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Opening Extract from...

How to Find Love in a Book Shop

Written by Veronica Henry

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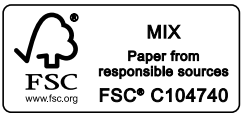

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Prologue

February 1983

He would never have believed it if you'd told him a year ago. That he'd be standing in an empty shop with a baby in a pram, seriously considering putting in an offer.

The pram had been a stroke of luck. He'd seen an advert for a garden sale in a posh part of North Oxford, and the bargain hunter in him couldn't stay away. The couple had two very young children but were moving to Paris. The pram was pristine, of the kind the queen might have pushed – or rather, her nanny. The woman had only wanted five pounds for it. Julius was sure it was worth far more, and she was only being kind. But if recent events had taught him one thing it was to accept kindness. With alacrity, before people changed their minds. So he bought it, and scrubbed it out carefully with Milton even though it had seemed very clean already, and bought a fresh mattress and blankets and there he had it: the perfect nest for his precious cargo, until she could walk.

When did babies start to walk? There was no point in asking Debra – his vague, away-with-the-fairies mother, ensconced in her patchouli-soaked basement flat in Westbourne Grove, whose memory of his own childhood was blurry. According to Debra, Julius was reading by the age of two, a legend he didn't quite believe. Although maybe it was true, because he couldn't remember a time he couldn't read. It was like breathing to him. Nevertheless,

he couldn't and didn't rely on his mother for child-rearing advice. He often thought it was a miracle he had made it through childhood unscathed. She used to leave him alone, in his cot, while she went to the wine bar on the corner in the evenings. 'What could go wrong?' she asked him. 'I only left you for an hour.' Perhaps that explained his protectiveness towards his own daughter. He found it hard to turn his back on her for even a moment.

He looked around the bare walls again. The smell of damp was inescapable, and damp would be a disaster. The staircase rising to the mezzanine was rotten; so rotten he wasn't allowed up it. The two bay windows either side of the front door flooded the shop with a pearlescent light, highlighting the golden oak of the floorboards and the ornate plasterwork on the ceiling. The dust made it feel other-worldly: a ghost shop, waiting, waiting for something to happen, a transformation, a renovation, a renaissance.

'It was a pharmacy, originally,' said the agent. 'And then an antique shop. Well, I say antique – you've never seen so much rubbish in your life.'

He should get some professional advice, really. A structural survey, a quote from someone for a damp course – yet Julius felt light-headed and his heart was pounding. It was right. He knew it was. The two floors above were ideal for him and the baby to live in. Over the shop.

The book shop.

His search had begun three weeks earlier, when he had decided that he needed to take positive action if he and his daughter were going to have any semblance of normal life together. He had looked at his experience, his potential, his assets, and the practicalities of being a single father, and decided there was really only one option open to him.

He'd gone to the library, put a copy of the Yellow Pages on the table, and next to it a detailed map of the county. He drew a circle around Oxford with a fifteen-mile radius, wondering what

it would be like to live in Christmas Common, or Ducklington, or Goosey. Then he worked through all the book shops listed and put a cross through the towns they were in.

He looked at the remaining towns, the ones without a book shop at all. There were half a dozen. He made a list, and then over the next few days visited each one, travelling by a complicated rota of buses. The first three towns had been soulless and dreary, and he had been so discouraged he'd almost given up on his idea, but something about the name Peasebrook pleased him, so he decided to have one last look before relinquishing his fantasy.

Peasebrook was in the middle of the Cotswolds, on the outer perimeter of the circle he had drawn: as far out as he wanted to go. He got off the bus and looked up the high street. It was wide and tree-lined, its pavements flanked with higgledy-piggledy golden buildings. There were antique shops, a traditional butcher with rabbit and pheasant hanging outside and fat sausages in the window, a sprawling coaching inn and a couple of nice cafés and a cheese shop. The Women's Institute were having a sale outside the town hall: there were trestle tables bearing big cakes oozing jam and trugs of mud-covered vegetables and pots of herbaceous flowers drooping dark purple and yellow blooms.

Peasebrook was buzzing, in a quiet way but with purpose, like bees on a summer afternoon. People stopped in the street and talked to each other. The cafés looked pleasingly full. The tills seemed to jangle: people were shopping with gusto and enthusiasm. There was a very smart restaurant with a bay tree outside the door and an impressive menu in a glass case boasting nouvelle cuisine. There was even a tiny theatre showing The Importance of Being Earnest. *Somehow that boded well. Julius loved Oscar Wilde. He'd done one of his dissertations on him: The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W.B. Yeats.*

He took the play as an omen, but he carried on scouring the streets, in case his research hadn't been thorough. He feared turning

a corner and finding what he hoped wasn't there. Now he was here, in Peasebrook, he wanted it to be his home – their *home. It was a mystery, though, why there was no book shop in such an appealing place.*

After all, a town without a book shop was a town without a heart.

A book shop could only make things better – for everyone in Peasebrook. Julius imagined each person he passed as a potential customer. He could picture them all, crowding in, asking his advice, him sliding their purchases into a bag, getting to know their likes and dislikes, putting a book aside for a particular customer; knowing it would be just up their street. Watching them browse, watching the joy of them discovering a new author; a new world.

'Would the vendor take a cheeky offer?' he asked the estate agent, who shrugged.

'You can but ask.'

'It needs a lot of work.'

'That has *been taken into consideration.'*

Julius named his price. 'It's my best and only offer. I can't afford any more.'

When Julius signed the contract four weeks later, he couldn't help but be amazed. Here he was, alone in the world (well, there was his mother, but she was as much use as a chocolate teapot) but for a baby and a book shop. And as that very baby reached out her starfish hand, he gave her his finger to hold and thought: what an extraordinary position to be in. Fate was peculiar indeed.

What if he hadn't looked up at that very moment, nearly two years ago now? What if he had kept his back to the door and carried on rearranging the travel section, leaving his colleague to serve the girl with the Rossetti hair . . .

And six months later, after weeks of dust and grime and sawing and sweeping and painting, and several eye-watering bills, and a few moments of sheer panic, and any number of deliveries, the sign

outside the shop was rehung, painted in navy and gold, proclaiming 'Nightingale Books'. There had been no room to write 'purveyors of reading matter to the discerning', but that was what he was. A bookseller.

A bookseller of the very best kind.

One

Thirty-two years later…

What do you do, while you're waiting for someone to die? Literally, sitting next to them in a plastic armchair that isn't the right shape for *anyone's* bottom, waiting for them to draw their last breath because there is no more hope.

Nothing seemed appropriate. There was a room down the corridor to watch telly in, but that seemed callous, and anyway, Emilia wasn't really a television person.

She didn't knit, or do tapestry. Or sudoku.

She didn't want to listen to music, for fear of disturbing him. Even the best earphones leak a certain timpani. Irritating on a train, probably even more so on your deathbed. She didn't want to surf the Internet on her phone. That seemed the ultimate in twenty-first-century rudeness.

And there wasn't a single book on the planet that could hold her attention right now.

So she sat next to his bed and dozed. And every now and then she started awake with a bolt of fear, in case she might have missed the moment. Then she would hold his hand for a few minutes. It was dry and cool and lay motionless in her clasp. Eventually it grew heavy and made her feel sad, so she laid it back on the top of the sheet.

Then she would doze off again.

From time to time the nurses brought her hot chocolate, although that was a misnomer. It was not hot, but tepid, and Emilia was fairly certain that no cocoa beans had been harmed in the making of it. It was pale beige, faintly sweet water.

The night-time lights in the cottage hospital were dim, with a sickly yellowish tinge. The heating was on too high and the little room felt airless. She looked at the thin bedcover, with its pattern of orange and yellow flowers, and the outline of her father underneath, so still and small. She could see the few strands of hair curling over his scalp, leached of colour. His thick hair had been one of his distinguishing features. He would rake his fingers through it while he was considering a recommendation, or when he was standing in front of one of the display tables trying to decide what to put on it, or when he was on the phone to a customer. It was as much part of him as the pale blue cashmere scarf he insisted on wearing, wrapped twice round his neck, even though it bore evidence of moths. Emilia had dealt with them swiftly at the first sign. She suspected they had been brought in via the thick brown velvet coat she had bought at the charity shop last winter, and she felt guilty they'd set upon the one sartorial item her father seemed attached to.

He'd been complaining then, of discomfort. Well, not complaining, because he wasn't one to moan. Emilia had expressed concern, and he had dismissed her concern with his trademark stoicism, and she had thought nothing more of it, just got on the plane to Hong Kong. Until the phone call, last week, calling her back.

'I think you ought to come home,' the nurse had said. 'Your father will be furious with me for calling you. He doesn't want to alarm you. But . . .'

The 'but' said it all. Emilia was on the first flight out. And when she arrived Julius pretended to be cross, but the way he

held her hand, tighter than tight, told her everything she needed to know.

'He's in denial,' said the nurse. 'He's a fighter all right. I'm so sorry. We're doing everything we can to keep him comfortable.'

Emilia nodded, finally understanding. Comfortable. Not alive. Comfortable.

He didn't seem to be in any pain or discomfort now. He had eaten some lime jelly the day before, eager for the quivering spoons of green. Emilia imagined it soothed his parched lips and dry tongue. She felt as if she was feeding a little bird as he stretched his neck to reach the spoon and opened his mouth. Afterwards he lay back, exhausted by the effort. It was all he had eaten for days. All he was living on was a complicated cocktail of painkillers and sedatives that were rotated to provide the best palliative care. Emilia had come to hate the word palliative. It was ominous, and at times she suspected ineffectual. From time to time her father had shown distress, whether from pain or the knowledge of what was to come she didn't know, but she knew at those points the medication wasn't doing its job. Adjustment, although swiftly administered, never worked quickly enough. Which in turn caused her distress. It was a never-ending cycle.

Yet not *never*-ending because it *would* end. The corner had been turned and there was no point in hoping for a recovery. Even the most optimistic believer in miracles would know that now. So there was nothing to do but pray for a swift and merciful release.

The nurse lifted the bedcover and looked at his feet, caressing them with gentle fingers. The look the nurse gave Emilia told her it wouldn't be long now. His skin was pale grey, the pale grey of a marble statue.

The nurse dropped the sheet back down and rubbed Emilia's shoulder. Then she left, for there was nothing she could say. It was a waiting game. They had done all they could. No pain,

as far as anyone could surmise. A calm, quiet environment, for incipient death was treated with hushed reverence. But who was to say what the dying really wanted? Maybe he would prefer his beloved Elgar at full blast, or the shipping forecast on repeat? Or to hear the nurses gossiping and bantering, about who they'd been out with the night before and what they were cooking for tea? Maybe distraction from your imminent demise by utter trivia would be a welcome one?

Emilia sat and wondered how could she make him feel her love, as he slipped away. If she could take out her heart and give it to him, she would. This wonderful man who had given her life, and been her life, and was leaving her alone.

She'd whispered to him, memories and reminiscences. She told him stories. Recited his favourite poems.

Talked to him about the shop.

'I'm going to look after it for you,' she told him. 'I'll make sure it never closes its doors. Not in my lifetime. And I'm never going to sell out to Ian Mendip, no matter what he offers, because the shop is all that matters. All the diamonds in the world are nothing in comparison. Books are more precious than jewels.'

She truly believed this. What did a diamond bring you? A momentary flash of brilliance. A diamond scintillated for a second; a book could scintillate forever.

She doubted Ian Mendip had ever read a book in his life. It made her so angry, thinking about the stress he'd put her father under at a vulnerable time. Julius had tried to underplay it, but she could see he was upset, fearful for the shop and his staff and his customers. The staff had told her how unsettled he had been by it, and yet again she had cursed herself for being so far away. Now she was determined to reassure him, so he could slip away, safe in the knowledge that Nightingale Books was in good hands.

She shifted on the seat to find a more comfortable position.

She ended up leaning forwards and resting her head in her arms at the foot of the bed. She was unbelievably tired.

It was two forty-nine in the morning when the nurse touched her on the shoulder. Her touch said everything that needed to be said. Emilia wasn't sure if she had been asleep or awake. Even now she wasn't sure if she was asleep or awake, for she felt as if her head was somewhere else, as if everything was a bit treacly and slow.

When all the formalities were over and the undertaker had been called, she walked out into the dawn, the air morgue-chilly, the light gloomy. It was as if all the colour had gone from the world, until she saw the traffic lights by the hospital exit change from red to amber to green. Sound too felt muffled, as if she still had water in her ears from swimming.

Would the world be a different place without Julius in it? She didn't know yet. She breathed in the air he was no longer breathing, and thought about his broad shoulders, the ones she had sat on when she was tiny, drumming her heels on his chest to make him run faster, twisting her fingers in the thick hair that fell to his collar, the hair that had been salt and pepper since he was thirty. She held the plain silver watch with the alligator strap he had worn every day, but which she had taken off towards the end, as she didn't want anything chafing his paper-thin skin, leaving it on the table next to his bed in case he needed to know the time, because it told a better time than the clock over the nurse's station; a time that held far more promise. But the magic time on his watch hadn't been able to stop the inevitable.

She got into her car. There was a packet of buttermints on the passenger seat she had meant to bring him. She unpeeled one and popped it in her mouth. It was the first thing she had eaten since breakfast the day before. She sucked on it until it scraped the roof of her mouth, and the discomfort took her mind off it all for a moment.

She'd eaten half the packet by the time she turned into Peasebrook high street and her teeth were furry with the sugar. The little town was wrapped in the pearl-grey of dawn. It looked bleak: its golden stone needed sunshine for it to glow. In the half-light it looked like a dreary wallflower, but in a couple of hours it would emerge like a dazzling debutante, charming everyone who set eyes upon it. It was quintessentially quaint and English, with its oak doorways and mullions and latticed windows, cobbled pavements and red letterboxes and the row of pollarded lime trees. There were no flat-roofed monstrosities, nothing to offend the eye, only charm.

Next to the stone bridge straddling the brook that gave the town its name was Nightingale Books, three storeys high and double fronted, with two bay windows and a dark blue door. Emilia stood outside, the early morning breeze the only sign of movement in the sleeping town, and looked up at the building that was the only home she had ever known. Wherever she was in the world, whatever she was doing, her room above the shop was still here; most of her stuff was still here. Thirty-two years of clutter and clobber.

She slipped in through the side entrance and stood for a moment on the tiled floor. In front of her was the door leading up to the flat. She remembered her father holding her hand when she was tiny, and walking her down those stairs. It had taken hours, but she had been determined, and he had been patient. When she was at school, she had run down the stairs, taking them two at a time, her school bag on her back, an apple in one hand, always late. Years later, she had sneaked up the stairs in bare feet when she came in from a party. Not that Julius was strict or likely to shout: it was just what you did when you were sixteen and had drunk a little too much cider and it was two o'clock in the morning.

To her left was the door that came out behind the shop

counter. She pushed it open and stepped into the shop. The early morning light ventured in through the window, tentative. Emilia shivered a little as the air inside stirred. She felt a sense of expectation: the same feeling of stepping back in time or into another place she had whenever she entered Nightingale Books. She could be whenever and wherever she wanted. Only this time she couldn't. She would give anything to go back, to when everything was all right.

She felt as if the books were asking for news. He's gone, she wanted to tell them, but she didn't, because she didn't trust her voice. And because it was silly. Books told you things, everything you needed to know, but you didn't talk back to them.

As she stood in the middle of the shop, she gradually felt a sense of comfort settle upon her, a calmness that soothed her soul. For Julius was still here, amidst the covers and the upright spines. He claimed to know every book in his shop. He may not have read each one from cover to cover, but he understood why they were there, what the author's intent had been and who might, therefore, like to read them, from the simplest children's board book to the weightiest, most indecipherable tome.

There was a rich red carpet, faded and worn now. Rows and rows of wooden shelves lined the walls, stretching right up to the ceiling – there was a ladder to reach the more unusual books on the very top shelves. Fiction was at the front of the shop, reference at the back, and tables in the middle displayed cookery and art and travel. Upstairs, on the mezzanine, there was a collection of first editions and second-hand rarities, behind locked glass cases. And Julius had reigned over it all from his place behind the wooden counter. Behind him were stacked the books that people had ordered, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. There was an old-fashioned ornate till that tinged when it opened, which he'd found in a junk shop and, although he didn't use it any more, he kept it, as decoration

and sometimes he kept sugar mice in the drawer to hand out to small children who had been especially patient and good.

There would always be a half-full cup of coffee on the counter that he'd begun and never finished, because he would get into a conversation and forget about it and leave it to get cold. Because people dropped in to chat to Julius all the time. He was full of advice and knowledge and wisdom and above all, kindness.

As a result, the shop had become a mecca for all sections of society in and around Peasebrook. The townspeople were proud of their book shop. It was a place of comfort and familiarity. And they had come to respect its owner. Adore him, even. For over thirty years he had fed their minds and their hearts, aided and abetted in recent years by his assistants, warm and bubbly Mel, who kept the place organised, and lanky Dave the Goth who knew almost as much as Julius about books but rarely spoke – though once you got him going it was impossible to stop him.

Her father was still here, thought Emilia, in the thousands of pages. Millions – there must be so many millions – of words. All those words, and the pleasure they had provided for people over the years: escape, entertainment, education . . . He had changed minds. He had changed lives. It was up to her to carry on his work so he would live on, she swore to herself.

Julius Nightingale would live forever.

Emilia left the shop and went upstairs to the flat. She was too tired to even make a cup of tea. She needed to lie down and gather her thoughts. She wasn't feeling anything yet, neither shock nor grief, just a dull heavy-heartedness that weighed her down. The worst had happened, the worst thing possible, but it seemed the world was still turning. The gradual lightening of the sky told her that. She heard birdsong, too, and frowned at

their chirpy heralding of a new dawn. Surely the sun wouldn't rise? Surely the world would be grey forever?

All the rooms seemed drained of warmth. The kitchen, with its ancient pine table and battered old units, was chilly and austere. The living room was sulking behind its half-drawn curtains. Emilia couldn't look at the sofa in case it still held the imprint of Julius: she couldn't count the number of hours the two of them had spent curled up on it with tea or cocoa or wine, leafing through their current read, while Brahms or Billie Holiday or Joni Mitchell circled on the record player. Julius had never taken to modern technology: he loved vinyl, and still treasured his Grundig Audiorama speakers. They had, however, been silent for a while now.

Emilia made her way to her bedroom on the next floor, peeled back her duvet and climbed into the high brass bed that had been hers since she could remember. She pulled a cushion from the pile and hugged it to her, for warmth as much as comfort. She drew her knees up and waited to cry. There were no tears. She waited and waited, but her eyes were dry. She thought she must be a monster, not to be able to weep.

She awoke sometime later to a gentle tapping on the flat door. She started awake, wondering why she was in bed fully clothed. The realisation hit her in the chest and she wanted nothing more than to slide back into the oblivion she had been in. But there were people to see, things to do, decisions to be made. And a door to answer. She ran downstairs in her socks and opened it gingerly.

'Sweetheart.'

June. Stalwart, redoubtable June, arguably Nightingale Books' best customer since she had retired to Peasebrook three years before. She had stepped into Julius's shoes when he went into the cottage hospital for what looked like the final time. June had run her own company for more than forty years and was

only too willing to pick up the reins along with Mel and Dave. With her fine bone structure, and her thick dark hair, and her armful of silver bangles, she looked at least ten years younger than her three score years and ten. She had the energy of a twenty-year-old, the brain of a rocket scientist and the heart of a lion. Emilia had at first thought there might be a romance between June and Julius – June was twice divorced – but their friendship had been firm but purely platonic.

Emilia realised she should have phoned June as soon as it happened. But she hadn't had the strength or the words or the heart. She didn't have them now. She just stood there, and June wrapped her up in an embrace that was as soft and warm as the cashmere jumpers she draped herself in.

'You poor baby,' she crooned, and it was only then Emilia found she could cry.

'There's no need to open the shop today,' June told Emilia later, when she'd sobbed her heart out and had finally agreed to make herself some breakfast. But Emilia was adamant it should stay open.

'Everyone comes in on a Thursday. It's market day,' she said.

In the end, it turned out to be the best thing she could have done. Mel, usually loquacious, was mute with shock. Dave, usually monosyllabic, spoke for five minutes without drawing breath about how Julius had taught him everything he knew. Mel put Classic FM on the shop radio so they didn't feel the need to fill the silence. Dave, who had many mysterious skills of which calligraphy was one, wrote a sign for the window:

It is with great sadness that we have to tell you
of the death of Julius Nightingale
Peacefully, after a short illness
A beloved father, friend and bookseller

They opened a little late, but open they did. And a stream of customers trickled in throughout the day, to pay their respects and give Emilia their condolences. Some brought cards; others casseroles and a tin full of home-baked muffins; someone else left a bottle of Chassagne Montrachet, her father's favourite wine, on the counter.

Emilia had needed no convincing that her father was a wonderful man, but by the end of the day she realised that everyone else who knew him thought that too. Mel made countless cups of tea in the back office and carried them out on a tray.

'Come for supper,' said June, when they finally flipped the sign to CLOSED long after they should have shut.

'I'm not very hungry,' said Emilia, who couldn't face the thought of food.

June wouldn't take no for an answer. She scooped Emilia up and took her back to her sprawling cottage on the outskirts of Peasebrook. June was the sort of person who always had a shepherd's pie on standby to put in the Aga. Emilia had to admit that she felt much stronger after two servings, and it gave her the fortitude to discuss the things she didn't want to.

'I can't face a big funeral,' she said eventually.

'Then don't have one,' said June, scooping out some vanilla ice cream for pudding. 'Have a small private funeral, and we can have a memorial service in a few weeks' time. It's much nicer that way round. And it will give you time to organise it properly.'

A tear plopped onto Emilia's ice cream. She wiped away the next one.

'What are we going to do without him?'

June handed her a jar of salted caramel sauce.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'There are some people who leave a bigger hole than others, and your father is one of them.'

June invited her to stay the night, but Emilia wanted to go home. It was always better to be sad in your own bed.

She flicked on the lights in the living room. With its deep red walls and long tapestry curtains, there seemed to be more books here than there were in the book shop. Bookcases covered two of the walls, and there were books piled high on every surface: on the windowsills, the mantelpiece, on top of the piano. Next to that was Julius's precious cello, resting on its stand. She touched the smooth wood, realising it was covered in dust. She would play it tomorrow. She was nothing like as good a player as her father, but she hated to think of his cello unplayed, and she knew he would hate the thought too.

Emilia went over to the bookcase that was designated as hers – though she had run out of space on it long ago. She ran her finger along the spines. She wanted a comfort read; something that took her back to her childhood. Not Laura Ingalls Wilder – she couldn't bear to read of big, kind Pa at the moment. Nor Frances Hodgson Burnett – all her heroines seemed to be orphans, which Emilia realised she was too, now. She pulled out her very favourite, in its red cloth cover with the gold writing on the spine, warped with age, the pages yellowing. *Little Women*. She sat in the wing-backed chair by the fire, slinging her legs over the side and resting her cheek on a velvet cushion. Within moments, she was by the fire in Boston, with Jo March and her sisters and Marmee, hundreds of years ago and thousands of miles away . . .

By the end of the following week, Emilia felt hollowed out and exhausted. Everyone had been so kind and thoughtful and said such wonderful things about Julius, but it was emotionally draining.

There had been a small private funeral service for Julius at the crematorium, with just his mother Debra, who came down

on the train from London, Andrea, Emilia's best friend from school, and June.

Before she left for the service, Emilia had looked at herself in the mirror. She wore a long black military coat and shining riding boots, her dark red hair loose over her shoulders. Her eyes were wide, with smudges underneath, defined by her thick brows and lashes. Her colouring, she knew from the photo kept on top of the piano, was her mother's; her fine bone structure and generous mouth her father's. She put in the earrings he had given her last Christmas with shaking fingers and opened the gifted Chassagne Montrachet, knocking back just one glass, before putting on a faux fox fur hat that exactly matched her hair. She wondered briefly if she looked too much like an extra from a costume drama, but decided it didn't matter.

The next day, when they had put Julius's mother back on the Paddington train – Debra didn't like being away from London for too long – Andrea marched her over the road to the Peasebrook Arms. It was a traditional coaching inn, all flagstone floors and wood panelling and a dining room that served chicken Kiev and steak chasseur and had an old-fashioned dessert trolley. There was something comforting in the way it hadn't been Farrow and Balled up to the rafters. It didn't pretend to be something it wasn't. It was warm and friendly, even if the coffee was awful.

Emilia and Andrea curled up on a sofa in the lounge bar and ordered hot chocolate.

'So,' said Andrea, ever practical. 'What's your plan?'

'I've had to jack in my job,' Emilia told her. 'They can't keep it open for me indefinitely and I don't know when I'm going to get away.' She'd been teaching English at an international language school in Hong Kong. 'I can't just drift from country to country for ever.'

'I don't see why not,' said Andrea.

Emilia shook her head. 'It's about time I sorted myself out. Look at us – I'm still living out of a backpack; you're a powerhouse.'

Andrea had gone from manning the phones for a financial adviser when she left school to studying for exams at night school to setting up her own business as an accountant. Now, she did the books for many of the small businesses that had sprung up in Peasebrook over the past few years. She knew how much most people hated organising their finances and so made it as painless as possible. She was hugely successful.

'Never mind comparisons. What are you going to do with the shop?' Andrea wasn't one to beat about the bush.

Emilia shrugged. 'I haven't got any choice. I promised Dad I'd keep it open. He'd turn in his grave if he thought I was going to close it down.'

Andrea didn't speak for a moment. Her voice when she spoke was gentle and kind. 'Emilia, deathbed promises don't always need to be kept. Not if they aren't practical. Of course you meant it at the time, but the shop was your *father's* life. It doesn't mean it has to be yours. He would understand. I know he would.'

'I can't bear the thought of letting it go. I always saw myself as taking it over in the end. But I guess I thought it would be when I was Dad's age. Not now. I thought he had another twenty years to go at least.' She could feel her eyes fill with tears. 'I don't know if it's even viable. I've started to look through the accounts but it's just a blur to me.'

'Well, whatever I can do to help. You know that.'

'Dad always used to say *I don't do numbers.* And I don't either, really. It all seems to be a bit disorganised. I think he let things slip towards the end. There're a couple of boxes full of receipts. And a horrible pile of unopened envelopes I haven't been able to face yet.'

'Trust me, it's nothing I haven't dealt with before.' Andrea sighed. 'I wish people wouldn't go into denial when it comes to money. It makes it all so complicated and ends up costing them much more in the end.'

'It would be great if you could have a look for me. But no mate's rates.' Emilia pointed a finger at her. 'I'm paying you properly.'

'I'm very happy to help you out. Your dad was always very kind to me when we were growing up.'

Emilia laughed. 'Remember when we tried to set him up with your mum?'

Andrea snorted into her wine glass. 'That would have been a disaster.' Andrea's mother was a bit of a hippy, all joss sticks and flowing skirts. Andrea had rebelled completely against her mother's Woodstock attitude and was the most conventional, aspirational, law-abiding person Emilia knew. She'd even changed her name from Autumn when she started up in business, on the basis that no one would take an accountant called Autumn seriously. 'They would never have got anything done.'

Julius was very easygoing and laissez-faire too. The thought of their respective parents together made the two girls helpless with laughter now, but at the age of twelve they had thought it was a brilliant idea.

As they finished laughing, Emilia sighed. 'Dad never did find anyone.'

'Oh come off it. Every woman in Peasebrook was in love with your father. He had them all running round after him.'

'Yes, I know. He was never short of female company. But it would have been nice for him to have met someone special.'

'He was a happy man, Emilia. You could tell that.'

'I always felt guilty. That perhaps he stayed single because of me.'

'I don't think so. Your dad wasn't the martyr type. I think he

was really happy with his own company. Or maybe he did have someone special but we just don't know about it.'

Emilia nodded. 'I hope so . . . I really do.'

She'd never know now, she thought. For all of her life it had just been the two of them and now her father had gone, with all his stories and his secrets.