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Echoes Of The Dance

Marcia Willett

ECHOES OF THE DANCE

MARCIA WILLETT

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Contents

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To Annie Keay

Marcia Willett was born in Somerset but now lives with her husband in deepest Devon. A former ballet dancer and teacher, she is the author of fifteen previous novels, including *The Children's Hour, The Birdcage* and *The Golden Cup*, all available in Corgi paperback.

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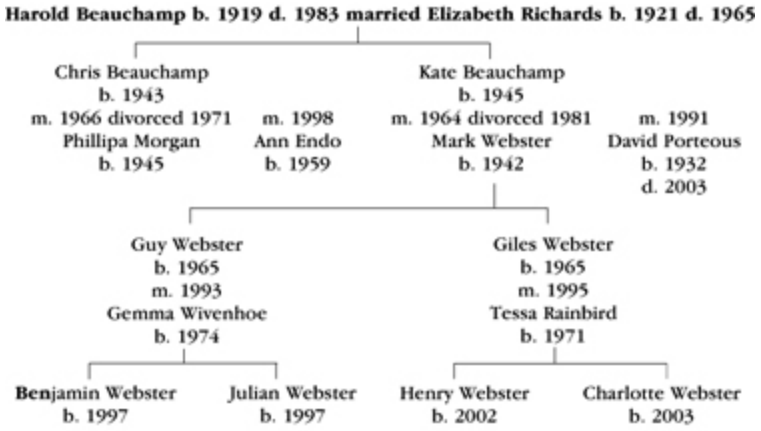

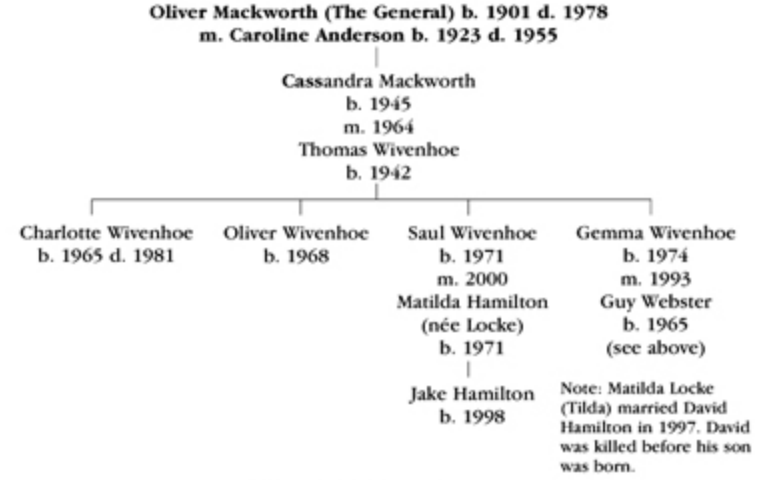

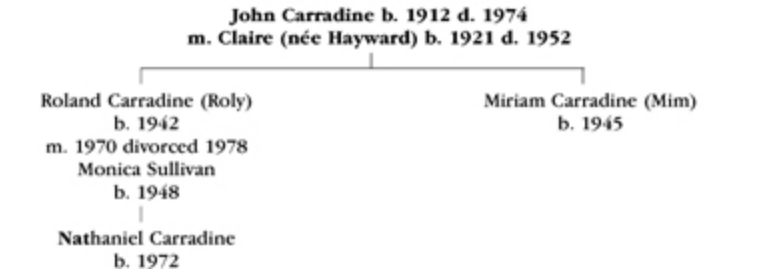

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Uncle Bernard was becoming bored with sitting in his drawer. Although he liked to be raised above the other dogs – he considered it to be quite right and proper that a person of his age and infirmity should be granted certain privileges – he was now looking forward to his late morning ritual of a little gentle exercise. He fidgeted irritably. Bevis, stretched out on his side on the flagstones in a puddle of early May sunshine, rolled a sympathetic eye upwards but didn't move until he heard the sound of a car's engine. Both dogs grew alert, ears cocked, listening to familiar sounds: the crunch of tyres, the slam of a door, Roly Carradine's footsteps crossing the yard.

As the door opened, the telephone on the deep-set slate windowsill began to ring. Roly dropped a bulging plastic bag onto a chair, gave Bevis a quick pat and hastened to answer it.

'Mim! How did it go?' His deep flexible voice was warm with interest. 'I didn't dare phone after your description of the dress rehearsal . . . Really? What a relief . . .' Roly sank into a wicker chair, cradling the telephone between his ear and shoulder as he listened to his sister's excited voice, pulling Bevis's ears as the big retriever pushed his head against his outstretched legs. Her voice changed down a gear and Roly's cheerful expression altered to one of frowning concentration. 'Who? Who did you say? Daisy Quin? Yes. Yes, the name is familiar . . . A serious injury? . . . Yes, I don't see why not. How long would she stay? . . . No,

that’s fine. And you’ll be down by then? . . . OK . . . Look, shall we talk again later? I’ve just got in, Uncle Bernard is whining to go out, and I’ve just fetched a foster and she’s still in the back of the car . . . About five o’clock then? Bye.’

He remained quite still for a moment, his face thoughtful, until Uncle Bernard – indignant at such a disrespectful lack of concern – yelped sharply to remind him of his duties.

‘Sorry, old fellow.’ Roly pushed Bevis aside and went to the battered pine chest, the top drawer of which was the elderly miniature rough-coated dachshund’s sanctuary. ‘Out you come.’

He lifted him down and watched him patter importantly – if rather stiffly – out into the yard, followed by Bevis who went to look at the newcomer sitting rather anxiously in the back of Roly’s estate car. For the last few years, since he’d announced his early retirement and closed his photographic studio in London, Roly had been fostering dogs for the local retriever rescue society. Bevis and Uncle Bernard were quite accustomed to dealing with a procession of misfits from broken relationships, bewildered puppies abandoned as soon as their charm wore thin a few weeks after Christmas, and faithful companions whose owners had died or been moved into residential accommodation. Here they stayed until homes could be found for them.

The old stone house standing just above the ford, amidst quiet lanes with tracks winding away onto the moor and up to Rough Tor, was a perfect staging post for these confused animals. Bevis, rescued from an acrimonious divorce, was rather like a kindly prefect dealing with nervous new pupils away from home for the first time, whilst Uncle Bernard – loved and cherished from the hour of his birth – adopted the attitude of a confident housemaster given to fits of irascibility at any signs of unsocial behaviour.

Roly raised the tailgate of the car and, ducking his head and hunching his broad shoulders, sat inside close to the small bitch whose tail thumped nervously as she gazed out at this unfamiliar scene. He stroked her trembling body reassuringly and she snuggled in under his arm.

'This is Bevis,' he told her. 'He's a nice person, really. I wish I could say the same for Uncle Bernard, but I wouldn't want to lie to you so early in our relationship.' Bevis advanced his nose, tail wagging, and Roly sighed with relief. 'Good fellow,' he said. 'Make her feel welcome. Her mistress died last week and she's in shock. Her name's Floss.'

He stood up, leaving the tailgate open so that Floss might choose her own time to jump out, and paused for a moment in the sunshine. Across the yard, at right angles to the house, a small stable was set back a little, a short flight of steps climbing to the upper storey and its own front door. It provided excellent – if minimal – guest accommodation and had been a useful source of income as a holiday let in the past. Now, it seemed, holiday-makers required dishwashers, jacuzzis, and wall-to-wall luxury – even on the edge of Bodmin Moor – and these days the flat was used by their own friends, who came with Mim from London at regular intervals to escape from the city. At least it would be available for Daisy Quin.

'Do you remember me telling you about her?' his sister had asked. 'She was one of my favourite pupils. Well, everyone loved Daisy: a real sweetie and such a gifted dancer. She'd just begun to get principal roles with the company she joined last year. Such a blow . . .'

He hadn't asked the nature of Daisy's injury: Mim's words – bringing forcibly to his mind her own terrible accident – were enough to tie his tongue and tense his muscles.

‘It’s a partly torn muscle in her back and the tissue is badly inflamed,’ Mim had added quickly, as if guessing his reaction. ‘She did it during rehearsal about six weeks ago and it’s pretty serious because it’s the third time she’s damaged it and each time it takes longer to heal. Anyway, the company has gone on tour without her. She’s managing to get about again and I thought a holiday in Cornwall might do her good. Would you mind?’

Of course he didn’t mind. It would be good to have some company: human company. He opened the plastic bag that contained Floss’s worldly goods and experienced the now-familiar pang of compassion: a good-quality leather lead, a green Frisbee, two hard rubber balls and a well-chewed teddy with both ears missing. These were her toys. A clean tartan rug, folded quite small at the bottom of the bag, and a metal feeding bowl completed the inventory. Taking one of the balls he went out to the car. Bevis was watching with benign alertness as Floss hovered uncertainly, making up her mind to jump out.

‘Good girl!’ said Roly encouragingly. ‘Come on, then. Look! What’s this?’

He bounced the ball several times and Bevis jumped at it, barking excitedly; even Uncle Bernard bustled back to check what was happening lest things were getting out of hand. Floss leaped from the car, chasing the ball with Bevis, and Roly reached for his cap, closed the back door, and led them all out into the lane that descended to the ford.

The clear water trickling down from the high moors barely covered the stony bed of the ford. Nevertheless, Uncle Bernard chose to cross by the old granite bridge as if to disassociate himself from the antics of the two bigger dogs, who rushed gleefully into the stream. Floss drank deeply from the icy water until Bevis barged her playfully and they began a mock fight, splashing and leaping, until

Roly threw the ball far beyond the ford and they both raced after it. As he turned up onto the track he could hear the soft clicking call of a stonechat and presently saw the handsome fellow perched high on a clump of bright-flowering gorse. His warning ‘tac-tac’ cry indicated that he was guarding his mate’s mossy nest, hidden out of sight, low down in the bushes.

It was hot: the clear air laden with the rich and exciting scent of the golden flowers. Roly breathed in deeply, joy unexpectedly expanding inside him as he felt the sun’s warmth like a blessing on his shoulders. It was at times like these that he remembered the real reason for returning to Cornwall: a determination to cast off guilt and anxiety, or at least to put such destructive powers into proportion, whilst accepting these moments of peace. The dogs were with him again, bringing the ball, jostling to be the first to chase it. It was wet and slimy in his hand as he took it from Bevis’s mouth to fling it higher up the path but, even as he grimaced and wiped his hand on his old cords, he laughed to see how they bounded away with their tails waving and paws scrabbling to grip the rocks. Uncle Bernard had picked up the scent of a rabbit and was pursuing his own course, nose to ground, and Roly paused to look around him: the piled granite outcrops of Brown Willy and Rough Tor filled the horizon ahead whilst, below him, hardy villages and farms were rooted into the land; small, scattered fortresses of stone and slate.

A jet plane screamed above his head, trailing vapour, so that the high blue board of the sky looked as if it had been scrawled upon by chalk, shaded thick in places. He watched it dwindle into the west, where smooth white clouds were heaped like pillows and he could see the distant sparkle of the sea. Calling to Uncle Bernard, he began to climb.

It was after a rather late lunch that Roly suddenly remembered that he'd promised to make a telephone call to his ex-wife. He sat back in his chair with a reluctant sigh, folding the newspaper he'd been reading, and then stood up and began to clear the table. He never bothered to use the dishwasher when he was alone and it took very few minutes to stack his lunch things on the draining-board. He knew very well that his decision to wash up immediately was merely a delaying tactic but he turned the tap on and reached for the detergent just the same. He had no wish to speak to Monica; no desire to discuss and review the lack of ambition she attributed to their son, Nat.

'It's not that he lacks ambition,' Roly had pointed out on numerous occasions, 'it's simply that he lacks *your* particular kind of ambition. He rejects your values.'

'Just because you've decided to bury yourself in the wilds of Cornwall . . .'

'No, no! I haven't buried myself at all. I lived in London for years, spending part of the time down here. Now I've reversed that. And I'm very happy, Monica. Would you say that you are happy? And, if you're not, why do you feel able to judge what's best for Nat? He seems to be perfectly content. I've seen some of the gardens he's working on and the pleasure he brings to people. Admit it: if he worked for *Ground Force*, and you could brag to your friends that he was gardening on television, you'd be proud of him.'

These conversations usually ended in acrimonious deadlock and Roly was bored with the endless variations on the same theme. He knew, however, that Monica needed to be in touch with him, required excuses to telephone and to demand that they should meet. His own guilt, his sense of failure, made it impossible to deny her.

'She left you,' Mim would remind him. 'At the first sign of trouble she was off.'

‘Oh, shut up,’ he’d answer irritably. ‘It’s just not that simple. . .’ And Mim would shrug, unmoved as always by these flashes of temper; always reasonable.

Perhaps it was because they’d relied on each other so much as children that Mim understood him so completely. Just as he’d supported her through the turbulent teenage years when she’d insisted with single-minded implacability that she wanted nothing but to be a dancer, so she had stood by him when things had gone so terribly wrong: when his heavy drinking spiralled downwards into alcoholism and he’d lost his confidence, lost his clients and lost his wife and child . . . Not that Monica was much loss as far as Mim was concerned – they’d never liked each other – but losing the small Nat had been a terrible blow to both of them.

Roly dried the last of the plates, hung the cloth on the Esse rail to dry and wandered over to the French doors that opened into the wilderness spaces of the garden behind the house. Here, as a boy, he had pottered with his mother during the last months of her long illness: here, when he was small, they’d sat beneath the arching boughs of the flowering cherry tree, watching the fish in the big ponds, and here he had first seen the heron in the garden. Until that spring, more than fifty years ago, the overhanging branches had protected the ponds and the heron was only to be seen along the river, but then winter storms had brought down two trees and opened up the wilderness so that the heron could land safely.

He was here now, dammit! Roly made as if to bang on the window but, as usual, some instinct stayed his hand. Instead he stood as immobile as the tall, elegant figure that had alighted on the branching willow some distance beyond the pond: so beautiful, so predatory. Roly moved slightly so as to get a better look and the heron rose at once, soaring with unhurried beats of his great wings, long legs trailing.

He would drift downstream now, to the small colony where he and his mate nested year after year.

Turning back into the room, Roly settled himself in the wicker chair and reached reluctantly for the telephone.

CHAPTER TWO

‘I’m thinking of coming down,’ said Monica – and Roly’s heart sank. He readjusted his grip on the telephone, trying to keep calm.

‘It’s difficult just at the moment,’ he said. ‘Mim will be home at the weekend and she’s invited one of her ex-pupils to stay.’

‘Don’t worry,’ – Monica’s pinched voice implied that this was exactly the reaction she’d expected from him: an excuse –‘I’m not asking you to put me up.’

Roly resisted the temptation to justify his remark and remained unhelpfully silent.

‘I shall stay with Nat,’ she said.

‘Good,’ he answered cheerfully. ‘That’ll be nice for both of you. In that case you’ll see for yourself how he is and you won’t need the usual sitrep now. How’s Jonathan?’

‘Busy.’ Her tone was sharp but with a subtle hint of wistfulness. ‘I hardly see him. He’s started work on this accountancy textbook. And the wretched clients are always wanting something.’

‘And to think that you wanted that for Nat.’ He couldn’t resist the little snipe. ‘He’s very contented with life. Still, you’ll see that for yourself.’

‘I only want his happiness, Roly.’ Suddenly she was quiet, dignified. ‘It’s all I’ve ever wanted.’

He deliberately hardened his heart against the instinctive compassion that she would immediately exploit

as weakness.

‘I wonder what it is that makes us all feel that happiness is some kind of divine right,’ he answered lightly. ‘After all, we only have to look around us to see that it’s such a difficult state to achieve. Contentment, possibly, but happiness . . .? Do you remember those lines by Alexander Pope? “Hope springs eternal in the human breast: Man never Is – but always To be blessed.”’ He chuckled. ‘A bit of a cynic, would you say?’

‘I’ve never understood poetry,’ she answered rather coldly. ‘I don’t think it’s cynical to hope that one’s child will be happy.’

Roly sighed silently and rolled his eyes.

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘But it depends on how you define it, doesn’t it? Clearly Nat’s idea of happiness wasn’t bound up in being a junior partner in Jonathan’s accountancy firm. Anyway, let’s not go along that path. When shall you be down?’

‘I shall have to check with Nat. Some time next week, if he can put me up. I’ll come over and see you all.’

The wistful note was back in her voice: that familiar intimation that nobody behaved quite fairly towards her and that, in some indefinable way, life owed her.

‘That’ll be good,’ he said. ‘We’ll wait to hear from you. Must go: the dogs are asking to go out. See you soon.’

He put the telephone back on the windowsill and looked guiltily at the dogs: they lay stretched out, peacefully asleep after their long walk. With Monica – as with the heron – his feelings always tugged in direct opposition: guilt combined with the need to appease her fought against an instinctive requirement to resist her implacable will.

‘Deep inside Monica there’s an emptiness,’ Mim had said once. ‘It’s terrible. We feel a compulsion to fill it with presents, kindness, ourselves even. And Monica absorbs all

of it and wants more because, however much you give, it will never be enough. She's insatiable. Be very careful, Roly.'

He'd tried to laugh it off – it sounded rather dramatic – but part of him knew it to be a truth. Mim had shrugged – she never nagged or hammered home a point – and had gone away as light and graceful as she always was, even after the accident. She had such elegance and style, nothing grasping or possessive about her, driven only by a striving for perfection in her work. She was like their mother: imaginative, impulsive and gifted with the kind of spiritual quality that had made Mim such an outstanding ballet dancer and had drawn people to their mother, Claire.

It was Claire who had seen the potential in the big barn by the ford. John Carradine had saved it, with the stable and the few acres surrounding it, from the sale of his father's farm. His plan had been to knock it down and build a smart little house for his pretty new wife but Claire had been shocked.

'Knock it down, Johnnie?' she'd cried in horror. 'But it's so beautiful. Can't we simply live in it?'

She'd dragged him through the huge doorway, her imagination already seething with ideas, and rather reluctantly he'd gone along with her suggestions: putting in the kitchen at one end, with steps down into a big central dining area that led down in turn to the great slate fireplace at the further end. She'd refused to employ an architect, preferring to spend hours discussing her ideas with the local builder. It had been a long battle with the puzzled workmen but she'd persevered – charming them, inspiring them – and the result was everything she'd dreamed of: a big living space, full of light, but warm and friendly. Her London friends came in a never-ending stream, to sit round the massive rectangular table or on deeply cushioned sofas before the big log fire, and they

repaid her hospitality by working in the wild area behind the house: damming the stream to make the big ponds, planting bulbs and shrubs.

Roly had heard the story many times; he could remember ‘the chums’ – as his parents called them – arriving, sometimes by car, sometimes having to be collected from the train at Bodmin. If they wondered why Claire had given up a promising stage career to settle on the edge of a wild Cornish moor with a young veterinary surgeon they’d ceased to mention it by the time Roly was old enough to understand.

He settled himself more comfortably in the wicker chair, remembering the way she was then.

If he half-closes his eyes he can see her dancing over the flagged floor with baby Miriam in her arms; he can hear her voice – ‘Begin the Beguine’; ‘These Foolish Things’. Mim leans out from her mother’s arms, willing her to go faster, to twirl around, and Roly laughs as he watches them, his crayoning forgotten. He twists round in the Windsor chair to see them as they go waltzing past. Father’s fat Clumber spaniel, Claude, barks encouragingly as Mim screams with delight at the movement. The wireless is tuned to the Light Programme and the dance music goes on and on, seamlessly swinging from one tune to the next. Mother sinks down at last, out of breath, her face flushed with exertion, but Mim’s mouth turns down at the corners.

‘Dance!’ she cries imperiously. ‘More dance!’

‘Tyrant,’ says Mother, laughing at Mim. ‘I can’t manage another step. You must dance on your own if you want to dance,’ and she sets Mim down upon the floor, where she stands for a moment, getting her balance, her eyes wide as she listens to the music. Then she is off, staggering a little but turning and hopping, arms held high, her face rapt with the joy of it.

‘Don’t you want to dance?’ Mother leans across the table to him, her fair hair falling all about her face, and he shakes his head.

He doesn’t want to dance but he wishes that he could make a picture of her just as she is looking at him now, with her hair anyhow and her eyes glowing. He wants to capture that look and keep it for ever. Instinctively he reaches for his crayon but she smiles and turns away, laughing at Mim’s antics, so that he has to try to remember exactly how it was with her face and hair, and the shining look that seems to come from inside her.

Roly jumped awake as Bevis nudged gently at his knee.

‘Good grief!’ he muttered. ‘Sorry, old boy. Was I nodding?’

Floss was watching him from her rug and he felt a pang of sympathy for her. What must it feel like to be suddenly taken from your home and put amongst strangers? It was a fine balance, making fostered dogs feel welcome but not allowing them to bond with him or with his own dogs: they needed to be ready to move on to new homes. He bent to fondle her ears and she sat up, tail wagging hopefully. He glanced at his watch: another hour at least until Mim was due to telephone.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We’ll take a walk up to the farm and see if they have any cream.’

He picked up Floss’s lead, lifted Uncle Bernard from his drawer, and they all went out together into the warm spring sunshine.

Later, after Mim’s telephone call, he had a more complete picture of Daisy Quin. It had been clear from the beginning, Mim told him, that Daisy’s career was more likely to be bound up in dancing than in acting or singing, yet she’d been the best all-rounder the school had ever had. It was

Mim herself, once so single-minded, who had encouraged Daisy to extend her talents: to develop a wide area of expertise to fall back on if something should go wrong. Nobody knew better than Mim how very vital it was to be flexible in the precarious world of dance.

After the accident, a friend who ran a successful stage school persuaded Mim to join her. She knew that Mim's name would attract even more pupils and she promised that the dancing classes would be Mim's own special province.

'You can see for yourself,' Jane West had said bluntly, 'how important it is to be versatile.'

Now it seemed that Daisy might have to be versatile too. Roly had said as much to Mim.

'Yes . . . ' she'd answered – but she'd sounded vague, as if she was searching for something just below the surface of her thoughts. 'There's an idea – nothing I can quite grasp yet. Daisy was different: rather special. I need to see her again.'

Roly had made no attempt to press her – he knew Mim in this mood – yet the conversation increased his curiosity and he realized that he was looking forward to meeting Daisy Quin.

CHAPTER THREE

Daisy Quin woke early on Friday morning. She could hear the blackbird singing in Henrietta Park – Pavarotti of the Park she called him – and the crying of the gulls as they drifted upriver. As she stretched sleepily, carelessly, the sharp pain knifing in her back and down her leg seized her anew with an awareness of her vulnerability and fear. The physiotherapist was by no means able to reassure her how fast, or even how total, her recovery might be and her short-term contract had expired at the end of the rehearsal period. Now it was the old story for the dancer: no performance, no fee.

She edged stiffly out of bed, sitting for a moment on the side of it and stretching cautiously, and then went into the kitchen to make some tea. They'd been so lucky, she and Suzy and Jill, to find this flat in Henrietta Street. During the last two years she'd made herself very much at home in Bath and the prospect of having to leave it was grim indeed. Especially just now. . .

Daisy took her mug to the window and gazed down into the street. She was by nature an optimist and she struggled valiantly with the twin devils of misery and depression, refusing to dwell on the dismal results of her disastrous fall during rehearsal six weeks earlier. Instead she thought about her forthcoming journey to Cornwall, smiling with gratitude when she remembered Mim's sympathetic reaction. She sipped her tea slowly, watching the splashy patterns of sunlight in the blossom of the trees in the park,

and all the while conscious of a small car parked beside the kerb.

She almost missed him when he came out. Suddenly he was there, below her on the pavement: briefcase in one hand, his car-keys in the other. He opened the door, hesitated, and then turned to cast a swift look upwards. She almost ducked out of sight, suddenly fearing that he'd think she was watching out for him – 'Well so you are,' she told herself – but, instead, raised her mug as if in salute. He lifted his hand in response, climbed into the car and drove away.

She drew back from the tall sash-window, feeling both elated and slightly foolish. After all, they barely knew each other.

'I'm your new neighbour,' he'd said as they'd arrived in the hall together one evening towards the middle of March. 'Paul Maynard.'

'Daisy Quin,' she'd said, liking him at once. He had very dark hair and his eyes were bright and quick. Everything about him was quick: his gestures, his movements, even the way he talked.

'Hello, Daisy Quin,' he'd said. 'Are you first floor or second floor?'

'First,' she'd answered. 'With Suzy and Jill. We're dancers with the Upstage Dance Company.'

He'd looked so surprised that she'd laughed at his expression.

'Someone has to do it,' she'd joked – and he'd laughed too.

'I love the dance,' he'd said. 'What fun. I'm settling myself in so as to be ready to take over the Art Department at Beechcroft School next term. Lots to do. See you later, Daisy Quin.'

He’d opened his door and vanished inside so quickly that she’d felt oddly bereft. Indeed, had it been anyone else she would have considered it almost ill-mannered, but there was some quality about Paul Maynard that made her certain that no rudeness was intended. She’d gone on her way thoughtfully, unable to put him out of her mind. It was odd, too, that she didn’t mention him to Jill or Suzy. She couldn’t quite bring herself to make the usual jokey observations about their new neighbour that would have been normal under the circumstances but, instead, waited to see if either of them met him by chance.

Neither of them mentioned him and then, a few days later, she saw him again in Argyle Street. She’d stopped at the florist on Pulteney Bridge and her arms were full of tulips; as she paused at the kerb, waiting to cross, she found him suddenly beside her. He smiled delightedly, as if she were the one person he was hoping to see.

‘Daisy,’ he said. ‘How nice! And what gorgeous flowers.’

‘Tulips are my favourites.’ She smiled back at him, foolishly glad because he’d remembered her name, confused but so pleased to see him. ‘Especially this dark rich purple colour.’

‘In that case,’ he answered at once, ‘I think we should go to Bar Chocolat and have something delicious, don’t you? Your flowers will match their décor so perfectly.’

She was surprised at this impulsive invitation but his ease of manner and complete naturalness made refusal seem immature and boorish.

‘It’s one of my favourite places,’ she admitted, ‘but I have to ration myself. The toasted coconut fudge ice cream is to die for.’

They crossed the road together, pausing to read the words on the blackboard outside – ‘Who says only pigs like truffles?’– before going into the little café. Sitting at the