
Opening Extract from...

Hidden Talents

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To Edward and Samuel,
my multi-talented sons.

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Chapter One

Dulcie Ballantyne had made a lifelong habit of not making a drama of the unexpected: for sixty-three years silver linings had been her stock in trade. Moreover, she would be a rich woman if she had a pound for every time someone had remarked on her calmness of manner and her continually sunny and optimistic outlook. 'Overreaction serves no purpose other than to make a difficult situation a lot worse,' she would say, whenever anyone remarked on her unflappable nature. It wasn't a happy-go-lucky, trouble-free life that had given her the ability to cope no matter what, it was a wealth of experience. In short, life had taught her to deal with the severest catastrophe.

But as she sat at the kitchen table, waiting for the day to fully form itself, tearful exhaustion was doing away with the last remnants of her self-control and she was seconds away from making a terrible mistake. She had promised herself she wouldn't do it, but desperation was pushing her to ring the hospital to find out how Richard was. As his mistress, though – even a long-standing mistress of three years – she had no right to be at his bedside or have his condition explained to her. 'Are you family?' the nurse had asked her on the telephone late last night, when she had almost begged to know how he was. She should have claimed to be a sister or some other close relative, but shock had wrenched the truth from her and she was informed politely that Mr Richard Cavanagh was still in the coronary care unit in a stable condition.

Stable.

She hung on to this thought, closed her eyes, and willed the man she loved not to leave her.

How often had Richard said that to her? 'Don't leave me, Dulcie. Life would be intolerable without you.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' she had always told him. She had meant it too. Her affair with Richard had been infinitely better than any other relationship she had known since the death of her husband twenty-two years ago. Before she had met Richard, there had been a series of liaisons and one or two men had almost convinced her she was in love, but mostly they had proved to her that she enjoyed living alone too much to want anyone with her on a permanent basis. Commitment phobia was supposed to be the prerogative of men, but as far as she was concerned, commitment was an overrated phenomenon. Much better to let things take their natural course, to do without the restrictive boundary that was frequently the kiss of death to a relationship.

She swallowed hard, ran her fingers through her short, dishevelled hair, and only just kept herself from crying, 'No, no, *no*!' She had changed her mind. She wanted Richard to stay in her life for ever. She would give anything to deepen the commitment between them.

She heaved herself out of the chair where she had been sitting for the last two hours and set about making some breakfast. She hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon when she and Richard had met at their usual restaurant for lunch – a hotel at a discreet distance from Maywood, where they'd hoped they wouldn't be recognised. It was while they were discussing the creative writers' group she was forming that he had grimaced, dropped his cutlery and clenched his fist against his chest. Horror-struck, she had watched his strong, vigorous body crumple and fall to the floor.

It had been so quick. One minute they were chatting happily, wondering what kind of people would sign up for the group, Richard joking that he would join so that he could spend a legitimate evening with her, and the next they were in an ambulance hurtling to hospital, an oxygen mask clamped to his face. She had behaved immaculately:

no hysterical tears; no distraught behaviour that would give rise to the suspicion that they were lovers. She had called Richard's home number on his mobile and left a message on the answerphone for his wife. She hadn't said who she was, just that Mr Cavanagh had been taken ill: a heart-attack. Half an hour later, though it was the hardest thing she had ever done, she had left the hospital before people started to ask awkward questions.

Now she wished she had stayed. Why should she care about the consequences of her presence at his bedside, or worry about anyone else's feelings but her own? Yet that would be so out of character. She *did* care about other people's feelings. Richard had once said to her, as they lay in bed together, 'You care too much sometimes, Dulcie. You're too understanding for your own good.'

'No I'm not,' she'd said, lifting her head from the pillow and gazing into his eyes. 'If I was that saintly I would think more of Angela and call a halt to this affair. It's very wrong what we're doing. It's selfish to be happy at someone else's expense.'

He'd held her tight. 'Don't say that. Don't even think it. Not ever.'

She had always thought that his need for her was greater than her need for him. Now, however, she wasn't so sure. She longed to see Richard. To tell him over and over how much she loved him.

Rousing herself, she cleared away her untouched breakfast and went upstairs to dress. Moping around in her old dressing-gown – not the beautiful silk one Richard had given her, which she wore when he was with her – wouldn't help anyone. It was time to pull herself together and become the cool, composed Dulcie Ballantyne everyone knew her to be.

From overpacked, higgledy-piggledy rails, she chose an outfit that would give her a superficial but necessary lift – a comfortable pair of wool trousers with a cream roll-necked sweater and a pink silk scarf, which she unearthed from the bottom of the wardrobe among her collection of shoes and

handbags. She thought of her daughter, and how much she disapproved of Dulcie's untidiness. Kate despaired of her, and had tried since the age of sixteen – she was now twenty-nine – to organise Dulcie's wardrobe. 'Colour co-ordination is the key, Mum,' she would say, riffling through the hangers and shunting them around. Curiously, and for no reason that Dulcie could fathom, it was the only area in the house, and her life for that matter, that she allowed to be muddled, where restful harmony didn't take precedence.

Once she was dressed, she looked down on to the walled garden from her bedroom window. Curved steps led down to the lawn, which was edged with well-stocked borders; some, despite the onset of autumn, were still bright with colour. Leaves had begun to drop from the trees, but the garden remained defiantly cheerful. In the middle of June, Richard had helped her spread several barrowloads of manure over the rose-beds. It had been a Monday afternoon and his family had thought he was away on business. But he had been with her. She'd had him to herself for a whole delicious two days. She smiled at the memory: a rare two days together and they had spent the afternoon shovelling horse droppings. They had laughed about that afterwards. He had claimed that that was what he liked about their relationship, its down-to-earth nature. 'You allow me to be myself,' he said. 'You expect nothing of me, which means I'm free when I'm with you.'

Their love was founded on a strong understanding of each other's needs and a companionship that was both passionate and close, something so many married couples lost sight of. She seldom wanted him to talk about his marriage, but often Richard felt the need to explain, or perhaps justify, why he, an ordinary man (as he called himself), was behaving in the way he was. From what Dulcie knew of his wife, she was an anxious woman who depended on him too much.

Turning from the window, she glanced at herself in the full-length mirror and tried to see beyond the stocky

roundness of her body and the burst of lines around her blue eyes, beyond the short fair hair she had dyed every six weeks because she knew it took years off her, and beyond the skin that had lost its firmness. Beyond all this, she saw a woman who was a chameleon. She had played so many different roles in her life, and was destined, she was sure, to play a few more yet.

Downstairs in the kitchen, while she was trying to summon the energy to go out and rake up the leaves, the telephone rang. She snatched up the receiver, her heart pounding. Richard. Darling Richard. He was well enough to call her. Well enough to reassure her that he was all right.

But it wasn't Richard. It was a young girl enquiring about the creative writers' group. She had seen the card Dulcie had placed in the window of the bookshop in town, and wanted to know if there was an age restriction.

Chapter Two

Jaz Rafferty switched off her mobile and stared up at the sloping ceiling above her bed. It was covered with neat rows of Pre-Raphaelite prints she'd bought during last week's college history-of-art trip to Birmingham's City Art Gallery. Her favourite was *The Last of England* by Ford Madox Brown; the artist had been so dedicated to capturing the coldness of the day – the grey sea and sky, the couple huddled together in their thick winter coats – that he had forced himself to paint much of the picture outdoors, his hands stiff and blue. According to Miss Holmes, her teacher, the picture was all about the young couple and their child embarking on a new and brighter future, but within it there was also a sense of regret at leaving home.

To a large extent Jaz could empathise with the couple, she was all for leaving home as soon as she could, but she doubted she would feel a second's regret when that happy day dawned.

She put her mobile on her bedside table and relished a rare moment of blissful quiet. Added to this was the knowledge that she had a secret. Secrets were great, especially if she could keep them from her brothers and sisters, who were the nosiest, most interfering and irritating bunch on the planet. They were the pain of pains. The wonder was that she hadn't left home years ago. When she was thirteen she had gone through a phase of saying that she was adopted; anything to make people think she wasn't related to four of the most loathsome people alive.

Phin (short for Phineas) was the oldest at twenty-two, then Jimmy, who was twenty. Although they were both earning good money working for Dad's building firm –

Rafferty & Sons – they still lived at home. 'And why would we want to live anywhere else?' they would say, whenever she called them mummy's boys for not finding a place of their own. 'Ah, it would break Mum's heart if we moved out.'

They were probably right. Mum loved and spoilt them to bits. Nothing was too much trouble when it came to Phin and Jimmy. 'Oh, go on,' she'd say, the minute Phin looked warily from the iron to the creased shirt he wanted to wear that night.

Pathetic.

And pity the poor girls who would be stupid enough to attach themselves to the Rafferty boys. They'd need to be certifiable to put up with them.

At seventeen, Jaz was next in line in the family pecking order. Every year on her birthday, 5 September, Dad always trotted out the same joke, that he'd had a word with the Almighty before she was conceived. 'Lord, I know how pushed you are, so I'll save you the bother of another boy. We'll make do with a girl this time round.'

Dad wasn't a religious man, not by a long chalk, but he used his Catholic upbringing in the same way he banged on about being so proud of his Irish heritage. 'Dad,' she said to him once, 'you're such a fraud. You wouldn't know a penny whistle if a leprechaun shoved one up your bum. You're as English as the Queen.'

'Yeah,' he'd grinned, 'and she's half German, isn't she?'

His hotline to God backfired on him, though: after a gap of several years, Tamzin (ten) and Lulu (eight) arrived. 'Sweet Moses,' he often complained, 'I'm overrun with women! What have I done to deserve this?'

More to the point, what had *she* ever done to deserve such a family?

From a very young age she'd had a feeling of being displaced. If it weren't for her colouring – so like her mother's – she would have believed that owing to some quirk of nature, or to a mistake made at the hospital where she was born, she had ended up in the wrong family. She

could have been no more different from her brothers and sisters, who all took after their father: he described himself as being heartily robust of build and temperament. Jaz would have put money on Tamzin and Lulu having been born with fists clenched, ready to take on the world and destroy it. In contrast, she herself was small and pale with annoying childish freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her hair was long, to her waist, and auburn ('*Not red!*' as she repeatedly informed her brothers, when they called her Gingernut), and she preferred to think rather than yack like the rest of her family. Family legend had it that she had been slow to talk as a toddler, and had been labelled 'a solemn little thing' by her father. Self-reliant from the word go, she had, at the age of six, briefly created her own make-believe friends to play with, but she soon had to lose them: they became as irritating as her brothers, crowding her with their insidious presence.

When the boys were old enough, they were allowed to help their father tinker with his collection of motorbikes. They also started to accompany him on trips to Manchester to watch boxing matches and to the horseracing in Chester and Liverpool. It meant that Jaz had her mother to herself, but not for long. When Tamzin was born, followed quickly by Lulu, Jaz accepted that she was destined to be the odd one out. Everyone but her was one of a pair: her parents, her brothers, and now her sisters. She withdrew and immersed herself in books, reading herself into other people's lives, happily escaping her own. With hindsight it seemed only natural that one day she would discover the joy of writing, that the simple process of putting words on paper – poems, short stories, rhymes, observations – would allow her to escape yet further.

She rolled off the bed, went over to her desk and switched on her computer. She checked that her bedroom door was shut, then opened the file marked 'Italian Renaissance'. She scrolled through the six-page essay she had written on Uccello's *The Hunt in the Forest*, for which she had been awarded an A, and stopped when a block of

blank pages had flicked by and she came to the words 'Chapter One'. After months of messing around with poetry she was writing a novel. She had started it last week but, what with all the homework she'd had, there had been little time to devote to it. Being at sixth-form college was great, but the workload was crazy.

Vicki, her closest friend from school, had moved with her to Maywood College last month, and there was no shortage of new students to get to know. There was one in particular Jaz wanted to get to know better. He was a year older than her and was in the upper sixth. His name was Nathan King, and all she knew about him was that he lived near the park in Maywood. He was tall, wore his hair short, but not too short, and was never without his long black leather coat, which flapped and swished behind him as he strode purposefully to wherever he was heading. He looked as if he knew exactly what he was about, as if he had it all sorted. It was his confident manner that had singled him out to her on the first day of term.

Hearing the sound of feet thundering towards her room, she snapped forward in her seat and scrolled back to the start of the history-of-art essay.

The door flew open. 'Who were you talking to?'

Without bothering to turn round, she said, 'Tamzin Rafferty, get out! You too, Lulu. Can't you see I'm working?'

'You weren't a few minutes ago. We heard you talking to someone. Was it a boy? Have you got a boyfriend?'

She twisted her head, gave her sisters her most imperious stare. 'Were you listening in on a private conversation?'

They looked at each other and sniggered. Then they began to giggle in that high-pitched tone that grated on her nerves. She moved calmly across the room to the bookcase and her CD player. She picked up the remote control, switched it on at eardrum-bursting level and watched Tamzin and Lulu take flight. They hated her music, especially the Divine Comedy – they hadn't yet evolved beyond S Club 7.

'Sweet baby Moses on a bike! Turn that racket down.'

Her father, Pat (or Popeye, as her mother and their oldest friends called him), stood in the doorway, his massive body filling the gap. Jaz switched off the music and he came in. 'Jeez, girl, that was loud enough to shake the paint off the walls. How you can work with that rubbish playing, I'll never know.' He looked towards her computer. 'Much to get through this weekend?'

'A fair amount,' she said, sliding past him to sit down. She was worried he might decide to fiddle with the keyboard and accidentally find her novel. Her dad liked to give the impression he understood nothing about computers, but she knew that he had recently had the business kitted out with an expensive new system and had insisted on being shown how to work it. She kept her eyes lowered and waited for him to leave. But he didn't. He drew nearer, stooped slightly, and began to read aloud what was on the screen. '"Uccello was fascinated by perspective and this can be clearly seen in this painting, which is both richly coloured and ingeniously constructed . . ."' He straightened up, placed a hand on her shoulder. 'I've said it before, Jasmine, and I'll say it again, you owe it all to your mother. You get your brains from her. Never forget that, will you?'

She turned and smiled affectionately at him. He was always saying that, always making himself out to be the ignorant, silent partner in his marriage. 'Oh, I'm just the brawn in the Rafferty outfit, that's why they call me Popeye,' he'd say. 'It's Moll who knows what's what.' But let anyone make the mistake of taking him at his word and they'd soon regret it.

'You're not going to give me that old I'm-just-a-thick-Paddy spiel, are you?' she asked.

He returned the smile. 'But it's the truth. I couldn't read or write when I met your mother. She wouldn't marry me until I'd mastered *Janet and John*.'

'That's true love for you, Dad.'

He gave her a light cuff around the ear. 'Cheeky madam.

Now, get on with your work. I'm expecting great things of you.'

'No pressure, then, Dad?'

He was almost out of the room when he stopped, turned back to her and said, 'So, has my little Jazzie got a boyfriend?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Chance would be a fine thing.'

'Hmm . . . best keep it that way until you've got college sorted.'

She watched him go. As dads went, he wasn't bad. Woefully sentimental at times, and scarily volatile but, beneath it all, she knew he was proud of her. He was always boasting to his friends about how clever she was. 'Mark my words,' he'd swagger, with a beer in his hand, 'this is the Rafferty who's going to put our family on the map. Jazzie's like her mother, book-smart.'

What he didn't realise was that his pride put unbearable pressure on her to perform. What if she let him down? How would he cope with the failure of a daughter on whom he'd pinned such high hopes? And did he have any idea how trapped she felt by the restrictions he placed on her in his desire to see her do well? He was happy for her to go out with Vicki, but heaven help any guy who showed the slightest interest in her. Dad would put him through untold tests before he would be satisfied that he was suitable. He never came right out and said it, but she knew her father wouldn't tolerate the distraction of a boyfriend at this stage in her life. But who'd be interested in her anyway?

She dismissed this line of thought and got back to the opening sentence of her novel. But the more she repeated it in her head, the clumsier it sounded. It wasn't long before her thoughts strayed once more. To her wonderful secret.

Next week she would be going to the first meeting of Hidden Talents. Just think, a writers' group where she would be taken seriously. Where she could talk openly about her writing and not be laughed at. Because that's what her family would do if they ever found out what she

was up to. She could hear her brothers now. 'Oo-er, little Miss Clever Clogs reckons she's an author, does she?'

She wondered what the other people in the group would be like. The woman she'd just spoken to, Dulcie Ballantyne, had sounded really nice. Hesitant, maybe, as though her mind was elsewhere, but quite friendly. Well, so long as the others were nothing like Phin and Jimmy, Tamzin and Lulu, she would be sure to get on with them.

Chapter Three

Beth King was often told that she ought to invest in a dishwasher. 'You could easily whip out this cupboard here,' people would say, thinking they were the first to come up with the idea, 'and slip in a dishwasher, no trouble at all. Just think of the hours you'd save yourself. And the wear and tear on your hands.' This last consideration was a favourite of her mother's. 'Hands, more than anything, age a woman,' she would claim. 'You can have any amount of surgery done to your face, but your hands will always give you away.'

They were probably right, these well-meaning friends and family, but the truth was, Beth enjoyed washing-up – not for any strange, puritanical reason, but because the kitchen of the first-floor flat that she and Nathan had lived in for more than ten years overlooked Maywood Park. The view was a constant source of pleasure to her: there was always something different to watch – squirrels scampering across the grass, couples, young and old, strolling arm in arm along the winding paths that led down to the river and the tennis courts, mothers with prams, dogs and children playing on the swings and roundabout – which Nathan had enjoyed when he was little. And then there was the ever-changing look of the park. Now that it was autumn, the trees were losing their coppery leaves, and the fading leggy bedding plants that the council had planted in the summer would soon be replaced with pansies tough enough to survive the rigours of winter.

The last of the lunch dishes rinsed, Beth dried her hands and reached for the tub of luxury hand cream her mother insisted on sending her, along with the rubber gloves Beth

always forgot to use. Her parents were wonderfully generous and still went out of their way to make her life easier.

As did her in-laws, Lois and Barnaby King.

But while she was grateful for her parents' generosity, which came from three hundred miles away – they had retired to warmer climes on the south coast – she found it difficult to feel the same enthusiasm for Lois's doorstep offers of help. Lois tried too hard and made Beth feel as if she were a charity case. 'Would you believe it?' Lois had said in April. 'I've stocked up at the supermarket and, without any warning, Barnaby's decided to take me away for the Easter weekend. You'd better have it, you know I hate to see good food go to waste.'

It would have been ungracious to refuse, especially as Beth knew Lois meant well. She always had. Ever since Adam's death, eleven years ago, she had committed herself to taking care of her son's widow and her only grandson. Occasionally Beth privately questioned Lois's motives, but she hated herself for thinking so cynically. What Lois did was kind and honourable and she should think herself lucky that she had such supportive in-laws. Nothing was ever too much trouble for them, and living just a few miles away in the village of Stapeley, they had always been there for her. Many a time Lois had despatched Barnaby to fix a leaking gutter or sort out a rotting window-ledge. 'Heavens! Don't even think of getting a man in to do it – you'll be charged the earth. Let Barnaby take a look for you. You know that's what Adam would have wanted.'

After all these years of living without Adam, it was difficult for Beth to know if Lois was right. Would he have wanted his parents to play such a central part in her life? Or would he have expected her to move on?

'Moving on' had become an irritating cliché to Beth. Everyone had served it up to her: her mother, her friends, the people she worked with – in fact, anyone who thought she should have remarried by now. Or at least found a serious boyfriend. 'You're not getting any younger, Beth,'

her closest friend, Simone, had said only last month. 'You're forty-three, not twenty-three, in case it's slipped your notice.'

'Fat chance of that happening,' Beth had retorted, wishing that a sandstorm would engulf her friend's house in Dubai where she was currently living with her husband, Ben.

'Or are you working on the misplaced theory that the choice of eligible men increases with age?'

'No, I'm just being selective. I haven't met anyone who measures up to Adam.'

'Rubbish! You haven't allowed anyone near enough to see how they'd measure up. You're being a coward.'

Simone's words were uncomfortably near the truth. Fear and guilt had played a part in stopping Beth finding a new partner. She had hated the idea of being disloyal to Adam.

In the aftermath of his death, she had thrown herself into taking care of Nathan. He had been only six, too young to feel the pain of loss, but old enough to understand that his and his mother's lives had changed. Within six months of the funeral they had moved from their lovely house in the country, with its pretty garden, to this flat in Maywood. Money had been tight. Without her knowledge, Adam had taken out a second mortgage on their house and had invested what little savings they'd had in a business venture that had gone disastrously wrong. It had taken Beth some time to find work, but perseverance had paid off: she had landed a gem of a job at the recently expanded health centre in town. She had worked there ever since and had been happy; the hours were fairly flexible and the camaraderie had been good for her self-esteem. Her sanity too.

Her social life had not been so fulfilling: on a receptionist's salary she couldn't afford to do much. She was always totting up the pennies – a modest trip to the cinema plus a babysitter amounted almost to the cost of a pair of shoes for Nathan. Funnily enough, as supportive as Lois was, she never offered to babysit so that Beth could go out at night. Nothing was ever said, but Beth strongly suspected

her mother-in-law didn't want her to meet anyone. To Lois, it was unthinkable that Beth could replace Adam.

But Beth's friends had had other ideas and before long they were dropping hints that it was time for her to start dating. Invitations materialised for her to meet unattached men at dinner parties. Simone had set her up with several unsuitable candidates – it was still a mystery to Beth where her friend's supply of single men came from. In those early years few got further than a second date. The first man she'd agreed to go out with had taken her for dinner in Chester. Just as she was beginning to think that he was almost 'promising', he had leaned across the table and asked about her favourite sexual fantasy. She hid her shock, and told him that an early night with a good book did it for her. Another man had bored her rigid with endless talk about his high-powered job and interdepartmental politics in the company. She had suppressed a jaw-breaking yawn, then nodded and politely said what she thought he wanted her to say.

When she grew tired of fending off men with whom she had no desire to form any attachment, she started to turn down Simone's invitations, using Nathan as an excuse – 'Sorry, Simone, I have to give Nathan a lift somewhere that night.' Or, 'Sorry, Nathan needs me to help him revise for an exam.'

Simone was no fool, and reminded Beth *ad infinitum* that time waits for no woman, especially a single one. Eventually she had said, 'How much longer are you going to use your son in this shameful manner? What excuse will you come up with when he leaves home? Or are you going to turn into an eccentric old woman who collects stray cats and makes marmalade that nobody will ever eat?'

'Anything would be preferable to the ear-bashing a so-called friend is subjecting me to. And if you really want to know, I'm putting things off until it's more convenient.'

'And as we all know, Beth, my poor deluded friend, procrastination is the thief of time.'

Beth knew that Simone was right, she *was* hiding behind

Nathan. Plenty of parents struggle to come to terms with flying-the-nest syndrome, but she knew that because she and Nathan were so close she would undergo a painful period of adjustment next year when he left for university. She had never suffered from loneliness – mostly because she didn't have time for such an indulgence – but that might alter when Nathan went to college. Common sense told her that she had no choice but to fill the void his absence would create.

In preparation for this change, she had taken an important step this morning, which she hoped would expand her horizons. She was joining a creative writers' group. She had always enjoyed 'scribbling', as she called it. It had started after Adam died: when she couldn't sleep at night, she had written down the thoughts that were keeping her awake. It had been soothingly cathartic and before long she had grown confident enough to turn the random scribblings into short stories. She now had a collection that no one but herself had read. Or ever would. Those clumsily put-together vignettes were about the past. Now she wanted to write something to reflect the new life ahead of her.

This morning she had told Simone about Hidden Talents during their fortnightly phone chat.

'Good for you,' she'd said. 'Any men in the group?'

'I wouldn't know. We have our first meeting next week.'

'What else are you going to do to occupy yourself?'

'Isn't that enough to start with?'

'You tell me.'

'Goodness, you're giving me the choice? What's got into you? Has the sun fried your brain?'

'Crikey, it's time to come home to Cheshire if it has.'

For all Simone's bullying, she was a wonderful friend, and Beth missed her.

She screwed the lid back on to the tub of hand cream and put it on the window-ledge. Looking down into the park, she noticed a fair-haired man sitting on one of the benches; he had two young children with him. For a few moments

she watched the smallest and blondest of the two little girls as she tried to catch a leaf that whirled in the wind. She wondered where their mother was, then chided herself for jumping to such a sloppy conclusion. It always annoyed her when people assumed she had a husband.

She was still staring at the man and his children when she remembered that Nathan was out for the rest of the afternoon and that she had promised to go downstairs to see her neighbour.

Adele – Miss Adele Waterman – had moved into the ground-floor flat a year after Beth and Nathan had arrived, which made them not just long-standing neighbours but good friends. To Beth's sadness, the old lady had decided, now that she was eighty-four, to call it a day: she was putting her flat on the market with the intention of moving into a retirement home. 'I'm under no illusion that my nephew wants the burden of me. He can never spare any time to visit so I'm spending his inheritance the fastest way I know how,' she had told Beth, with a chuckle.

Beth picked up a tin of home-made chocolate cake and went out, hoping that when the time came, Nathan would treat her more kindly than Adele's only relative had treated her.