra Rhodes dress because she said it made me look fat!' she added regretfully. Inwardly astonished, Carole gathered everything up as the two friends headed for the door arm in arm. Rebecca looked back and said to Carole, 'I won't be long, we'll just be at the Rose and Crown for a glass of wine and a packet of crisps' she winked at Carole.

Caitlin's idea of lunch being rather grander than Rebecca's they wondered further along the road to a wine bar that did good food. They ordered mains, side salad and a bottle of Pouilly Fuisse, which arrived nicely chilled.

'Becca your shop is wonderful.' Caitlin was serious, 'I'm really sorry I haven't been before. I kept meaning to and then you know...' she tailed off, 'Perhaps you could open on the Kings Road or Brompton, that would be nice and close. Maybe you could get Halston too!'

'Well actually you are the first to know but I am getting Halston, and I will certainly be considering the Kings Road for my next branch!'

'Wow Becca, that's brilliant. You are so clever!' responded Caitlin really admiring her friend's taste and business acumen. The food arrived and they busied themselves with eating for a few minutes. Caitlin then said, trying to sound casual,

'Have you seen Dylan since my party?'

'No, why?' responded Rebecca, not giving anything away.

'Because silly you both look nuts about each other' Caitlin responded as though to a small child. Rebecca took this in.

'Is it that obvious that I like him?'

'Well yeah, actually you both look as though you might copulate on the floor at any moment.' Caitlin responded making Rebecca snort and choke on a mouthful of food, 'I can't believe he hasn't asked you out, he couldn't take his eyes off you all the evening at mine.'

'Well he hasn't' answered Rebecca baldly, 'so he can't be that keen.'

'I'm sure he is' replied Caitlin, with a wry smile, 'I had an experimental flirt with him myself and he hardly noticed my allure!' she wrinkled her nose, thinking, 'Perhaps he's afraid of getting involved because he likes you too much?' She hazarded.

'Well I'm too busy to think about him anyway' said Rebecca with finality, 'I'd better be getting back to the shop. Caiti thanks ever so much for the lunch and the flowers and the huge purchase.' She smiled at her friend fondly, 'How did you track him down for the party?' she asked, suddenly reverting to their prior conversation.

‘Charles, he knows everything about Dylan’ Caitlin answered, prophetically.

## **Suzanne - December 1975**

Suzanne finished work and tidied her desk, it was the last day of work before Christmas and almost everyone had disappeared early. She was getting the train straight to Oxford to spend the festival with her father. She wasn’t looking forward to it, the first without her mother. She arrived at the house to find it looking dark and neglected. Letting herself in she called out to her father, and heard his footsteps coming to the hall to meet her. He looks old she thought as he approached, his arms held wide for a hug. She smiled hello and kissed him, returning his embrace.

‘I hope there’s some food in the house’ she said, ‘I’m starving.’

‘Yes’ he responded, smiling ‘I remembered you were coming darling and I went to the covered market and got an assortment of things. I knew you’d be clever enough to do something tasty with the ingredients.’ Suzanne looked in the fridge with some trepidation as making a recipe from some of her father’s previous purchases had proved a little challenging. However on this occasion she saw eggs and cheese in the fridge and potatoes in the vegetable basket and she knew there were some frozen vegetables.

‘How about an omelette with a jacket potato?’

‘That sounds perfect darling, would you like a glass of wine?’

‘Yes please, Dad. Silly question!’ she rolled her eyes at him. He poured wine and sat at the table watching his daughter as she deftly produced a delicious plate of food with minimum fuss and effort, chatting to him as she worked.

‘We should go out to eat tomorrow. It’s not fair that you work all day and cook all evening’ he declared out of the blue. Suzanne was pleased; he hadn’t suggested anything remotely sociable since her mother died.

‘That would be nice’ she responded, ‘Here dinner’s ready’ she placed the food on the table and handed a bottle of wine for her father to pour. They ate in comfortable silence.

The next day, the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, Suzanne rose early and set off for a shopping spree. It was a lovely though chill morning and she enjoyed the brisk walk into the city where she planned to start food shopping in the covered market. She walked along Cornmarket and entered the market through Golden Cross admiring a few shop windows as she passed. Suzanne had shopped in the market all her life and knew several of the traders. Today she was intent on stocking up the larder for the Christmas holiday; she wanted to make the time as festive as she possibly could.

She roamed around the market stopping to greet traders and a few shoppers as she pushed her way through the milling crowds, all jostling for last minute purchases. First she selected a capon, thinking that a turkey would be far too big for two, bacon and sausages followed. The fish stall produced smoked salmon. Fresh cod for this evening, prawns for Christmas Eve. Leaving bags of purchases in her wake to be collected later she amassed a variety of vegetables, fruit fresh and dried, and nuts. The cheese stall was next; she selected Stilton, Cheddar and some French varieties. The wine shop and delicatessen came last, here she chose a mixed case of wine and stocked up on tins and jars of exotic ingredients to inspire her cooking, artichoke hearts, anchovy fillets, stuffed olives, pesto, pate, duck rillettes, and chestnut puree. Bread, cheese biscuits, crisps and nibbles completed the food. Retracing her footsteps Suzanne picked up all her bags and boxes and complete with a retinue of helpers exited onto the High Street and took a taxi back to the house.

Once everything was unpacked and stored it was time for lunch. She put out the fresh bread and cheese and called her father through from his study. He marvelled at the transformation of the fridge as he extracted the dregs of last night's bottle of white to pour Suzanne a glass,

'A holiday treat, and for all your hard work' he excused the lunchtime drink.

'Thanks Dad, mm lovely!' she responded, taking a sip, 'This is just the start, I'm going back again this afternoon to get a few decorations to brighten the place up a bit and to do some last minute shopping. Do you want to come with me?' she ventured, knowing that he had become something of a recluse. To her surprise and delight he announced,

'I'd like to and don't forget we're going to eat out tonight. I thought you might like to go to the carol concert at Christ Church and then we could go to the pub in Walton Street on the way back?'

'That would be lovely' beamed Suzanne, 'The Jericho or Jude?' she asked, wondering which one was her father's current favourite.

'Or maybe you'd prefer the Bird and Baby?' he asked, alluding to the Eagle and Child pub on St Giles that local wags had renamed.

'Any one for me' Suzanne replied, 'I'm out of the loop these days. You know best.'

Suzanne decided on reflection to postpone the further shopping trip until the following day. Even though Oxford would be hell on Christmas Eve heaving with shoppers, it would also be fun. She preferred to spend the afternoon doing some food preparation and getting ready for the carol concert. Her father concurred without hesitation. He seems to be coping with life much better Suzanne thought with relief.



Bathed and dressed she joined her father in his study; he was also spruced up and ready to leave.

‘You look smart Dad’ she approved, taking in the dark blazer, shirt and tie and grey flannels; again feeling a sense of relief that her father seemed to be more pulled together. They strolled into the centre glad of the topcoats and scarves they had donned. They entered the magical world of Christ Church through Tom Gate joining a gaggle of visitors heading across the quad to the cathedral. There was a crush to enter and queue for a seat in the nave, preferably one from where you could see the choir.

Jack and Suzanne got lucky, squeezing on to the end of a pew near to the choir stalls resplendent with Christmas flower decorations. The serried ranks of candles in the wrought iron candelabras placed next to each chorister creating a pool of soft light. The singing was exquisite the pure voices soaring high to the vaulted ceilings and swelling to the blast of the organ. Suzanne was transported with delight and began to feel lighter of heart than she had for many months. As though communing wordlessly her father chose that moment to squeeze her hand and smile sideways at his daughter. Her heart swelled with love for him and relief that he was making a recovery at last.

They decided on the Jericho as they ambled back through Oxford. So cutting across from St Giles through Little Clarendon Street and passed the Oxford University Press they arrived just in time for last food orders. They decided quickly on Bangers and Mash for Suzanne and Pie and Chips for Jack and chose a bottle of burgundy to go with it. He elected to drink a pint of beer while they waited for their food, pouring a glass of the wine for Suzanne. They chatted amiably together, first the concert then the plan for the following day. Suzanne had presents to buy and also wanted to get some decorations to make the house more festive. Her father suggested looking out a box of old decorations that they’d used for years,

‘I think they will be up in the loft’ he said, ‘some are as old as you!’

‘That’s an idea. It won’t make you too sad will it?’ she asked.

‘You can’t stop the memories haunting you so may as well enjoy the best ones’ he replied philosophically.

They agreed to this plan and decided also to take a walk down to the river in the afternoon to see if they could find some holly.

The following day flashed by. They completed their shopping, separating for an hour and then meeting up to return home together. After a snack lunch Jack went in search of the decorations and Suzanne wrapped presents and prepared food for the evening and the morrow. They had a successful foray for holly even managing to find a few sprigs laden with

berries. Early evening was spent decorating the kitchen, as it was more cheerful than the dining room for their Christmas meal. The hall and her father's study also received a modicum of attention, as they were the most used parts of the house.

Suzanne then prepared a sumptuous repast, smoked salmon, capers and cream cheese with bagels followed by cheese and biscuits. They had a glass each of champagne with the salmon and red with the cheese.

'I've been thinking about the house' Jack began 'I hardly use any of it now. I've been thinking about selling it.' He looked across at Suzanne trying to gauge how she would feel about this idea, 'Not if you mind though' he added, 'the place has lots of memories for you too.' Suzanne could hardly believe what she was hearing; she had been wondering how to broach the very subject to her father.

'It's not up to me Dad. It's what is best for you, and anyway I wouldn't mind at all. Memories last wherever you are' she smiled encouragingly, 'Have you thought where you would go? Is there somewhere near here that you'd like?'

'Not really' he replied 'I just need a small flat or maisonette really' he paused and then hesitating slightly elucidated, 'I wondered about getting a place in London to be nearer to you. That is if you wouldn't mind. There are lots of things to amuse me there; the library, museums, and concerts. I wouldn't want to be a nuisance though.' He paused, 'It would save you feeling that you have to come home to see me here all the time too; which I love and appreciate.' He finished, all in a rush.

'Actually Dad, I think that's a great idea. I'd love to have you nearby as long as you feel sure you won't miss Oxford and your friends here too much?' Suzanne had long been thinking of this move as a potential solution and had consequently discounted the Diplomatic Service scenario that had seemed so tempting, at least for the time being.

Contrary to their expectations Jack and Suzanne enjoyed their Christmas day. Suzanne had found for her father a leather bound copy of 'The Pickwick Papers' one of his favourite Dickens novels with which he was mightily pleased. In turn he had bought for her a very attractive satchel style brief case in a conker brown hide, which was perfect she declared with a hug. Christmas Lunch was a great success and they spent the day reminiscing without tears and planning for the future. Jack would put the Oxford house on the market in the spring after it had received a bit of a spruce up, a lick of paint and some de-cluttering should do the trick they thought. Meanwhile Suzanne would explore possibilities in London to buy a house that they could readily convert into separate living areas, or two flats located near to each other. Suzanne would start their search around Pimlico.

## Penny - July 1976

Simon James Donaldson arrived in the early hours of February 12<sup>th</sup> 1976 screaming lustily. Penny had endured twenty hours in labour but with the sight of her new born son the pain was immediately forgotten. She fell in love again completely and unequivocally; the child was the centre of her universe. From the point of view of her friends she was lost to them in a world of feeds and nappies, naps and feeds, soft toys and baby grows, many of which were dispatched by them as presents for the baby.

The Christening was to be on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> July. Penny and Charles had a long discussion about godparents for their first-born. Penny wanted all her old friends as she didn't want to offend anyone and couldn't choose between them, and she also wanted Jo. Charles thought that Jo should be godmother as she lived with them and was actively involved with the baby, although he could see Penny's point that Jo was already an Aunt. He thought he would ask Martin, his best man to be one godfather but wasn't sure about the other.

'Wouldn't you want Dylan to be the other?' asked Penny, surprised that his choice hadn't been instant.

'I'm not sure that Dylan would be that suitable for the role' responded Charles. He was very fond of his oldest friend but he had concerns about Dylan's lifestyle that he kept to himself. Penny digested this information before declaring diplomatically,

'I think that you will provide the spiritual guidance for our son darling, and Martin would be a good back up. Dylan could play the role of the hedonistic godfather.'

'That was rather the point I was trying to make about his non-suitability' remarked Charles, with a wry smile, 'Anyway I'm not sure that he would accept. He doesn't like responsibilities.'

The decision was made eventually to have a big family party with a marquee out on the lawn so that they could mark their second wedding anniversary at the same time. All friends would be invited and told to form an orderly queue for god parenting of the tribe they hoped to produce. Simon's chosen ones would be Martin and Daniel, Jo and Suzanne, two family members and two friends. They were all delighted to accept and contrary to Penny's worries no one left out was even slightly offended.

1976 was one of the hottest summers since records began and the day of the Christening was no exception. Simon behaved impeccably sleeping through the whole service until Charles baptised his son whence he opened his eyes and smiled beatifically and toothlessly at his father.

Local friends and parishioners had erected the marquee, which proved to be useful as a sunshade in the scorching heat. Many of them had also rallied around to produce bowls of salads, cakes and puddings to supplement the almost constant few days of food preparation that Penny had done. Jane had prepared a whole poached salmon that provided a striking centrepiece to the impressive array. Penny's parents had arrived bearing gifts in the form of cases of champagne, which had totally taken over space in the fridge.

The women were almost all attired in maxi dresses and sandals, the fashion of the day coinciding exactly with the requirements of the weather for once. The fine cotton and silk fabrics being wonderfully cool to wear. After the formality of the church service was over the men had removed jackets and ties with a sigh of relief. Most were now in suit trousers and open neck shirts with the sleeves rolled up.

Everyone cooed over the baby admiring his soft downy head and big blue eyes, attributing his various features to one parent or the other, or Auntie Jo or Uncle Daniel or Auntie Agnes or one or other of the grandparents. The three friends gathered around Penny and took turns holding Simon as they chatted with her. They reminisced about her wedding two years earlier, complimented her on the garden, the food, her dress, the house and most of all her pride and joy, her son.

In her turn Penny admired her friend's outfits and wanted to know all their news. Rebecca was pleased with the way that Palmerstone was doing and made it known that she was planning to open another shop, but probably not until next spring she qualified. There followed much excited speculation about where the shop would be and what would she stock, would it be the same or dramatically different. Rebecca, laughing would not be drawn on either, as she had not yet finalised her plans.

She was certainly an excellent advertisement for her business dressed in a fine cotton lawn maxi in pale pinks and mauves in a paisley pattern. The bib style bodice and hem slightly quilted to give weight. Here the pattern and colour intensified to deep pinks and purples, echoed in the ribbon ties from the bodice, wrapped and tied loosely at the back emphasising her slim figure. She had not been unaware when she selected the dress that her body was visible through the fabric in certain light. In fact she had thought that if Dylan was at the Christening he could take a look at what he was missing because he was not going to get anywhere near her this time.

Suzanne reported progress on her father's recovery and on their plans to purchase in London. She had found a house in Pimlico which could easily suit their purposes as it would divide quite easily into self contained parts for privacy but could also provide them with a

large, light living space to share. It looked like the Oxford house had been sold so they were planning to make an offer.

Caitlin was full of parties, theatres, opening nights and weekends in the country. She was never short of invitations and was still finding her London lifestyle amusing. Her big news was that she was expecting to have a half brother or sister any day soon. Her father had married Ariel in the September of 1974, not long after she and Caitlin had first met. They were now expecting their first child.

‘That’s really strange’ remarked Penny, ‘that I have a child older than your brother or sister.’

‘I know. If I have children they’ll have an aunt or uncle of about the same age’ said Caitlin, ‘not that I have any imminent plans.’ She hastened to add, as she observed a quizzical look from Rebecca. ‘Actually I’m really happy for them they are besotted with each other and desperate for the baby’ she said generously, ‘a bit like you two love birds’ she added to Penny.

It was at this point that Dylan arrived very late in the day. It was impossible for Rebecca to avoid him as she was standing chatting with the hostess for whom he immediately headed expressing profuse apologies and producing an extravagant present for the baby. He looked suave in a linen suit of a cafe au lait hue, the jacket slung over his shoulder. His face and arms deeply tanned by the sun shown off by a white silk shirt hinting at the well-muscled body beneath. He greeted each of the girls with a kiss on the cheek, Rebecca steeling herself to be indifferent to him. As her turn came she lifted her chin and said in her best artificial party tone,

‘Dylan, how nice.’ She presented her cheek for the briefest brush of his lips, and turned away from him engaging a surprised Suzanne in conversation about the Pimlico house, ‘How many storeys are there? How are you thinking of dividing it?’ she asked, commencing a detailed exchange about floors, kitchen and bathrooms, necessary plumbing, refurbishment and decor.

Dylan moved to greet Charles and having apologised for his lateness and congratulated him apologised again that he had to leave. No sooner said he was gone, a scrunch of tyres on the gravel and a roar of exhaust announcing his departure.

The rest of the day was uneventful and enjoyable. Locals disappeared towards the end of the afternoon leaving family and overnight guests to clear up the debris and repair to the kitchen for cheese and wine or cups of tea for the fainthearted.

Later, lying propped up in bed having fed the baby and put him down to sleep, Penny chatted happily to Charles about the events of the day. She loved nothing better than a house full of people, especially all of her favourite ones. Charles finished his ablutions and approached the bed attired only in his socks and dog collar. He waved his semi erect penis with his hand as he approached the bed with a certain look in his eye. She shook with half suppressed giggles as he mounted the bed announcing his intention to claim his conjugal rights.

‘Time we made another baby Mrs Donaldson’ he fell on Penny and they lay together giggling happily. Then with a well practiced manoeuvre he entered her and their bodies moved rhythmically together in the intense bliss of sexual compatibility, slowly and gently Charles rode Penny until she came in gasps of pleasure, only then did he allow himself to ejaculate with a groan of relief. They would like another baby soon but neither minded practising!

## **Rebecca - July 1976**

Rebecca had enjoyed the weekend of the Christening and had spent many hours chatting with her friends individually and together. She was happy that they all seemed to be in a good place at the moment, Penny looked radiant with happiness, and Caitlin was having fun. Suzanne was more relaxed about her father and looking forward to the move. Rebecca was pleased with herself for not responding to Dylan’s presence. She thought that she had handled the meeting really well, though she had worried that it may have been the cool reception she had given him that had made him leave so precipitously. But who knew with Dylan, she shrugged her shoulders dismissing the thought.

Mondays were a funny day in the shop sometimes hectic sometimes really quiet. Today was one of the later. Rebecca and Carole set about remerchandising the shop and re-dressing the window. The secret of this time of year was to mix new things in with the sale items cleverly so that customers were tempted in by a bargain but ended up buying the new stuff, or some of each which was an even better result.

The two had worked hard shifting stock around the rails, creating new looks with different pieces and arranging clever juxtapositions of colour and print to draw the eye. Happy with the effect Carole made coffees for them and produced some chocolate to share.

‘Yum!’ approved Rebecca, ‘Why don’t you go home Carole, I’ll cash up.’

‘You sure?’ she checked, already heading to the stock room to collect her bag.

‘Yes of course, see you tomorrow.’

Rebecca busied herself doing final tweaks, lining hangers up with precision and restacking tees so that they were in perfect alignment. She sighed inwardly as the doorbell chimed. Typical nobody comes in all day and then you get someone at closing time. She straightened up and fixed a welcoming smile on her face and turned to greet...Dylan. Dylan was half hidden by a bouquet of irises, Rebecca's favourite flowers, looking gorgeous and smiling contritely. He stepped into the shop, pushing the door shut behind him with his foot. He proffered the flowers for Rebecca to take. Surprised and wrong footed by his appearance in the shop she almost took them from him. Then with a determined tilt of her chin she put her arms behind her back and refused defiantly,

'No, Dylan, no thank you' she shook her head and backed away,

'Why? I want to apologise and to take you out' he smiled his winning smile and sighed, 'give me a chance to explain myself, please Rebecca.' He pushed the flowers firmly at her, saying 'Here take these, please.' As she reluctantly took the flowers from him he glanced at his watch 'It looks about shop closing time to me. Why don't you let me take you out for a drink and we'll talk.' He sensed a hesitation and pushed his advantage, 'you could take these upstairs and put them in water. I'll hang around here for you, as long as you lock up first. I may not be an ideal shop assistant.' He joked, trying to diffuse the atmosphere. 'And you may like to clean up a bit, you have a smut on your nose' he finished, with a lopsided grin that set Rebecca's pulse soaring.

She found herself upstairs wondering what the hell she was doing. Dylan was right she did have a smut, which she scrubbed at angrily. She stood stock still in the bathroom for a few minutes breathing deeply trying to calm down and think straight. *Surely there would be no harm in just going for a drink and hearing him out* she thought. Having decided she quickly changed into jeans and an Indian print wrap top tied loosely around her waist. She brushed her dark glossy hair which she now wore shoulder length. Rebecca brushed her teeth then wished she hadn't because Dylan might think it was because she expected to be kissed, which thought sent her back into overdrive.

She slipped her feet into flat sandals and picking up her bag marched back downstairs before she could change her mind. Dylan was lounging against the central island coolly taking in the shop fittings and the serried ranks of clothing. He smiled widely as Rebecca reappeared,

'You look great, and so does your shop. You have a huge amount of talent my dear.' He stated seriously. 'Now where shall we go?' he asked looping his arm casually through hers. Rebecca steered him along the street to the wine bar and selected a small table in the corner

away from the bar which was already quite busy despite being early on a Monday evening. She sat and watched Dylan as he pushed his way to the bar to order drinks. His hair was shorter though it still curled over the collar of his shirt, of a pale blue washed to a thread chambray. The once expensive shirt was loosely tucked into an equally worn pair of Levis, the softness of the old denim just suggesting the muscle of his buttocks and thighs. He was much tanned from the hot summer weather they had been enjoying; the tan accentuated the striking colour of his eyes. She sternly cautioned herself to be dispassionate about this man who disturbed her so much but appeared to be playing with her emotions. She wondered what he would have to say to her to excuse his odd behaviour.

Dylan just then returned to the table plonking down a bottle of wine and two glasses and sat next to Rebecca on the upholstered corner seat so that his thigh brushed hers. He reached over and poured a glass of nicely chilled Macon Blanc and lifted his glass in salute, 'To the most beautiful girl in my world!' Rebecca flushed and grimaced at the too extravagant praise making Dylan laugh and protest his veracity. They sat quietly for a few moments both taking in the attractions of the other and examining their own feelings then both speaking at once,

'Let me tell you...'

'Why did you...'

They both broke off and hesitated. Then Dylan took the initiative,

'My turn, I think I more than owe you an explanation.' Dylan proceeded to tell Rebecca how much he had been attracted to her from the moment he set eyes on her walking into the cathedral at Charles's wedding.

'I wanted to talk to you all day at the reception but every time I came near to you someone else butted in' he continued ruefully. 'In the end you came to find me.'

'I did not' protested Rebecca, 'I was just admiring the garden in the sunset and you...you ambushed me!' she countered. Dylan laughed and took her hand,

'I was just teasing you *ma belle!*' he raised her hand to his lips and dropped a kiss into her palm, smiling mischievously into her face, then rebuking himself proceeded, 'I apologise. I must tell all and let you be the judge of my behaviour.' He continued, 'I wanted to ask you to see me that evening and then the opportunity was denied to me by Martin's untimely intervention, if you remember?' She nodded ascent. 'Next day I was set to travel; you know that I am a freelance photographer and I travel extensively for my work?' he cocked an eyebrow with the question. Rebecca shook her head and indicated that she didn't really know that much about him. 'Well I do' he continued, 'and I suppose that is why I did nothing. It's not exactly a great proposition to present to a girl that you are serious about.' Rebecca



digested this information, and eventually said, 'You could have given the girl a chance to decide for herself.' He smiled and agreed his mistake gravely,

'I see the error of my ways and I suppose that is what I'm here to ask. Would you want a relationship with someone who is often away travelling, someone who can't always keep promises and commitments because of his work?' He looked seriously into her eyes and explained, 'It wouldn't be fair of me to ask you without telling you about the downsides. Would you consider seeing me Rebecca?' Her heart was racing again and she felt a flood of relief and yearning. He really wanted her, seriously. She raised her eyes to his and stated simply,

'Yes, I would. I will, I mean.'

Dylan made a strangled whooping sound and bent and kissed her full on the mouth. Success he thought, as he ravished her thoroughly with his tongue. He had secured the girl and his exit route whenever he needed it. Now to seal the deal, he lifted his mouth from hers emitting a guttural groan of pleasure. Rebecca was blushing furiously aware of several glances in their direction, not all approving.

'Shall we get out of here?' whispered Dylan, grazing his lips against her ear as he spoke. They walked out of the wine bar in a semi-somnambulant state and made for Rebecca's flat his arm around her waist. They barely made it through the flat door before they were tugging and tearing at each other's clothes, mouths locked desperately together. Dylan bent and lifted her easily off her feet to carry her up the stairs without ceasing to kiss her.

'Bedroom?' He asked, disengaging his lips from hers, seeking both permission and direction in his request.

'Um' she acquiesced hazily, 'this door'. He pushed the bedroom door with his foot and deposited her gently in the middle of her large double bed.

'Are you sure?' he growled huskily, 'first date and all that.'

'Don't you dare try to leave me in this state!' she exclaimed in mock censure, laughing and grabbing his shirtfront she pulled him down on top of her.

'Well in that case, you wanton hussy' rejoined Dylan, pressing himself against her so she could feel every inch of him. 'Open my fly and hold me' he ordered. She obediently unzipped and gasped with pleasure as she released his cock and took his shaft in both hands. 'Take your panties down.' As she struggled from her underwear he rolled his body onto hers so she could feel his full weight. He pushed her top away from her breasts and sucked at her nipples. She pushed him away desperate for him to take her clitoris. He laughed and very slowly kissed and tongued his way down her body, pausing at her belly to lick the flat taut

flesh. 'Open your legs. Hold your pussy open for me.' He demanded. He laid his head on her thigh for a moment staring at her mound and the labia open ready for him. She was so engorged with desire that he could see her clitoris standing to attention. Just the way he liked his women he thought. Very slowly he inserted his tongue and flicked her clitoris slowly and languorously.

Rebecca was so aroused that she whimpered for him to enter her. Dylan straddled her body and very carefully guided his cock so that the tip only entered. Then he rubbed slowly and rhythmically the end of his penis against her, then he plunged in and then retreated again and again until bucking and clenching him with an intense orgasm that shook her very being Rebecca screamed with pleasure and Dylan finally thrust into her and rode her fast and hard until she came again as he whipped his cock out and ejaculated in a great spurt across her belly. Groaning they fell together in a sticky mess spent and replete.

Rebecca had never experienced anything remotely so intense in her few prior sexual encounters. She was hooked.

## **Suzanne - August 1976**

Suzanne and her father, Jack had been in the Pimlico house for a month. The arrangement suited them both and they had settled into a routine that fulfilled their needs for both company and solitude.

Suzanne had found the house during a Saturday trawl of the estate agents. A Georgian five storey terraced house, in the middle of Pimlico on Westmorland Terrace. It could be perfect for their needs and they should be able to afford it with only a small mortgage for her to pay. She had viewed the house and liked it immediately. More important, she could see that with some structural work it would provide the flexibility of joint living space and private quarters that they wanted.

The sale of the Oxford house had gone through almost immediately the house went on the market in March. Her father then surprised Suzanne. Once he had approved the new house he elected to leave for a visit to Australia to visit an old friend who had emigrated to Sydney over 20 years before. She was impressed and pleased by his intrepidity and waved him off from Heathrow on the start of his adventure.

Suzanne completed the purchase of Westmorland Terrace and, organised to a fault, had the builders in the next day executing the modifications that she had had an architect design for her. The plans that the architect had produced made the most of the tall thin building, opening up rooms and letting in lots of natural light. When the house was finished they had a

large dining kitchen on the lower ground floor with French windows out onto the postage stamp patio garden. On the same floor, at the front of the house there was a large study, cum snug, for Jack. The ground floor provided a spacious sitting room. At the back where the old kitchen had been there was now a guest bedroom and shower room. The first floor was made into a spacious bedroom and bathroom for Jack and the second floor the almost identical layout for her. The top floor was to be a hobbies room for Suzanne, a roof light adding to its usefulness and appeal.

The architect had maximised storage opportunities in her design. Bookcases were to be built into the alcoves either side of the fireplaces in the reception rooms and likewise clever layouts in the bedrooms allowed for built in wardrobes. The studies were both lined on one wall with a combination of shelves and cupboards to meet any storage eventuality. Suzanne, in keeping with her architect's advice, had all the wooden floors polished and repaired where necessary and kept the decorations very neutral in a palette of whites and creams. The patio was newly brick paved and a raised border built against the end wall for a few plants to suit her limited gardening talents.

Suzanne took a few days off work to supervise moving her meagre belongings from the Earls Court flat and to arrange delivery of the few pieces that her father had decided to keep and store, his desk and the old scrubbed pine kitchen table being the largest. These tasks complete she planned her shopping spree; a combination of Habitat, Heals and John Lewis should do it she thought finishing her list.

By the time Jack returned from his big adventure in Australia the house was well nigh finished. The lower ground floor looked sensational the blonde wood of the kitchen units and the oak of the floor relieved by white painted walls featuring a couple of giant, colourful framed posters beneath which sat a large squashy sofa. The chrome and black leather chairs brought from her flat, the contrast really effective, surrounded the old kitchen table. The French windows stood open to show the pocket size patio garden replete with potted plants and a small wrought iron table and chairs, perfect for reading Sunday papers on a nice day. In his study Jack's desk was placed so that he had light from the basement window and his boxes of books had been arranged tidily on the bookshelves. Suzanne had bought a big comfy swivel chair and a cheerful patterned rug to warm the wood floor.

For the ground floor living room Suzanne had used a lovely rug from the Oxford house that she hardly remembered; here it provided a strong feature for the otherwise neutral colour scheme. Suzanne picked out a couple of prints in red and ochre, which complimented the main colours of the rug. She'd bought three medium sofas that sat around the fireplace with

occasional table between and a large coffee table in front; they were covered in cream linen loose covers with a scattering of bright cushions. She had put the bed from her flat in the guest room and it looked cosy covered in the orange throw and red cushions.

In her father's room she had kept the furnishings simple and masculine, the covers in a burgundy colour that she knew he liked, and a natural wool carpet for warmth. She had bought matching towels for his bathroom, which was big enough to contain a separate large shower cubicle as well as the large traditional freestanding bath.

Her own rooms, which she showed him proudly, were configured in the same way as his own but she had chosen softer colours. A French style sleigh bed was covered in a patchwork quilt in pinks, reds and whites splattered with flower and bird prints that she had made herself. The old chair from her flat set by the window for reading. Her bathroom was much the same as the one downstairs so they just glimpsed this on the way to a final stop in her loft room. Here she had chosen to have a big table, which had been awkward to get up the stairs, now here it provided a central working space beneath the new skylights. She would use it for working, but also for writing, painting and sewing all of which she enjoyed doing in her leisure time.

Jack was awestruck by his daughter's practicality and taste. He thought she had made a brilliant job of the house and he told her so. They spent a lovely evening together happy in their new home, and with lots to talk about had a late night.

The final additions to life in Westmorland Terrace came courtesy of Rebecca. She had arrived for super clutching a large wicker basket, which was emitting squeaks of protest from its inhabitants.

'House warming present' she announced, hoping that the new arrivals would be warmly received. 'Here.' She passed the basket to Suzanne, 'Take a look, they are soo cute!' Suzanne opened the basket on the kitchen floor to reveal two small kittens, a tabby and a black and white; their eyes round with curiosity. Suzanne lifted them carefully out from captivity and watched them as they skittered around the kitchen inspecting everything, occasionally distracted by an ear that needed a scratch or a tail chasing interlude.

'Come and see what Becca's brought us' she called through to her father in the study. Jack came through and greeted Rebecca who he hadn't seen for some time and admired the antics of the kittens for a while. He liked cats. They had had a pair not dissimilar from these when Suzanne was a toddler he reminisced to the girls.

'Do you remember darling?' he asked Suzanne.

‘Yes of course, they were around until I went to school. Weren’t they called Cain and Abel?’

‘Yes that’s right they were. You do have a good memory.’ He smiled benignly at the two friends and volunteered to open the bar.

‘Great stuff, thanks Dad, meanwhile I’m going to take Becca for a tour of the house.’

‘Please’ Rebecca responded springing to her feet, ‘I love this room, by the way; can’t wait to see the rest.’

Rebecca was genuinely impressed by what her friend had achieved in the house. It was lovely. Suzanne shrugged off the praise and attributed the success to the brilliant architect that she had used.

‘It cost far less than I thought it would and she solved so many problems and came up with innovative ideas that I never would have thought of. I would definitely use her again, except I probably won’t ever move.’ She qualified.

The tour finished they returned to the kitchen to join Jack who had their drinks ready. Suzanne put the finishing touches to the meal while Jack described what he had seen of Australia and related some of his experiences there at Rebecca’s request.

They all watched the antics of the kittens with amusement as they listened to Jack’s exploits and the girls exchanged news. Choosing names for the kittens then emerged as a priority; the black and white one proved quite easy as he had a distinctive black marking across the top of his head and eyes on his otherwise white face.

‘Zorro!’ said Suzanne, inspired.

‘Oh, brilliant Annie’ Rebecca nodded her agreement, ‘he looks just like a bandit!’ Naming the tabby required a bit more effort as they felt a theme was required. The game provided much amusement as they dined on a very good Moussaka that Suzanne had prepared and drank some first class burgundy. Finally, after a few suggestions that were met with groans of derision from the other participants, Rebecca cried,

‘Ziggy!’ she was a fan of David Bowie and the name seemed to go with Zorro, though way off the original thought track.

‘That’s it’ endorsed Suzanne, ‘Perfect, Ziggy and Zorro, I’ll have to get a poo tray and baskets for them tomorrow.’ Suzanne had put some newspaper down as a temporary measure and had tucked them up on a warm blanket for sleeping purposes when, exhausted by the excitement of the day they had curled up in a ball together on the sofa and fallen asleep.

Rebecca decided it was time for her to get back home to bed and said her farewells to Suzanne and her father. Suzanne hugged her friend goodbye on the doorstep thanking her

profusely for the kittens; she thought they would be great company for her father while she was out at work.

‘Take care of yourself Becca, you look tired and much too skinny’ reprimanded Suzanne with affection; she was worried about her friend and thought she was probably working too hard.

‘I will, don’t worry Annie’ she responded, thinking inwardly that this may be easier said than done. Her relationship with Dylan was not at all what she had expected or hoped for.

## **Jo - August 1976**

Jo was happy in her job and very much enjoyed sharing her brother and sister-in-law’s house. She particularly felt privileged to have played a role in young Simon’s early years. Now that Charles and Penny were expecting their second child and she had almost completed her second year at Houghton Conquest she felt ready to move on. She had been travelling home to Lincoln ever more frequently over the past year as her relationship with Julius had intensified. Their first date had been on the evening before Charles and Penny’s nuptials. Jo had remained secretive about her growing commitment. She wasn’t sure how her family and friends would receive Julius. Not that she thought that any of them were racist in their beliefs, more that they all lived in predominantly white middle class communities.

Julius’s parents had travelled from Jamaica to England seeking work in the early 1960’s. Julius and his brother and two sisters had been born in North London at two-year intervals, Julius the youngest in 1950. The Johnson family had moved out of London seeking a better life when Julius was four years old. They had settled in Nottingham where the children all attended school and with their parent’s encouragement did well, particularly Julius who had passed all his exams with high marks and gone on to train as a teacher.

Jo had first encountered him when he was a first year student at Lincoln College and she had been in her last year at high school. She had spent a day at the college attending lectures to see if she liked the idea of teacher training. Julius had been detailed to look after her for the day. They had both liked each other immediately, she because he was so intent on making her day interesting and informative; nothing was too much trouble. He was drawn to her because she was naturally curious and interested in everything and wasn’t at all awkward around him. She asked him about his family and how he came to be in Lincoln. He liked this about her and found it refreshing, most people pretended not to notice he was black which seemed to him like ignoring the elephant in the room, though he understood it was mostly through ignorance or embarrassment.

Jo had written a letter to Julius thanking him for his kindness to her during her visit. He had replied which had led them to correspond quite frequently. Jo sent him long letters about her experiences at Bedford College during her first year; it was these letters that had given him the confidence to ask her to go out with him for a drink when next she was at home. Thrilled Jo had responded affirmatively and they had been seeing each other ever since. At first she had seen him during weekends with her parents. They never thought to question their daughter going out with friends every Saturday night that she was home.

As she and Julius grew more serious about each other she had found it easy in practice to deceive her family. When she went to Lincoln Charles automatically thought she was staying with their parents, when she wasn't at home her parent's thought she was with Charles and Penny. Unfortunately for Jo her conscience wasn't so easily manipulated. If their relationship was to blossom it was time that they let their respective families know. The longer they left it the harder it would become.

Julius had just received a promotion. He had been asked to become head of the fifth year at the secondary school where he had taught since graduating. He had suggested to Jo that they may live together, or if she preferred they could marry. He couldn't imagine life without her he had added seriously.

'If you could get a job back here it would help us to get started' he said 'but we could manage now on my income.' He would love to take care of Jo and for them to have lots of babies together. They would make beautiful babies with the mixture of their colouring, her blonde with his black he thought fondly.

Jo and Julius planned the family introductions to take place on the same weekend. Charles and Penny were spending a rare weekend with Jo's parents in Lincoln so she contrived to arrange to bring her 'boyfriend' home to meet them all on the Saturday evening. She was to go with Julius to meet his family the following day at lunchtime. They were both very apprehensive about the introductions though keeping up pretence with each other that the introductions would be merely a routine.

Jane was surprised and rather hurt that she knew nothing of this boy that Jo was seeing. Her daughter was normally very open with her mother. The evening arrived and Jo steeled herself for the meeting. She knew that she had been deceitful and she was ashamed of it. What she was not ashamed of was her lovely Julius she would be really hurt if her family didn't take to him. She needn't have worried. In fact retrospectively she felt rather ashamed of doubting her family.

Jo and Julius walked from his flat up the hill to the Cathedral Close, arriving at the house in plenty of time for the evening meal. Jo took Julius straight to the kitchen, where she knew that most of the family would be congregated around the huge kitchen table. All of them made Julius feel welcome and the natural curiosity that they felt about Jo's mysterious 'boyfriend' was measured; sensitively dispersed within a melee of other conversations as they caught up with each other's news and discussed future plans.

Penny easily broached the subject of Julius's culture as she had travelled quite widely visiting several of her father's postings. She was quite disappointed to learn that Julius had never been to Jamaica, as she had loved the Latin American countries that she had visited. The conversation once started elicited all the information needed about Julius's roots, his family and their immigration to England with hopes and aspirations for family's betterment. Julius told of his education and his career in teaching, interrupted several times by a proud and supportive Jo.

Julius, keen to remove the spotlight from him, asked Penny and Charles about the new arrival, its imminence being obvious to all. Everyone fussed over Simon when he appeared bathed and in his pyjamas for a bedtime story and a goodnight kiss before being carted off to bed, protesting mildly. Jane had cleverly decided to serve dinner in the kitchen as she thought it would be less intimidating for a stranger in the midst of such a large clan. Jo appreciated her mother's sensitivity and busied around to help get the table laid and the food served. Observing Julius chatting animatedly with Penny and then also with Charles, as he returned from tucking Simon into bed, Jo was able to relax and enjoy herself.

The couple left the close at the end of a very successful evening and walked hand in hand back through the darkened streets of Lincoln. The tall black man and the petite blonde woman attracted occasional hostile glances, as they had experienced occasionally in the past, from some late night revellers. Jo shrugged her shoulders inwardly knowing that other's prejudices were a fact of her life from now on. Julius flinched from the hurt that such ignorance inflicted on both of them. As they walked they discussed the evening that they had spent with Jo's family. Julius had liked them all and had felt welcome he said. Inwardly he was hoping that Jo would get such a good welcome from his own family.

The following morning Jo drove them both over to Nottingham to meet the Johnson clan. Julius was deep in thought about his family and their possible reactions to Jo. His parents he thought would be polite and kind but would have reservations about a white girl in the family. His brother Arnie and sister Jamie would probably be fine. It was his sister Angelique that he had doubts about. She had had an unfortunate racially motivated incident



with some white boys in her teens. Though unhurt, the experience had left her with a bitter attitude towards whites and she avoided making friends with any that she came into contact with, sometimes causing hurt feelings. He wondered now if he should warn Jo or if he could give Angelique the benefit of the doubt. He, different from Jo, had taken the precaution of pre-warning his family.

Unlike Jo's mother, Lydia, Julius's mother, had laid the table in the virtually unused, at least for dining, dining room of their Victorian semi. She had also mistakenly chosen to cook a Sunday roast when she would have been much more comfortable with the traditional Caribbean dishes she normally cooked. Consequently she was hot and harassed when her son arrived with his new white girlfriend. Julius's father, Winston, was more prepared and with the easy charm that his son had inherited he greeted Jo with friendliness as he shook hands with his son and patted him on the back.

They sat in the front room trying not to listen to raised voices from the kitchen where Lydia was scolding Jamie and Angel to help her or go and talk to their brother. Winston made small talk with his son and Jo, wishing that they were in the kitchen enjoying a beer. Arnie eventually made an appearance and nodded at Jo, in a friendly manner as he greeted his brother.

'Anyone for a beer?' he asked, wandering toward the kitchen,

'Yeah, great thanks Arnie' smiled Julius, thankful for the idea, 'Jo? Dad, a beer for you?' he asked, getting up to help fetch the drinks. As they drank their lagers tongues loosened a bit and the conversation began to flow more freely. Called through to eat, they all filed into the dining room and resumed talking though with a more stilted flow. Lydia was worried about the dinner and consequently fretted despite reassurance from Winston and Julius. Jo found herself unusually tongue tied and looked to Julius for help. He responded by telling the story of how they had met at Lincoln finishing by saying,

'So Jo went to College in Bedford and trained to be a teacher too.'

'Except that I chose to teach younger children; I like reading stories and making things with them.' She elaborated, picking up from Julius's lead.

'That's good' smiled Jamie, 'you'll have a load of mine and Arnie's here in a minute, 'they've been dragged off to the park to let off some steam.'

The afternoon improved greatly for Jo when Jamie's three girls and Arnie's two boys returned with Arnie's wife and Jamie's partner. All awkwardness was suspended, as the kids appeared clamouring for Granny's trifle, ice cream, banana fritters and chocolate gateaux all of which were a great success with children and adults alike. After lunch the boys wanted to

play football and badgered Uncle Julius to play with them in the back garden. The girls inveigled Aunt Angelique and Jo to play with them, the age range between four and seven throwing up a multitude of proposals. The two adults thrown together made a reasonable start to a difficult relationship by together referring adroitly the girl's differing demands.

It had been agreed between Jo and Julius that she would leave him alone with his family that evening. She hugged him goodbye on the doorstep having made her thanks and farewells to Lydia and Winston. She then drove over to Lincoln for the long overdue conversation with her parents.

## **Suzanne - July 1977**

Life for Suzanne was fulfilling but not very exciting she thought. She loved the Pimlico house that she shared with her father in a pleasantly amicable relationship. Neither felt pressure to spend time with the other yet they both enjoyed the times that they did. Suzanne had fallen into a routine of cooking an evening meal that they shared and talked over the experiences of the day like an old married couple. Sometimes Suzanne felt like a substitute for her mother but not often and she didn't really mind.

Ziggy and Zorro were a great form of entertainment for them both. The two young cats were constantly seeking and finding new adventures to amuse themselves and their owners. Apart from a phase of racing up the living room curtains which Jack had firmly put a stop to; their games were harmless. They played hide and seek springing out from their hiding place and wrestling the other to the ground in a flurry of fur. Zorro liked to race across the polished floor and leap onto a rug at such speed that it slid across the floor with him on top like a toboggan. Ziggy liked to lay in wait on the stairs ostensibly sleeping with his legs in the air then he would grab hold of Zorro from underneath as he came to investigate. The two would then roll down the stairs locked in combat, which would end with a mutual washing session and a short nap. In the evenings after dinner Zorro liked to lie on the back of the sofa and hang his paw over the side to pat Suzanne's head. Ziggy would sit on the arm of the sofa next to Suzanne or curl up beside Jack.

Suzanne's work was demanding and she enjoyed the many challenges that she faced day to day. Mr Lewis, who had become her unofficial mentor, was due to retire in a few weeks time and she wondered how his leaving would affect her future career. He had been true to his word and become a stalwart supporter of her work. He had introduced her into senior and influential networks, which had provided her with contacts in many of the civil service departments. Suzanne was beginning to wonder if a sideways move would be good for her

career and also may be more intellectually stimulating. She had heard that there was a position coming vacant in the Home Office. The post would be senior to her current role and it would be educational. She had met some of the senior people and thought she may have a good chance if the post was not already earmarked for an internal candidate. Henry Lewis would definitely know the answer to this conundrum and she intended to ask him the following week.

Her father, Jack, had settled into life in London. He often spent the day at the British Museum or the British Library researching for some paper that he intended to write but somehow never ever got down to. He sometimes ventured to Oxford to meet up with his ex colleagues and occasionally had visits from the same in London. When an overnight visit was organised Suzanne would help her father to entertain. Actually she found the dinner table conversation extremely interesting, as her father's friends were all formidable intellectuals.

Suzanne had maintained her interests in learning cooking and languages and added a new string to her bow by completing a touch-typing evening class. She intended to use this skill to exploit the use of modern information technology that was starting to creep into everyday life. Suzanne despaired sometimes of the laggard nature of the civil service but she knew that one day that they would have to change. The whole world would be using computers. She also harboured dreams of writing in the future.

Suzanne had also developed an interest in all things Spanish. She suspected it had begun with her Mediterranean cookery course; her pleasure in the food soon lead to additional interests; first into learning the language, followed by the history and culture of the country. An idea had then started to form in Suzanne's mind. She would travel to Spain and spend two or three weeks exploring some of the cities and areas that she had been reading about. She would fly out to Madrid or Seville, hire a car and drive around the southern regions, particularly Andalucía, the area that fascinated her most. At first her father was worried about her undertaking this adventure on her own. However he understood that his daughter was more than capable of taking care of herself and also that she needed to have independence from him.

Suzanne spent several weeks poring over maps and travel books planning her journey. She wanted to visit Seville, Granada, Malaga, Marbella, Cadiz, Jerez and Madrid. She planned her route to make the most of the scenery and cultural opportunities and produced a detailed itinerary. Next she contacted travel agents and obtained details and prices for flights, car hire and hotels on route. She found a small local company who were very helpful and she struck

up such a good relationship with Ruth that she almost felt that they ought to do the journey together.

Suzanne had thought extensively about travelling with a companion but her options were limited. Her father she needed to have some space from occasionally and she knew that he shouldn't become too dependent on her constant availability. Her best friends were all too time limited, Penny with her family to care for, Rebecca with her business and Caitlin travelled constantly anyway. She was quite good friends with a colleague at the foreign office, Shirley was in an equivalent position in a different department and the two women had struck up a good working relationship which had over time become a friendship.

Suzanne and Shirley had first socialised with other colleagues after work on a Friday evening, which had led to occasional plans to meet for a drink, a meal or a concert. Suzanne didn't think that she really knew Shirley well enough to spend several weeks in her company. There would also be difficulties for them both to get leave at the same time from work. This all left Suzanne as a solo traveller. In some ways she was excited by this and in others apprehensive.

Not however trepid enough to deter her. Suzanne booked her flights and a few hotels at key points on her journey but not for every night because she wanted to be flexible enough to change her plans to suit her needs. Ruth hired a car for Suzanne to pick up at the airport as she could get a much better rate. Suzanne had booked the final two weeks of May and the first week of June for her holiday; the most time she had had off work since she joined the civil service.

Looking back on those three weeks exploring southern Spain Suzanne realised that this journey was the first in her long love affair with the Spanish people. She had had the best of times. Driving along dusty roads and tracks, winding up and down mountain roads, bouncing over potholes and rough terrain marvelling at the wonderful views of the Mediterranean with glimpse of Gibraltar and North Africa in the distance, she was in heaven. She stopped and ate at small bodegas used only by the locals as she journeyed, sampling the very best in simple local dishes.

In the evenings she would book into a small posada and settle herself into her room, wash and change and go out on foot to explore. She wandered around taking in her surroundings causing a certain amount of curiosity and consternation being a lone woman traveller. She soon gained confidence to practice her Spanish on the local people who were always surprised and delighted to hear a tourist speak in their own language however lacking in exactness. She would talk to the cooks, often women in the local cantinas, asking them for

recipes that she could try at home on her family and friends. Although not deliberate in intent she had soon found that flattery of this sort earned her a friendly welcome wherever she journeyed. She was often given gifts of bread fresh from the oven, or olives just harvested tomatoes still warm from the sun and speciality cheeses to take with her on her onward journey.

Suzanne had read a book by Washington Irving when she had been studying in Oxford. His description of a journey that he made on horseback with a friend in 1851 had sparked her imagination. Irving and his associate from the Russian Embassy in Madrid had journeyed across the deserts and mountains of southern Spain to visit Granada and the famous Alhambra a spectacular Moorish palace. With this story in her mind one of the most spectacular parts of her journey was traversing the scorching dry planes and then climbing through the foothills towards the high snow capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada to reach the wondrous city of Granada.

Here she spent a couple of days exploring the winding streets and plazas of the city sampling its food and wine. She made a pilgrimage to the Alhambra palace, which she found breathtakingly beautiful. The Moorish design of the formal gardens with their network of waterways and fountains making the gardens appear like a cool inviting oasis amidst the heat of the desert. She admired the ancient's inventiveness and engineering skills that had enabled them to harness the melted snow and rain water from the height of the mountains to water and cool the palace gardens.

It was with great regret that Suzanne finished her journey back in Madrid a few days later and flew back to the UK. She loved Spain and had felt at home there, she felt sure that she would return again and again.

## **Caitlin - November 1977**

Caitlin received the news of first her grandmother's death and very shortly afterwards that of her grandfather with sadness and regret. She had visited them only once since her mother had been killed so tragically not long after the lovely holiday they had all spent together in Sorrento. Not being able to face retracing her steps to Sorrento she had visited them in their beautiful Palazzo in Venice. The family home stood on the bank of the Grand Canal directly opposite the Ca'd Oro. You could enter the property either by boat or from the street up steep external stairs to the main door. Caitlin arrived by limo from the airport and had been greeted here by her grandfather's equally ancient retainer.

She had been awed by the ancient splendour of the place and although her visit was short she had enjoyed seeing her grandparents again. She was sad for her grandfather that the family title would die with him; he was last of a long line of noble blood. She had not given much thought to the family inheritance and this was certainly not in her mind when she got a call from her lawyer.

The London branch of the New York law firm that her father had used for years was in Lincoln Inn Fields, the senior partner St John Maguire had put through the call to Caitlin himself. He had requested that she meet with him at his chambers and named a convenient time. Caitlin was too surprised to equivocate, and the call was disengaged before she had time to collect herself and seek clarification.

Caitlin dressed herself in what she considered to be a business like outfit to attend the meeting and tied her hair back to add gravitas to her appearance. She had met St John once before when she had signed some papers after her mother's death. As she was shepherded into his office this memory flashed through Caitlin's mind. St John stood to receive her and shook her hand briefly, indicating a chair on the other side of the huge desk that you could hardly see as it was groaning under the weight of piles and piles of papers tied in pink ribbon.

'I expect you know what this is about' he started, and not giving her time to respond proceeded, 'you are the sole heir of your grandfather's estate. He altered his will in your favour after your mother's decease' a faint smile of commiseration crossed his face, 'a copy of his wishes was filed with me and I have recently spoken to the Italian law company that handled his affairs.' Caitlin had guessed that her Grandparents would have left something for her to remember them but she was sure that her mother had cousins and that they would inherit the estate.

She willed herself to concentrate as St John went through the details with her. She was to inherit the Palazzo in Venice, the summer residence in Sorrento, and an apartment in Rome that she hadn't even know that they owned. There was also innumerable paintings and antique furniture in each of the properties as well as family jewellery and investments in stocks and shares and bonds that they would have to have valued but would probably amount to something in the region of five million dollars. Caitlin could hardly believe what she was hearing and was struck dumb with shock.

'The downside to your fortune' continued St John with a wry half smile 'is that the cost of maintenance to the Venetian Palazzo alone will probably set you back a pretty penny.' He stood indicating that the meeting was over and saw Caitlin to the door. Shaking her hand he

said that he would be in touch and he would need her to sign some papers in due course. Later that day she called her father in New York and told him about her meeting.

‘Did you know Papa?’

‘I thought that you were probably his only direct descendant’ he replied, ‘your mother was an only child and although she had cousins they were all from her mother’s side of the family. Well, well, little one’ he chuckled, ‘It looks like you’ll be wealthier than your father soon! I’ll know where to come to if we need a lone.’ He guffawed loudly at the thought. Caitlin rebuked him for his levity and said she needed his advice.

‘Why don’t you come out sweetheart? We’d love to see you and the baby’s due in the next week or so, you could meet your new sibling. I’ll be happy to advise you regarding your new inheritance as you know.’

‘Thanks’ she replied, heartfelt, ‘that’s exactly what I was hoping you would say. As for the new baby I can’t wait! I’ll book a flight and let you know when I get to JFK.’

‘I’ll send the car. Looking forward to your visit darling, bye.’

‘Bye Papa, see you soon.’ Caitlin smiled feeling much better now she’d talked to her father.

Five days later she arrived at the airport to be met as promised and driven to the Park Avenue house. Hughes greeted her in his customary manner and called for Juan to take her bags up.

‘Your father apologises Miss Caitlin. He has just now been called to the hospital for’ he hesitated, searching for the correct expression, ‘the birth’. Caitlin smiled,

‘That’s great’ she replied, ‘Hi, Juan’ she greeted her father’s manservant. ‘Do you think I should get down to the maternity unit or...’ she hesitated not sure what she should do.

‘Your father said he would call as soon as there was any news’ interjected Hughes. At that moment the phone rang and he crossed the hall to answer.

The waiting Caitlin heard ‘Yes Sir, very good Sir, congratulations Sir!’ then lowering the phone Hughes called her over to speak to her father.

‘It’s a boy’ Frank announced, his voice choking with pride and joy, ‘mother and baby are both fine. I’m going to stay here until I’m thrown out which will be in about half an hour. So I’ll be with you soon after then and we’ll go out to celebrate. You’ll have to wait for visiting tomorrow I’m afraid.’

‘OK Papa, I’m so pleased for you. Give my best to Ariel and the baby. See you later.’ She hung up beaming at Juan and Hughes, ‘A boy! Papa’s really excited. I expect he’s

thinking of Yankees matches already.’ Referring to the New York baseball team of which her father was a fanatic supporter. Caitlin had been a real disappointment on this score.

Next day Caitlin accompanied her father downtown to the Sloane to meet the new arrival. The infant Sebastian James Frank looked much like any other new-born Caitlin had ever seen but she followed the accepted form by admiring every inch of him in minute and ecstatic detail which just about met with the parent’s expectations. He was a sweet little chap and looked angelic clamped to his mama’s bosom.

‘I expect Papa has ordered him a Yankees baby-grow by now’, she remarked mischievously to Ariel.

‘Wicked child’ responded Frank chuckling, ‘Actually it’s a good idea, do they make them?’

‘No idea. I’ll find out for you shall I? A good business opportunity if they don’t’ Caitlin added. The matron appeared at this juncture and visiting time was curtailed for mother and baby to rest. Ariel and baby would be allowed home the next day if all continued well. That evening Caitlin had a long conversation with her father about the Italian inheritance. She was worried about the upkeep of the Palazzo; having visited it she knew that it was vast and very old. Added to its age the building stood directly on the canal so damp must be a continuous problem; and of course there was always the threat that Venice might sink completely, although she reflected it had managed pretty well so far. The summer villa near Sorrento was different as she felt an emotional attachment to the place. The apartment in Rome she would need to visit before she made a decision.

‘I may have a possible solution for the Palazzo.’ Frank declared, pondering an idea. He had recently had a meeting with an investment banker turned property developer that he knew slightly, Mario Ferraro. Mario was looking for investors to set up a chain of ‘boutique’ hotels. Frank had been quite taken with the idea. He often stayed in hotels that were so unremarkable that he forgot where he was.

‘I know he’s looking for properties to develop. It may be worth while having a chat with him, though I expect he would drive a hard bargain.’

It was this conversation that led to a phone call that Caitlin received a week after she returned to London.

‘Mario Ferraro’ a deep voice announced, ‘Frank gave me your number. I’d like to see this Venetian Palazzo you have for sale. Can you arrange for me to view?’ Caitlin surmised that he was a man in a hurry from his brusque manner. Christmas was fast approaching and she



hadn't finalised any plans. Neither was she actively marketing the Palazzo, she had only just received the deeds.

'It's not for sale on the open market so there are no agents to do viewings.' Her brain went into planning overdrive; 'I could meet you there between Christmas and New Year.' She supplied.

'Right. I'll re-arrange my schedule and call you back.'

In actuality it was a female who called on his behalf.

'Mr Ferraro will meet you at the Danieli in the lobby at 11.00 on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup>. The addition of 'Will this suit your requirements?' was obviously an afterthought. Fortunately Caitlin knew her way around Venice and consequently the location of the Danieli hotel. The next task was to persuade Rebecca to accompany her out to Rome to visit the apartment. Caitlin was worried about her best friend, particularly as she had precipitated the relationship with Dylan that seemed not to be working out as she had planned. She wanted to get Rebecca away for a few days. Although Christmas wasn't the ideal time for the retail business Rebecca had built up an excellent team and if she didn't take a break now she would be completely taken up establishing the new shop. Caitlin's plan was for them to fly out on Christmas Eve and arrive in time for lunch and last minute shopping. They could park their bags at the apartment on Corso d'Italia, only a few steps away from the main shopping street of Via Condotti.

Caitlin decided that presenting Rebecca with a *fait accomplie* was the best strategy. Taking a deep breath she called the shop and asked for Rebecca,

'Hi darling' she breezed, 'surprise for you. I've booked flights for us to go to Rome for Christmas!' She continued persuasively, 'I really need your opinion on the Rome apartment Becca, and we'll have such fun.' Caitlin could hear the silence on the other end of the line while Rebecca processed the idea. She had been quite antisocial lately and Caitlin feared a point blank refusal, qualified by the need to work of course as Rebecca would not like to hurt her friend's feelings.

'Oh Caiti, that would be fun, but the shop and Christmas time is really busy. I don't think I could manage...' she hesitated because as she spoke the words she knew that the real reason for her reluctance was Dylan. He may turn up out of the blue, like he usually did and she wouldn't be there for him. She straightened her back and squared her chin in a way that Caitlin would have recognised had she been there in person. She must get a grip of her life. 'You know what I'd love to!' She felt a rush of affection for her friend, 'I have a good team

now, and I can sort out rotas for a short while; its ages since we had any fun.’ She finished in a rush, ‘Thanks Caitlin, It’s really generous of you.’

By the end of the brief conversation Rebecca had all the details of the flights and where to meet with Caitlin for their Roman holiday.

## **Rebecca - December 1977**

Since that first torrid evening with Dylan Rebecca’s life had been turned inside out. She felt like she was riding a roller coaster of emotion, one day on the top of the world the next in utter misery. It seemed almost as if Dylan timed his departures to coincide with the moment she finally relaxed and gave way to her feelings for him. Consequently she never seemed to be able to unwind when she was with him and she pined for him when he wasn’t there. She had even got into the habit of staying in waiting for him to call. He never did.

Work was Rebecca’s salvation. Her business was doing very well and she was negotiating for her second shop in the Kings Road. She had already bought new labels for the shop with the plan to take over the lease in mid February. She had two girls in her existing team who would like to work in the new branch and she was comfortable that she would be able hire new people for both locations. She was in the process of organising shop fitters, builders and decorators for the necessary refurb.

Rebecca had been wondering what she would do for Christmas as she had turned down her mother’s invitation because of shop commitments with the promise that she would visit home at Easter, though she wasn’t sure how she was going to manage this. Caitlin’s suggestion had come like a ray of hope in the bleak vista of her personal life. Rebecca’s spirits lifted as she planned her packing for the trip. She knew that there would be shopping trips, dining out, and knowing Caitlin she had probably secured a slew of party invitations. Her own wardrobe needed revitalising and a few days with Caitlin would be sure to require some seriously glamorous outfits. It was sometimes difficult for Rebecca and the others to grasp the mind-boggling extent of Caitlin’s fortune.

Rebecca took an afternoon off to complete her Christmas shopping. Firstly she spent a couple of hours in Palmerstone getting Carole and the other two girls to help her choose some clothes for Rome. After she had picked a few key pieces she set off for Oxford Circus to do some window-shopping, she liked to keep up to date with her competitors and get new ideas. She had also to buy presents for her staff. They were her most valuable assets and without the team she had built Palmerstone would be nothing. She went to Liberty and caught up with a few of her old colleagues. She chose presents carefully for the team. She knew their

tastes and bought well. Finally she bought presents for Penny and her family, Suzanne and her father, and a small present for Caitlin; she wanted to get her something else from Rome as a memento. She had already posted presents for her mum and dad and brother Rob.

What should she do about Dylan she wondered? She felt sure that if she got him something extravagant he would not have anything for her and she would be embarrassed. On the other hand if she played it cool and didn't get anything for him he would be bound to produce some amazing present that made her feel guilty. Not for the first time she was caught in a no win situation. She remembered her father's maxim, well half remembered, it was something to the effect that a book was an acceptable gift whatever the circumstances. She set off for Charing Cross Road to her favourite bookstore and selected a travel book by Paul Theroux.

That evening she spent a happy couple of hours wrapping presents and finishing her Christmas cards. She hadn't seen Dylan for ten days, who's counting she grimaced at herself, but this was nothing unusual. He often disappeared for twice as long. She decided to take a long hot bath and then to try on a few of her purchases so she could pack a capsule wardrobe for Rome. She was beginning to get excited about the trip with Caitlin and found that for the first time in a long while she was looking forward to something. She hoped Dylan didn't turn up now and spoil it. But of course he did.

She heard the doorbell ring as she was contemplating getting out of the bath where she had been enjoying a long soak. She could tell by the ring that it was Dylan and immediately hopped out of the bath and pulled on a towelling robe to speed downstairs to let him in.

'Hey what have we here?' whistled Dylan. 'A hot wet Rebecca all ready for me.' She blushed at his innuendo and reached to kiss him. He followed her up the stairs with a hand straying up inside her robe so that by the time she reached the landing she was melting inside for him. He scooped her up and kissed her almost brutally,

'God I've missed your hot sweet pussy', he said slipping his fingers in to stroke her clitoris, 'shall we?' he indicated the bedroom door. Rebecca nodded dumbly. The first thing that Dylan saw on the bed was an overnight bag and clothes laid out ready to pack. His mood changed immediately. He swung her down saying coldly, 'I see you're planning to leave. A fine home coming I must say Rebecca.'

'I didn't know when you were coming back' she countered and 'I can't sit around forever waiting for you.' She knew it was the wrong thing to say to Dylan the moment the words left her mouth. He looked furious.

‘I thought we had discussed my work commitments and that you had agreed to the parameters.’

‘Well yes of course I did’ said Rebecca wrong footed, ‘but I expected that you would call me and let me know where you are and you know, talk to me’ she stammered lamely.

‘Right, yeah. Like when I’m in an Amazon rainforest I just go to the nearest phone box and put in a long distance call to make sure that my poor little rich girl isn’t worrying her pretty little mind.’ This was unfair to Rebecca, but she was put in the wrong again.

‘So tell me, where are you off to my sweet.’

‘Not until the day after tomorrow’ she said hopefully, ‘Caitlin invited me to her new place.’ She guessed he wouldn’t like the detail. ‘You could stay tonight.’ she flushed and lowered her eyes feeling cheap and needy. Dylan weighed his options. He liked her begging for it, he could leave her desperate for him. On the other hand he could do with relieving himself; he hadn’t had sex for a couple of days.

‘Come here’ he commanded, ‘take that thing off’ he pulled the tie open as he spoke. Rebecca stood naked in front of him. He upended her deftly onto the sofa and releasing his cock from his fly entered her quickly and rode her hard and fast coming quickly and urgently inside her. He stood, zipped his fly, picked up his jacket and walked out without a backward glance. Rebecca cried herself to sleep. He had made her feel like a whore.

## **Caitlin - December 1977**

They’d arranged to meet at the terminal; Caitlin was shocked when she saw Rebecca walking towards her. She looked very thin and on closer inspection her eyes looked swollen as though she had been crying. Caitlin hugged her hello, holding her tighter and longer than was normal. Rebecca knew that she knew something was wrong.

‘Hey let’s get through immigration and get a coffee and croissant. I’m starving and you look like you could do with a proper meal.’ Rebecca marvelled how easy it was to travel the way Caitlin did. The first class departure lounge and BA flight a different world to the steerage experience she was accustomed to. Well hardly accustomed. She’d only done that twice.

With the miles travelled the distance to Rebecca’s problems receded. Caitlin was pleased to see the lightening of her friend’s spirits and was determined that Rebecca would have an enjoyable festive holiday in Rome. She had planned lots of excursions for them to undertake if they felt like it, including a tour around the Vatican on their last day. Mostly she wanted to spend time with her friend and offer her unconditional support.

The two travellers cleared immigration and took a taxi to the apartment on the Corso d'Italia. The driver drove through the late morning traffic of Rome at an alarming rate, blasting his horn repeatedly to clear a path through the dense traffic. The girls gaped in awe at the ever-improving vistas as they neared the centre. Rebecca had never seen anywhere so astonishingly beautiful. At last they arrived at the ornate wrought iron gates of an imposing mansion with a final blast of the car horn. The mansion was built in the Palladian style; the upper floors painted a soft madder red, the ornate window frames picked out in white with wrought iron Juliette balconies at each window studding the facade. A uniformed concierge greeted the girls at the entrance. As he guided them into the building Caitlin noticed with a catch her grandfather's name was still advertising his ownership of the fourth floor apartment.

The concierge knew to expect Caitlin and a friend and the apartment had been made ready for their arrival. The apartment was set over the entire fourth and fifth floors of the building and the roof terrace above. The views were amazing; looking directly onto the Villa Borghese surrounded by its extensive park. The girls traversed the apartment in awe. Caitlin had no idea that her grandparents had kept an apartment in Rome and the scale of the place was completely unexpected. Rebecca couldn't quite believe that her best friend now owned this amazing, seven bedrooms, and five-bath room apartment in the centre of Rome. The place was vast. Caitlin wondered what on earth she was going to do with all the property she had inherited.

'Let's go and get some lunch and have a look around.' Caitlin said, 'It's a lovely sunny day despite the cold.' The two walked towards the Via Condotti with some Christmas shopping in mind. The Borghese Park to their right they soon found themselves at Harry's Bar. 'Perfect!' Caitlin approved, 'we'll have a glass of Prosecco and a bite to eat here. We're only about five minute's walk to Via Condotti after.'

Seated at a window table in the antique panelled restaurant they sat drinking in the atmosphere as they sipped Prosecco and perused the menu. Caitlin was pleased to observe that Rebecca's spirits seemed much improved with hardly a shadow passing over her lovely features. They chose simple American style burgers and side salads and ordered another drink.

'Have you thought what you're going to do with the apartment?' asked Rebecca, 'It's stunning, and from what I've seen of it so far Rome wouldn't be a bad place to hang out.'

‘No, indeed’ Caitlin responded, ‘it’s a bit weird that I didn’t know about the apartment. It’s been in my grandfather’s family for years but when I came to Rome with Mama we stayed at the St Regis.’

‘It couldn’t have been because they didn’t have enough space for you.’ Rebecca remarked wryly.

‘No I think they might have squeezed us in! Perhaps it was just more convenient to stay in the hotel than to get the apartment opened up for us.’ She speculated.

The two shared views about the apartment as they picked at their lunch and sipped drinks. Caitlin thought that it might be possible to split the flat into two and sell half. She felt somehow disloyal to her grandfather’s memory to sell off all the properties and possessions that he had bequeathed to her. She was aware however that maintenance and upkeep would be astronomical for places that she would barely use.

‘Hey it’s not a problem I would mind having,’ joked Rebecca. Her face clouded briefly as an unpleasant recollection of her own problems intruded into her thoughts. ‘But I can see your dilemma Caiti, it would be a shame to lose contact with all that family history but as you say, how much would you use this apartment and the Sorrento and Venice properties?’

‘I’ve almost made up my mind to sell the Venice Palazzo. My father has arranged for me to meet a property developer there next Thursday. I’m going to have to fly direct from here leaving you to fly alone to London I’m afraid.’

‘I expect I’ll cope.’ Rebecca insisted on paying the bill and the two ambled out into the sunshine with their minds set on shopping.

Caitlin saw to it that Rebecca enjoyed the Christmas break far beyond her expectations. She knew that her best friend would open up when she was ready to so she did not attempt to force any confidence. Instead she filled the days with possibilities of pleasures. Rebecca could choose what they did and where they went. She could also choose to opt out. Caitlin was happy to see her friend’s pallor disappear and some flesh appear on her etiolated frame for they ate endlessly it seemed.

Some of their conversations were dedicated to the apartment and ideas for its refurbishment. The furnishings were very traditional and not to Caitlin’s taste although there were some valuable pieces that she may keep or sell to pay for the alterations. Rebecca mentioned how successfully Suzanne’s house had been transformed by using an architect to design and oversee the project. Caitlin thought it was a good notion and made a mental note to contact Suzanne as soon as she returned to London. It was time she paid her a visit anyway.

The two dedicated many hours to shopping, not just to the last minute Christmas things. Rebecca was constantly reviewing her retail offer so she was interested in any opportunity to discover new labels or pick up new merchandising ideas. Rome was inspiring for her. She found that the window display and general layout of the stores tended to be much more sophisticated than in London. The tendency was for a spare, spacious feel to the retail space. Rebecca made a mental note of several ideas to try and discovered a couple of new labels that she would like to buy for the new shop.

Christmas Eve was a special day. They spent the afternoon wandering through the bustling streets, pausing at the Piazza di Spagna to listen to the roving musicians playing and singing carols. The square and the streets all around were packed with last minute shoppers inspecting the wares of street vendors and stopping to buy roasted chestnuts hot and sweet from the hawkers braziers. That evening they dined simply in a traditional family trattoria dawdling over the meal so that they could join the throngs who would soon head for the Vatican City to congregate in St Peter's Square. If they got their timing right they would get near enough to the big screen to see the Pope presiding over Midnight Mass in St Paul's Basilica.

The cold night air hit them as they left the warmth of the trattoria. They made their way quickly towards the river Tiber aiming to cross over at the Ponte Cavour. St Peter's Square was a magical sight with the giant Christmas tree in the middle and there was a bustle of expectation from the throng. It was a bit like a rock concert thought Rebecca irreverently. Although the service seemed long and tedious to the two non-Catholics the atmosphere was awe-inspiring. They left the square with a deeper sense of the Christmas message and felt quite spiritual.

Caitlin had organised Christmas day to be full of treats. She had made up a stocking full of tiny gifts that she hoped would amuse Rebecca. They would open these after they had breakfasted on smoked salmon, cream cheese and bagel, like a proper New York Jewish lox and a bagel, with bucks fizz. After breakfast Rebecca could call home. They were then going to go for a walk in the park followed by present opening in front of a roaring log fire. They would have this in the smallest of the four reception rooms which was the nearest to being a snug though still severely oversized to merit the name.

Rebecca woke to a cry of;

'Happy Christmas!' from an excited and effulgent Caitlin. She sat up in bed to be hugged by her friend.

‘Santa’s been’ she announced, ‘he’s left stockings for us! Let’s go and open them and have breakfast.’ Rebecca who had not had so much fun in ages caught the spirit of optimism that Caitlin had created.

‘Lovely, let’s go’ Rebecca hugged Caitlin warmly, ‘Merry Christmas.’

The day could not have been bettered. The weather was glorious. Chill, with a blue sky and a benevolent sun. They both spoke to their families during the course of the day and exchanged warm wishes and promises of visits soon. Christmas dinner at the St Regis was festive in an odd way. Their fellow diners were almost all visitors to the city. The food was excellent and the wine flowed. The formality broken, people conversed with each other from table to table, exchanging yuletide greetings. By the end of the evening it felt like they were in a one off global family. Rebecca and Caitlin walked home together arm in arm singing carols off key and laughing tipsily at every silly remark.

On Boxing Day morning the real world came barging back into Rebecca’s mind. The lovely bubble of happiness that Caitlin had created slipped away. Thoughts of Dylan and the turmoil of her seesaw feelings for him could not be blocked out any longer. She howled like a wounded animal and sobbed into her pillows hoping to muffle the sound from Caitlin’s ears. Caitlin was a light sleeper and heard her friend’s distress. She lay still letting her friend sob until the storm abated. She then padded across to Rebecca’s room and went over and sat on her bed. The whole maelstrom of her feelings and bits of what had happened spilled out of Rebecca as Caitlin listened and soothed.

Caitlin could recognise the signs of an abusive relationship. It sounded to her that Dylan was systematically controlling her friend through psychological manipulation. Caitlin was horrified by the part that she had played in pushing them together. She determined to find out what was going on and her instinct told her that Charles may be the key.

## **Penny - December 1977**

Penny put down the phone with a worried look furrowing her brow. She had been surprised and pleased to hear from Caitlin but the content of the conversation had proved to be less welcome. She knew that Caitlin would not have exaggerated her concerns about Rebecca’s welfare. She would broach the subject of Dylan with Charles. She knew that they had been friends since they were toddlers but she also remembered Charles’s reluctance to ask Dylan to be a godparent for Simon. Penny worried all afternoon about Rebecca. Should she call her she wondered. Her instinct was to fly to her friend’s side and protect her from



harm. However she knew this was not practical. She was expecting her second child in a couple of weeks and Simon and Charles needed her at home.

Later that evening, after Simon was tucked up in bed, the dinner prepared and the two sat down to eat, Penny broached the subject. Charles looked alarmed when Penny mentioned that Dylan had been seeing Rebecca. He ran a hand over his face. A gesture he used when he was anxious, Penny noted.

‘I wouldn’t have invited Dylan if I’d thought for a minute that he would pursue one of our friends. He doesn’t usually stray out of his own circle...’ Charles tailed off, looking worried and guilty.

‘So you do have concerns about Dylan’s behaviour then?’ Penny asked, ‘particularly with women?’ she continued, ‘is it in his character to be controlling and’ she hesitated to use the word Caitlin had, ‘abusive?’

‘Dear God!’ Charles cried, ‘Has he hurt Rebecca?’

‘No! Not physically anyway. It seems to be more manipulative. He disappears for weeks telling her that he is working on a foreign assignment. He never calls her to let her know where he is and when he’ll be back. He just turns up when he feels like it and expects her to drop everything...’ Penny fell silent thinking that maybe Dylan did work in isolated parts of the world and couldn’t get in touch with his girlfriend. But she also knew that her friend was not prone to hysterics and inventing woes to gain attention. Caitlin had said that Rebecca was traumatised.

Charles sighed deeply and embarked on the story of Dylan’s life. Charles’s father, Peter had been a parish priest at the time, much like Charles was now. He had his first living in Ironbridge, Shropshire where Charles and Jo were both born. Jane, his mother, had decided to continue to teach part time after Charles was born. To make this possible they had employed a woman from the village who came to the Rectory each day to mind Charles. Martha Byrne brought her own child Tommy with her and the two toddlers, almost identical in age, played well together.

‘Tommy?’ interrupted Penny, puzzled.

‘I know confusing’ Charles smiled apologetically, ‘a lot about Dylan is just that. He has reinvented himself almost entirely as you’ll hear.’

Charles told Penny how his mother had learned more about Martha and her son. In fact his birth mother had abandoned the new-born baby. He had been placed, carefully clothed and wrapped, inside the porch of a nearby Catholic Church. Martha found the baby there when she went to the church to light a candle for her dear departed husband. Fortunately the baby

had not long been left and Martha acted quickly. She took him to the Cottage Hospital where the nurses were able to warm and feed him. The Police had made enquiries but it was never discovered whom the parents were. Once the baby was deemed healthy he was taken into care. Martha had formed a bond with the baby when she had visited him in hospital and she continued to make visits to the children's home. She made enquiries about the possibility of fostering Tommy (so named by the nurses), with a view of adopting him.

Charles wasn't sure why Martha didn't adopt Tommy. She had fostered him for about five years, until they had both started school.

'We can ask mum this weekend; she will remember all the details. I know Martha was really upset and so was Dylan. Well we all were.' Jane was arriving at the weekend to look after Simon while Penny was in hospital. She then planned to stay and help out for a while until Penny was recovered enough to manage.

Charles continued his tale. The two toddlers had become inseparable and spent most days playing together. Charles remembered what fun they had. Tommy had a fertile imagination and was a cheeky fellow able to get into a scrape and extricate himself with roguish contrition. There was never any harm in any of their escapades. Some days he would be quiet and introverted for an unknown reason but his moods were usually short lived. When Jo was born Tommy was jealous of the attention that Charles paid to his younger sister and feigned total disinterest himself.

The two boys went together to the same primary school in Ironbridge and remained the best of friends. It was about this time Charles remembered that the big upset took place. Tommy didn't come to school for over a week and no one would tell Charles what had become of his best friend. When he did return Tommy was taciturn to the point of dumbness, Charles being the only soul he would speak to at all. Charles was very worried about his friend. His mother, Jane, had explained to him that Tommy no longer lived with Martha. He had to live in a special home for children who had no parents of their own.

Charles felt very sorry for his friend and would bring Tommy home with him after school as often as he was allowed, even making excuses for him when he was surly and unkind to his sister Jo.

Tommy spent solitary hours imagining whom he was, making up and writing stories about his parents. They became romantic figures in his fertile imagination. It was about this time, Charles remembered, that Tommy became Dylan. He was about eight years old. Things settled down for a while and Dylan seemed happier and started to integrate with other children more, though Charles was always his best friend. All the girls liked Dylan because

he was good looking with his striking eyes and dark curls. Dylan learned to break hearts in the school playground.

When Charles was 11 his father was moved to Lichfield and the family with him.

‘Dylan was hysterical when I told him we were leaving. He begged me not to go’. Tears stood in Charles’s eyes as he remembered; Penny leaned nearer and took his hand in hers. He smiled reassuringly and continued to tell the tale. Jane had arranged for Dylan to be able to visit them in the school holidays, which had served to placate Dylan’s fears. He had visited regularly and the boys had continued to be friends although their interests and tastes were growing apart.

When Dylan was able he had left care and had gone to London where he had disappeared for a couple of years. Then out of the blue he had contacted Charles the summer before he had started his training for the church. He had seemed to Charles quite different. Much more self-assured and he appeared to be prosperous.

‘He said he was a photographer and travelled a lot. He gave me a contact address and number in Chelsea, a well-heeled area. He was very mysterious about his life really, and I wondered if it was all made up, another one of his stories...’ Charles shrugged, discomfited, ‘I called the number once. It was before our wedding and I thought I had to invite Dylan to be there and also for the stag thing. It was a woman who answered’. He tailed off, not sure of the implications of this fact.

‘Do you think then that he is living with another woman and seeing Becca,’ Penny searched for the expression, ‘on-the-side?’

‘The truth is I really don’t know what to think’ responded Charles regretfully.

The following weekend Jane arrived from Lincoln bearing gifts knitted for the new arrival and toys for the two year old Simon. They ate supper in the kitchen as soon as Simon had gone off to bed. After a long exchange of family news the subject of Dylan was broached.

‘Poor little soul’ Jane murmured, remembering all the upset as though it were yesterday. ‘Martha loved him like he was her own. It was all such a shame’ she explained with a sigh. ‘Martha married again, I suspect because it would help her chances to foster Tommy’ Jane began. She then told how Martha had taken up with Joe not long after her first husband had died. She was in her late 30s and childless, the only thing that had been missing from her happy relationship with Shamus Doyle. She had found the baby, and saved its life by her quick actions, on account of her visit to the church while grieving for her first husband. Tommy filled the space in her heart and the void in her life that her husband’s death had left. In those days fostering and adopting children was a lengthy process and single women, albeit

well liked and respected members of the community like Martha, were not regarded as suitable surrogate parents. Joe had turned out to be a less than ideal husband. He was jealous of the boy, leaving his care entirely in Martha's hands.

Unfortunately he was also a drinking man. This usually made him taciturn and bellicose. Sometimes he would get so inebriated that he would attack Martha physically. It was after these belligerent attacks that Tommy would be very withdrawn. Poor Martha was terrified of Joe but her fear was solely for the child. If Social Services found out they would take him away from her.

'Of course, as you know Charles, her worst fears were realised. Tommy's case worker discovered the truth and he was immediately deemed 'at risk' and taken back into care.' Jane told how Martha had tried to get him back but she had no chance of success either with or without Joe. She finally gave up.

'Mercifully, Martha left Joe and went to live with her sister in Ireland. So at least she was spared further abuse from that vile brute. I often wonder about her and where she is now. We lost touch with her after she had gone to Ireland and we moved to Lichfield.'

Peter had been a music scholar and had used his talents to grow and develop the church choir while they were in Ironbridge. His ability had been recognised in the Diocese hierarchy. The Archdeacon had discussed Peter with the Dean of Lichfield Cathedral, which led in turn to an invitation to join the cathedral as a Canon. The attachment to the cathedral would carry specific responsibilities for the choir and would involve some teaching in the choir school. The offer was very appealing and came at a fairly good time in terms of the children's education. They would not have to relocate until Charles had sat his Eleven-plus exams and Jo at nine would have time to settle into a new junior school prior to her exams. The new baby was not expected until December.

Dylan was completely devastated. Distraught really Jane remembered.

'I think that you were the only stability in his life' Jane added to Charles, 'Dylan really loved Charles, still does I think' she elucidated to Penny. 'We did consider taking him on ourselves but we had some concerns about his behaviour to Jo and also I was pregnant with Daniel at the time. I still wonder if that was the right decision to make. It wasn't easy to leave him.' Jane's face registered the deep regret that she had felt at the time.

'I had no idea that you had considered that' Charles responded.

'No. You were very upset at the time anyway. You two were very close, like brothers. Anyway as you know we decided to make arrangements with the Children's Home for Dylan to spend some of the school holidays with us.' Jane remembered that this was not an easy

process and suspected that had they not been connected with the church it would not have been allowed.

‘Dylan came every summer for a couple of weeks and also for Christmas for several years, probably until you were about 16.’

‘That would be about right’ Charles responded, ‘He was able to leave the Home then and he couldn’t wait to get away from there and start his new life in London. It had to be London. The Smoke, he called it.’

‘He was such an odd mixture, Dylan, sweet and funny one minute and wild and reckless the next. I never worried about Charles as he was always the one to influence the best in Dylan but I did make efforts to keep Jo out of his way.’

‘Is that why Jo hardly remembers Dylan?’ Charles interrupted,

‘Yes, I expect so. When Dylan was visiting you Jo used to go away to Guide camp, or stay with my sister, Aunt Lizzie, or with one of her friends. Anyway, why the sudden interest in Dylan’s life?’ Jane asked.

Charles hedged, ‘Penny and I were just talking about him and we were curious about what happened.’

‘He seemed very grown up and charming when I talked to him at your wedding. He told me that he’s a photographer now, it sounded as though he’s doing really well.’

‘Mm, yes’ agreed Charles; changing topics to safer ground, ‘did you say that Jo and Julius have named the day? I thought I heard you mention something to Pen as I went up with Simon.’ The conversation reverted to family matters with Jo’s impending nuptials the hot topic.

Suddenly Penny felt a sharp and strong contraction. She put her hand over her bump and with a smile for Charles announced that he ought to get her to the Cottage Hospital. Lucy Rebecca Donaldson was born just two hours later; the hospital barely having time to admit Penny before the baby arrived bawling enthusiastically.

## **Caitlin - December 1977**

Caitlin and Rebecca left together for the airport in Rome, Rebecca to return to London and Caitlin to fly to Venice. It was two days before her meeting with Mario Ferraro but she had decided that a few days in Venice would be useful and pleasant. She thought that she would feel lonely in the big bare apartment in Rome once Rebecca had left. The girls said tearful farewells at the airport, Rebecca departing first for home. She was determined to forget

Dylan and to throw herself into the plans for the new shop and tried to reassure a concerned Caitlin that this is what she would do.

‘I’ll be at the Danieli until Saturday then back in London. Let’s meet up on Sunday.’ Caitlin hugged Rebecca close, ‘I’ll be thinking about you. Call me at the hotel if you need me’ Caitlin smiled encouragingly, ‘you can tell me all the progress on the shop on Sunday. I can’t wait to have a Palmerstone on my doorstep.’

‘Thank you Caiti, thank you for everything, for being my friend in need.’ Rebecca tried hard to choke back the tears as her voice broke with emotion. ‘Bye, see you on Sunday’ she flung over her shoulder as she disappeared through emigration.

Caitlin had called and reserved a suite overlooking the lagoon at the Danieli. She planned to spend the next day visiting her Grandparent’s palazzo to assess the extent of their possessions so that she could make an informed decision on what furniture she may sell with the property. She was finding the whole process quite difficult. She realised now as an adult that she had not spent enough time with her grandparents to get to know them. To poke through their lives and possessions as the new owner and to make the decision to get rid of much of the stuff that they had collected together she found to be a huge responsibility. She was also aware that she didn’t really have that much choice either, to own three Italian properties was just not feasible for a young woman on her own who had elected to settle in London.

Caitlin checked into the Danieli in the mid afternoon. Arriving by water taxi she was impressed with the scale of the building in its magnificent setting right on the lagoon. Her first impression was of intricate carved wooden doors and panelling, lofty ceilings broken by arches supported aloft pink marble columns, huge Marano glass chandeliers and richly carpeted steps ascending to a minstrel gallery. She quickly booked in and climbed the ornate stairs up to her suite, her mind firmly set on a long soak in the bath. Once she had accomplished this and attired in a hotel bathrobe Caitlin put in a call to Penny. With a promise on both sides to speak again soon and love sent on Caitlin’s side for a safe and speedy birth the two friends said their goodbyes. Caitlin decided on room service being tired and overloaded with site seeing in Rome, Venice would keep until the morrow.

The next morning Caitlin made a pilgrimage to her grandparents’ Palazzo. This time she approached via the Grand Canal in a water taxi. She could feel the chill from the water as she entered the building from the canal. Clutching the heavy and ornate ring of keys she had been given with the exchange of deeds Caitlin climbed the steep steps up to the main entrance and let herself in. The once grand Palazzo felt faded and forlorn in the damp winter morning.

The magnificent family home had been closed and uninhabited now for six months or so Caitlin reflected. She could smell damp in the air and wondered if any of the furniture and furnishings would be mildewed. She felt an overwhelming sense of sadness for her grandparents. Life was so transient. Everything that had been handed down from generation to generation, all that they had bought together, the plans they had made, the refurbishments discussed and executed, all left to slowly rot. Caitlin gave herself a mental shake for being so morbid. Her grandfather and grandmother would remain in her heart, possessions were not important in the grand scheme of things.

Caitlin busied herself going from room to room taking stock of what were now her possessions. She mentally selected a few small items of furniture including an adorable mantel clock and a collection of decorative enamelled boxes that her grandmother had collected. Almost all of the furniture was far too grand for her London house and also not really to her taste. If she could sell pieces with the property it would be for the best and would add to the ambience of the Palazzo if it were to become a hotel. Better that the place was refurbished and maintained, as it needed to be than to be left empty for most of the time. She wondered briefly what Mario Ferraro would be expecting to see and if the Palazzo would suit his requirements. She doubted whether there were many potential buyers for such a large property with a hefty contingent liability of the maintenance.

She spent a long time looking through old family photographs all heavily framed in silver placed around the reception rooms on a grand piano and various console tables of great antiquity. There were several photographs of her mother Sofia, some with herself as a baby, small child and teenager. There was one beautiful snapshot of dining together in a Sorrento restaurant, which must have been taken by a waiter. All four of them smiling to camera and raising glasses of wine in a toast. What a happy time she had enjoyed the last summer that her mother had been alive. Caitlin stifled the tears that sprang to her eyes. She would definitely keep all of these as mementoes.

Much of the furniture she now saw was in all probability quite valuable. She would need to get an expert from Sotheby or Christies to take a look at it before she made any hasty decisions. Her father had warned her that Mario Ferraro would strike a hard bargain if he got the opportunity. She should be prepared to counter propose and to seek to get the maximum return from what was after all her grandparent's treasured possessions. Caitlin finished her tour of the Palazzo and decided to go back to the hotel for a late snack lunch and then go out and see some of the sights. St Mark's Square at least she should visit. She had her inventory of things that she wanted to keep and also a list of items that may be valuable. She would

call her father and get from him contact names at the top auction houses, that way she would be treated seriously.

The following morning Caitlin had room service for breakfast. She had plenty of time to prepare for the meeting with Mario Ferraro and she took the opportunity to dress and do her hair and make-up in an unfussy business like way. She then took out the notes that she had made for herself after her visit to the Palazzo. She had called a few agents and spoken to her father's contact at Sotheby. Caitlin now had a clearer idea which pieces should be sold at auction and had lengthened her reservation at the Danieli for a couple more days so that she could meet with Mr Stevenson from the auction house.

Caitlin called New York and had a long conversation with her father the previous afternoon. He had given some advice on what she should ask for the Palazzo now she had obtained some valuations from local agents. It sounded like a lot of money to Caitlin but, as her father had iterated, the Palazzo was a uniquely desirable property. It could rival hotels like the Danieli and Cipriani for location, although smaller in scale. But that was what Mr Ferraro was after for his boutique hotels. With her thoughts gathered Caitlin marched down the huge stairway of the Danieli to meet Mario bang on 11.00am as arranged.

She was expecting to see a man of about her father's age so the gorgeous hunk at the reception desk only earned her passing interest in a quick scan of the lobby seeking the unknown person of Mario Ferraro. Seeing no one who seemed to fit the bill her gaze flitted back to the hunk at the desk only to find that he was approaching her with a wide smile and his hand held out in greeting.

'Miss Alexander, Mario Ferraro, I'm pleased to meet you.' Caitlin took his outstretched hand and returned his greeting,

'Caitlin, please.' She tried to keep the handshake and greeting business like while having an overwhelming desire to flirt. The guy was gorgeous! Typical Italian colouring with dark well cut hair just long enough to be fashionable. His eyes were large and brown framed with dark lashes and straight dark brows above. A straight nose of just the perfect size and a full but masculine mouth and chiselled jaw line completed the picture. Caitlin reprimanded herself internally for behaving like a teenager with a crush. He must get this reaction all the time she surmised.

Caitlin pulled herself together metaphorically in time to hear Mario outlining his agenda for the day. First stop the Palazzo to view. Then lunch to discuss the deal, would she prefer the Danieli or maybe she'd like to try somewhere different, Harry's Bar or maybe the Fortuny restaurant at the Cipriani. As he was talking he was shepherding Caitlin through the main



door of the hotel, hailing a water taxi and giving directions. Caitlin felt like she had been whipped up into a passing tornado. Mario was a man with a purpose and a man in a hurry.

The tour of the Palazzo seemed almost perfunctory to Caitlin. Mario swept through the building scanning each room rapidly and moving quickly on to the next. Having completed the circuit he paused for a moment in front of a beautiful renaissance console table laden with family photographs. Picking one up, he appraised it briefly.

‘You look very like your mother except for your colouring which is more like Frank’s.’

‘Yes, I suppose I do. Thank you’ Caitlin responded, taking the statement as a compliment because her mother had been widely regarded as a society beauty.

‘You’ll be keeping this family stuff?’ he gestured at the photographs and ornaments atop all the surfaces, more as a statement than a question.

‘Of course,’ Caitlin responded, ‘they are all I have left of my mother’s family.’ She wondered as she said this why she was declaring something so personal to a stranger.

‘Lunch then’ said Mario, ‘Where is your preference.’ Caitlin picked the Cipriani, as she hadn’t eaten there for some time. Harry’s Bar she had done in Rome with Rebecca only a week before. ‘Good, I like a girl who knows her mind.’ Mario responded steering her through the door on the waterside of the Palazzo where a waiting motor launch had mysteriously arrived for them. When they arrived at the Cipriani the table was reserved for them. Caitlin wondered if Mario had second sight or had booked at each of the potential restaurants he offered her. They were shown to a table next to the large patio windows that afforded sweeping views over the lagoon and the city. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

The service was impeccable though Caitlin guessed that Mario, like her father, expected and got the best of everything. Mario sought her preferences then ordered for her in fluent and rapid Italian. Then sitting back in his chair he looked relaxed for the first time. Perhaps the look of a languid cat waiting to pounce, Caitlin warned herself. The food was divinely good. Mario poured wine for her but drank water himself. She sipped slowly and decided that one glass would be enough she needed to keep alert. No mention of the Palazzo was made instead Mario talked revealingly about his family and life in New York.

He was second generation Italian-American. His grandfather had immigrated to the States back in the twenties with his young wife who was pregnant at the time. They arrived in New York and settled in the Bronx. His father was born two years later. There was often ribbing between them, Mario told with a smile, particularly when Italy competed against the USA, his Uncle Giorgio being Italian and his father Maurizio being American.

His Grandparents had established a restaurant soon after their arrival and had been successful within their own community. Giorgio and Maurizio had bigger ambitions. Nurtured by the American dream the brothers had hit on the idea of manufacturing icecream like the homemade gelato of their homeland. Their small venture grew and grew until they had a multi-million dollar business manufacturing and distributing icecream through a network of restaurants and delis and latterly supermarkets.

The two brothers had made the fortunes of the whole family. Mario and his brother, sister and cousins all benefited from the best education that money could buy. Mario had attended St Paul's School in Concorde, New Hampshire. Then Yale and finally achieved an MBA at Harvard Business School before entering the world of finance on Wall Street. He had made a lot of money in a short time and now wanted to start a new venture with the proceeds of his success. This was where the Palazzo came into the picture.

'Caitlin, I do apologise. I've rattled on about myself for the whole meal. You must think me very rude.' He smiled widely at Caitlin, holding her eyes with his, 'you see I already know a lot about you. I know that you're mother was Italian, and that she died tragically.' He paused, smiling sympathetically, 'I understand a bit of what you must have felt, and your loss. My mother too died when I was a teenager. She had cancer and it was a slow and gruelling process.' Caitlin smiled and touched his arm in empathy,

'It's difficult to bear whichever way it happens,' she sympathised, 'I'm really sorry.'

'Thank you.' Responded Mario with sincerity, 'Of course' he continued changing the mood, 'I also know from Frank that you went to school in the UK and then went on to the Sorbonne where you didn't do a lick of work!'

'Papa said that!' Caitlin responded in mock dismay. 'I never thought that he knew.'

'Then you inherited your mother's estate and then the estate of your grandparents, so I understand you are quite a catch!' Caitlin knew that he was teasing her now. With pretended severity she said,

'Well I dare say I am, but I would hope for myself not for my possessions.' Mario laughed aloud at the defiant shake of her blonde curls as she spoke. He was enchanted.

'Shall we order coffee and get down to business?' Mario said, changing his pace back to brisk and business like. Caitlin agreed to the suggestion and made herself disengage her mind from how attractive she was finding her lunch partner.

Mario ran through an appraisal of the Palazzo and it's suitability for his proposed boutique hotel and the associated costs he would have to bear. He mentioned pieces of furniture that he would like to acquire along with the building, all with picture perfect clarity. Caitlin was

astounded by his prodigious memory. Finally Mario named his offer. It was so close to the figure that she had discussed with her father that she again wondered if he was psychic. Caitlin knew that she should bargain for a better price but she thought the offer was fair and decided immediately to accept. As they shook hands on the deal Caitlin felt a frisson of desire that she'd not experienced for some time. He really was very attractive.

'Great. It's good to do business with a girl who knows her mind' he reiterated, 'my lawyer will contact yours. Do you use an American or British firm?' Caitlin explained that their British firm of lawyers had handled the transfer of the estate to her from her grandfather and would be best placed to complete the deal on her behalf. Mario had a trace of regret in his voice as he announced,

'Well I have a flight to catch, so I'm off to the airport now. My launch will drop you at the Danieli or anywhere else you have a mind to go.' He stood and held Caitlin's chair for her to stand, and shook her hand firmly.

'Thank you Miss Alexander I'll speak to you when we complete.' Caitlin felt deflated with disappointment as he strode out of the Cipriani without a backward glance for her.

## **Rebecca - February 1978**

Rebecca had arrived back in London with a newfound determination to make her business a success. She would put Dylan out of her mind and concentrate entirely on plans for the opening of her new Kings Road branch. The task had proved to be not that simple but she had always found work to be a successful antidote to painful introspection. She threw herself into the planning of the new boutique.

The Kings Road Palmerstone would reflect exactly the brand of the Wimbledon shop but in other ways it would be unique to the catchment area it would serve. Rebecca had bought higher end labels to compliment her existing stable. There were many successful city types living in the area often with wives or girlfriends, sometimes both, who had time and money to burn. She needed to cater for a party lifestyle for the Chelsea set where the wives and girlfriends were often part of the display of career success and personal wealth. The trophy wife and the Sloane Ranger were both terms coined to describe the types of women that Rebecca wanted to seduce into her new shop.

The shop fittings were sleeker than in the Wimbledon shop reflecting the additional available budget. The floors were of polished oak and rails and shelves were fitted around the walls in blocks so that clothing could be broken up with displays of bags, shoes, folded tees, jeans and jumpers. Rebecca had learned from the shops she had visited on the Via

Condotti in Rome. The space was kept very clean and minimal so that it was easy to rifle through the collections for those who liked to shop independently. Of course all the new staff had been trained in the Palmerstone way of attention to detail and absolute commitment to customer service. The shop was due to open in the middle of February with the Spring Summer Collections interspersed with some pieces more suitable to the English winter climate sourced from the Wimbledon shop. Careful merchandising made the older stock look fresh and inviting as well as wearable. Rebecca intended to manage the new store herself to begin with leaving Carole to manage Wimbledon.

The opening was scheduled for Thursday evening. The invitations had been sent out, many of them with the help of Caitlin's extensive address book. Champagne was laid on and the staff from both Palmerstone shops standing by. The evening was a great success with the till ringing merrily throughout the evening.

Caitlin came in with a couple of her Sloan Ranger friends in tow and between them seemed to buy up half of the store. Rebecca gestured her thanks and love to Caitlin too busy to spend any real time with her. Caitlin was going on to an opening night so didn't stay long. However she did take her laden carrier bags with her and took care to mention the new store to a society photographer who took a snap of her entering the gallery. The next day featured a small piece in the Evening Standard linking Palmerstone with the Chelsea set; Rebecca was so excited that she called Caitlin immediately to thank her for her unstinting support.

'Hey that's what friends are for' was all she elicited from Caitlin. Rebecca wondered if Caitlin had heard anything from Mario who she knew had made an impact on her friend but decided not to ask, as she knew that Caitlin would respond with an inquiry about Dylan. She had not heard from him.

With the new shop up and running Rebecca was busier than ever. She was finding it difficult to travel between the stores on public transport, as she often needed to switch stock around from place to place. Examining her bank account was a revelation. The first shop had been doing very well and she had made a decent profit. But having two shops made a huge difference. Her account was in sufficient credit for her to be able to buy a vehicle to travel between the shops; even a new car would be possible. With a car of her own she would be able to visit home more easily too, a visit which was long overdue. Rebecca scoured The Evening Standard looking for a suitable vehicle and decided that she would invest in a brand new Mini. She called the car dealer the very next morning and ordered her Mini in glossy black with caramel leather seats.

Shortly after she had made the call she started to feel extremely sick and had to run to the bathroom to throw up. She looked at herself in the mirror after she had washed her face and brushed her teeth. She found it hard to recognise the old Rebecca in the haunted eyes and gaunt face that looked back at her.

She tried for a moment to think that she had been sick with apprehension at spending so much money but the truth was already fixed in her mind. She knew that she was pregnant.

## **Penny - February 1978**

Penny had no hesitation when Rebecca called her a short while later. It was Sunday and Charles was conducting the Matins service. Penny was at home with Simon and the baby.

‘Becca, darling come down here for a few days, pack your bag now and hop on a train. Rebecca choked back a sob of gratitude. She needed help and Penny was the one who knew about pregnancy and babies. Babies she thought. *God how am I going to cope?*

Rebecca ran into Penny’s arms on the station platform. She sobbed and hiccupped in turn,

‘Thank you Pen, I’m so glad you’re here. What a mess I’ve made of my life. My parents will be so upset and....’

‘Hush! Hush! Everything will turn out all right’ soothed Penny; inwardly worrying for her friend’s situation. ‘Let’s get you home and we’ll be able to talk about it later.’ She had left the children with Charles as soon as he had returned from church rushing off to meet Rebecca. She had not briefed him regarding Rebecca’s bombshell and wondered how he would take the news. She had no doubt that he would be supportive of her friend’s plight but not sure what his moral scruples would be. She knew that he had distanced himself from Dylan over the years. Would he want Penny to do likewise with Rebecca? The thought of having to let down or displease either one of them filled her with alarm. Penny did not take her obligations lightly.

Charles was a sensitive and intelligent man well able to deduce what may have brought Rebecca to their door so precipitously. He still felt a degree of responsibility in the matter as he had introduced Dylan into Rebecca’s life however inadvertently. When his wife arrived with Rebecca he was able to greet her with sincere warmth already aware of her condition. Penny was once more deeply grateful for her good fortune in meeting and marrying Charles. Rebecca had pulled herself together on the short journey to the Rectory and was able to greet Charles with a smile of affection, the new baby (her namesake) with goo’s of admiration and Simon with whoops of delight. As she admired baby Lucy Rebecca and played with the two

year old she wondered what it would be like to do this with her own child and felt the first small stirring of maternal feelings.

That evening the three grown-ups talked late into the evening. Charles and Penny told of the call from Caitlin after Rebecca had returned from Rome to London. Her call had alerted them to Rebecca's unhappy relationship with Dylan. Charles then recounted some of the stories of his childhood friendship with Dylan, stories of which Rebecca had heard from Dylan. Penny added some of the information that Jane had afforded and Charles added his own concerns and apologise.

Rebecca painfully told some of the sorry tale of her meeting and falling for Dylan and the confusion of emotions that she had been feeling ever since their involvement. Then she told them both together that she thought that she was pregnant and that she had not seen or heard from Dylan since the day that the baby was conceived. By the end of the evening all three were completely drained of emotion.

Penny ran a hot bath for Rebecca and added bath oil and provided lots of fluffy towels and a bathrobe.

'Go and have a long soak to relax and I'll bring you up a mug of cocoa to help you to sleep.' Rebecca obediently did what she was told and felt a lot better for the advice. Once Rebecca was in bed and fast asleep and baby Lucy had been fed Penny and Charles spent another half hour discussing the events of the day as they always did.

Charles had seldom felt as compromised, torn between his vows as a clergyman and as a husband and friend. Marriage was sacred to him, as was life. The idea that Rebecca may choose to have an abortion worried him enormously but beyond everything he felt that he should do his utmost to right the wrong that he had inadvertently caused.

'I don't think that Rebecca will choose to have an abortion' Penny defended stoutly, 'but if she does I must support her wishes.'

'I know you would, my darling' Charles returned, 'but I pray that you are right and that she will choose to keep the child.'

After a long moment's silence he continued, 'Perhaps if Dylan knew that he had fathered a child he would feel some obligation towards it, maybe he could learn to give it the love that he never had himself.'

## **Francesca - February 1978**

Francesca was newly returned from Rhodesian where she had been covering the agreement by the Ian Smith regime to handover majority rule to black leadership. She had spent the last

twenty years as a Foreign Correspondent working on different newspapers in junior roles until she had landed a plum job with The Guardian almost seven years earlier. For the last two years she had been one of the leading presenters on foreign affairs for the BBC. Her career had been tough, working as she did in an almost exclusively male world and witnessing first-hand the atrocities of war and the decimation caused by natural disasters. The first things she wanted to do when she got home were to luxuriate in the bath, take a massage and have a lot of steamy sex.

It hadn't always been this way. She had met a fellow reporter, Shaun Mulvaney, who had been working for the New York Times. They had fallen in love and become engaged to be married, joking at the time that a Foreign Correspondent could only marry another one. Tragically for the couple Shaun was sent out to Vietnam to cover the arrival of the US Marines in March of 1965; he was killed by a sniper bullet a couple of weeks into his assignment. He had been 31 years old. Francesca was 28.

A couple of years after the death of her fiancé Francesca had returned from Tampa, Florida where she had been covering the race riots. Francesca, hardened by her work and by the death of her only love, had taken to cruising bars to pick up young men for sex. This particular evening she struck lucky. A tall darkly handsome young man approached her soon after she had sat at the bar and ordered a Scotch and Dry. There was a slight Irish lilt to his voice that reminded her of Shaun. After a while he began to amuse her. He had a roughish twinkle in his eye and told a good yarn. She was diverted.

So Francesca had taken Dylan home to her apartment in St John's Wood and quickly got down to getting what she needed. Dylan had obliged by shagging her long and hard through the night until she was exhausted and replete like never before. She had been a little disconcerted when she discovered that he was actually only just 17, not the 19 years that he had admitted to. He had been living on his wits on the streets of London, sometimes sleeping rough other times prostituting himself for food and a roof over his head. She saw something in Dylan that was raw and almost feral, a quality that she recognised in herself developed by living hand to mouth in some of the armpits of the world.

She had been back in London for about three weeks, partly on leave and partly in the Fleet Street offices of her newspaper; for some reason she allowed Dylan to stick around. She supposed it was because the sex was really good. She was in no danger of becoming entangled by her emotions. Dylan was fulfilling a need, like a masseuse easing the knots out of her neck and back, sex relaxed her body.

This was how their relationship started; when she was sent out to Jerusalem to cover the Israeli's annexation of the eastern part of the city she allowed Dylan to stay. Francesca laid down the rules before she left. He could stay in her apartment on condition that he never invited anyone back. He could come and go as he pleased but if anything ever went missing from her apartment he would be out on his ear. She never had any illusions that Dylan would be exclusively hers; in fact she suspected that he frequented his old haunts and hooked up with prostitutes who had in the past given him freebies on account of his good looks and his sexual prowess.

Over the years Francesca's career had blossomed and her salary increased commensurately. When she had moved to a townhouse in Sydney Street, SW3 in 1972 Dylan had tagged along. Neither saw the need to change the status quo; the relationship with no strings attached was perfect for both. Francesca didn't know what Dylan got up to when she was away on assignments and she never asked. Dylan was free except when she was back in the UK when she expected his full attention.

It was no hardship to Dylan to deliver on this requirement as he liked sex and she gave him good sex. They never went out together their relationship was strictly in the bedroom. Francesca was generous in her appreciation and sometimes bought expensive gifts for him. He also got to live in a great townhouse in Chelsea and to drive her cars. Francesca occasionally thought that he might make something of himself. He was intelligent and funny but lazy and she supposed he had no ambition. In that she was wrong.

Dylan admired her career and would have liked to be a photojournalist, or at least a photographer, himself. Despite the appearances to the contrary he was really not confident enough to try.

## **Caitlin - February 1978**

Caitlin returned from Italy to her London social scene. She had met Rebecca as planned and continued to spend time with her old friend understanding that she needed a lot of emotional support that she was too proud to ask for. Caitlin herself was feeling down, as she had really liked Mario. The first for a long time she mused. She had been chaste for ages and he had sparked desires that had been dormant. She threw herself into a social whirl and flirted with several potential lovers but none of them really appealed that much. The truth was that she was much more attracted to Latinos than to English men.



One morning she had a call from the lawyer's office, a young woman asking to speak to Caitlin followed by St John's plummy tones. He asked after her and then swiftly moved to the business in hand.

'Will you call into the office at your earliest convenience, say tomorrow at 10.00, to sign the completion papers on the Palazzo?' Caitlin had agreed and the call ended with a polite, 'Look forward to it.'

Caitlin had no sooner signed the papers and the money been deposited in the bank when she heard from Mario again for the first time since leaving Rome. Her heart quickened as she recognised his voice on the phone.

'Caitlin, *mia bella*, it was good to do business with you but now our business is complete perhaps we could do something more pleasurable?' Before she was able to frame a cohesive sentence he continued, 'Perhaps dinner tomorrow? I am flying in from the States and staying at the Savoy.'

'That would be lovely, thank you Mario' she replied, kicking herself inwardly for such a trite response.

'Excellent, I look forward to seeing you again *mio caro*, I will send a car; around 8.00?' Caitlin agreed and Mario had hung up with a smile in his voice as he said '*Ciao, bella!*'

Caitlin was thrilled. Her instincts had not been wrong he did really like her; he just had scruples about mixing business with pleasure. Pleasure she thought with an inward stirring. How she could do with a good seeing to! She had really missed the freedom that she had enjoyed in Paris away from the social networks that knew who she was and liked to gossip. She had lived a life of self imposed celibacy since returning to live in London as she associated primarily with the same circle that her parent's had inhabited.

Shortly after the call from Mario she made appointments for a facial, manicure, pedicure and wax. Her hair had recently been trimmed and hi-lighted. She would call into the new Palmerstone shop to pick up an outfit for dinner with Mario, she needed something very slightly seductive but not obvious. Looking beautifully groomed and glowing with anticipation Caitlin burst into the new Kings Road Palmerstone the following afternoon. Carole who she knew from the Wimbledon shop and from Rebecca's glowing reports greeted her with professional warmth.

'Hi Carole' Caitlin responded brightly, 'is Rebecca here today?' she asked as she began to browse the rails.

‘I am sorry Miss Alexander, Rebecca has taken a few days off and gone out to visit a friend of yours, in Bedfordshire I believe.’ Caitlin stopped browsing and turned to face Carole a faint furrow appearing between her brows.

‘Oh, I didn’t know she planned to go see Penny.’ As an afterthought she added, ‘Caitlin, please.’

‘I think it was quite sudden.’ Carole supplied hesitating how much she should discuss with Caitlin. Carole had become much attached to her boss and had been worried about her health of late. She also knew that Caitlin was an old and trusted friend of Rebecca’s. She didn’t want to overstep the mark of employee however and decided not to speak of her concern unless Caitlin asked for information. She switched her mind into professional sales mode and asked Caitlin instead if she was looking for something for a particular occasion and offered to help her to select some possibilities to try.

Caitlin accepted her help, explaining the first date scenario to which Carole responded with spot-on understanding,

‘Something suggestive but pretty maybe even a little bit prim; fire under the ice.’ She summarised, smiling.

‘That’s it exactly’ responded Caitlin with a wicked laugh. ‘I can see why Rebecca rates you so highly.’

‘Thanks, that means a lot’ returned Carole smiling widely, ‘I love working here, and I really like Rebecca.’ She hesitated, and then added in a rush, ‘I mean I like her as a friend as well as respecting her as my boss.’

‘That’s great’ replied Caitlin, ‘I know she likes you too, and trusts you completely.’ The two women smiled at each other warmly. Carole busied herself around the rails selecting dresses here and there that she knew would suit Caitlin and the occasion. Armed with half a dozen choices Carole shepherded Caitlin to the changing room. They had soon whittled the choice down to two dresses both short.

‘Either of these feels just right.’ Caitlin said, giving a twirl to look at the back of the eau de nil shift dress which skimmed her figure and finished just above the knee showing off her shapely legs, the high heeled Manolo stilettos adding a sleek simple sophistication to the outfit along with a simple clutch to finish. ‘You are clever Carole.’

‘Try the Halston again, I thought that that looked great on you’ Carole persuaded handing the sapphire blue long sleeve jersey bias cut dress to Caitlin, ‘this one looks so demure but it clings subtly to every curve; you’d knock his eyes out!’

‘I think you’re right, thanks’ laughed Caitlin, ‘I’m really into Halston and I was thrilled when Becca told me she was going to stock his label.’ After some deliberation Caitlin chose both dresses and the shoes and bag, as Carole knew she would, and the sale was completed with mutual pleasure.

When Caitlin got home at five she reckoned she had plenty of time to complete her toilette so put in a call to Penny. Some things were more important than a first date. Her conversation with Penny was stilted so Caitlin knew that Rebecca was in the room and Penny didn’t want to discuss her problems. Caitlin decided that the best approach was complete openness and told Penny the course of her afternoon’s shopping trip and then asked,

‘Can I speak to Becca please Pen? I’m worried about her as you know and I can tell you don’t want to break her confidence.’

‘Yes of course.’ Penny said, with relief, as she did feel torn between loyalty to Rebecca’s confidence and to Caitlin’s concern and prior involvement; much better that they should speak directly than for her to be a go-between.

‘Becca are you OK darling’ asked Caitlin as soon as Rebecca came to the phone, ‘It’s just that I went into Palmerstone this afternoon and Carole said you’d left London unexpectedly to go to Pen’s and I wondered if...’ she tailed off in dismay as Rebecca broke down in sobs at the other end of the line. Between sobs, Caitlin understood that things were worse than she could have imagined. Not only had Rebecca not seen Dylan since before Christmas but also she was almost certainly pregnant with his child. Penny came back on line and finished the telling of the sorry story while Caitlin blinked back her tears as she listened.

‘Pen, can I come down, tomorrow maybe? Just to see Becca and you guys of course. I feel so bad about all this. It was me that pushed her towards Dylan and well you know I love Becca and I can’t bear for her to be so distressed....’ Penny did know and she understood how Caitlin was feeling; in some ways not too dissimilar from her husband’s disquiet in the matter.

‘You know you’re always welcome Caiti, whenever and wherever.’

‘Thank you Penny, I knew it. I’ll come down tomorrow, be with you around lunchtime?’

‘Great, we’ll all look forward to it, won’t we Becca?’ Caitlin heard a more robust

‘Yes, we will, a lot.’ from Rebecca in the background.

Caitlin had a wonderful evening out with Mario despite worries about her friend. Knowing that she would see Rebecca the next day and that she was safely with Penny and Charles enabled her to push thoughts of Rebecca’s plight to the back of her mind for now. Mario’s driver picked her up promptly at eight as arranged. The sleek black Mercedes cruised

through the streets of London reaching her destination in a matter of minutes. Mario had chosen San Lorenzo in Beauchamp Place. Caitlin had dined there a few times with her parents it had been a big favourite of theirs. The owners Mara and Lorenzo Berni had become good friends.

When Caitlin entered the restaurant, which had a lovely Italian family feel to it, Mara who seemed to be expecting her greeted her warmly. Seconds later Mario hustled in apologising for his lateness and kissing first Caitlin and then Mara on both cheeks in greeting. It turned out that the couple had known Mario since he was a child through friendships with his father and grandparents.

Seated at the best table the two chatted easily together. They each drank a glass of Prosecco while they perused the menu in a leisurely way; both knowing that they would order the simple pasta dishes that Italian families love the best. Caitlin chose Pumpkin Ravioli, Mario Spaghetti Vongole, and an Italian Barroso wine to drink. A pitcher of water and side salads were also requested.

Mario, thought Caitlin, was like a different person from the hyper active business Mario she had met in Venice; though when they had lunched there she had seen glimpses of the expansive relaxed Mario when he had talked about his family. Caitlin chatted happily about her father and his sanguine marriage to Ariel and their obvious adoration of each other and the baby 'Princeling' as she had dubbed her half brother Sebastian. Mario smiled and told Caitlin that he had seen her father Frank only a couple of days before on Wall Street.

'He looks very happy as you say *mia bella*.' Caitlin blushed slightly at the familiarity spoken with a caress in his voice, as Mario continued, 'You like your new little bother, no?'

'Yes of course! He was really adorable when I saw him but he was new-born then, not very interesting. I must go out to see him again soon' she added, 'and Papa and Ariel of course. I only call him the Princeling because they are so besotted with him. I'm very happy for them. I love my father dearly and Ariel makes him happy so I like her too' Caitlin smiled genuinely.

'That's good' remarked Mario, 'families are very important and children are at the centre of the family don't you think?' He pursued.

'Yes, I agree that family is very important. I hadn't thought of it quite like that but children do become the most important focus of married couples...' Caitlin acquiesced floundering for a moment as this was serious stuff for a first date, 'my friend Penny and her husband have two small children and their lives revolve around the babies.' She added.

‘Penny, is she your best friend?’ Mario asked. Caitlin proceeded to tell him about the four girls and their long friendships feeling on safer ground than talking about babies and families. Mario listened and smiled as she enthused about her wonderful friends.

He then turned the conversation to the Venice Palazzo that he had just bought from Caitlin and asked her if she would like to hear about his plans for it. Caitlin was very interested but felt strange hearing about the development potential of his purchase. She found it illuminating to hear him talk with real enthusiasm for the design and layout of the place and thought to herself that he should have trained to be an architect or a designer. His vision was inspiring and he had excellent taste.

Mario talked about paint colours and fabrics, furniture and drapes with as much finesse as her interior designer had, or like Rebecca talked when she was enthusing about clothes. As Caitlin was interested and informed on the subject herself she was soon drawn into the plans and contributing suggestions herself as well as sanctioning his ideas with smiles and nods in all the right places. The time passed convivially as they finished their very good dinner and ordered espressos and gelato to finish.

‘The gelato they serve here is supplied by my father and my uncle so you must try it *mia caro*’ he urged, as she was about to demur.

‘Well in that case how could I possibly refuse?’ She smiled. The ice cream was delicious so Caitlin was glad that she been swayed and that she could also say in complete honesty, ‘I now understand how your father and uncle made a fortune out of something that sounds rather ordinary.’

‘Yes, indeed’ he agreed, ‘one thinks of commodities like oil and gas or gold not ice cream in terms of making money. But everyone has to eat and Americans love anything sweet.’

The meal finished Caitlin’s butterflies returned. Would they go back to hers or to his hotel? Would they just kiss or would she let him make love to her. She knew she wanted him; her body was pulsating with desire. Should she play the prude, not on the first date scenario? In the end the choice was not hers to make. Mario escorted her to the street outside San Lorenzo and kissed her on both cheeks and smiling meaningfully into her eyes declared that he had enjoyed her company very much and would very much like to see her again soon.

‘Thank you Mario, for a lovely evening and I too would like that.’ Caitlin responded.

‘Tomorrow?’ Mario asked.

‘No, I can’t, I’m sorry I would have liked...’ Caitlin explained quickly the trip to see Penny and that Rebecca would be there too.

‘Oh yes,’ remarked Mario wryly, ‘the all important friends’ but he smiled as he said this and added, ‘enjoy!’ Then back to businesslike Mario, ‘my driver will be here in a moment to take you home; I have a visit to make nearby. I will call you in a couple of days? *Ciao Bella!*’ Mario added and kissed her warmly again on the cheek as the black Mercedes slid to a halt beside them.

Caitlin had least expected this scenario at the end of the enjoyable evening that they had spent together. She wondered if Mario had decided that she wasn’t his type after all. Then she thought that couldn’t be right he wouldn’t have asked to see her again the next day. After turning everything over in her mind once again she decided that he must be serious about her. Maybe he thought that she was a virgin and her being Frank’s daughter didn’t want to make the wrong impression. She settled herself down to sleep with a smile of anticipated pleasure on her face.

The next morning Caitlin woke to hear the phone ringing and sat up in bed to answer, her voice bleary from sleep.

‘Caitlin, good morning!’ It was Mario, ‘I’m sorry to wake you *mio caro*. I wanted to ask what time you leave for your friend Penny’s home and to suggest you may like to have the use of my driver. Sergio is very good and he will get you there safely. I would feel happier that you were with him.’ Caitlin grinned in sleepy delight at Mario’s caring gesture.

‘Thank you Mario, that is very kind of you.’ She could easily use her usual driver but it seemed churlish to refuse the kind offer and also she felt to accept would be to cement the nascent relationship further. She really liked him.

An hour later in the midst of her preparations for the visit to Ampthill the doorbell rang and she ran downstairs to receive two huge bunches of pink roses. She loved that he had known she would be a pink girl, not red, and when she read the messages tears pricked her eyes with gratitude. One bunch was addressed to her ‘Caitlin mia caro, I miss you already, Mario’ and the second to Penny. ‘To Penny whom I hope to meet soon, enjoy your visitor. Mario Ferraro.’ It was really sweet of him and so thoughtful. She finished her packing in plenty of time. Mario’s driver Sergio arrived promptly and the journey out to Bedfordshire uneventful.

## **Rebecca - February 1978**

In the Rectory at Ampthill Rebecca awoke to the same feeling of acute nausea. There was absolutely no doubt now that she was pregnant. She lay still for a moment willing the sick feeling to recede. Finally giving in, she dragged herself out of bed and raced to the bathroom arriving just in time to throw up. Tired and depressed she climbed back into bed wondering

for the millionth time what she was going to do. Well really more that there was nothing she could do. Her life was completely out of control. For Rebecca this was a new and very unwelcome experience. She was cheered by the sound of footsteps and a tap on the door knowing it was Penny coming to the rescue. Penny poked her head around the door, smiling sympathetically at Rebecca,

‘I’ve brought a cup of tea and a piece of toast. Might make you feel better. I had terrible morning sickness with Simon for about three weeks and then it just went away and I felt fine again.’ She set the tea and toast down on the bedside table and sat on the side of the bed reaching over and bestowing a hug and a kiss on Rebecca’s cheek. ‘Caitlin will cheer you up.’ She offered.

‘Yes, I expect she will’ replied Rebecca somewhat doubtful, ‘you do too Pen. More than that, I don’t know what I would have done without you for the last couple of days. Thank you.’ Her thanks were heartfelt. The two chatted in a rather desultory fashion for a few moments. Rebecca tried to pull herself together, ‘I’m sorry Pen, and I’m really not great company for you.’ Penny responded with a squeeze and,

‘Hey friends are for the bad times as well as the good. I know you would always be there for me if anything awful was to happen.’

‘Yes, I would. But I hope the time never comes’ responded Rebecca, ‘you and Charles makes me feel secure and hopeful for the future for all of us.’

‘Thanks Rebecca, as you know I feel blessed in my marriage and lucky to have two perfect babies.’ She wondered if it might be a good time to talk more to Rebecca about the practicalities of bringing up the baby she was carrying. Rebecca sensing that Penny wanted to help her to think through the problem of her unlooked for pregnancy and to be supportive responded:

‘Pen, I keep wondering how I’ll cope with the shops and a baby on my own.’ Her face looked pinched and desolate as she said this but she soldiered on without resorting to tears, ‘I want to have the baby, I already feel connected to it in some strange way. Sort of protective I suppose. I just know that Dylan will not want anything to do with it or me. He’ll just walk away without a backward glance.’ Her voice hardened as she remembered the time he had done this before, after humiliating her completely. The time the baby was conceived. ‘But I have started to think how I’ll manage. My flat above the shop in Wimbledon could work out all right. The baby could come to work with me and sleep in a Moses basket in the staff room. The girls will really like it I think. Then when it’s bigger it will have to go to nursery or I’ll get a nanny to look after it.’ Penny was delighted and relieved that Rebecca had

started to apply her old logic and problem solving skills to her situation. She seemed to have accepted where she was and implemented a plan to move forward; just as she always did reflected Penny.

Caitlin arrived a couple of hours later to find her friends, still deep in conversation, sitting in the snug. The three all hugged and kissed each other enthusiastically and Caitlin was relieved and happy to see that Rebecca seemed quite upbeat. Together they revisited the conversation that Rebecca and Penny had been having before her arrival. Caitlin nodded and agreed and thought that Rebecca would manage fine, especially with the help of the girls in the shop. She had met most of them and she knew that they all liked and respected Rebecca and would put themselves out to help her.

The subject of Rebecca's pregnancy was interrupted for a while when the girls went into the kitchen for lunch and the huge bouquet of flowers discovered. Caitlin blushed slightly as she explained their origin and confessed that she'd dumped them there on the way in so as not to cause a distraction.

'But we like distractions!' Rebecca countered immediately, 'Is there something that we need to know Caiti?'

'Well I don't really know...' Caitlin hesitated, 'and if it is something special I don't want to be gloating about my good fortune when you're going through such a bad time Becca.' Her look pleaded for forgiveness. Rebecca immediately gave her a big hug and said to both of them,

'Please both of you, I thank you for your kindness and support but don't think for a minute that you have to tread around me on eggshells. I want you to be happy. It gives me hope, like I said to Pen earlier. Why should you guys be miserable because I've made a big mistake?' Rebecca looked her old self as she lifted her chin in the way that her friends were accustomed to see when she was facing a challenge. 'Come on Caiti dish the dirt. We want to know all about this Mario character don't we Pen?'

'You bet' seconded Penny, 'Dish!' Caitlin laughed as she started to tell the tale of her meetings with Mario so far. All three felt comfortable and contented as they settled into the old established patterns of their friendship. They exchanged opinions on Mario's motivations, some quite likely, others absurdly fabricated until they were giggling happily like their eleven year old selves. Rebecca wiped her eyes from tears of laughter and exclaimed:

'I wish Annie was here it would be perfect!' Penny looked at her watch

'I'm going to call her now. She could be here for dinner if she's got nothing planned.'



Suzanne had thought she would write up some of the notes she had made during her travels in Andalucía. But that could wait she decided immediately when she took Penny's call late in the afternoon at work. Her father would look after Zorro and Ziggy; she would call and let him know where she was going. She could go straight to St Pancras and catch a train. Suzanne kept a small supply of toiletries at Penny's as she often went down at fairly short notice. She took her duties as godmother to Simon very seriously.

When Suzanne joined the group of friends that evening their conversation continued seamlessly. Suzanne was brought up to date with all the happenings. She expressed her concerns for Rebecca and felicitations to Caitlin. They all played with Simon who was a cute child with blond curls and big blue eyes, more like a girl than a boy said Caitlin meaning a compliment,

'Not fair for a boy to have such gorgeous long eyelashes!' The baby, Lucy, was passed around between them and rocked gently when she opened her eyes and made a little cry. Penny felt inordinately proud of her children and oddly maternal to her friends. In some ways she was glad that Rebecca was going to be a mother. It would be good to have one of her friends to discuss baby things with. To know how different that it made you feel being a mother. She just wished that the circumstances were happier for her friend.

When Charles joined them the girls warmly welcomed him. They all loved him because he made Penny so happy as well as because he was such a good, kind person. He listened to his wife and the other girls making plans for Rebecca and the baby and was deeply relieved to know that the pregnancy would not be terminated. He also felt a certain amount of disquiet that all thoughts of Dylan being a part of the equation were off the agenda. He wondered if Rebecca even intended to tell him or give him a chance to 'do the decent thing'. Charles knew it wasn't the right time to raise the subject but his unease refused to budge.

## **Penny - February 1978**

The following day Suzanne left early to get to work. She tiptoed around the house trying not to wake the others but Penny was a light sleeper used to the night-time demands of babies. She slipped out onto the landing to hug Suzanne goodbye,

'Come again soon, Annie. We love to see you.'

'I will, and thank you Pen. I love to come down.' Suzanne hugged Penny tight, 'Say goodbye to the others for me please. I'll be in touch with Becca as soon as she's back. Give a big hug for my godson.' Suzanne left quickly and quietly.

Penny went back to bed but lay awake thinking some more about Rebecca and the baby and Dylan. Perhaps Charles was right (he usually was) and Rebecca should tell Dylan. To deliberately deny Dylan the knowledge of his fatherhood seemed unfair to Dylan and to the child. Penny ran the idea around and around trying to think of the best solution for everyone. She knew that Rebecca had been deeply hurt and humiliated by Dylan's behaviour although none of them knew the extent of the abuse. Would Dylan change if he were to be a father and husband? Jane had attested that Dylan was a likable child and young man in most ways, and he and Charles had been very close as children. On the other hand Charles seemed to think that Dylan could not cope with responsibility. There was also the concern that Jane had alluded to about Dylan's behaviour towards Jo. Perhaps Dylan's childhood had set patterns too deep to change. Penny heard Rebecca stirring and decided to get up and make tea. It was pointless worrying about it all, she may as well do something useful.

Later that morning there was a phone call for Caitlin from Mario. Penny answered and thought that he sounded very nice and rather dishy. Caitlin blushed as she went out to the hallway to take the call. Mario was calling from New York.

'Caitlin, *mia caro*, I hope you are having a good time with your friends? I called to arrange for Sergio to collect you and your friend Rebecca. Will it be today or tomorrow that you'll need him? I will be in London again tomorrow evening if you will do me the honour of dinning with me again?' Caitlin was overwhelmed with nervous anticipation. Remembering her manners and trying to remain cool she thanked him for her flowers and the thoughtful gift of those he had sent for Penny.

'They're really lovely, my favourite colour. Thank you again, she breathed, 'and yes dinner tomorrow night would be perfect. We plan to return to London tomorrow morning' she invented as they hadn't yet discussed their return. She did feel however that Rebecca was ready to get back to Palmerstone: the return would be therapeutic for her after the calm and recuperation afforded by the sojourn with Penny and her friends.

'Excellent!' responded Mario, sounding very pleased, 'Sergio will come for you tomorrow at 10.30?' he hazarded.

'That would be perfect. Thank you so much Mario.'

'I can hardly wait for tomorrow evening to see you again *ma bella* Caitlin. *Ciao!*' He finished and hung up.

Caitlin had to suffer a bout of teasing at the hands of Penny and Rebecca about her ardent suitor, which she did with good grace and in good spirits. She was enjoying the attention and

the thrill of the chase. She tried not to think about the culmination of the chase as she was so erotically charged that she could barely think of anything else once she started in that train.

Playing with Simon and baby Lucy served to distract Caitlin and Rebecca from their respective preoccupations. Simon aged two was charming to amuse. He trotted around between the three girls offering toys to play with and conversing in a strange mixture of clear understandable English words and some obscure language of his own. His head of golden curls, left long by a doting mother, and big blue eyes were adorable and he was beyond cute with his baby sister begging to hold her and planting kisses on her sleepy face.

Rebecca spent much of the day immersed in baby talk with Penny and again felt the stirring of maternal feelings mixed with the sheer inconvenience of her situation. Penny chose her moment with care to broach the subject of the father. She wondered aloud if Dylan may like to know about his fatherhood and what he would feel. Rebecca was silent for a few moments before she sidestepped with,

‘I’ve been wondering how to break the news to my parents about having an unmarried mother in the family.’

‘How do you think they will react?’ asked Penny.

‘I’m not really sure.’ Mused Rebecca, ‘they’ll be pleased about the grandchild bit. How they’ll take the unmarried I’m not sure. I expect they’ll be OK with it as I’m far enough away from home to avoid any embarrassment in their circle.’ Rebecca had got to know her mother in an adult relationship over the last few years since she had been at college and in London. Mary had proved to be much less strict and straight-laced than Rebecca had viewed her as a schoolgirl. Indeed she suspected that her mother might have been a bit racy in her youth. Penny dropped the subject of Dylan. She knew that Rebecca would not be talked into anything she wasn’t ready for.

The three girls spent a relaxed and chatty evening with Charles as though nothing was out of the ordinary. Caitlin had presented Mario’s offer to Rebecca and Penny earlier in the day and they had all agreed to it. Rebecca needed to get back to work; she was beginning to fret about Palmerstone without being at the helm. Penny though thrilled to have her friends to stay was ready to return to normal family life with just Charles and her babies. Caitlin was itching to get back to London and to see Mario again.

Penny waved her friends off the next morning as they disappeared waving in turn from the back of Mario’s sleek Mercedes. She sighed to herself partly sad and partly relieved to be alone again. She spent the day tending to the baby and helping Simon to scribble across the

outlines of his picture book, amused at his selection of colours and his constant and largely unintelligible chatter as he played.

Penny was very content in her marriage and with motherhood and it disturbed her that Rebecca would not have the same support and love that succoured her. Her mind kept returning to the conundrum that was Dylan. Could he make Rebecca happy? Would it be the making of him having to face up to responsibility? Could fatherhood compensate for his own disastrous childhood?

That evening once the children were in bed she brought up the subject again with Charles. He paused in the midst of stirring the supper that he was preparing,

‘It’s been on my mind too.’ He continued, stirring and inspecting pans, turning the heat up and down. Penny watched indulgently, he was a great cook and enjoyed experimenting.

‘Personally I think that Dylan should know. He has a right to know. A child is made by two parents, not just the mother.’ He smiled at his wife understanding her internal conflict.

‘Darling you know how much the children mean to me and how much they love to be with me. You as their mother are more important to them but nevertheless sometimes Simon or

even Lucy wants their Daddy more. What would the family be without me as part of it?’

Penny understood exactly what he meant. Rebecca’s child would never know the experience of having a father. Was it fair to deny it that experience without at least trying to repair the damage?

Over dinner their conversation continued to revolve around Dylan, Rebecca and the baby. Penny cleaned up afterwards while Charles went upstairs to check on the children. When he came back down Penny was yawning sleepily. He took her into his arms and administered a bracing hug.

‘Go to bed baby, you look tired out.’ He placed a kiss on her forehead, turned her around and gave her a little push and a playful pat on her bottom.

Charles sat up for an hour or so after Penny had retired. Finally coming to a decision he made a phone call to the Chelsea number he had for Dylan and arranged to meet him the day after.

## **Suzanne - February 1978**

Suzanne travelled back to London with thoughts of Rebecca’s difficulties vying for attention with the meeting that she had planned with Mr Lewis. Suzanne privately thought that Rebecca would be wise to have an abortion however unpleasant. It would be extremely difficult for her to bring up a child at the same time as managing the growing demands of her

business. But it was not her affair and she would not have dreamed of influencing her friend either way. Suzanne had no thoughts of Dylan proving to be an adequate partner and parent having heard the accounts of his past and of his recent behaviour. Deciding there was nothing that worrying would accomplish she put the matter aside. She would call Rebecca the next day and invite her around for one of their regular evenings. Rebecca would need the support of all her friends.

Suzanne had arranged to have lunch with Henry Lewis who had become a confidant as well as a mentor to her. They would just slip out for a quick bite at one of the local pubs; nothing fancy. She wanted to ask him what he thought of her chances for the vacancy at the Home Office. Moreover whether he thought that it would be a good move for her career. Henry came by her desk at 12.30 prompt causing a ripple of interest from the junior staff. The most senior people seldom visited their ranks. Suzanne placed her papers in the desk drawer and locked it prior to getting up and greeting him formally. The two left the office together and made for the nearest pub. Henry Lewis was an ex public school boy (Eton) and as he freely admitted had retained a taste for what he referred to as school dinners. His favourite was Shepherd's Pie and when really expansive could be relied upon to order Spotted Dick for pudding.

Once they had ordered their food they settled into a corner with a pint of beer for him and a half of lager for Suzanne. She swiftly moved to the topic she had in mind and was gratified to get a very positive response from Henry,

'Ah, well my dear I'm glad you asked me about that. I heard about the position myself. On the grapevine you know...' Suzanne did know. She knew that Henry Lewis could be relied on to know everything that was happening around Whitehall from his formidable array of networks. 'I thought I would mention it to you myself,' he continued, 'It could be just the thing to get you noticed more widely. Show that you have ambition that sort of thing.' He added.

'I wondered if you'd heard anything about it.' Suzanne paused as his Shepherd's Pie and her Bangers and Mash were delivered to the table, 'Do you know if they've lined anyone up internally?'

'Um, I did hear that they have an internal candidate. Someone very keen but not considered to be quite right for the position. You would be the better candidate by far. Could be a tricky role managing the, ah, disappointed candidate.' He added as though Suzanne would definitely get the job. Their conversation ceased while they both tucked into the rather good pub grub.

‘I don’t know what I’ll do without you!’ Suzanne declared suddenly and honestly. They had both finished eating and were sitting drinking indifferent cups of coffee. ‘I mean,’ she continued, ‘When you retire and you know...’ she hesitated, ‘lose touch with your networks and also forget about all this silly stuff.’

‘Ha! My dear, I still have my inside track for information. A mole in every department so to speak, though of course in the non-espionage sense’ he added with a laugh, but also with a quick look around to make sure he had not been overheard uttering an indiscretion. *Civil Service habits die hard* he thought.

‘Henry, may I ask what you’re planning to do when you retire?’ Suzanne asked. It was a subject that had interested her for a while but she had felt awkward asking. Their relationship had revolved entirely around the world of work. He smiled benignly at his young friend,

‘Well I’m going to travel for a few months. I have a sister in the United States and her daughter, my niece, in Australia. I have planned an around the world trip with stops in some exotic places; Hong Kong, Singapore, Haiti, Trinidad, Jamaica, many places that have long fascinated me.’

‘How wonderful!’ Suzanne enthused and added, shyly at first, ‘I plan to go to live in Spain one day...’ she warmed to her topic, ‘I went away earlier this year and travelled around Andalucía.’ She began to tell of her adventures. Henry listened attentively, once again admiring the talents and abilities of his young protégé. She was an unusual and interesting young woman. He nodded and smiled as she spoke eloquently about her experiences, asking here and there a question. When she paused in her account he smiled and astonished her by saying,

‘Once I’ve finished my wider travels I too intend to settle in Spain. Well on Mallorca to be precise. I bought an apartment out there a few years ago now and have been visiting regularly since.’

‘Oh that is such a coincidence!’ Suzanne remarked, ‘Do you speak Spanish?’

‘*Si, un poco mas,*’ he replied in reasonably good Spanish, ‘but I suspect not as well as you do. I’m no linguist, unlike you Suzanne.’ She flushed with pleasure at his compliment of her ability. ‘Now I think we had better be getting back to the office.’ Mr Lewis returned to brisk authoritative manner. As they returned to work walking together he thought to himself that he would have a word with Reynolds at the Home Office about Suzanne and her interest in the promotion. She would be perfect for the job.

That evening Suzanne called Rebecca and had a long chat mostly inconsequential as the purpose was to arrange for a visit.

‘I have a great recipe for an Andalucian speciality that I want to try out. I got it from a woman in a tiny village. She said it was a secret family recipe that her mother, grandmother and great grandmother had cooked before her. Sort of rabbit stew really,’ Suzanne laughed, ‘but delicious all the same. Well it was when she cooked it!’

‘Thanks Annie, it sounds great and I’m sure you’ll do justice to the dish. How about next Tuesday? We’re remerchandising the shops this Monday and Tuesday so it’ll be good to relax a bit after that.’

‘Perfect! We’ll look forward to it.’ She often spoke in plural, as her father was almost always included. She wondered momentarily what he would think about Rebecca’s pregnancy; if she were to tell him that is.

The next day Suzanne received an unexpected call from the Home Office. An appointment was requested for her to meet with Mr Reynolds. His secretary asked if she could manage Monday late afternoon for an informal chat. Suzanne was delighted and knew that she owed the opportunity to Henry Lewis. Mr Reynolds was his counterpart. She would spend the weekend preparing for the meeting as she was aware that it would be anything but relaxed even though it was to be informal.

## **Caitlin - February 1978**

Caitlin returned to London with heightened expectations of her affair with Mario. Sergio had collected Rebecca and her from Penny’s as arranged and delivered them safely to their respective homes. On dropping Caitlin off Sergio produced a small package and presented it to her with a small bow of his head,

‘From Mr Ferraro, he hopes that you will wear this small gift this evening.’ Caitlin blushed furiously not knowing how to react, to be pleased or embarrassed. Sergio registered no curiosity however and immediately took his leave. The black Mercedes slipped into the traffic with ease and was gone.

Caitlin unwrapped the present as soon as she got into the house. It was from Tiffany, she recognised the distinctive blue of the box immediately. She opened it to reveal a pair of beautiful earrings. The centre a pretty pink stone that she didn’t recognise, cabochon cut. The surrounding stones were unmistakably diamonds set in platinum that formed a flower shaped stud. They were exquisite and very her. They would also have been very expensive. She realised with a quiver of her heart that he must be very serious. She felt scared and also excited all at once.

That evening Caitlin got ready for her date with Mario in a flutter of nerves. She decided on a wrap dress by Halston that she had had for some time. It always made her feel attractive as the cut and particular shade of pink made the most of her colouring and flattered her shape. She had picked it out mainly though because Mario's gift of the earrings would look stunning with it. Ordinarily she would probably have nipped around to Palmerstone to consult with Becca over her choice and to show her the amazing gift. At the moment, despite what Rebecca had said to the contrary, she thought that it would be insensitive to show off her good fortune.

The evening followed a similar pattern. Sergio collected her and drove her to the restaurant, this time to the Savoy Grill. Caitlin's heart beat faster. The Savoy was where Mario usually stayed when he was in London. Would tonight be the night she wondered. She had chosen to wear a very pretty yet seductive bra and panties in case, and frankly was fantasising almost constantly about Mario tearing them off her in his haste to consummate the relationship. Caitlin liked sex and had recently had to satisfy herself to calm her frustrated desire. It was not as good as the real thing though. Just thinking about the culmination of the evening made her wet with desire.

Mario was waiting for her in the hotel bar. He rose immediately to greet her kissing her warmly on both cheeks, and taking hold of her hand turned her around to admire the effect of the dress, which he knew was by Halston, and commented on the match with the earrings, *'Bellissima! Caitlin mio'* he purred into her ear. She thanked him profusely and with sincerity on his choice of the earrings. They were perfect in every way. Perhaps he was too. The evening went well, Mario chatting easily about his recent trip to New York, his business plans and a family visit he had made to see his parents. Caitlin told Mario about her visit with Penny and Charles and the evening that the four girls had spent together. She didn't mention Rebecca's situation to Mario. She somehow didn't think he would approve and anyway it was up to Rebecca whom she chose to tell. The two lingered over coffee and again Mario persuaded her into partaking of the gelato. Caitlin reprimanded him playfully saying, *'You will not be so complimentary if you continue to feed me with gelato. I'll be so huge I won't be able to fit into anything!'* Mario answered in such a way that she understood that he would like to see her fatter. She blushed knowing that he meant with child. Again she could hardly contain her arousal. She had to drag herself back to reality as she heard Mario asking her if she intended visiting her father soon.



‘I would like to see you in New York, Caitlin. I spend more time in the States and also in Italy than I do here in London. Would you consider living in Manhattan rather than here in London?’ Was Mario asking her to live with him she wondered blankly?

‘I will be going to see Papa and Ariel and the Princeling sometime soon’ she answered, ‘but I haven’t made any arrangements yet.’

‘Let me make the arrangements for you *Bella*, we could travel together. I will see you there more often than we can here and...’ he shrugged meaningfully, ‘perhaps we may soon spend all our free time together?’ Caitlin again wondered exactly what he intended and decided that she must ask him to follow his meaning.

‘Do you mean you want us to live together?’ asked Caitlin blushing again, she felt very uncertain of her ground here.

‘Not live together *Bella*, I would like to marry and start a family.’

‘Oh!’ Caitlin could not pretend to be anything but astonished at the speed of Mario’s declaration. She smiled shyly at him, ‘Is that a proposal, Mario?’

‘I guess so!’ He sounded serious when he added, ‘But I would want to speak to your Father first.’ This sounded incredibly old fashioned to Caitlin. She wondered if it were typical in Italian families. But of course she was herself half Italian. *Did her father ask her grandfather, the Count, if he could marry her mother? Maybe so but that was almost 30 years ago.* All these things were running through her head when she heard Mario’s voice breaking into her thoughts. ‘Will you Caitlin? Will you marry me?’ Caitlin heard herself answering:

‘Yes’ before she could properly marshal her thoughts. She must be in love. Mario then astounded her once more by producing from his coat pocket another Tiffany box. Her heart leaped with excitement. Inside was a beautiful pink diamond engagement ring. It had been chosen with care. The stones complimented perfectly the ones of her earrings without matching; a look that she considered to be far more tasteful. Caitlin was overwhelmed with love for Mario. He was the one. They would marry and have babies.

Mario was now making plans in his customary whirlwind way. She was swept along in his wake. He would arrange the flights to New York; they would fly out the next day. She would call her father and arrange for Mario and her to dine with them as soon as it was convenient. Then she would meet his parents and the rest of his family. They would marry in the late spring or early summer. Where would she like? Caitlin decided Italy, Sorrento. She would like the wedding to be at the summer Palazzo; it was so beautiful there. By the

end of their dinner Caitlin was dizzy with the speed of her fairy tale romance and all the plans that Mario was making.

Finally he put his arms around her and pulled her towards him. Expecting a kiss she lifted her face to his her mouth softened with expectation. Disappointed once more she realised that Mario intended a chaste kiss and a farewell until the next day. The same routine was repeated where Sergio drove her home and she went to bed alone.

Her mind was reeling with all the plans and her body was consumed with desire. Caitlin hardly slept at all.

## **Rebecca - February 1978**

The same evening Rebecca also received a proposal of sorts. She had been getting ready to go to bed when she heard a ring on her doorbell. She ran lightly downstairs thinking that it must be Annie or Caitlin. She found instead Dylan on her doorstep and from the shadows behind him another figure emerged, Charles.

‘You’d better come in.’ Rebecca invited flatly. She was at a loss to understand why Dylan had turned up again now and why Charles would be with him. Was she being dim she wondered? She gestured to them to sit at the table in the sitting room and brought glasses of beer for them both. She’d completely gone off drinking alcohol since she’d been pregnant. She sat down opposite to the two men noticing obscurely that they each looked more attractive when together. The gypsy good looks of Dylan highlighting the blonde angelic look of Charles and vice versa. She determined to stay silent waiting for them to explain their visit. It was Dylan who broke the silence. He seemed genuine in his apology for what had happened between them. She understood from him that he also knew that he had made her pregnant although he alluded to this obliquely. Charles then indicated that Dylan had something more he wished to say; he looked meaningfully at Dylan then got up from the table and wandered into the kitchen as though to get more beer.

Dylan and Rebecca were left alone together sitting across from each other at the dining table. Dylan’s face reflected the inner turmoil that he was going through. He had agreed to Charles that he should marry Rebecca. No one in the world could have persuaded him into this action other than Charles. Dylan loved his childhood friend more than anyone else in his life. He was attracted to Rebecca and perhaps almost loved her but his fear of emotional involvement had always pushed him away from making commitments. His no strings attached affair with Francesca had suited him well enough. He could not imagine himself as

a married man or as a father; in fact the thought terrified him. He had made a promise to Charles though and he knew he had to keep it.

‘Rebecca, I er think we should get hitched...for the baby y’know.’ He managed looking less than sure about the proposal. Rebecca sat stony-faced looking across the table at the man that she had thought she loved. He couldn’t really have thought that such a lame proposal, obviously influenced by Charles, could tempt her to spend the rest of her life with him could he? She decided to say as much. Her mulish expression underlined the fact that she was not desperate for him or his insulting proposal.

Dylan respected her for it. He finally decided to pull out all the stops and applied his Gaelic charm to the task in hand. By the end of a long evening he had managed to persuade Rebecca that he was a changed man and that he really would try to make her happy and that he would be a devoted husband and doting father. Charles supported his friend’s declarations and Rebecca was finally convinced that it was the right thing to do. She was not however sure that Dylan was able to live up to his promises.

It was getting very late in the evening by the time that all the arrangements had been agreed to. Charles would not conduct the service but he and Penny would be witnesses for them at a registry office. Charles would organise everything for the following Saturday, in the meantime Dylan was to accompany him back to Ampthill where he would stay with them for the few days before the marriage. It was obvious to Rebecca that Charles didn’t want to let Dylan out of his sight in case he was to change his mind. The whole evening had attained a surreal air that she couldn’t get to grips with. Rebecca was used to organising her own life not to have terms dictated to her but this time she seemed incapable of making a decision.

She wasn’t sure that marriage to Dylan was the right choice but she felt caught up in this grander plan that was happening to her. Thoughts of her parents’ and the relief that they would feel intruded into the numbness that had descended on her mind. All the fears of coping with the business and the baby that had beset her were now re-examined in the light of this new development.

Marriage, marriage to Dylan she turned the thought over in her mind. Wasn’t it what she had dreamed of? Longed for even? She was so tired that she couldn’t think straight. It was with relief that she heard Charles saying that they would be going now. He added that Penny sent her love and was looking forward to seeing her on Saturday. So Pen knew about it all thought Rebecca, wishing that she was there to help her cope with the fog in her mind.

The next day Rebecca immersed herself in work. They were in the midst of remerchandising the shops with the spring collections. The Kings Road shop was in turmoil

when Caitlin breezed in to see if Rebecca could snatch a coffee with her. She had to speak to one of her friends before the adoring Mario whisked her off to the States. She wished with all her heart that Rebecca could be as happy as she was herself. Rebecca greeted Caitlin warmly but demurred at first to leave the chaos in the shop. Her new assistant manager, Nicky, who had used to work with her in Liberty, waved away her excuses saying that they could manage without her for half an hour. Rebecca gave in leaving the girls with a few key instructions before departing with Caitlin.

They ordered coffees and sat down together in a quiet corner. Caitlin could contain her excitement no longer. She waved her engagement ring under Rebecca's nose with a look split uneasily between ecstasy and concern.

'Oh my God! Mario's proposed?' Becca crushed Caitlin in a bear hug; 'I'm so pleased for you babe.' She congratulated with genuine pleasure, 'Tell all!' Caitlin spilled the whole story of the evening before, the words tripping over each other in her haste. Rebecca was amazed and delighted in turn. When she finally got to recount her own evening it seemed even more surreal.

'So' she finished her tale, 'we seem to both be getting married.' Caitlin was in turn delighted for her friend although she was concerned by Rebecca's lack of enthusiasm over Dylan's proposal.

'Are you sure Becca?' She asked quietly, 'It's a big step to take if you're not.'

'No I'm not sure.' Rebecca shrugged, 'I just feel confused and sort of out of control. What about you Caiti? Are you sure?'

'I think so. He's gorgeous and kind and thoughtful. It's all a bit of a rush though. But that's Mario I suppose he's always in a hurry!' She hesitated to mention her slight fears about the sex, or lack of it. She turned this over in her mind and decided that she'd say something to her friend, if only to be reassured. As she was about to speak of her concern Rebecca was hailed by one of her customers who she greeted in return; the moment was lost.

That evening Caitlin flew out to the States with Mario and Rebecca went around to Suzanne's for dinner both with news of their respective weddings to impart.

## **Suzanne - February 1978**

Monday had been a momentous day for Suzanne too. She had cleared her diary so that she could attend the meeting requested by Mr Reynolds and she had spent the weekend preparing for the event. Suzanne approached the informal meeting as though she was to attend an interview. She re-examined the job description and carefully audited her own skills and

experience to match the criteria. Where she lacked experience she thought carefully about the transferability of her different skills and experience and how these would benefit the new situation. By Sunday evening she felt confident that she could impress Mr Reynolds with her abilities. It was then time to relax and enjoy the evening, cooking a meal to share with her father and playing with the cats.

The meeting had gone extremely well. Suzanne felt assured that she had performed well and she had liked Mr Reynolds. He was very different from her mentor, Henry Lewis, in respect of appearance and manner. Reynolds was short and rotund with a ruddy complexion and happy expression. She liked him immediately; he was a Mr Pickwick lookalike she thought. Once he moved from social niceties to the subject in hand she was aware of a phenomenal intellect lying behind the outward urbanity. She was glad of the training that she had received at the hands of her father. His demeanour belied the content of the conversation almost entirely. Suzanne thought later that many a person may have come unstuck thinking that they were having an idle conversation with Mr Reynolds.

Suzanne had spent an hour with him discussing the workings of the civil service in general, her own department at the Foreign Office on which he was very well informed and upon the workings and demands of the Home Office. When she left his office he rose and shook hands with her warmly,

‘Thank you for your time Miss Harrison, I seldom find a flaw in Henry Lewis’s judgment. Yet again he has been proved correct.’ He smiled benignly, ‘We will be in touch shortly. I’ll see if we can circumvent the interview process, if that is you still want the job?’

‘Thank you, yes’ Suzanne returned, gratified.

By the time Rebecca arrived for dinner the following evening Suzanne had received a call from Mr Reynolds confirming the offer. She was over the moon with delight and excitement about the new challenge. Rebecca still looked pale and thin Suzanne noted with concern and her natural ebullience had been lacking for some time. Suzanne was keen to counter her friend’s depressed state with a comfortable evening, good food and cheer. She knew too that the shenanigans of Ziggy and Zorro could be counted on to bring a smile to Rebecca’s face.

They sat in the kitchen and chatted of this and that as Suzanne busied herself translating her Andalucian recipe to fit the English ingredients she had sourced. The smells were good enough to draw Jack from his study and alert the cats to their dinnertime. Once fed Ziggy hopped aboard Rebecca’s lap, curling up and purring contentedly as she stroked his soft fur. Rebecca smiled as she fussed him, the action made her feel relaxed and homely just as Suzanne had hoped. She had long been aware of the recuperative powers of her cats.

The rabbit stew turned out very well indeed and Rebecca ate better than she had in a long time, even breaking off pieces of bread to mop up the delicious sauce along with the others. They finished the meal with some cheese and celery and another glass of red wine. Jack then returned to his study to leave the girls to gossip alone. He gave Rebecca a warm hug goodbye as he made off.

‘Take care of yourself young lady.’ He admonished, ‘you look tired and much too thin. Working too hard like this one I expect.’ He added, nodding at his daughter with affectionate pride. Rebecca continued to smile after Jack had departed. She felt at home here, comfortable, well fed and nurtured. Ziggy continued to purr happily on her lap his front paws stretched out and resting on her stomach. Zorro had made himself comfortable likewise on Suzanne who stroked him absently as the girls chatted.

‘I have news’ said Suzanne, ‘I’ve been offered a job at the Home Office, a promotion; quite a good one.’ She smiled, pleased with herself.

‘That’s brilliant Annie. I think you’ll be running the show before long!’ Rebecca remarked only partly in jest. She had a great deal of respect for Suzanne’s capabilities and her work ethic. ‘When will you start?’ She had no doubt that her friend would pursue the opportunity, even though she knew that Suzanne had ambitions of the Diplomatic Service one day in the future.

‘Beginning of next month. I thought I might take a few days off before. Do you fancy going away somewhere for a few days?’ Suzanne asked.

‘I don’t think I’ll be able to, sorry Annie.’ Rebecca searched for the right words to tell Suzanne her own news. ‘I’ll be a married woman by next week,’ she stated baldly. She told Suzanne of her visit from Dylan accompanied by Charles and what had been decided. ‘Will you come to the registry office? I’d like it if you were there.’ Rebecca paused briefly, then continued, ‘I know that you’re not that keen on the idea of me and Dylan and the baby but I think it’s what I have to do.’

‘Hey!’ Suzanne reached over and patted Rebecca on the arm, ‘It’s nothing to do with what I like. I want you to be happy and that’s the end of it. Do you think you can be with Dylan? He seems to come with a lot of baggage.’ She sounded doubtful but not against the plan.

‘I can try.’ Rebecca responded, looking more her old self than she had for a while. ‘We have a chance if he tries as well, and he said he would.’

The two girls talked about their hopes and plans for the future each supportive of the other even though their direction of travel was so different. When Rebecca finally got up to leave,

regretfully pushing Ziggy off her lap, she said to Suzanne, 'I know it's rather premature to ask this but will you be godmother to my baby please?' She patted her still flat stomach as she spoke.

'I'd love to.' Responded Suzanne deeply touched. The two hugged each other farewell. Rebecca thanking Suzanne for a lovely meal and a great evening,

'I feel so much better Annie. Thank you so much.'

## **Penny - February 1978**

Penny spent an odd week entertaining her husband's best friend soon to be her best friend's husband. Penny kept thinking that she had probably seen more of Dylan than Rebecca had, certainly in the last few months. Penny wanted very much to like Dylan and as was her usual way tried to find the best in him. She observed Dylan with her husband and could not help but like Dylan for the loyalty of affection he showed. Sometimes Penny felt that Dylan was rather jealous of her relationship with Charles, a distant reflection of how Jane had felt he had been with Jo. Of course Dylan was now a man not a boy but nevertheless she saw the devotion for Charles in his eyes.

Dylan repaid Penny's desire to get to know him with reciprocal warmth. He liked Penny and didn't feel threatened by her. She was obviously devoted to Charles and she doted on her children. That she was one of Rebecca's closest friends also made it important for him to get along with her. Seeing Charles with his children made Dylan think about his own role as a father and he found within himself a newfound desire to fulfil this role. He observed Charles closely as he tended to the needs of the baby and the small boy and he even held Lucy for a while and played with Simon. He couldn't quite come to terms with the idea that he would be doing these things with a baby of his own in six months time.

By the time Saturday arrived Penny and Dylan had commenced what was to be a lifetime friendship. Penny's liking for Dylan was typical of her. She was a nurturer by nature who was predisposed to collect waifs and strays. She could see the good in Dylan that had been perverted by his hard and unloving existence. She too, as had Suzanne, observed that he carried with him a lot of history that may be hard to circumvent. She worried for Rebecca and Dylan's relationship and thought that at the first signs of difficulty Dylan may disappear.

Possibly he would just return to the comfortable existence that he had with the older woman that Charles had told her about. Penny wished she didn't know about this. The secret knowledge made her feel disloyal to Rebecca. She had found the whole situation of

Rebecca's relationship with Dylan difficult. Her husband had been torn emotionally and morally and she had often felt her loyalties split.

Getting to know and like Dylan better could be a mixed blessing in the future. No one thought that Rebecca and Dylan's marriage was going to be easy. Penny understood that her and Charles's interference in the affair may come back to haunt them.

## **Rebecca - March 1978**

Meanwhile in London Rebecca had taken Carole into her confidence. It was the day before she was going to be married. She needed help to choose something to wear, for the first time in her life being totally at a loss. Carole took the whole situation in her stride with her customary kindness and efficiency. By the end of the day she had helped Rebecca to pick out a cream and lilac dip dyed long dress. The wide square neck and empire line suited her shape and the overall affect was hippy and chic at the same time.

Rebecca decide to wear the silver and turquoise pendant that the girls from Liberty had given to her, ballet flats and an Indian silk scarf in purples, pinks and green tied loosely around her head would finish off the look. Carole smiled widely and nodded her head in approval as Rebecca stepped out of the fitting room in the full ensemble. She looked totally herself yet the outfit suited the occasion. Carole hugged Rebecca spontaneously and wished her good luck with emotion in her voice.

'Thanks Carole, you've been such a help and support. I don't know how to thank you.' She hugged her colleague and friend in return with real affection. Rebecca took in her reflection and decided that she looked quite good, much better than she had for some time. She made a mental note to order a few more tunics and empire line dresses; she was not the only expectant mother that Palmerstone catered for. She wondered what Dylan would wear and for the first time in a while she allowed herself to think about her handsome husband to be. She felt the familiar stirring of desire that these thought had used to illicit. Perhaps they could make a go of it. She would give it a damn good try.

Suzanne called Rebecca that evening to finalise arrangements for the next day. The civil ceremony was to be at 12.30 and afterwards they would all go to a favoured restaurant in Wimbledon Village for lunch. This Suzanne had organised after checking with Penny what was intended. Suzanne would call around for Rebecca at 11.45 and they'd make their way to the registry office together.

'Are you nervous Becca?' Suzanne asked, 'I could come around tonight if it would make you feel better?'



‘No thanks Annie, I’m fine, nervous but I’ve made up my mind to it now and I’m going to do my best to make it work.’

‘Good for you, I’m glad.’ Suzanne wished her friend a goodnight and hung up. She continued to think about her well into the night, worried that it would all end in tears.

When Rebecca and Suzanne arrived in good time for the service they were relieved and gratified that Penny, Charles and Dylan were already waiting for them. Dylan looked cool and handsome in a linen suit that Rebecca remembered from Simon’s Christening when Dylan had put in such a brief appearance. She wondered if he remembered too, the first of many stormy scenarios between them. If he did he showed no signs. If anything Dylan looked happy. He smiled lopsidedly at Rebecca in a way that always made her heart lurch, and even made friendly overtures to Suzanne despite the fact that the two were mistrustful of each other.

For the first time Rebecca felt acutely aware of Charles’s discomfort. He was wearing a grey suit and not his dog collar. She realised that the situation between his best friend and his wife’s best friend may have been difficult and quite a compromise for a man such as Charles. He was certainly not particularly comfortable with a registry office wedding. Rebecca spontaneously gave him a hug and thanked him. She felt sorry for the difficult situation that she had inadvertently foisted on all her closest friends.

The ceremony was efficient and not totally without ritualistic solemnity. When Dylan made his vows he turned and looked her in the eye as though he meant to honour them. She did likewise to him. They exchanged a kiss and embrace, signed the register and were finished by one o’clock to make way for the next couple.

Charles drove them all the short distance to the restaurant and they enjoyed a merry meal together. After the meal was finished they all felt in good spirits. Charles played chauffeur again first dropping the newly-weds back at Rebecca’s flat then Suzanne in Pimlico before He and Penny set off for home their hearts lightened by the mission being accomplished.

Dylan manfully carried Rebecca over the threshold joking that she should carry him, as it was her threshold. He didn’t appear to be concerned about the fact however.

‘Can you er, can we y’know...?’ He asked her awkwardly. Rebecca laughed at his uncertainty,

‘You mean can we have sex?’ She teased, ‘It’s probably the safest time as I can’t get pregnant can I?’ Dylan laughed ruefully and pulled her into his arms. They made love slowly and languidly. Dylan making sure that she was satisfied before he came keeping his

rhythm slow and gentle so as not to hurt the baby. Dylan felt almost complete when he fell asleep his body entwined with hers.

Their marriage had started with more promise than either had dared to hope for.

## End Book 1

To be continued in Book 2 – The Pimlico House

If you liked this story (or even if you didn't) please, please, please return to your e-book store and:

Rate the story

Review the story

Tell your friends...

There is absolutely nothing as good as receiving feedback for our efforts. Thank you!

Discover other titles by Sarah Bevan Fischer at:

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/sarahbevanfischer>

The Pimlico House Book 2 The Friendship Diaries –

Westbourne Grove Book 3 The Friendship Diaries -

St Kew Book 4 The Friendship Diaries –

## About the Author

No, No, No, Yes and No... Sorry getting ahead of myself with the answers to FAQs: No the Friendship Diaries are not autobiographical. No the characters are not based on your truly; nor are the characters based on real life people friends or enemies. Yes and No the books were started with a plot and story line but it has to said they went *off piste* a couple of times as a four in the morning inspiration kicking in or occasionally the damn thing just wrote itself!

The one sure thing about life someone said is that you're born and then you die. Well I've managed the first and haven't got to the last yet probably because I've travelled a very winding path.

I did say no to the question: ‘are any of the characters based on me’, I lied. I once had two cats and I now live in Andalucía. Also I have to confess I flirted with the civil service, (Suzanne) which was never entertaining enough to flirt back. I do my best to hide an encyclopaedic knowledge of the fashion industry (Rebecca) when in more erudite company and I’m age phobic (Caitlin). I guess the nearest thing to my real life was a couple of summer holidays in the Cathedral Close in Lincoln as a young teenager (Penny); for borrowing the location I beg forgiveness from my cousins.

I hope that you will love reading the Friendship Diaries as much as I loved writing them. Caitlin, Rebecca, Suzanne and Penny have been my imaginary friends for a long time now. I can’t wait to start the next chapter in their lives and the lives of their children. Will they or won’t they end up together?

Connect with Me Online:

Twitter: <http://twitter.com> <https://twitter.com/SarahBevanFisch>

Facebook: <http://facebook.com/> <http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Friendship-Diaries/171357553004539?fref=ts>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/sarahbevanfischer>