

## Prologue: A Seed is Sown

*Lost Angel of a ruin'd Paradise!*

Shelley

With a galvanic jerk Fran March opened her eyes to find herself practically nose to nose with a total stranger: a sleeping young Neptune, his lightly muscled body, carelessly disposed in sleep, green-washed by the early morning light filtering in through thin caravanette curtains.

Recoiling, she slipped from the bed, praying he wouldn't wake up, panicking as she tried to find her clothes among the clutter of a camper van that both looked and smelled like a potting shed.

*This* Neptune's trident was the homely gardening fork that fell over with a clatter as she struggled with the unfamiliar sliding door, almost weeping with silent frustration.

She froze as he stirred and half opened drowsy, green-flecked eyes, only to close them again and sleep on, long narrow nose pressed against the pillow, hair in improbable spirals and the darker stubble pricking out along the edge of his jaw.

The door finally opened enough to let her slip out into a world silent except for the non-judgemental birds, though, misjudging the drop, she didn't so much hit the ground running as fall to her knees in the pub car park like a penitent Pope Joan.

## Altered Conceptions

'Mum, you know you've always told me that my father was a student prince who turned into a toad and hopped it when you kissed him?' Rosie asked me ominously on Boxing Day while we were watching *Who Do You Think You Are?* Mal was safely out of the way upstairs in his study poring over his stamp collection, yearning for a Cayman Blue.

'Yes,' I agreed cautiously, the chunk of Christmas cake I had just eaten suddenly turning to stone in my stomach, though you'd think a survival instinct that sent a surge of energy to the leg muscles for a quick getaway would have been much more useful – except that Rosie had me cornered on the sofa.

She was wearing a familiarly stubborn expression, like a very serious elf maiden, all long, honey-blond locks fronding around her slightly pointed ears and a frown above her straight brows. Her changeling greengrey eyes were fixed accusingly on mine.

'Or that other story, where you said he was Neptune disguised in human form, and he dragged you down into his sea kingdom because he'd fallen in love with you? Only you escaped, helped by friendly dolphins, and were found wandering the beach covered in seaweed next morning?'

'Mmm,' I said vaguely, though actually I was quite proud of that one – some of the details were pretty inventive, especially all the little mussel shells clapping with glee when I got away, and a desolate Neptune blowing his conch shell to summon me

back every evening for a month before giving up and swimming sadly away for ever, totally conched out.

Perhaps it *was* a fishy story, at that?

My favourite was the one where her father was a gypsy king with fast flamenco fingers, cursed by an evil witch never to stay more than one night in any place. If he did, she would appear, take his Music out and shoot it. (Music was a dog.)

That one always made Rosie cry, and I had to assure her that the king never stopped more than one night in any place, because he loved Music more than anything. And so the dog lived for ever, and they were very happy travelling about in their caravan, except when he thought about the beautiful princess he had had to leave behind.

But now, seemingly, the time for fairy stories was over.

‘Mum,’ Rosie said sternly, ‘you’ve never told me anything *real* about my father, and although I do know it’s because you don’t want to talk about it, now I’m eighteen and at university I think I have a right to know all about him, don’t you?’

‘Yes, darling, but there really isn’t much more to tell you,’ I said helplessly, because there hadn’t been that many facts to embroider. He came, he went – what more could I say? ‘Those stories were all variations on the truth, Rosie.’

‘I’ve been talking about it with Granny and she says it’s time you came clean, because you met my father at university in your first term and had been going out with him for two years before you got pregnant with me, so you must know all about him!’

*Thank you, Ma.*

‘Granny is wrong: that wasn’t your father,’ I said shortly. ‘I’ve never said he was.’

Mind you, I’ve never said he *wasn’t* either, so perhaps it’s not surprising that Ma, my husband and now even my daughter assumed it, and also that I never wanted to talk about it simply because he abandoned me.

And I don’t want to think about him, either; why rake up old hurts?

‘Well, Granny says he *must* have been, you hadn’t been going out with anyone else, but when she wanted you to write and tell him you were pregnant, you refused,’ she persisted.

‘Because it was nothing to do with him,’ I said patiently, though I suppose it was, in a way. If Tom hadn’t told me it was over between us on the night of the end-of-term pub crawl and party, maybe I wouldn’t have had too much to drink and ended up pregnant.

That put paid to the last year of my graphic design course, though Rosie, when she arrived was such a perfect creation that I felt I should have been allowed to submit her like a work in progress at the end of finals and get my degree anyway.

And once I set eyes on Rosie I never regretted having her, of course – except when she was giving me the third degree like now, and frowning at me as though she could extract the truth by telepathy: but only the one she wanted, a tidy truth with checkable details. A name, a face – a father.

I couldn't give her any of those things, but clearly the time had come to give her what I had; to expose the bare bones of a buried past. I knew it had to come one day.

'OK, Rosie, I'll tell you everything I remember, which isn't much – it was such a long time ago.'

I patted the sofa cushion and she plumped down, looking at me expectantly. 'This had better not be another of your fairy stories.'

'It isn't, but that doesn't mean you're going to like it any better. Granny was partly right about Tom – we did meet in my first term at university, though he was a year ahead of me. But he dumped me right at the end of my second year because he was off to Rome on an arts scholarship and didn't see me as part of his new future. It was a bit of a shock.'

That was the understatement of the year – I was devastated. He'd even given me a ring a few weeks before with 'Forever' engraved inside it, though 'For Now' would have given me more warning of his intentions.

'Poor Mum! And then you realised you were pregnant in the summer holidays?' prompted Rosie sympathetically.

'Yes, but not by Tom,' I said, quickly scotching any ideas of a romantic tragedy. 'Your father was someone I met on the rebound.'

Seeing she looked totally unconvinced I elaborated. 'It was like *Brief Encounter*, but with sex. All I really remember about him now were his amazing eyes – sort of hazel with green rays round the pupils, and a lovely warm, deep, comforting voice.'

There had to have been *something* compelling about him at the time, or I wouldn't have gone off with him like that, even on the rebound and far from sober, would I?

'Come on, Mum, you can't expect me to believe that! You? A one-night stand? Per-lease!' she said scathingly. 'And after everything you've told *me* about safe sex and loving relationships?'

'Because I didn't want you to make the same mistakes I did,' I said, though I suppose if it hadn't led to pregnancy I would have conveniently forgotten the whole Midsummer Night's madness – or put a romantic gloss on it.

'Why does even Mal think it was this Tom, then?'

'He just assumed it, like Granny, since it's not an episode I ever wanted to discuss, even if it did mean I had you, darling, which I've never regretted in the slightest. And please don't bring the subject up when he's about, will you? It's all best forgotten.'

Mal is the jealous kind, so one previous lover seemed as much as he could take when we were at the trueconfessions stage of our relationship. Mind you, although I didn't tell him who Rosie's father was – or wasn't – my words circled in an endless holding pattern around this perfectly obvious gaping hole in my narrative, and he never once asked the question.

Rosie had got up and was wandering restlessly about, scowling. 'But if you *are* telling the truth this time, Mum, then you can tell me *something* about my real

father, can't you? You did at least know who he was? Didn't you want to tell him about me?'

She came back across the room, a paler, taller version of myself at her age, as though her father had been a ghost, which for all I could remember of him he might well have been. I mean, in eighteen years I've nearly convinced myself that there was no second party involved, so Rosie's was practically a born-again virgin birth: she's mine, all mine.

'So what was he called? Where did you meet him? What did he look like?'

'I . . . can't remember,' I said uncomfortably, but I could see I wasn't going to be allowed off the hook until I'd given her more than that. 'He was just passing through the town and we picked him up in a pub somewhere and took him on to the end-of-term party with us. We'd all had a lot to drink. He said his name was Adam, and he was a gardener, but that's about all I know about him.'

'And you expect me to believe that?' she said angrily.

'Well, *I* did. And he had an old camper van,' I added, though that's one of the details I have allowed to go fuzzy over the years . . . except that sometimes I wake up with a thumping heart in an absolute panic, thinking I'm back in the damned thing and trying to creep out before the stranger I've spent the night with wakes up.

(And it smelled like a potting shed, come to that, so perhaps he really was a gardener, generous with his seed. But let's leave the analogy there before I start to feel like a Gro-bag.)

'Mum, you could at least tell me the truth, and not fob me off with yet more fairy stories!' she said vehemently. 'A camper van!'

'I have, Rosie,' I said, getting up and giving her a hug, which she endured rather than returned. 'I have told you the truth, and if I knew more details I'd tell you those too. But I love you, and Granny loves you – isn't that enough?'

I didn't include Mal, fond as he is of her in his way, for the relationship's always been tinged with mutual jealousy, though things are better now that Rosie's away during term-time studying veterinary science. But she's always spent a lot of time with her granny anyway, since Mal is not a pet lover, and so most of her menagerie stayed with Ma after we married, something I'm not sure she's ever quite forgiven him for.

Mal's footsteps sounded upstairs and Rosie said quickly, 'I wish I knew if you were telling me the truth this time!'

'Rosie, I'm sorry if it's not what you wanted to hear, but that's what really happened,' I assured her. (And how *did* I come to have such a bossy little cow for a daughter?) 'And by the time I knew I was pregnant there was no way to find out more – no means of tracing him. I never even knew his second name.'

'You must have talked to each other!'

'Yes, but we had both drunk an awful lot, don't forget,' I said patiently. 'I don't remember what we talked about, but he must have been really nice or I wouldn't have gone back with him. I was only horrified next morning when I was sober, because I thought I still loved Tom.'

'But if Tom was your boyfriend, why are you so sure he's not my father?' she demanded.

On any list of twenty questions you didn't want your daughter to ask, this would come fairly high up.

'I just am . . . And although I wasn't on the pill, we always took precautions.'

'Accidents happen,' she pointed out. I hope she doesn't know this from experience, but am not about to ask her while she is interrogating me. Or even at all.

'Well they didn't,' I said firmly, though I couldn't put my hand on my heart and truthfully say that I was one hundred per cent sure that Rosie wasn't Tom's baby, because we might have got a little slapdash with the contraception towards the end of our affair . . . 'And don't think I didn't try and convince myself that you were Tom's, because I did – but I'm positive you're not.'

She changed tack with disconcerting suddenness. 'You could tell me something about this Tom Collins, though – like, why his parents called him after a drink?'

'Collinge, not Collins!' I said. 'And why do you want to talk about him? It's pointless – what's past is past. We're happy *now*, aren't we? That's the important thing.'

This was rhetorical: no teenager is ever going to admit to being happy, it's not in the job description.

Mal came in, the tall, dark and handsome answer to any almost-maiden's prayer, except for the thunderous frown, and snapped, 'Rose, your phone's been going off every five minutes in your bedroom – can't you hear it? And why must it play such loud, irritating music?'

Rosie gave him her best 'you're speaking a dead language, you fossil' glare. 'Why didn't you tell me before?' she demanded indignantly, and dashed off.

It was probably one of the boyfriends she prefers not to tell us about, though why they have to be a deep, dark secret I don't know. Perhaps they vanish if exposed to the light of parental inspection.

I could feel the twitchings of an idea for a new cartoon coming on – or perhaps one of my Alphawoman comic strips. Something involving vampires and unsuitable boyfriends . . . But before I could pin it down Mal jerked me back into reality by demanding, '*When* did you say she was going back to university, Fran? And why does she have to be so untidy? The place is like a pigsty!'

The newborn inspiration turned its face to the wall and died; I do hate these sudden transitions from my out-of-body experiences. And 'untidy' was two abandoned magazines and a scatter of rose catalogues on the floor and an empty glass on the coffee table's otherwise pristine surface. Pigs should be so lucky.

'She takes after me and Ma: chaos comes naturally to us. And she's going back to university on the fourth, after my birthday,' I sighed. 'I *do* miss her when she's gone.'

'Well, you've got me,' he pointed out jealously.

'Not for girlie chats, though, and you're off on that six-week contract the day after Rosie leaves,' I said.

Mal is something clever with computers, so he often works away troubleshooting. I might have added that even when he *is* home he is either up in his

study messing about with his stamps, or down at the marina with his boat, but I didn't want to seem to be complaining. It's not like his hobbies are gambling, binge drinking and loose women, is it?

'We'll be able to keep in touch by email now too,' I reminded him, for his surprise Christmas present to me had been the creation of the Fran March Rose Art website, which was very thoughtful of him. Rosie has promised to get me confidently surfing and emailing before she goes back to university, having much more patience with beginners than Mal, and I am to have a designated workspace under the stairs, with his old computer.

Truth to tell, I don't mind Mal's absences that much once he has actually gone, since not only do I actually like being alone, but I have lots of work to get on with out in my studio. Right now I need to finish off the illustrations for my third annual Fran March Rose Calendar, because the deadline is the end of January, and I still have December and the cover illustration to go.

And oh, the bliss of slumping into comfortable, guilt-free slovenliness! The effort of constantly maintaining the level of household standards Mal increasingly favours would be beyond me even if I tried, which I don't, apart from token gestures, but I'd had a pre-Christmas blitz and everything still looked pretty clean. But then, *my* idea of a hygienic and tidy home is merely one where the health inspectors don't slap skull-and-crossbones Hazard stickers on the bathroom and kitchen doors on a weekly basis, while *his* is the domestic equivalent of an operating theatre.

'Do you want to go out for a walk before it gets dark?' I asked hopefully. 'We always used to go for a long hike on Boxing Day.'

'No, I think I'll watch that tall ships DVD you got me for Christmas again,' he said, and, while I was glad that my present had found favour, it occurred to me that we were leading increasingly separate lives. I expect it makes a marriage healthy not being on top of each other all the time, but I do miss the long country walks we used to take together before he got boatitis. And while nothing would induce me to get on something that can go up and down, or side to side – or even both at once – without any warning, at least it gives him a bit of fresh air and exercise when he is at home between contracts, playing doll's houses on his *petit bateau*, *Cayman Blue*, down at the marina.

Oh, well, not only have I got Mal and my beloved Rosie home and still speaking to each other, but Ma's coming down to Fairy Glen (her cottage in the village) for a few days, so we can all be together for my birthday on the third: what more could I want?

I curled up next to him on the sofa, and after a couple of minutes he noticed I was there and put his arm around me. He smelled like a million dollars, which is about what I paid for that aftershave: worth every penny.

'Fran, you're singing "I Got You Babe",' he pointed out accusingly, as though I was doing something antisocial – which perhaps, considering my voice, I was. I never know I'm doing it unless I'm out somewhere and a space clears all around me as if by magic.

'Sorry,' I said, 'I'm just feeling happy.'

And let's not forget mega relieved too: I'd managed to get through the tricky question-and-answer session with Rosie that I'd known had to come one day, and I thought it had gone quite well, considering.

Must remember to disillusion Ma too.

## An Unconsidered Trifle

Although relations between them were a little strained by my birthday, Mal and Rosie still hadn't seriously fallen out with each other, which must have been a record – though I think I might if she carries on shooting questions at me about her father at unexpected moments, as if trying to catch me out.

The mud at the bottom of the once limpid pool of my memory has been stirred with a big stick, so that when she suddenly shoots at me, 'How tall was Adam?' up to the surface bobs the reply, 'Oh, well over six foot,' without a second's pause.

'What colour was Adam's hair?'

'Like dark clover honey.'

'What was Adam's last name?'

'No idea.'

'What colour was the camper van?'

'Blue and white.'

'What on earth were you drinking?'

'Rough scrumpy cider.'

However, I have now run out of answers so she has given up, thank goodness, and even Rosie can see that I can hardly put an ad in the press saying, 'Did you have a one-night stand nearly twenty years ago with a slender woman of medium height, with grey eyes and long, wavy, strawberry-blond hair? If so, please answer this ad for news that may interest you.'

Of course, had I known what the outcome would be, I would have noted Adam the gardener's full name and address at the very least. Mind you, had I known the outcome I wouldn't have done it in the first place – but then I wouldn't have had my beloved and infuriating daughter, would I?

She was now packing for her return to university the next day, and I kept missing items of clothing, like my Gap T-shirt and good leather belt. Also several pots of home-made jam and two bottles of elderflower champagne.

Ma, fresh back from her seasonal visit to Aunt Beth up in Scotland, had arrived at her cottage with the dogs and was coming round later for birthday tea, bringing the cake, Tartan Shortbread and a litre of Glenmorangie.

I crooned 'This Could Be Heaven' along with my inner Walkwoman.

'You sound amazingly cheerful for someone on her fortieth birthday,' Mal observed, tidying up the wrapping paper from the present opening and disposing of it, neatly folded, in the wastepaper basket.

At any minute he would be pointedly positioning the vacuum cleaner somewhere I'd fall over it, I could see it coming, but I'm not cleaning anything today . . . or tomorrow, or the day after, come to that. Cleaning's rightful place is as a

displacement activity while you are psyching yourself up for something more interesting.

I smiled happily from under the brim of the unseasonal straw gardening hat, adorned with miniature hoes and rakes and even a tiny scarecrow, sent by my Uncle Joe in Florida. ‘Of course I am! I’ve got everything I could possibly need right here in St Ceridwen’s Well, haven’t I? A handsome husband, a lovely daughter, modest success with my work – especially now I’m selling more cartoons as well as my illustrations – *and* we live in North Wales, the most beautiful place in the world. What else could I want?’ He suggested mildly,

‘To lose a little weight?’

That deflated my happiness bubble a trifle, as you can imagine . . . though thinking of trifle fortunately reminded me that I must pop out and decorate mine with whipped cream, slivered almonds and hundreds and thousands.

Rosie came in, carefully carrying a tray with coffee and some of the yummy Continental biscuits covered in thick dark chocolate that had come in the henshaped ceramic biscuit barrel that was her present to me. This, together with microwave noodles, is about the extent of her catering skills, but still one up on Mal, who doesn’t even seem able to find the kettle unaided.

She cast him an unloving look, evidently having caught his comment. ‘You aren’t hounding poor Mum about her weight on her *birthday*, are you? And there’s nothing wrong with her – she’s perfect, just like Granny. Cosy.’

‘Thank you, darling,’ I said to her doubtfully, ‘but cosy isn’t quite the image I want to project.’ It sounded a bit mumsy, and though Ma isn’t fat, she’s pretty well rounded. Good legs, though, both of us.

‘Well, *I* certainly don’t want an anorexic mother, all bones and embarrassing miniskirts! You’re just right – plump and curvy. No one would think you were forty, honestly,’ she added anxiously.

Clearly forty was something to be dreaded, only it didn’t feel like that to me. Or it hadn’t until then. And of course I had noticed that I was a bit plumper, because I’d had to buy bigger jeans, though T-shirts stretch to infinity and all the tops I make myself for special occasions are quite loose caftan-style ones, so they’re still fine. (The one I had on today was made from the good fragments of two tattered old silk kimonos pieced together using strips of the crochet lace that Ma endlessly produces, dyed deep smoky blue.)

‘When I first met your mother at the standing stones up in the woods above the glen, she was so slender she could have been a fairy,’ Mal said, smiling reminiscently, and Rosie made a rude retching noise.

‘Well, nobody loves a fairy when she’s forty,’ I said briskly, hurt by all this sudden harping on about how I used to look.

‘*I* do,’ Mal said with one of his sudden and rather devastating smiles, and for him this was the equivalent of declaring his affections in skywriting, so I was deeply touched, even when he added, ‘Though you’d probably feel healthier for getting a few pounds off, Fran. Perhaps you need more exercise.’

‘She gets lots of exercise gardening,’ Rosie pointed out, which I do, because it is my passion, though only *selective* gardening; soon after I conceived Rosie, I also

conceived a passion for all things rose. Very strange. But Rosie should just be grateful it wasn't lupins or gladioli. Or dahlias. Dahlia March? I don't think she'd ever have forgiven me for that one.

Most of my Christmas and birthday presents had a horticultural theme – or a hen one, for in the absence of any pets after Rosie's old dog, Tigger, died we have had to love the hens instead.

This year I also got some garden tokens and I desperately want to use them to get a Constance Spry, even though everyone says they are terrible for mildew – but where could I put it? Would it do well in a tub on the patio? And would Mal notice my roses were impinging on his bit of the garden?

There were some non-rose related presents too. My friend Nia, a potter, gave me the delicate and strange porcelain earrings (and Mickey Mouse wristwatch) I am wearing now, and Carrie at the teashop had left a pot of her own honey on the doorstep, tied up in red and white checked gingham with pinked edges and a big raffia bow. Oh, and a mosaic kit from Ma's elderly cousin Georgie, who has it fixed in her head that I am perpetually adolescent. (She could be right.)

Mal gave me a travel pack of expensive, rose-scented toiletries (although I hardly ever go anywhere), and a storage box covered in Cath Kidston floral fabric. I thought I would have that in my studio to store odds and ends in, of which I seem to have an awful lot, some already in boxes with helpful labels such as 'Useless short pieces of string', 'Bent nails' or 'Broken pieces of crockery'. I once kept used stamps too, but Mal has rather cornered that market.

His boat being laid up safely for the winter, once Mal had tidied the room to his satisfaction he took his coffee and headed back to his study and colourful collection of perforated paper, and Rosie and I settled down to play with my presents and eat a whole packet of biscuits between us.

But at the back of my mind the weight issue niggled at me like a sore tooth. I just couldn't leave it alone and resolved to ask Nia's advice next time I saw her because she's always on a diet, though I can never see any difference. Small, dark and solidly stocky is pretty well how she has always looked.

And although I am sorry she and Paul have just got divorced, I'm also selfishly happy to have her living back in the village (if you can call a handful of cottages with a teashop, Holy Well and pub a village).

The trouble with the idea of dieting is that food is such a pleasure to me, and so is cooking: my one successful domestic skill! It will be torment to create lovely meals for Mal, and Rosie when she's home, if I can't eat them too.

Still, you can't start a diet on your birthday, can you? And Mal loved me anyway, he'd actually come out and said so.

I found I was singing the words to '(If Paradise Is) Half as Nice', cheerful once again, because if getting fat was the only serpent in my Eden I was sure I had the power to resist.

Everything in the garden was coming up roses.

Inspiration later impelled me out through the darkening January afternoon, across Mal's tailored lawn (which I'm not having anything to do with, since a carpet that grows is just outdoor housework), and under the pergola to my studio among the chaos of frosted rose stems.

Well, I say 'studio', but it's more a glorified garden shed covered in a very rampant Mme Gregoire Staechelin (the hussy), where I do my artwork for greetings cards, calendars and anything else I can sell. I've rather cornered the rose market, in my own style, which is far removed from botanical illustration, but I find I'm doing more and more cartoons lately; they're taking over my head and my life, tapping into a dark vein of cynicism I hadn't realised I'd got until lately.

Recently I had an idea for a comic strip with a female superhero . . . Alphawoman! Most of the time she's the perfect wife, the sort of woman Mal has suddenly started holding up to me as ideal: she works full time for a huge salary yet is always there for her husband, cooks, cleans, effortlessly entertains, keeps perfect house and also fundraises for charity, while staying fit, slim, young, chic and beautiful. Just about my opposite in every way, in fact, so comparing me with these Women Who Have It All is about as fair as comparing a Blush Rambler with a Musk Buff Beauty: you get what it says on the label, and it isn't going to be a rose by any other name just to please you.

And really, this is *so* perverse of Mal, because that's the way his first wife, Alison, was heading when they got divorced and, reading between the lines, he couldn't handle it. The last straw seems to have been when she started earning more than he did and suggested she pop out a quick baby and he could be a house husband and look after it while she got on with her Brilliant Career in international banking.

But when *I* got a job soon after we were married, doing casual waitressing at Carrie's teashop in the village to pay for Rosie's riding lessons and stuff like that, he didn't like it in the least, though perhaps that was mostly because he considered it menial. And while he used to say I was scatty and dreamy as though they were lovable traits, *now* he says it accusingly.

Still, my Ms Alison Alphawoman is not quite invulnerable, because chocolate is her kryptonite, and when she comes into contact with it she turns into . . . Blobwoman! A scatty, plump and dreamy sloven just like me, who's only good at cooking, painting and drawing cartoons (though actually I'm pretty brilliant at all those), but who manages to bail Alphawoman out of tricky situations anyway.

And come to think of it, I don't think I did a bad job as a mother either, once I got over the surprise. Parenting just seemed to be Rosie and me having fun together, all the way from mud pies to marrying Mal, when things hit a slight blip. But in the end it was Mal who had to adjust to the idea that my life was still going to revolve around Rosie much more than him.

I wanted to linger and play with my intriguingly Jekyll-and-Hyde Alphawoman, despite my shack being cold as the Arctic – working in a wooden shed never stopped Dylan Thomas, after all – and I could always put my little heater on if I got desperately chilly. But today, birthday revels called, and so too did my miniature seventy-seven-year-old dynamo of a mother.

'Fran! Fraaa-nie!' she shrilled.

I do wish she wouldn't.

Ma had brought my birthday cake, which she had covered entirely – yes, you've guessed! – in huge Gallica roses cunningly modelled in icing sugar. It was beautiful.

With her came an inevitable touch of chaos, for when Ma walks into a room, pictures tilt, cushions fall over and the smooth deep pile of the carpet is rubbed up the wrong way and studded with the sharp indentations of stiletto heels.

Ma had dumped a rather Little Red Riding Hood wicker basket decorated with straw flowers on the coffee table and now began to unpack whisky, shortbread, a small haggis, a bundle of the grubby crochet lace she makes when she's trying not to smoke and a DVD with a mistily atmospheric photograph of an overgrown bit of garden statuary on the cover.

'The haggis and the shortbread are from Beth and Lachlan,' she said. 'I won the DVD, thought you might like it.' Ma is forever entering competitions or firing off postcards to those 'the first five names out of the hat will receive . . . ' things.

'What is it?' Rosie said, pouncing. '*Restoration Gardener*? That doesn't sound exciting!'

Ma shrugged. 'That's what I thought. I can't abide gardening programmes; gardens are for walking round, or sitting in with a drink, the rest's just muck and hard work.'

Reaching into a seriously pregnant handbag she began to pull out her cigarettes, then remembered she couldn't smoke in our house in the interests of family harmony, and produced some half-finished crochet instead.

'Well, are we having that cake? And what are we drinking the whisky out of, Mal?'

'I don't want whisky,' Rosie said. 'I'm going to make myself a cocktail with the kit Mum gave me for Christmas. Do you want one, Granny?'

'No, thanks, my love, I prefer my poison unadulterated.'

'You don't know what you're missing,' Rosie said, vanishing into the kitchen to brew her potion, which was not much different in appearance to the ones she used to concoct a few years ago when she was convinced she was a witch and could do spells. That was right after the phase when she thought she was a horse and wore holes in the carpet, pawing the ground.

Soon we were all mellow and full of alcohol and food . . . except Mal, who was looking a trifle constrained and narrow-lipped, and clearly fighting the urge to fetch a dustpan and brush to the crumbs on the carpet.

Unfortunately there is always a little tension between him and Ma, and when Rosie is there too I'm sure he feels they are ganging up on him – which they often are. Ma finds his ever-increasing obsession with tidiness and hygiene, and his refusal to allow her dogs in the house, definitely alien if not downright perverted – as do I, really, if I'm honest.

It's his one major flaw, and he hid it pretty well until we were married (being jaw-droppingly handsome is pretty good camouflage for anything); when he suddenly

insisted that Rosie leave all her beloved pets behind with Ma, we were very nearly *unmarried* again pretty smartly until we reached a compromise whereby Rosie was allowed to bring Tigger. It was touch and go, especially once Mal realised that no matter how madly I loved him I would always love my daughter more.

It is tricky for a stepfather, but deep down Mal is very fond of Rosie, and though he *says* he never wanted children I know that is just because Alison insisted he got tested and he discovered he couldn't father any himself. And while I would have loved another baby, at least I don't have to worry about contraception!

We've all had to make tricky relationship adjustments, but generally we manage to get along in a civilised way, despite Mal's slow ossification into a finicky, short-fused old fossil, trying to attach as many expensive consumer items to his shell as possible using the superglue of credit.

Fortunately, I'm not a romantic; I know a relationship has to be worked on and that this is as close to Paradise as any woman can expect. (Now I come to think about it, it even has twin snakes-in-the grass in the form of our ghastly next-door neighbours, though frankly I could do without them! They certainly rank at the top of the list of people I would be least likely to take an apple from.)

As if on cue, Ma said, 'Those Weevils wished me a Happy New Year as I came in, Fran – they must have shot out the minute my engine stopped. What are they up to, twenty-four-hour surveillance?'

'It feels like it. I can't make a move outside without feeling watched,' I said ruefully.

'*Wevills* – and Owen is my friend!' Mal snapped. 'I'm more than happy to have good neighbours to keep an eye on things when I'm away.'

'They seem to be keeping an eye on things even when you're *not* away,' Ma pointed out. 'And maybe Fran doesn't want to live like a *Big Brother* contestant.'

'No I don't, and they may be nice to me when you're there, Mal, but it's totally different when you're not. They're entirely two-faced.'

'You're imagining things, Fran, they're lovely people and very popular in the village.'

'A man can smile and smile yet still be a villain,' Ma pointed out. 'Weevil by name and weevil by nature – you can't fool me. Did you like your *skean-dhu*?'

'What?' he said, thrown by this example of Ma's laterally leaping conversational gambits.

'The knife, for putting down your sock. Thought it would be handy for Swindon. You never know what they get up to down south.'

Even I wasn't sure whether she was joking, but when Mal said he intended using it as a paperknife she looked entirely disgusted.

Later, Mal took himself off to the yacht club for a drink with Owen, the male Wevill, who inspired his boating passion and now frequently crews for him on *Cayman Blue*. He is small, bald-headed, wrinkled and unattractive, while his wife has a face like blobbed beige wax, a loose figure, and the hots for Mal.

Is it any wonder I don't like them?

Rosie volunteered to walk back up the lane to Fairy Glen with Ma so she could play with the dogs, and I gave in to temptation and went to check my website to see if anyone else had visited.

I am getting terribly proficient now I know how to get rid of all the things I inadvertently press, so I was soon able to see that I'd had thirty-six visitors to my site . . . though come to think of it, at least half of those were probably me.

Then I checked my email and found four messages, only three of which wanted me to grow my penis longer, buy Viagra or look at Hot Moms.

The fourth was from someone called bigblondsurdude@ home and the subject line said, cheerily, 'Hi, Fran, how U doing?'

I dithered over that one, since I didn't think I knew any surfers or dudes, but then opened it, my finger ready on the delete button just in case it was a nasty.

And it *was* a nasty, as it happens: a nasty surprise.

Hi Fran,

Remember me?! Found your website – great photo! You don't look a day older than when I last saw you. I'm glad you're doing well up in North Wales. I'm teaching art and surfing down here in Cornwall, the best of both worlds, but I often come up to visit friends at a surfing school not too far from you, so I might drop in one of these days!

All the best,  
Tom

Tom?

When old loves die they should stay decently interred, not try to come surfing back into your life.

I deleted him, but printed the message out first, and shoved it into the desk drawer, just in case. But if I didn't answer, surely he would assume he'd got the wrong Fran March?

And if I hadn't been so insistent on keeping my own name when I got married, it would have been the Fran Morgan Rose Art site and Tom would never have been able to launch this stealth attack on my memories.

Thank goodness Rosie hadn't been around to see it – she'd probably have been emailing him right back by now, asking probing questions about blood groups and stuff.

## Up the Fairy Glen

Rosie went back to university, together with half the contents of my larder and selected items of my wardrobe, all packed into her red Volkswagen. She calls it Spawn of Beetle since it's much newer than mine, due to both Granny and Mal's mother being putty in her manipulative little hands.

I cried for ages after she'd gone, which, as you can imagine, pissed Mal off no end, but although she drives me crackers when she's home I miss her dreadfully.

‘I cry when *you* go away too, Mal,’ I told him, although actually that was a lie because I don’t any more, I just feel sad for ten minutes or so. I expect I’ve got used to his frequent absences, but Rosie is (or once was) a part of me, and although my brain wants her to be off having a life and getting a career, my heart wants her right here with her mum.

So next day I tearlessly waved Mal off too, as he manoeuvred his big Jaguar with difficulty around my car, which I seemed to have parked at an angle, half in, half out of an azalea bush.

He was too preoccupied to notice Mona Wevill casually standing on her doorstep wearing only thin silk pyjamas in the same rather distressing pinky-beige as her face, so that she looked baggily nude. Her boobs were not just heading south, but had actually passed the Equator.

She is certainly not any competition, even though I’m nowhere near as pretty as when I was younger. You know you’re past it when you stop feeling indignant at workmen shouting after you and instead want to go and personally thank them for their interest.

Anyway, not only did I *not* cry as Mal’s car vanished, but I actually felt relieved he wasn’t going to be there to make me feel guilty about my weight, especially since I have grasped that he finds my measly few extra pounds such a big turn-off! At least now I have six weeks before he comes back to do something about it.

I went up the frosty garden to see to the hens in their neat little coop. They looked at me as if I was mad when I opened the door of their nesting box and asked them if they wanted to come out, moaning gently as they mutinously huddled down into their warm straw nests.

‘Please yourselves, girls, but you’ll be sorry when Mal’s back and you *have* to stay in your run all day,’ I told them, but they weren’t interested.

Later that morning I set off for Fairy Glen to help Ma pack up too, since everyone seemed determined to leave me at once; though at least Nia should actually be coming back from spending Christmas and New Year at her parents’ house any time now.

Ma, a small bohemian rhapsody layered in vaguely ethnic garments and with her head tied up in a fringed and flowered turban, was sitting in an easy chair in a haze of cigarette smoke doing the quick crossword in yesterday’s *Times*. The lacquered pen she held in her nicotine-gilded fingers was the exact shade of her lipstick and nail varnish, but I knew that was just a happy accident and not by intent.

Ma is a happy accident.

The two long-haired dachshunds threw themselves at me, yapping shrilly, and she waved away a cloud of smoke with a heavily beringed hand. ‘That Mal gone, then?’

‘Yes, first thing. And Rosie rang last night to say she’d had a good journey down,’ I said, sitting on the floor so I could let Holly and Ivy climb all over me. For the next six weeks I could safely reek of old dog, or hens, or rose manure, or anything else I wanted to.

‘Ma, have you ever been on a diet?’

‘Diet? No – but me and a couple of friends thought about getting fit once, years ago when we all used to play tennis. We went to this meeting of the Women’s League of Health and Beauty in the village hall, and there were about twenty of them there in black leotards and tights, all being trees reaching up to the sunshine. Then they had to be beautiful gazelles, bounding across the plains. You’d have thought a lion was after them.’

‘So did you join in?’ I asked, fascinated.

‘No, we decided not to bother. I didn’t think the floor was up to it, for one thing.’

Recrossing her feet, which were incongruously shod in her favourite mock-lizardskin stilettos, she said rather abruptly, ‘Fran, I’ve been sitting here thinking about selling Fairy Glen.’

I sat back on my heels and stared at her. ‘Sell the glen? Do you mean the cottage, or just the glen itself?’

‘The whole thing, of course – house and grounds. I couldn’t sell one without the other, could I? They go together. The thing is, I’m seventy-seven and all this driving’s getting a bit much for me. And now Rosie’s off at college and you’re settled and happy enough with Mal – though he wouldn’t be my cup of tea! – I think the time has come to sell up.’

This was a stunner! My parents bought the place long before I was born, so all my happy childhood memories were of roaming the narrow wooded glen, from the overgrown remnants of a tea garden to the ancient standing stones set in a mysterious, magical oak glade high above the little waterfall. Victorian daytrippers had gone in droves to visit fairy glens, and this one, its natural beauty enhanced by grottos, statues and convenient flights of steps, had enjoyed a brief vogue. Long neglected, it had formed the perfect secret garden for me, Nia and Rhodri (the Famous Three) to have adventures in.

The old stone cottage had been hideously remodelled into some kind of miniature Gothic castle, the only concessions to modernity being an electric cooker and a small bathroom. Ma’s chosen style of interior décor was Moroccan magpie nest crossed with dog kennel.

‘But, Ma,’ I croaked, finally regaining the power of speech, ‘won’t you miss it?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ve had so many happy times here, and it’s where I feel closest to your father – he loved it so much. But memories are portable things; I won’t lose them if I sell the Glen.’

‘You could sell Marchwood instead and move here permanently,’ I suggested – Marchwood being her big detached thirties house in Cheshire, near Wilmslow.

‘Well, my love, I thought of that, but it’s always been my main home and I’m settled there. There’s my watercolour class, the bridge club and the girls: never a dull moment.’

The girls are the friends she hangs out with, a sort of Hell's Grannies chapter. Never agree to play any kind of card game with them; they'd have your last penny and the clothes off your back before you could say Old Maid.

'And then Boot does the garden and any handyman stuff, and Glenda does the cleaning, so it all runs along smoothly,' she added. 'But Fairy Glen is falling apart. It needs love and money spent on it, and I feel it's time someone else had a chance to live here and love it like I did.'

I could see the sense of what she was saying even if I hated the thought of it; and it wasn't like I would never see Ma again. I knew she wouldn't come and stay with me if Mal was home, but she would be less than two hours' drive away, so I could even pop over for the day.

No, I think what dismayed me most was the sudden realisation that she was getting old. This was the first sign she'd ever given that she wasn't going to go on for ever.

'I'm tough as old boots,' she said as if reading my mind. 'I'm not about to turn my toes up, I'm just falling back and regrouping: "downsizing" – isn't that what they call it these days? And if I do sell Fairy Glen, then I could go off on that round-the-world cruise with some of the girls, and have fun.'

God help any cruise ship with Ma and the girls on board! 'Speaking of regrouping, Ma . . .' I said, and repeated much of what I had told Rosie about her transient father, while she looked at me pretty hard and blew a whole series of smoke rings.

I got the message: she didn't really believe me either.

Much more of this and I will start to think I hallucinated Adam the gardener or have got false memory syndrome or something. But at least we all seem agreed that Tom exists . . . though I have forgotten where I put that email printout from him, so I might have imagined that. I could have *sworn* I put it in the desk drawer, but maybe it is somewhere out in the studio. Or in the pocket of the jeans currently going round and round in the washing machine. Who knows?

But since it *is* mislaid and I deleted the message, I can't possibly answer it, can I?

Back home I spent a couple of hours in my studio trying to finish my calendar designs, but not only was I totally distracted by the thought of Fairy Glen being sold, my fingers were so cold that if I'd tapped them with a pencil they would have fallen off and shattered.

I could do with a more efficient heater, or better insulation, or both.

There was a phone message from Nia when I went back to the house to thaw, so I rang her once I could grasp the receiver.

'Has he gone?' she asked conspiratorially, as though poor Mal were an ogre or Bluebeard.

'Yes, early this morning. He should be phoning me any minute to say he's arrived.'

'Oh, good – see you in the Druid's Rest around seven, then?' she suggested. 'I've got some news.'

‘So have I, and I want your advice on diets – Mal thinks I’m too fat.’

‘You’re not fat!’

‘Well, I’m certainly not slim any more – even Rosie described me as cuddly!’

‘There’s nothing wrong with cuddly,’ Nia said decisively.

‘You haven’t seen me since I pigged out over Christmas,’ I said ruefully. ‘My spare tyre would fit a tractor.’

‘It’s not much more than a week since I last saw you, Fran. You can’t have put that much weight on!’

‘You wait and see,’ I told her, because it’s truly amazing the way all the calories have bypassed my digestive system and gone straight to my stomach and hips, laying up a fat store for a famine that was never going to happen . . . unless *diets* count as famine. But I wouldn’t need a diet if I hadn’t got fat, so if my body decides this is starvation, isn’t it going to be a sort of vicious circle? Or am I hopelessly confused?

Diets *must* work, or there wouldn’t be any point to people going on them, would there?

I rather gingerly checked for emails before I went out, but there were only impersonal rude ones, easily deleted from both computer and memory.