

Chapter One



'I'm saying this more in horror than in anger, sweets, but are you really going like that?'

Gina shot her sister a look that combined irritation, amusement and a touch of exasperation. They were in the car on the main road to Cranmore-on-the-Green and turning back to revamp her outfit was not an option. Sally's little girls were asleep in the back and Gina found it easier to drive if they were not singing and squabbling and spilling cartons of juice in her car. She wanted to get as far into the journey as possible before they woke up.

Now, she said, 'Seeing as we're actually on our way, I *am* going to go like this. What's wrong with what I'm wearing anyway? I've got a jacket in the boot.'

Sally, eighteen months younger and making the most of the Indian summer, was wearing a long skirt, drapey top, gladiator sandals and a great many beads. She brought off the hippy-chick look irritatingly well. Gina felt herself being judged.

'It's very corporate,' Sally pronounced. 'A black

trouser suit and a crisp white shirt might be fine for your business meetings but this—'

'It is a business meeting.' Gina glanced at the sat nav. 'Anyway, most of my clothes are still in those cardboard boxes the men give you when you move. At least the shirt is clean and ironed. Nothing else I currently own is.'

'It's not exactly a business meeting,' said Sally, having cast an eye over her children to make sure they were still asleep. 'It involves a significant letter. From our mad Aunt Rainey.'

Gina felt she should suppress Sally's excitement just a bit. 'It is business. Our dear departed aunt had a space in this guy's antiques centre. That's business, isn't it? The letter is just something about that. Probably.'

Sally tutted at Gina's down-to-earth attitude. 'Yes, but it's contact from beyond the grave.' She said this as if she was Yvette Fielding announcing an especially spooky edition of *Most Haunted*.

Gina giggled. 'Rubbish! We just got letters from her solicitor. It would only count as being beyond the grave if we had a séance.'

'Do you think that's a good idea?'

Gina was laughing properly now, even as she shook her head. 'Honestly, Sal, you're barking. I do not think a séance is a good idea. Besides, it's completely unnecessary because we have letters. Actual paper, here-in-the-real-world letters.' She sent Sally a loving if

somewhat despairing look. 'I do wonder sometimes if being an artist and a stay-at-home mum has rotted your brain.' She paused for a second. 'Not that you don't do a brilliant job keeping it all together on no money. But some of your ideas are a bit out of left field.'

'Well, you have to keep yourself amused somehow when you're hunting for little garments under the bed and stopping the girls from killing each other.' Sally sighed.

Gina felt a pang of guilt for the brain-rot remark. 'You're such a brilliant mother, Sal, really you are. The girls are a real credit to you.'

'But? I feel a but coming on!'

'Nothing about you, but I do think this meeting will just be signing a document so the antique centre can get the space back or something. It won't be anything exciting.'

'So, you don't think there'll be actual money then?'

Gina shook her head. 'I don't see how there could be. You saw Aunt Rainey more often than I did but I think we'd have known if she was rich, surely? She didn't own a house and she never seemed to have much cash.'

Sally sighed again. 'I miss her, you know. Aunt Rainey was a real character, always talking about the Beatles and all those old bands as if they were her best friends, but she was a lot of fun. I wish I'd seen more of her really but having the twins so soon after we moved down here, it wasn't easy.' She smiled.

'She came to tea a couple of times, always dressed like an ex-rock chick, and I thought how much the girls would love her when they were a bit older but, well, she died.'

'She was a lot of fun and quite eccentric. And if you're not careful, you'll end up just like her,' Gina added.

'I wouldn't mind. She was great.'

'I know. It was a compliment. Sort of.'

Sally regarded her sister as if not knowing quite how to take this. Eventually she changed the subject.

'So, what was he like? This Matthew Ballinger?'

'I haven't met him, have I?'

Sally waved a hand, as if this was a minor detail.

'But you spoke to him. What was his voice like?'

'OK. Nice, even. Although he sounded a bit grumpy . . . You're doing it again, aren't you?'

'What?' Sally's outraged innocence reminded Gina of her nieces when confronted with some huge mess or other.

'Matchmaking,' said Gina, trying to sound firm. 'That's why you're fussed about what I'm wearing. You've got to stop this.'

Her sister looked out of the side window, possibly slightly embarrassed. 'Well, it's time you had a boyfriend again.'

'No it's not. I'm on a break from men. The last one was a real disaster, who actually took money from me as well as all the other crap you know by heart now.'

Gina paused. Being lighthearted about her failed relationship wasn't yet easy, even if she was well and truly over him. 'That was part of the reason why I moved down from London, in case you've forgotten. I'm not going there again, not for a long time.'

'Where? London?'

Her sister growled.

Sally allowed Gina a second to calm down. 'That wasn't the main reason though. After all, London is massive. You could have avoided Egan if you tried.'

'Oh, I tried! But when you know all the same people you're bound to run into the one man you really don't want to see.'

'That's just an excuse. You really moved because you wanted to see your nieces grow up,' said Sally comfortably.

Gina smiled in agreement. 'I do. And there's the fact that business is so dire and my only big client left has come down here too. Also the rent on my flat had shot up and with the recession I had to regroup. All of which you know.'

'You've missed out "and you pestered the life out of me",' said Sally.

'That too.' Gina laughed.

'You'll love it down here though. I know you will.'

Reluctantly, Gina agreed. 'I know I will too. I already love waking up in my cottage and seeing fields at the bottom of the garden instead of the back end of a dodgy fish and chip shop.'

‘There will be things you’ll miss though,’ said Sally generously. ‘You were in the seething metropolis and now you’re—’

‘In the sticks? Missing being able to get a good curry?’ Sally had never before acknowledged a single downside. Was she now feeling responsible for her sister’s happiness?

‘We have a truly brilliant balti, but maybe you’ll miss the buzz? I hope not. I’m so thrilled that you moved. We all are.’

‘Not just so I can babysit?’

‘Of course not! As if.’

Gina chuckled. She loved her nieces and although she found them fairly exhausting she always liked spending time with them. ‘I think I am a country girl at heart and it is so much cheaper renting here than in London.’ She paused. ‘But no matchmaking, you hear? If ever there comes a time when I think I might be ready for another relationship – say in about ten years—’

‘When you’ll be forty, nearly past child-bearing.’

‘—I’ll either let you know or go on the internet.’

‘That’s so unromantic!’

‘Good. I’ve had it with romance.’

‘You haven’t really. Everyone has a romantic side, they just don’t want to acknowledge it.’

Gina raised her eyebrows and tried not to smile. It was her sister who was the romantic. She herself was a hard-bitten businesswoman who had a living

to earn. She had absolutely no space for romance in her life, now or at any time in the future. Falling in love had been a disaster. From now on her head would rule her heart, and just to be sure, she'd avoid relationships altogether.

'Now I know that you are never going near another man, is it safe to wonder what this Matthew Ballinger might be like?' Sally continued. 'Is he young or old? Same age as Aunt Rainey, do you think?'

'He sounded middle-aged. And no, I couldn't tell from his voice if he was married or single.'

'I didn't ask!'

'Did Aunt Rainey ever talk about him? When she came to visit?'

Sally screwed up her face in thought. 'Not that I can remember, but I had the babies and they took up most of the conversation, one way or another.'

'I asked Dad on the phone if he knew anything about him. He didn't. He did say that Rainey was prone to having younger men hanging round after her though.'

'Perhaps he's one of her young lovers.' Sally sighed. 'Maybe when I'm sixty-odd I'll have young lovers.'

Gina laughed. 'Not if Alaric is still around you won't!'

Cranmore-on-the-Green was a Cotswold town known for its historic, picturesque buildings, antiques, tea shops and tourists. Now, on this bright, autumn day,

it was bustling with people taking advantage of a few days of late sunshine.

Gina and Sally had found a huge car park seemingly miles from the town centre and, after a few minutes of struggle and 'want to walk', they managed to get both girls strapped into the double buggy. The little party then made its way through the crowds.

'You've never been to the French House, have you?' said Gina.

Sally shook her head. 'No. Cranmore-on-the-Green doesn't have a supermarket, so I don't need to come very often, and there are so many antiques shops and centres I wouldn't know it if I had seen it. I always send Alaric's parents there for a little trip out when they stay. They love it. But I've got a little map so we should be able to find it quite easily.

'It's a shame he couldn't have the girls,' she went on, steering the buggy into the road to make way for a group of elderly women who had obviously had lunch in the pub and were now trying to find the coach park.

'No, it's good that he couldn't,' Gina said firmly. 'He had to meet a client which might result in a good commission.' Gina felt her artistic, romantic sister and brother-in-law needed to be a bit more business-like and sometimes became over-businesslike to compensate. She secretly thought of them as the Flopsy Bunnies, 'improvident and cheerful'.

'Yes, but not everyone likes children and we do

want this meeting to go well,' said Sally, hefting the buggy back on to the pavement.

'Oh come on. They're adorable. Anyway, we're only going to be five minutes, I expect. Here we are, the French House.'

'Goodness!' said Sally. They stared up at the building, which was old, stately and huge. It was different from the Georgian buildings on either side, the windows being closer together and taller. A curtain of Virginia creeper covered the walls with scarlet and a couple of slightly rusty brackets supported a sign proclaiming it was indeed 'THE FRENCH HOUSE'. A couple of bay trees in tubs stood on the front steps, which led to a pair of large double doors. The sign needed repainting and the bay trees had lost their original lollipop shape but to Gina the faint air of neglect made it look beautiful and romantic.

'It sort of looks French, doesn't it?' said Sally.

Gina nodded. 'I suppose it does.'

Sally sighed. 'We'd better see if we can get the push-chair up the steps and through the door.' The house didn't look as if children ever went into it.

A bell jangled as they arrived in the entrance. Gina noticed there was quite a large hole in the carpet but the brass on the door was brightly polished. A pleasant-looking middle-aged woman came up to them. 'Hello, I'm Jenny. Matthew is expecting you. Would you like me to mind the buggy? He's upstairs.'

'Thank you, that would be very kind,' said Sally, after more introductions.

After some discussion about which twin wanted to go with Gina, they each picked up a golden-haired moppet and followed Jenny up a grand-looking staircase. As Jenny knocked on one of the doors at the top of the stairs, Gina straightened her shoulders. She didn't know what lay ahead but it was all a bit daunting.

Chapter Two



Matthew Ballinger stood up from behind his enormous desk as the party entered, looking astonished and not at all happy as the tide of femininity swept into his office. He was very tall with dark eyes and hair to match. The hair needed cutting and the eyes seemed wary. For an instant he gave Gina the impression that he was an antique himself but then she realised this was crazy – he wasn't even that old. It must have been because the room, which was not large and was crammed with furniture, looked like the set for a Dickens novel and made her think Matthew Ballinger should be wearing a high collar and tail coat. He cleared his throat.

Gina, feeling sorry for him, held out her free hand. 'Hello! You must be wondering what on earth has happened. We're Gina and Sally Makepiece – you're expecting us. The girls – Persephone and Ariadne – are extras. They're twins,' she added, as if knowing this helped. And she'd stuck to their maiden name, Gina realised, wanting to keep things simple.

A look, which she interpreted as absolute horror

masked by good manners, crossed his face. 'Matthew Ballinger. How do you do? Do sit down. I'll find some more chairs.' He was obviously well out of his comfort zone.

In spite of his reticence, Sally gave Gina several knowing looks while he was finding another chair. Her facial expressions and mouthings indicated she felt he was 'gorgeous!'

Gina barely had time to roll her eyes and frown before the chair was produced. Her sister really was way out of order sometimes. Besides, a sort of saturnine cragginess didn't always translate to 'gorgeous'. Although, she had to admit – purely objectively – that he wasn't bad-looking.

When Gina and Sally were seated, with Persephone and Ariadne on their knees, Matthew Ballinger retreated behind his desk. 'Sorry, I wasn't expecting so many of you.'

'You don't need to worry about the smaller versions,' said Gina. 'They're only here for the outing.'

'Couldn't find anyone to look after them,' said Sally apologetically, giving Persephone a hug.

'Right, well,' said their host, producing a file. 'I've got a letter from your aunt's solicitor which presumably is the same as the ones you've got? And then there's the one we have to open together.'

'Yes,' said Gina, knowing if she'd been entrusted with a letter like that her curiosity would have got the better of her. She'd have at least put it up to the

light. Sally would have had it over a steaming kettle in minutes. Perhaps Aunt Rainey had known that. How could he be so calm about it?

‘So, shall we open the letter then?’ said Sally after a few desperate seconds of waiting.

‘We might as well,’ Matthew said, producing the envelope. He picked up a letter opener, slit the envelope with agonising precision and cast his glance down the page.

‘Oh dear,’ he said eventually. ‘It’s . . . it’s a bit complicated. Look, would you like a cup of tea or something?’

Gina and Sally looked at each other. Complicated? What did that mean?

‘We don’t need tea. We’d like to—’ said Gina.

‘I still think a drink would be best,’ Matthew interrupted, getting up and heading for the door. ‘I’ll see if there’s some squash for the children.’

‘Juice!’ said Sally. ‘They can’t drink squash. E numbers,’ she explained. ‘Makes them hyperactive.’

He shuddered visibly. ‘Jenny?’ he called down the stairs. ‘We couldn’t have some tea, could we? And some juice for the girls.’

‘Juice,’ said the twins, almost in unison. ‘Want juice!’

Gina wanted to press Matthew but he was looking so forbidding that she didn’t know where to start. Sally was distracted by the girls, who were getting visibly restless. Since her abilities as a mother included

conjuring skills, she was able to produce a couple of rice cakes from her sleeve to placate them.

An old clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly, slowing time with its measured pace. Something in the room seemed to sigh. Gina wondered if it had been her. It could have been the furniture.

At last the door opened and the Nice Lady they had met downstairs came in with a tray.

'This is Jenny Duncan,' said Matthew Ballinger. 'She's the backbone of the place.'

'Oh, we've met, Matthew,' said Jenny. 'I have a pushchair the size of a family car in my cubby hole.'

The moment she spoke there was an eruption. Following the tea tray was what looked like a rather thin donkey. The girls began to scream.

Sally's maternal instinct told her to lift Persephone up out of harm's way but because of the size of the harm, it wasn't possible. Gina, in charge of Ariadne, decided to carry her out of the room. She didn't think she was in danger but the screaming was deafening her.

'He won't hurt you!' said Matthew loudly but only just audibly. 'It's only Oscar.'

Then Oscar started to bark. The sound was so deep and terrible it seemed to come from the bowels of the earth. Gina hadn't thought the girls could scream any harder but somehow they managed it.

'Quiet!' said the Voice of God, which turned out to be Matthew.

For a second or two there was silence. Oscar looked away, embarrassed, as if the bark had nothing to do with him. The girls, unaccustomed to being told what to do, especially by strangers, stopped screaming more from shock than obedience.

'Jenny, if you wouldn't mind removing the dog?' said Matthew. 'And you two,' he said to Ariadne and Persephone, although Gina felt he was addressing her and Sally as much as he was the girls, 'if you stop making such a noise we can get our business done quickly and efficiently and then we can all get out of here.'

As one, the girls began to weep, silently but wetly. Big fat tears slid down their cheeks from wide-open eyes. Gina remembered that Sally had always been able to do this as a child and wondered if it was a gift they'd inherited.

'I'm sorry,' said Sally. 'I can't concentrate while the children are so upset. We'll have to do this another time.'

'It shouldn't take long,' said Gina, who wanted to get it over with.

'I think maybe Mrs – er – Sally is right,' said Matthew. 'Another time might be better. Maybe in the evening, when the children are asleep?'

'Brilliant idea!' said Sally. 'Let's meet at Gina's house. Then if the children aren't asleep, they won't be my responsibility. Their dad can sort them out. Card, Gina!'

Gina was used to being the sister who was in charge. She felt in her pocket for a business card, glad she'd been organised enough to get them done immediately she moved. She handed one to Matthew. 'It's not far at all – only about twenty minutes away. How about tomorrow night? Sally, would that be OK with you?'

Matthew took the card and looked down at it. Just for a moment Gina wished it wasn't quite so funky, but she was a PR person and she needed to present the right image. It just didn't seem right this time, in such a dignified and old-fashioned setting.

'Oh yes – but let's get the girls out of here!' Sally begged. The silent weeping was beginning to be audible. Gina knew from experience the screaming could start up again at any moment.

'About eight suit?' said Matthew.

Gina nodded. Ariadne had drawn breath for a shriek. As Oscar gave her a look of mild curiosity, Ariadne let rip. Gina ran out of the room with her charge. It was like being a moving car alarm, she thought.

A few minutes later, after a quick struggle with the pushchair, Gina, Sally and the twins were outside the French House.

'Quiet!' said Gina, who had been impressed by how well this had worked on them before. The noise subsided. 'I don't know about you,' she went on, 'but given we can't have a bottle of Pinot to help us recover, I'm going to need a bloody big pink cake!'

It took a little while, plus cake, ice creams and some sparkly hairgrips, before the party felt calm enough to discuss their recent experience.

'I know the girls are a bit hysterical about dogs,' said Sally, 'but you must admit it was a giant.'

Gina nodded. Even she had felt unnerved when that monster had trotted in behind the tea tray.

'And Matthew was hardly less terrifying,' said Sally, whose talent for exaggeration had been enhanced by chocolate gâteau.

'I think he was just a bit overwhelmed by us all,' said Gina. 'He wasn't expecting four of us and we did rather take over the place.'

'Well, I think he's a Mr Rochester: all dark and brooding.'

'And sinister?'

'Oh, not sinister!' said Sally, affronted by the suggestion. 'Mr Rochester was gorgeous, wasn't he!'

'Sweetie,' Gina chuckled, 'I know you're really talking about Matthew here. But he's an antiques dealer, which means he's probably gay, or married. And even if he isn't either, I'm still not interested. How many times do I have to tell you I'm taking a break from men? You wouldn't push drinks on an alcoholic.'

Her sister regarded her through narrowed eyes. Sally, in spite of being short of both money and time, was both in love with her husband and happy, and she wanted everyone else to be happy too. She felt

the only way was through the love of a good man, but before she could launch into her well-honed speech about success in business meaning nothing if you had no one to share it with, Gina said, 'So, Matthew's read the letter now and we haven't. I hope that doesn't put us at a disadvantage.'

'I don't suppose it will,' said Sally, retrieving yet another hair-slide, from the floor this time. 'After all, Aunt Rainey wouldn't leave something in her will to a stranger when she had us.'

'She was eccentric,' said Gina. 'Maybe she would.'

Sally shook her head. 'She did live in France a lot in the sixties and dye her hair well past the age when orange was a good colour for her, but she had all her marbles. That's why Dad got almost everything and we got mysterious letters.' She glanced at Gina. 'And an intro to Matthew at the same time.'

Gina didn't rise to the bait. She got up and retrieved her coat from the back of her chair. 'Well, we'd better get going. I want to get home before it's dark. Spooky country roads and all that. Besides, the parents will be dying to know what went on today. I'll ring them.'

'I'm not sure they'll be all that interested,' said Sally, who had never forgiven her parents for moving to Spain just when she became pregnant.

Gina, who had also felt a bit let down at the time, nodded. 'I'll tell them anyway.'

The little girls stared out of the window singing to themselves on the journey home. Gina and Sally

didn't talk much. Gina was thinking about the chaos that was currently her home and wondering which bit she should tackle first. Sally had a vacant expression on her face. Gina knew from experience she was probably working away at something in her head and briefly envied her for being an artist. Gina loved her work as a freelance PR but public relations, although stimulating and creative in its way, lacked a decorative side. She felt this missing element far more than not having a boyfriend.

When they arrived at Sally's house, Alaric carried his daughters inside while Sally made the usual offers of supper and a bed for the night.

'Honestly, I must get back,' Gina had to say at least three times. 'I've just about got a path between my bed and the door but I should make a bit more space.'

'You're not going to do that this evening. Stay with us. Alaric can bath the girls and we'll open a bottle of wine.'

'Tempting though that sounds I must do something useful. That's the trouble with being freelance, you don't get time off in the same way. And I should do some unpacking. I'll see you very soon.' She started the car engine.

Her sister spoke through the open window. 'At least we know one thing . . .'

'What?'

'My gaydar, which you know is impeccable, tells

me he's not gay! And before you ask, you know perfectly well who I'm talking about.'

Gina laughed and drove off, leaving her sister waving madly in front of the little cottage she had made a home. Gina couldn't imagine why on earth her sister felt so sure Matthew Ballinger wasn't gay. Just because he wasn't camp didn't mean a thing. Nor did the fact that he had a dog the size and colour of a donkey. He did run an antiques centre, and even though she hadn't looked that closely, all the bits and pieces in his office had looked well kept and lovingly arranged. Although, thinking about it, she remembered a rather dodgy china dog, all Chinesey, with huge, rolling eyes. Would a gay man put up with something so ugly in his work space? Maybe Sally had a point, but it was nothing to her. Gina had forsworn men.

Chapter Three



Matthew rang the following morning to ask if he could bring Oscar with him that evening.

'Normally he'd be all right at home, or I'd leave him with Jenny, but she can't have him and there are so many firework parties at this time of year. He hates bangs.'

As Gina had been sure when she'd heard his voice that he was going to cancel, she found herself saying, 'Oh, that's fine. Bring him. The girls aren't going to be here after all. I'm not that keen on bangs either.'

'Good. I will. Thank you. I'll see you at eight then.'

Gina sat where she was for a few minutes after they had disconnected. What had Aunt Rainey been thinking of? What on earth had been going on in her mind when she wrote those letters and left the strange instructions with her solicitor? Was she, Gina, going to experience more life changes than she'd already taken on? And if so, was she up for it?

Gina went through to the sitting room which was also her office. The little cottage, though enchanting, didn't have room for a separate work space. Her

friend Dan, a property search consultant who had found her new home for her, had been concerned about that, but she had reassured him that when the cupboard-cum-second bedroom was no longer full of stuff to unpack, she could move up there.

It was going to be tough setting up her business in an area where she only had one business contact. The first thing she'd done when she'd arrived the previous week was to get herself online and her post redirected.

Her client would pay the bills for a month or so but would not cover anything extra. She had to find some more work as soon as possible. At least as a public-relations person who specialised in marketing she had plenty of ideas as to how to do that, and she decided a leaflet was the answer. When times were hard it was more important than ever to make sure your name was out there, and she would do this by getting her leaflet to every business in the surrounding area. Later that day, when she was at last happy with her copy, she looked up a local printer and drove over to see him.

Sally arrived at quarter past seven that evening, laden with baskets and boxes.

'This is so you can do a makeover on my house?' asked Gina while she and Sally were still kissing each other hello.

'I know you've only just moved in and won't have had time to do a thing to make this place anything

like a proper home. I'm just here to help.' She looked around critically.

'I've been frantic all day working!' said Gina, wishing she didn't sound as if she was apologising for attending to the practicalities of life and not the aesthetics.

People meeting the sisters for the first time often assumed that Gina was the stronger character, but now she surrendered to the soft and scented bulldozer that was her sister on a mission.

Gina moved boxes, found chairs and rugs and generally assisted as Sally performed the sort of miracle usually seen on television with a staff of thousands and a celebrity to help.

By ten to eight Gina slumped in the only armchair and looked about her. 'Wow!' she said.

'Hmm, not too bad, given I didn't have long,' said Sally, looking around her with a satisfied-bordering-on-smug expression.

Tea lights glowed on every surface. A rug lay in front of the fireplace and Gina's work area was covered with a deep red cloth studded with tiny mirrors which reflected the candlelight. What had been a desk looked like a cross between a dresser and a shrine. The papers were in a box Sally had converted into a filing tray; the computer had been relegated to the bedroom.

Gina's pillows had been wrapped in more red tablecloths – a student trip to India meant Sally had dozens of these – so the sofa and armchair looked deeply

inviting. There was a bunch of Michaelmas daisies and Japanese anemones from Sally's garden on the windowsill as well as more tea lights.

Sally twitched a cushion. 'Looks OK, doesn't it?'

'Frankly I think it looks like a bordello, but a very cosy one,' said Gina.

'Now all you need is a fire. Does the fireplace work?' said Sally, ignoring Gina's comment.

'Yes, and the landlady had the chimney swept.' She paused. 'But it's not that cold and the heating works OK. Do we really need a fire?'

'It'll make the place look more welcoming,' said Sally, rummaging in the only basket not yet empty. 'Matches, matches, come to Mummy.' She looked at her sister impatiently. 'Now find some glasses, do. I've brought wine.' Sally was setting the scene and it had to be perfect.

Gina found the glasses and a cloth to polish them with in case they were dusty after the move. She didn't bother to protest that it was a business meeting and not a party because she knew Sally wouldn't listen. As far as Sally was concerned, where there was more than one person gathered together it was a celebration, the space had to look pretty and if it was after six o'clock there had to be wine. She had inherited their mother's gift for hospitality. Gina hadn't to the same extent; although she liked people to be comfortable and for the place to be tidy, she couldn't dress a room quite as well as Sally could.

Once Sally had the makings, including candle ends, newspaper and kindling, she looked up at her sister. 'OK, over to you. Light the fire.'

Gina smiled as she knelt on the hearthrug. Her sister could do the pretty bits but Gina could get a fire going quicker than anyone.

When the wood Sally had brought had caught and the fire was going nicely, Sally gave her sister a critical inspection. Gina was wearing jeans and jumper.

'This is fine,' said Gina, brushing bits of stick off herself. 'The jeans are clean, the jumper is newish and I've put mascara on. Look.' She batted her eyelashes to demonstrate. 'If I put any more on he'll think I'm weird. I wasn't wearing any make-up when we first met.'

'I know,' said Sally grimly. 'You never do. You are thirty, you know, maybe it's time to stop relying on your wonderful natural complexion.'

Suddenly worried, Gina peered into the mirror. 'Do I look old?'

'Of course not. Anyway, you look great in candle-light. Now let me just have a final check that everything is perfect . . .'

By the time there was a knock on the door, a little after eight, the cottage looked cosier than it had for years and certainly since the short time Gina had lived in it. Even by Sally's high standards it was extremely pretty and inviting.

In the flurry to create the perfect *Country Living*

effect Gina had forgotten to mention Oscar. She'd forgotten about him herself until she opened the door. Fortunately Sally managed to stop herself imitating her daughters as Oscar loped into the cottage; she kept her exclamation down to a small squeak.

'Matthew, welcome,' said Gina, to give her sister time to breathe deeply. 'Sally has insisted on making the cottage look dressed for a party, not a meeting, so I hope you're up for a glass of wine.'

Oscar, not waiting for an invitation, flung himself in front of the fire, thus taking up most of the floor space.

'Thank you, that would be nice,' Matthew said.

'Why is your dog so big?' Gina heard Sally ask as she went into the kitchen to fetch the drinks.

As she came back in again she heard Matthew reply, 'Because he's mostly Irish wolfhound and big is how they come. And although he's huge, he's terrified of bangs. It makes it difficult to leave him alone at this time of year, with firework parties going on at all times.'

'Oh I see!' said Sally, softening somewhat.

Gina handed him a glass of wine and then one to Sally, who was sitting in the armchair with her feet curled under her. Spiders made Gina do that, not dogs the size of hearthrugs.

'So what's the rest of him?' asked Gina, having seated herself on the kitchen chair. She didn't feel she knew Matthew well enough to sit next to him on the sofa.

'He's technically a lurcher,' said Matthew, 'but he's

mostly wolfhound, which makes him largely unsuitable for lurcher-like activities.'

'Largely is about right,' said Gina. 'And I'm not going to ask about lurcher-like activities because I'm sure I don't want to know – but he's lovely,' she added, suddenly realising she did like him. He was a gentle giant. Matthew was certainly a giant – he and Oscar took up most of the room – but was he gentle, like his dog? She dismissed the thought swiftly. He certainly seemed less imposing than he had in his office.

'Oscar dearly loves a good fire,' said Matthew. 'It was kind of you to light one.' He was perched on the edge of the sofa, as if he wanted to make a quick getaway.

'That was Sally's idea actually. She said it made the place cosier. I felt it might be a bit hot.'

'We can always open a window,' said Sally, who seemed to have summoned up enough courage to put her feet on the floor now.

'So what about Aunt Rainey's letter?' said Gina, who was feeling more and more anxious. She had forgotten her sister was afraid of dogs and felt guilty for inflicting such a big one on her. And Matthew seemed ill at ease too. In fact, only Oscar seemed remotely comfortable.

'I took the liberty of taking photocopies so we've all got one.' He handed the girls a piece of paper each.

They both studied them for a few seconds.

‘Actually,’ said Gina. ‘I can’t read in this light.’ She looked at Sally, knowing she would hate it if Gina ruined the effect by turning on the overhead lamp.

‘Nor can I,’ said Sally, ‘but Matthew, you’re near the lamp. You read it aloud. It’ll go in better that way anyway.’

‘OK,’ he said, and began. “My dears . . .” He looked up, making it clear he would never use an expression like that.

‘You’re probably wondering what this is all about. Let’s just say I’m a meddling old woman but indulge me! I want my lovely nieces to discover the joy of the antiques business. Some people call it “the Disease” but it’s such a delightful one, I have no qualms in infecting others with it. So, I’m giving the girls £500 to start off with and I’d like you, Matthew, to take them on, let them have my space and what’s left of my stock, guide them through the first tricky months and if you make a profit within four months, you will all get a bit more money. Have fun!’

Matthew stopped reading and looked at them both.

‘Go on,’ said Sally.

‘That’s it. That’s all it says,’ said Matthew.

For a few moments, the only sound to be heard in the room was Oscar’s gentle snores and the crackling of the fire.

'Aunt Rainey was a little bit crazy,' said Gina eventually. 'Wasn't she?'

'Well, she was pretty eccentric,' said Matthew. 'But she did very well and was a real asset to the centre. She was an erratic buyer but she always found interesting things. People came in regularly to see what she'd got her hands on.'

'But how exactly does an antiques centre work? There didn't seem to be many people around when we came the other day,' said Sally.

'It's not like a department store with every stall manned. Owners rent space and take it in turns to man the centre. We always have two people on duty, but sometimes people come in to check their stock. We have about ten traders in the French House in total.'

'So why aren't they there all the time?' asked Sally. 'You'd think it would be easier to sell your own things if you're actually there.'

'Dealers have to buy stock, restore it possibly, and most of them have stock in other centres too. It may seem odd if you're used to ordinary shops but it works perfectly well,' said Matthew. He was back to perching on the edge of the sofa, frowning at them both.

'I don't think we can do this,' said Sally, having thought about it for all of thirty seconds. 'We know nothing about antiques and I don't imagine it's something you can just pick up.'

Matthew made a noise which sounded as if he was about to agree but Gina interrupted.

'I disagree,' she said. 'I think we should give it a go. I certainly need the extra inheritance, and you do too, Sally.'

Sally looked at Gina in amazement. 'Sorry? Run that by me again?'

Gina felt herself flush slightly. Generally she was the sensible sister and for her to support this mad idea was very out of character. However, whilst Sally had been asking Matthew questions, she'd been thinking about Aunt Rainey's letter. She obviously wanted them to take over her stall – she wouldn't have written specifically to say so if she hadn't. She might have been eccentric but she wasn't an idiot. And for some reason she was determined that they work with this rather difficult man – who was obviously reluctant to have her and Sally inflicted on him. But she wouldn't be daunted. 'I just think we shouldn't dismiss it out of hand,' she said quietly but firmly.

Sally frowned. 'I'm sure we could get the will changed – convince the lawyers she wasn't of sound mind or something. And it can't be a lot of money, can it?'

'I wouldn't have thought it would be enough to be worth wasting it on trying to get the will changed,' said Matthew. He shrugged. 'I don't suppose anyone would know if I just sold her stock for you. No need for you two to get involved.'

There was another long silence before Gina said, 'That would be cheating.'

'Yes,' said Sally. 'I'm not as law-abiding as Gina, but if Rainey went to all this trouble to get us involved, then that's what she wanted. We can't just go against her wishes.'

Gina sensed her sister, in one of her characteristically lightning changes of mood, was coming round to the idea.

Matthew sighed. 'The antiques business is not exactly thriving at the moment. It will be very tough to make any money and there's a lot to learn.'

'I'm sure. But we're quite capable of learning new things,' said Gina, wondering why she was suddenly so determined to take on another challenge.

'I didn't mean to imply you weren't,' said Matthew. 'I'm just trying to think what's best.'

'Look,' said Gina, 'I do understand how daunting it must be for you. We're two strangers and our dead aunt wants you to teach us what you've probably spent your life learning. I do completely get that you don't want to take it on.' She paused. 'On the other hand, if you could find it in you to do that, we would try our very, very best to make a go of it.'

There was another agonisingly long silence. 'I don't want to seem obstructive,' Matthew said at last, 'I just don't want you going into this whole business thinking it's going to be like it is on *Bargain Hunt* or whatever, when it's a lot more mundane than that.'

'But?' prompted Sally, helping herself to crisps.

'Well,' said Matthew, almost as if the words were hurting as they came out, 'although I wasn't related to Rainey, she was very good to me. When my father died a couple of years ago, she was a rock. If this is what she wanted, and you really are up for a lot of hard work and disappointment, I will take you on.'

Gina let out a long breath. She could tell it had been a big effort for him – and why wouldn't it be? Why would Matthew want to take two sisters he knew very little about under his wing when he was obviously a serious type of person, who took his business very seriously too? But they could be serious as well, especially Gina. 'That's very, very kind.'

'We'll try really hard not to let you down,' said Sally.

Matthew looked down at Oscar and rubbed him at the base of his tail with his foot. Then he sighed. 'I miss Rainey. She wasn't like a mother to me or anything like that but she stopped me getting too gloomy. She encouraged me to get Oscar although everyone else said I'd be mad to get such a big dog. But it was the right decision. If she wants me to do this, then I owe it to her to carry out her wishes. She was very wise.'

It was a long speech for someone who didn't seem in the habit of making long speeches. The room was very still. A log shifted in the grate and Oscar groaned in his sleep.

'Then let's drink to our new partnership,' said Gina, raising her glass.

'Yes. Here's to us,' said Sally.

'To us,' said Matthew more quietly. He was obviously still getting used to the notion.

They all clinked and then Sally said, 'We're like the Three Musketeers!'

'Are we?' said Matthew, looking puzzled.

'Well, not really—' began Gina.

'Oh, OK, we're not going to have sword fights or anything but there are three of us,' said Sally. 'And Oscar can be D'Artagnan. He was a dog.'

Gina was used to her sister coming across as slightly dotty and stole a glance at Matthew. He might pull out of the arrangement or condemn Sally as a complete idiot.

'Oh, I remember. Dogtanian,' he said. 'On children's telly?'

'That's it,' said Sally. 'I knew dogs had something to do with it. *The Muskahounds*.'

'Right,' said Gina, getting up and adding another log to the fire, patting Oscar at the same time. 'Now, what's the first step in our new adventure?'

'You'll need to come over to the centre and we'll see what stock Rainey left. I'll find you some space and we'll see how you get on,' said Matthew. Whilst not sounding exactly enthusiastic he did seem serious about helping them. 'What usually happens is that the dealers rent space – an area or a cabinet,

depending on what they deal in – and then serve in the centre to pay rent. If you're really good at selling' – he directed this at Sally – 'you could do more hours.'

'I am really good at selling,' she said bluntly, 'but I'm terribly short of time, what with the twins and all that. I'll do what I can though. I'd enjoy it,' she added a little wistfully.

Gina was aware that her sister, who loved being a mother, sometimes felt the lack of another life. 'I'll help out whenever I can,' she said, glancing at Sally and then Matthew. 'I'm used to doing pitches so I expect I can sell too. But what worries me is I'll have absolutely no idea what I'm selling.'

'I'll have to give you a crash course – both of you,' said Matthew.

'What's the best way to learn?' asked Gina, who liked to do things properly.

'By doing it,' said Matthew. 'There isn't a correspondence course – well, there probably is – but if you're going to deal and not just collect, you have to learn by doing.'

Sally got up. 'More wine? Or should I make some tea?'

'No thank you, nothing more for me,' said Matthew. 'I've got an antiques fair to go to very early tomorrow morning.' As he got to his feet, so did Oscar, causing Sally to step back a bit but not actually jump on to her chair.

'I should go too,' she said. 'My girls wake horribly early.'

Gina smiled. 'It seems I'm the only one not getting up at dawn.' She stretched a little. 'I'm going to feel very smug tomorrow.'

Matthew raised his eyebrows. 'I think you should come with me to the fair. I'll pick you up at six thirty. We need to be there by seven.'

This was like a verbal bucket of cold water. Gina opened her mouth to give him all the reasons why this was a totally unreasonable suggestion but there were so many, she didn't know where to start and so she shut it again.

'Absolutely,' said Sally excitedly. 'We should make a start on this straight away.'

'But we haven't seen what Rainey has already,' Gina pointed out, having at last thought of a sensible objection.

'She had very eclectic tastes,' said Matthew. 'I'll steer you away from anything too radical. And bring cash if you can, or we can stop at a cashpoint on the way. You don't have to buy anything; it would just help you get your eye in. But this is a good local market, not too big. The perfect place to start.'

Gina clung to her wineglass for support. 'I just think we should feel our way into this a little and not go on a buying trip before we've even seen the centre properly.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, stop being so sensible,'

said Sally. 'Golly, if I could go off on a spending spree to a market I'd be ecstatic.'

'To an antiques market?' Gina demanded, not convinced.

'Well, I'd rather it was fabric or paint or stuff like that, but I'd go like a shot. Really, Gina, if we're doing this, we should get on and do it.'

Gina reached out for Oscar's head, which was level with her chin, and rubbed it thoughtfully.

'I'll pick you up at six thirty tomorrow morning,' Matthew repeated as he nudged Oscar towards the front door. There was a firmness about him that made Gina feel that arguing would be pointless.

Gina closed the door behind him and then confronted her sister.

'I never guessed that was going to happen,' said Sally.

Gina bit her lip. 'It is a bit of a shock. But a good shock, I think. I feel weirdly positive about it, as if it's the right thing to do.' She looked at Sally, suddenly guilty. 'Is it all right with you?'

Sally shrugged. 'Well, my gut reaction wasn't positive, but I'm up for anything that gets me away from my lovely girls, just for a little bit. And you never know, we might make that profit and get that little bit of extra money Aunt Rainey promised us.'

And with that she flung her scarf round her neck, grabbed her bag, blew a kiss at her sister and was gone.