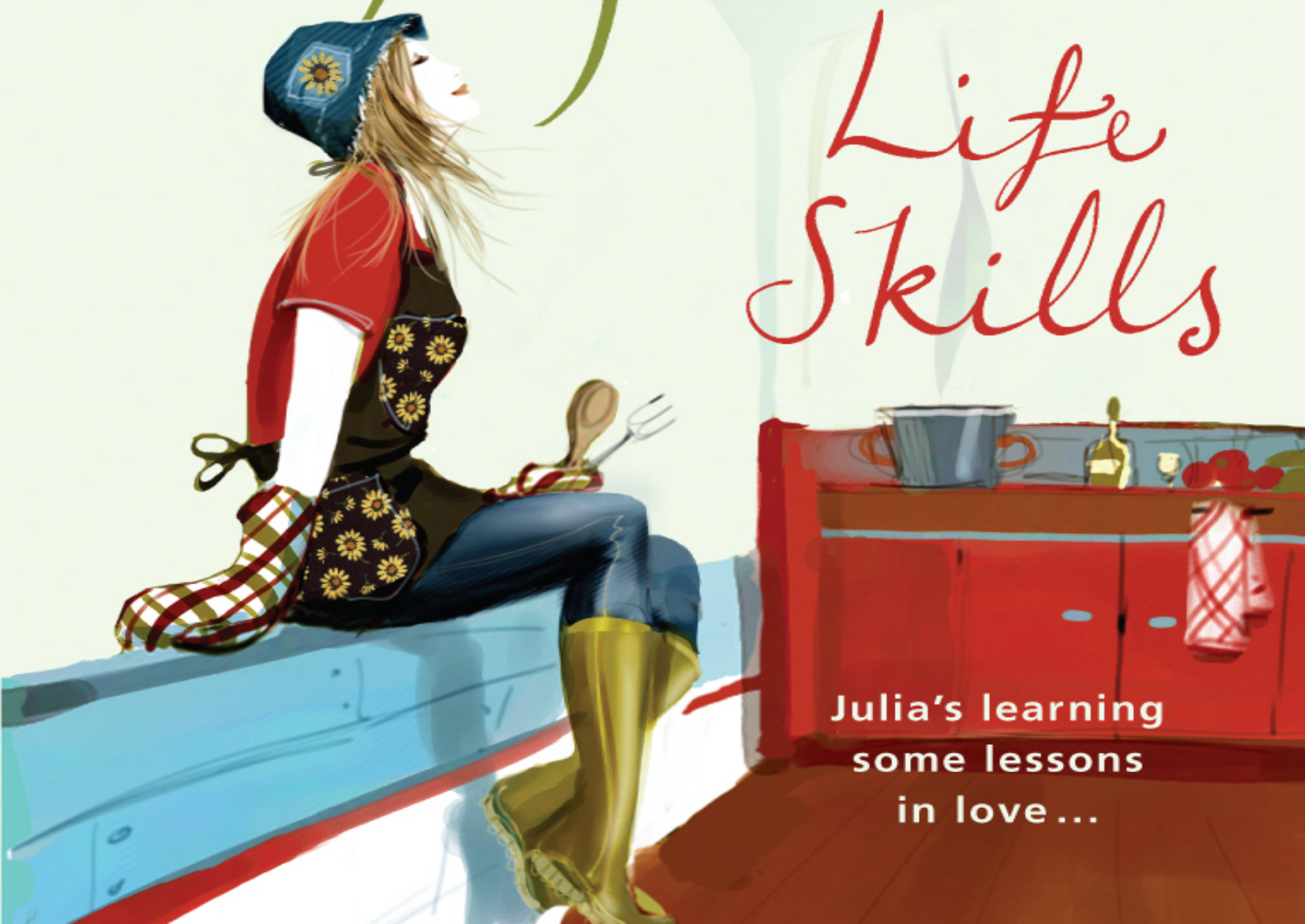


The *Sunday Times* Top Ten Bestseller

# Katie Forde

## Life Skills



Julia's learning  
some lessons  
in love...

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## **About the Book**

A combination of overwork and jet-leg propels Julia Fairfax into becoming engaged to a golf-playing wine buff called Oscar. But when she realises that she has fonder feelings for his adorable Labrador than for Oscar himself, she is forced to confront the fact that there is something drastically wrong. Ditching her fiancé and jacking in her job, she decides to revolutionise her life.

Her new career as a cook on a pair of hotel boats is certainly a departure, and teaches her more about life than how to get a couple of narrow boats through a lock. But even afloat, Julia's past catches up with her. Not only must she contend with the persistent Oscar (not to mention his frightful mother and her own mother's determined matchmaking), but also the arrival of her childhood enemy, the enigmatic Fergus Grindley ...

## **About the Author**

Katie Fforde lives in Gloucestershire with her husband and some of her three children. Recently her old hobbies of ironing and housework have given way to singing, Flamenco dancing and husky racing. She claims this keeps her fit.

Also by Katie Fforde

*Living Dangerously*

*The Rose Revived*

*Wild Designs*

*Stately Pursuits*

*Thyme Out*

*Artistic Licence*

*Highland Fling*

*Paradise Fields*

*Restoring Grace*

KATIE FFORDE



***Life Skills***



CENTURY

*To Susan Watt,  
with much love and gratitude*



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# Chapter One



‘I just don’t understand you, Julia!’

Discreetly, Julia wiped the spit from her eye and tried to get out of range. If she’d realised Oscar was going to be quite so upset when she broke up with him, she wouldn’t have done it in his car. She would have invited him in for coffee and he would have been spared hitting his funny-bone on the steering wheel, which he’d done twice already, and she could have avoided the more physical manifestations of his distress.

‘And all this wanting some “fun” nonsense!’ he went on. ‘You’re a bit old for that, aren’t you?’ A droplet of indignant froth landed on her sleeve.

‘I’m only thirty-four, not exactly over the hill,’ she said quietly, burrowing in her pocket for a tissue.

‘It’s pretty old to have children! And Mother offered us so much help with them!’

Julia began to lose sympathy for him. ‘You mean when she offered to drag your old nanny out of her retirement home so they could be potty-trained the moment they’re out of the womb! Hasn’t she heard of disposable nappies?’

‘She offered help with school fees too!’

‘Only if we have a boy who’s bright enough to get in to dear old Sandings!’ She referred scathingly to his Alma Mater, the last place on earth she’d send her children to, if she ever had any.

‘Well of course. Private education is expensive. You could hardly expect her to fork out thousands of pounds for a gir – someone who’s not very bright.’ He fell silent, aware,

possibly for the first time in his life, of how crass he had been.

Julia took a moment to swallow her rage. There was no point in ranting at Oscar. He was sexist and élitist in every fibre of his being and he could no more change that than he could change his blood group. Why had it taken her so long to spot it?

‘I do appreciate it was kind of her to offer help with school fees’ – she fixed her gaze on his walnut dashboard so he wouldn’t see she was lying – ‘but I’m still breaking off our engagement. Children aren’t my first priority right now, and we’d just make each other miserable.’

‘Then why did you agree to marry me in the first place?’

It was a fair question, but while she knew the answer, it wasn’t one she could give Oscar. ‘You’re very attractive. I was flattered by your attention. And I do love Sooty.’

This last was a mistake. Her spot of ego-restoration was undone by the reference to his half-grown black Labrador which had been a puppy when they first met.

‘Sooty!’ Oscar blinked. ‘What has Sooty got to do with it?’

‘Well, nothing really. It was just that anyone who has a dog seems like good marriage material.’ She’d gone off course. She was trying to soothe Oscar, not make him feel like a refuge for unmarried potential mothers, which, sadly, he was. ‘I was flattered, Oscar,’ she repeated. ‘But I’ve realised I could never be the sort of wife you need.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You said,’ she explained quietly, ‘when I was passed over for promotion, that it didn’t matter because I’d be giving up work anyway when we got married.’

He’d worked out by now that that had been a mistake. ‘Then why did you leave? If your job means so much to you?’

This time Julia’s anger was harder to suppress. ‘I did explain. They gave Darren *my* department, that *I’d* built up,

for nearly *five years*, just because he's a man and plays golf! He's not even competent!

'But a lot of people prefer to deal with a man and golf's not only about the game, you know. A lot of business –'

'I built up the lettings department without being a man, or spending my spare time in the bar at the golf club!'

'Well, they wouldn't let you in unaccompanied . . .'

'I persuaded that Finnish company to use us to handle their relocation rather than one of the big Oxford firms –'

'I know, Peter was very pleased to get the business. He told me –'

'And did your golfing buddy also tell you why he didn't give me the department?'

'Only what he told you, darling.' Oscar, unnerved by Julia's anger, tried to pacify her. 'That he thought that while Darren was young, he had a lot of potential . . .'

Julia concentrated on keeping calm. If she let herself think about what Oscar was saying she'd explode and make a nasty mess on his leather upholstery. 'This is all old ground, Oscar, and not getting us anywhere. But I think you must realise now that we're not suited.' Seeing him about to prove her wrong, she hurried on. 'There are lots of super girls out there who would . . .'

She faltered. Was there anyone willing to be a 1950s wife at the beginning of the new millennium? 'Who would – appreciate your many good qualities – and recognise what a catch you are. You're very attractive and supremely eligible, Oscar, it's just me you're not right for.'

She picked up her handbag and fumbled for the door-handle.

He put out a hand to stop her getting out. 'And this canal business? What's that all about? You've walked out on a perfectly decent career working for a very sound chap, and behaved very badly while you were about it, may I remind you . . .'

Julia wanted to laugh. At the time she'd been too angry, but in retrospect, her departure from the office had had its funny side. Having heard her extremely toned-down version of her reasons for leaving, Peter had reached out across the desk to pat her, saying, 'There, there.' This patronising gesture had knocked over his coffee mug, which had been full. Coffee had spread all over his desk (which he kept clear, to prove how efficient he was) and on to his trousers. He'd been distraught. 'This suit is brand new! My wife'll go mad! Do something before it stains, Julia, please!'

'Why don't you ask Darren?' she had replied coolly. 'He's got a lot of potential.'

'But he won't know anything about coffee stains!' Peter had gone on. 'He's a man!'

'So he is. Shame.' Julia had smiled with mock sympathy and walked out.

Now she said mildly, 'I don't think I behaved that badly. You can't blame me for not wanting to scrub away with tissues at Peter's crotch, now can you?'

'Don't change the subject! You know nothing about this woman, or canals for that matter.'

'I'll know more about them both when I've had the interview. But I would have left Strange's anyway. I'd been there too long.' Six years too long, she now realised.

'You don't even know how much this woman is going to pay you! How will you make ends meet? Thought of that, have you?'

'Of course! I'm not an idiot.' Julia bit back her irritation. 'I shall let my house. That'll cover the mortgage and the bills. Whatever I get paid will just be pocket money.'

'Pocket money! Huh!'

'I'm young and single, Oscar - well, youngish. I've got my feet on the housing ladder. So as long as I can pay the mortgage, I don't need to earn vast amounts. Anyway, perhaps the pay is good.' She thought this as unlikely as he

did, but since neither of them actually knew, she thought she might as well say it.

‘If people don’t pay you, they don’t value you!’

‘I was paid well at Strange’s, and what did that prove? But I don’t value myself by my salary, and I don’t expect anyone else to. Now I really must go.’ This time she actually got the door open and her foot out before Oscar jumped in again.

‘My mother will be very disappointed about this, very disappointed.’

‘I think she’ll be heartily relieved,’ said Julia, who had overheard an unflattering conversation about her age and her child-bearing potential on the one occasion she and Oscar’s mother had met. ‘This leaves you free to find someone younger and more biddable.’ Oscar flushed to hear his mother’s words echoed. Julia kissed his cheek. ‘I’m sorry it didn’t work out, Oscar. But I know I could never have made you happy, not for long.’

Julia got out of the car and made her way into her house feeling sad and guilty. Although she hadn’t recognised it at the time, she reflected, it had been Oscar’s inherent dullness and his heavenly Queen Anne house (she blushed with shame) which made her agree to marry him.

I was just so tired all the time, she thought, putting on the kettle, working my socks off getting the lettings department going. She’d spent hours on the phone to Finland convincing a very high-tech firm that she had at her fingertips, in sleepy Oxfordshire, plenty of very high-class accommodation for its top executives, and more hours convincing people who owned said accommodation that their Cotswold gems would be safe in her hands. She’d set up a team of gardeners so no rose would go unpruned or bindweed unchecked and even got a firm of furniture restorers ready to remove the merest scratch on the Chippendale furniture. She remembered now how scathing Darren had been when he’d discovered these details, saying it was a waste of time. She had had great satisfaction in

telling him that anxieties about their chairs were what stopped a lot of people letting their property. He had just muttered about insurance and cast-iron contracts as if Julia had never heard of them.

Working such long hours had affected her social life, and Oscar, introduced to her by her boss, seemed pleasant and undemanding. His idea of fun (apart from a challenging game of golf) was taking Julia to excellent country restaurants and showing off his knowledge to the wine waiter. As he hardly drank at all himself (his classic Jaguar was as precious to him as his Labrador puppy), Julia found herself on the business end of some excellent vintages. Not requiring much in the way of conversation, Oscar was quite happy if Julia just nodded and murmured at him, and wasn't offended if she caught up on some much-needed sleep in the car on the way home. He had asked her to marry him when her mind had been on something quite else and thus she had found herself engaged to a man she didn't really know at all, and who knew even less about her.

Somehow there'd never been time to get to know each other better, and Julia, still rushing about, began to see the prospect of a life of being well fed and watered in a beautiful setting (Oscar had some wonderful antiques to go with the house) as rather attractive. But when the promotion that was hers by right was given to Darren, young, arrogant and inefficient, just because he was male, she realised she needed to do some serious reassessment and, she also realised, downsizing (the Queen Anne house had seven bedrooms). Working so hard had allowed her to make a serious error of judgement and it wasn't worth it. Perhaps she should feel grateful to Peter Strange for inadvertently showing her the light.

After she had stormed out of the office, she had bought a copy of *The Lady* in preparation for her new life. For although part of her wanted to fill a rucksack and go

hitchhiking round India that very minute, another, better developed part wanted to earn some sort of living.

Not even waiting to get home, she turned straight to the back pages and read as she walked, wondering why she had given so much of her life to a company like Strange's, who would always see women as little more than glorified secretaries, whatever they achieved.

Narrowly avoiding a puddle, and banging her hip on the garden gate, her excitement grew. Every 'Situation Vacant' seemed like a shining window of opportunity, beckoning her to a new world, exciting, glittering, totally different from the stress of the past six years. It was so nearly too late. Thank goodness Oscar's mother had wanted them to be married in an extremely fashionable church, which had a nine-month waiting list.

The narrowness of her escape caused her to be a little rash as she circled advertisements. She only just managed to retain enough sanity not to apply for jobs as a nanny (*Chance to travel with family*) or groom (*Must love large dogs*), when she had little experience of children and none whatsoever of horses.

But there had been one job which was not only intriguing but which she felt she could do. And it was this which had her one cold February lunchtime, just over a week after finishing with Oscar, outside an old coaching inn on the outskirts of the town.



## Chapter Two



Julia opened the door and went into the pub, suddenly nervous. Oscar's right, she thought. I'm mad, I should stick to what I know and not meet strange women in pubs which are so dark I can't find the bar. Stumbling through tables and chairs and peering round agricultural machinery and under original oak beams, she was eventually led to it by a murmur of prosperous voices.

Three silver-haired men paused in their gentlemanly one-upmanship about sit-on lawn mowers as Julia appeared. They knew that these days it was perfectly acceptable for a woman to enter a pub on her own, but none of their wives would do it. Julia, familiar with the species, relaxed and smiled sympathetically. One of the men got to his feet and called through to the kitchen: 'Madge! Shop!'

Julia ran her tongue over her teeth in case there was lipstick on them. She wanted this job so badly. Having to admit that Oscar was right, and to trawl through the appointments section of the *Daily Telegraph*, would be a terrible disappointment.

She distracted herself by studying the comforting list of nursery food on the blackboard until 'Madge' appeared, wearing a light dusting of flour over her stripy apron. Julia ordered a glass of red wine, took it to a table by the window and stared out into the car-park. Rain was beginning to spatter into the puddles, making little exclamations of surprise at Julia's recent spate of life-style changes.

She should really have brought an updated c.v. with her, but when she had walked out of her office so dramatically,

she had cut herself off from proper secretarial facilities and, apart from a barmaiding job she'd had as a student, fifteen years before, there was nothing she could add to her résumé which might help her current application.

*Athletic, outdoor type, good cook, good with people, wanted for work on the canals. No canal experience necessary . . .* Julia didn't feel she was particularly athletic, but after Oscar's recent comments about her age she thought it was time she became so. She was a good cook and definitely good with people, which was one of the reasons, she now reflected, she was so livid when Darren got her job; he was *hopeless* with them.

She had reached the end of her glass of Fitou and was debating whether another would be wise when a very young woman arrived.

Slender enough to get away with her tight leather trousers, white T-shirt and short jacket, she was wearing expensive-looking boots and a devoré scarf which could have paid for Julia's entire outfit. Gold glinted on her wrist and at her ears and she was stunningly pretty. Her hair was short and thick and had at least three colours of blonde highlights in it. It was the sort of style which would need trimming every three weeks, and 'lifting' every four, by the sort of fashionable London stylist who, if you wanted an initial consultation, would, like Oscar's mother's fashionable church, have a waiting list nine months long.

Julia was wondering if she could possibly work for someone who looked so much like a celebrity deb and if she should slip out of a back door before she was noticed, when the young woman turned and saw her.

'Julia Fairfax? Suzy Boyd. Sorry I'm late, I got hopelessly lost. What are you drinking? Red wine? Is it nice? I'll join you.'

Julia found herself responding to the wide, orthodontised smile which followed the greeting, but felt dowdy in her sensible jacket and trousers. Suzy Boyd was so glossy and

well groomed, like a highly bred young racehorse, prancing with health and good breeding. She made Julia feel like a shaggy old riding-school pony.

Suzy returned with two glasses, passed one to Julia and took a sip of the other. 'I've never interviewed anyone before. I've got a list of questions.' She rummaged in a leather sack with a designer's name in gold on the outside and a lot of clutter on the in. 'Here.' She glanced at it. 'I wonder if we ought to chat a bit first, or get right on in with the questions?'

Julia, who was warming to Suzy, in spite of the leather trousers and minimal thigh-spread, said, 'The questions would give us a starting point.'

Suzy was obviously relieved to have this decision made for her. 'Right, let's see. You're thirty-four' – she glanced up quickly as if checking for signs of maturity – 'and you've had cooking experience?'

'I cooked in a pub one summer holiday, when I was a student, but it's been just dinner-party cooking since then.' If you discounted a couple of dainty little suppers for Oscar, and the one horrible occasion when she had cooked Sunday lunch for his mother. Julia had felt she was in a gravy advertisement and getting lumps in it.

'But you've cooked for quite large numbers?'

'It depends what you mean by large.'

Suzy put her head on one side, allowing a fall of straw-coloured hair to swing free of her cheek. 'Well, we take ten passengers, and three crew, so if we were full, that'd be thirteen. Could you manage that?'

'I expect so.'

'Good,' said Suzy. 'I'm not sure I can. I've never cooked for more than six, and then it's been a nightmare. I did a cookery course when I left school. My parents thought it would be useful.'

Julia felt compelled to ask. 'And was it?'

Suzy seemed doubtful. 'It might be now.' She referred to her list again. 'What about canal experience?'

'None at all.' Julia badly wanted this job, but she didn't want it under false pretences.

'Never mind. Uncle Ralph said if I insisted on experience I'd never get anyone.' Suzy took a gulp of wine. 'And we've got Jason.' She looked at Julia, and Julia saw uncertainty in her prospective employer's face. 'It was – is – Uncle Ralph's business. He'll sell it to me – on easy terms over a few years – if I can make a go of the first season. Otherwise, he'll sell to someone else.'

'How . . . nice.' Personally, Julia had had her fill of responsibility.

'It might be. Uncle Ralph has always been on my side. Against Mummy and Daddy, anyway.' Suzy wrinkled her nose. 'I didn't quite mean that like it sounded. I mean, they love me so much, but they don't seem to want me to be happy. Ralph has always understood how suffocated I feel.'

'Mmm.' Julia tried to sound non-committal and sat with what she hoped was an open, receptive expression on her face. She hadn't been to an interview for years, having worked for Strange's for so long, but she was sure it was a bad idea to comment on her prospective employer's parents. It hadn't done her a lot of good when she'd allowed herself the merest breath of criticism of her ex-fiancé's mother, even if that breath had included the word 'cow'.

'And as I said, we've got Jason.' Suzy wrinkled her nose. 'Which I suppose is a good thing.'

'Only suppose?'

'He's a bit patronising. I met him last summer, when I went on the hotel boats with Ralph. He taught me a lot and he said I was "quite good". But he obviously meant "good considering I was a Daddy's Little Princess".'

Julia felt herself flush. She had been having the same thoughts about Suzy herself.

‘Which I was,’ admitted Suzy cheerfully. ‘But not any more. From now on, I’m going to manage without my parents’ money and their outdated ideas.’

‘Good for you.’ Julia had suffered from outdated ideas herself lately.

Suzy referred again to her list. ‘Uncle Ralph said I was to ask you why you applied for the job. He said it was very revealing. Not quite sure how.’

Julia decided to give it to her straight. ‘I’ve just broken off an unsuitable engagement and left my job at the same time. My boss and my fiancé were best friends. I’ve decided I need a complete change and to do something fun.’

‘That’s sounds a good enough reason. In a way, that’s why I’m here. My parents wanted me to marry and settle down too.’

‘Aren’t you a bit young for that?’

‘Of course. But they think I have unsuitable tastes in men. Just because I had an affair with the pool boy!’ She made a face. ‘But it was never serious. I don’t know why they made so much fuss.’ She grinned, and a pair of dimples appeared in her delicately made-up cheeks. ‘It was after that they rolled out the heir apparent to Daddy’s empire. Bor-ring! Tell me about your ex-fiancé.’

‘He was boring too, only somehow I managed not to notice. He – well, his mother really – wanted us to have children right away so his old nanny would still be alive to look after them.’ She saw the question ‘Why did you let yourself get involved with a man like that?’ form on Suzy’s lips and avoided it. ‘He had a heavenly house and a sweet Labrador puppy. Sooty really was the best thing about Oscar.’

‘Boring name though. Sooty. For a black dog.’

Julia considered. ‘You’re right. It does reveal his total lack of imagination.’ Julia remembered she was being interviewed and brought herself back to the point. ‘Apart from all that, I felt I needed a break from – office life.’ Julia

was deliberately vague. She didn't want to scare Suzy. 'This job seemed very appealing.'

'Did it? Ralph gave me the advert he always used. I thought it might be a bit *old-fashioned*.'

'Did you want someone younger?' Oscar had given her a complex. Her child-bearing years might be diminishing, but surely she wasn't yet old as an employment prospect?

'Oh no. At least, I don't think so. I mean, you are fit and everything, aren't you?'

'I think so.'

Suzy winced. 'I'm going to have to give up my membership of the country club when I leave home, so God knows what will happen to me. Flab City, I expect.' Suzy rearranged the beer mats with long, French-manicured fingers. 'They have a delicious trainer who actually looks good in Lycra. Made it worth the effort of going.'

Julia swallowed. 'Mmm.'

'Would you like another drink?'

'I'm not sure . . .'

'Did you drive here?'

'No. It's not far. I walked.'

'I've got to start doing that soon. Daddy's going to make me give back the car. He thinks by taking away all my toys he'll make me "see sense".'

'Would your parents *make* you marry a man you didn't love?' Julia's own mother delivered some pretty heavy hints, but she hadn't used force yet.

'To be fair, I don't suppose they would, but they want me to do something sensible: i.e., something they want me to do. They think this whole canal thing is ridiculous and won't give me a penny.'

'Well, why should they? What's in it for them?' Suzy seemed a little startled, but Julia persisted. 'I mean, you are grown up. Why should they give you money?'

Suzy looked bewildered. 'No reason at all, really. Except they always have.'

‘Lucky you.’

‘Lucky in some ways but stifled in others. The trouble with being a “Daddy’s Little Princess” is you never know what you can do because you don’t ever have to struggle. I don’t even know if I can earn my own living, and I’m twenty-four.’

‘You mean you’ve never had a job?’

‘Oh yes, I’ve had jobs – as a receptionist, a demonstrator, a bit of modelling, things like that – but I’ve never had to live on my salary. Uncle Ralph says’ – Suzy took a breath – ‘that even living on one’s salary isn’t really earning a living. He reckons you have to go out and find customers to do that. Being given a salary doesn’t really count.’

Julia buried her fingers in her hair. ‘I never thought of it like that.’

‘No, but he’s right. And if I can prove to my family that I can run this business, get it to make money, they may stop trying to groom me into being a company wife. And Uncle Ralph will let me buy it, if I want to. Otherwise, I’ll have to go home at the end of the season with my tail between my legs.’

Julia shuddered. ‘Tell me about the business then. What is it, exactly?’

Suzy took a breath. ‘It’s a narrow-boat hotel. Only we have two of them. Narrow boats, that is.’

‘Narrow boats? Like barges, you mean?’

‘Never say that word!’ Suzy was horrified by Julia’s unintentional blasphemy. ‘They hate it if you call narrow boats barges! Barges are much wider! These are less than seven feet across! Seventy feet long though,’ she continued more calmly. ‘They used to carry cargo on canals. Almost all the carrying trade has gone on to the roads now, so the canals are almost entirely for recreational use.’ Julia had the impression that Suzy was quoting someone else’s words. ‘Hotel boats are for people who don’t want to hire their own boats and do all the lock work and the cooking and stuff.’

‘So why do you have two of them? Wouldn’t it be easier to just have one boat?’

‘Well, there are a couple of hotel boats who just have the one, but they can only take about five passengers. Most of the others are pairs and take ten or twelve. Some of them have en-suite facilities, though Uncle Ralph’s don’t. His pair take ten, less cost-effective than twelve, of course.’ Suzy took a breath and carried on. ‘The passengers sleep in the butty, that’s the one without an engine, towed by the motor. The motor has some staff accommodation, the galley, the saloon where everyone eats and stuff, and a well-deck where they can sit and look at the scenery. Hang on.’ Suzy dived into her bag again. ‘I’ve got last year’s brochure somewhere. There’s a picture.’

Julia examined the bird’s-eye plan of what looked like two elongated railway carriages with pointed ends. The cabins were shown with washbasins and hanging space, the motor boat had a fairly large-looking galley, saloon and sitting area. Everything was telescoped into the narrowness with remarkable ingenuity. ‘They look quite spacious.’

‘They do on paper. In reality things are pretty tight. But neat, you know? A place for everything and everything in its place and all that.’ Suzy frowned. ‘Let’s have another drink.’

‘I’ve never had much to do with boats,’ said Julia, when, on her suggestion, they had blotted up some of the alcohol with shepherd’s pie.

‘Mostly, it’s being able to catch ropes, being strong, and not minding heights,’ said Suzy.

‘Oh.’ Julia didn’t like heights, didn’t know if she could catch ropes, and didn’t, just at that moment, feel terribly strong.

‘But don’t worry about any of that. There’ll be time for you to learn all you need to know before the season starts. The boats are at a boatyard having some work done on them at the moment. It would be good if you could come with me and help get them ready. Then Ralph said he’d help us take



them down to Stratford, for our first lot of passengers. Once we're at Stratford, we're on our own. Except for Jason, of course.' Suzy wrinkled her nose again at the mention of his name, giving Julia the distinct impression that Jason was a mixed blessing.

Julia felt she should come clean about her misgivings. 'I'm not sure I'm going to be terribly good at boating. Do you really want to offer me the job? You might have more - more athletic people to see.'

'You're the only one I liked the sound of. One of the others had just finished being a cook on a round-the-world yachting trip - seriously scary. And there was one who sounded a complete airhead with no experience of anything, let alone cooking.' Suzy regarded Julia steadily. 'Uncle Ralph told me I must get someone with common sense, whatever else they didn't have. Besides, all the others were men, and I had to have a woman because we have to share accommodation. Uncle Ralph wouldn't like it if I shackled up with the crew straight away.'

'I suppose not,' said Julia, reassured that she was the best of a bad bunch of candidates. 'And what are they called? The boats, I mean?'

'*Pyramus and Thisbe*. It's out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Appropriate as we go to Stratford-upon-Avon such a lot. So' - Suzy gave Julia a look of entreaty which had melted stonier hearts than hers - 'will you come? It's terribly hard work but such fun. And the canals are so wonderful. I'm sure you'll just fall in love with them, like I did.'

Julia felt it must have been love which made an apparent social butterfly willing to give up all the comforts her father could provide. 'I'd really like to. It sounds just what I need at the moment, but hadn't you better check my references and stuff?'

Suzy shook her head. 'Uncle Ralph will meet you and if he doesn't like you, he'll say.' She frowned. 'The wages are crap, I'm afraid. I should have said, but I didn't want to put

you off straight away.' She named an extremely meagre sum. 'Will you be able to manage on that?'

Julia gulped, grateful that Oscar need never know how little she was going to be paid. 'I'm going to let my house which should cover my standing orders, council tax and whatever.'

'That's all right then. Will you have any money over?' Suzy spoke with an ingenuousness which revealed that she had never had to think of anything so mundane.

'No.'

It occurred to Julia that if common sense was why she had been employed she ought to show some of it now. Suzy had had three large glasses of wine. 'Tell you what, why don't you come back with me and have some tea? Or even stay the night. I don't think you should drive.'

Suzy shrugged. 'Daddy's going to take my car away anyway, it won't make any difference if I get done for drunken driving.'

'Yes it will. Leave your car and come back with me. I'm not doing anything special tonight – just packing to go and see my sister tomorrow. You can pick it up in the morning.'

'A girls' night in? That would be fun.'

As Julia supported Suzy along the road on her platform soles she realised that a 'girls' night in' was as foreign a notion to Suzy as council tax. But they spent a very pleasant evening sitting in front of the fire, eating pasta, drinking the wine Suzy insisted on buying. They ended their time together as very good friends.

Suzy had offered to give Julia a lift to her sister's, and as they walked back to the pub together the following morning, to retrieve Suzy's car, she took hold of Julia's arm confidently. 'I feel so much less scared about the whole thing now I know you're going to be with me. It's great to feel I've got a grown-up on my side.'

Julia didn't know what to say. She had just given up Oscar and a well-paid job so she could have a break from being

grown up, but she was flattered by Suzy's confidence. 'Thank you. I'll do my best not to let you down.'

Suzy laughed. 'Of course you won't.' She clicked open the doors of her bright scarlet hot hatch, which might as well have had the slogan 'Stop me for Speeding' emblazoned on it. 'Now hop in, and we'll see if I can get you to your sister's without getting lost.'

Angela lived in a pretty village near Oxford, less than ten miles away from Julia, which they reached via a couple of wrong turns. Once Julia had got out, Suzy sped off without waiting to be introduced, having executed a dazzling three-point turn, shouting promises to send Julia details of where and when they would meet again. Julia felt that whatever else working for Suzy might turn out to be, it wouldn't be dull.

Her sister, two years younger than Julia, opened the front door with Petal, three months old and gorgeous, draped over her shoulder.

'Hello, Ju. How'd the interview go?'

Julia embraced her sister. 'I'll tell you in a minute. You look awful! Don't this lot let you have any sleep?'

'Not so's you'd notice.' At this moment Ben, an energetic two-year-old, thrust a toy in Julia's direction as a gesture of well-meaning, and then ran back into the kitchen, overcome with sudden shyness.

'Did you get the job?' asked Angela as they followed Ben.

Julia nodded. 'I did, but don't ask me how much I'm going to earn because it's probably less than Ben's pocket money. But I think it'll be fun.'

'So what's she like? Your new employer?'

'V. glam, but really sweet and very good fun. Hello, Grace.' Julia addressed the eldest of her nieces and nephews. 'Cool shoes. When you grow out of them, can I have them?'

'If Petal doesn't want them,' Grace agreed. 'I've got a Tamagotchi.'

‘Let’s see then.’

With her children clamouring for attention, it was some time before Angela had the opportunity to pump her sister for more details about her new job. But eventually they reached the kitchen and she dumped Petal on Julia’s lap. ‘Here, have your niece for a while and I’ll make some coffee. I’ve had to carry her around all morning.’

‘Oh, why?’

‘Wind. Last night wasn’t so much broken as shattered, into twenty-minute slots. And when Petal finally got off, Ben had a nightmare.’

Julia glanced across at her sister. Never plump, her children had turned her into a wraith. ‘I don’t know how you do it, Ange.’

‘I don’t actually have a choice. If you’ve got children, you have to look after them. Unless you’ve got a high-powered job and can afford a nanny.’ Angela took a restorative draught of coffee. ‘So, tell me about yours then.’

‘About my high-powered job?’ Julia chuckled. ‘It won’t be as demanding as children, that’s for sure, but it’s just what I need – different and fun.’

‘I never did think Strange’s appreciated you.’

‘But does anyone appreciate *you*?’ Petal had started to grizzle so Julia handed her back, looking on in awe as her sister hefted Ben up, one-handed to share her lap with the baby. ‘I can’t imagine ever feeling brave enough to have a baby. All that pain, and then no sleep for months and months.’

Angela laughed. ‘When the time is right you’ll want them. You just haven’t found the right man yet. Talking of which, how is Oscar taking it?’

Julia shrugged. ‘As you’d expect. He’s furious about this whole canal thing.’

Angela looked suddenly sheepish. ‘And so’s our distinguished brother, by the way. It just slipped out . . .’ She held up a defensive hand. ‘And having dumped you in it that

far, I also tossed in about you and Oscar breaking up.' Angela sighed. 'I'm sorry! But I was tired. Children do scramble your brains rather.'

'Well, it gave him another reason to disapprove of me, I suppose. Something he likes doing.'

'You and Rupert always rub each other up the wrong way, but he's very fond of you. He even suggested you might be able to sue Strange's for constructive dismissal. He said to let him know if you wanted to.'

Julia smiled, touched that her stuffy-solicitor brother should have been so thoughtful. 'I don't suppose I've a hope in hell, seeing as I walked out, but it's kind of him to offer. And have you heard from Our Mother lately?'

Angela nodded, used to being the member of the family who kept the other members in touch. 'She had some hippy staying with her, chopping wood and putting up wind chimes in her garden. You must tell her how you got on. She's mad keen on this boating idea.'

'She would be. In some ways, she's really cool, as Grace would say.'

Angela broke off the corner of a chocolate biscuit. 'Mmm. To everyone except her daughters. Think of all those young men she attracts!'

'And tries to pass on to me,' said Julia grimly. 'I swear the only reason she didn't like Oscar was because she didn't find him for me, and it meant she had to stop matchmaking.'

'She'll be free to do that again now,' said Angela. 'But have you heard about her latest alternative therapy?'

'What? Radionics?'

Angela nodded. 'She asked me to send a lock of Petal's hair so she could "put it on the box" and work out why she isn't sleeping through the night yet.'

'Oh goodness. What did you do?'

'I told her Petal wasn't sleeping because she was only three months old and that she hadn't any hair to spare.' She

stroked her daughter's down-covered pate.

Julia shook her head. 'It's funny, Dad wasn't all that stiff and conventional. I don't know why Mum went so New Age hippy when he died. Does Rupert know about the radionics?'

'Oh yes, but you know Rupe. Mum can't do any wrong in his eyes. Maybe he'd feel differently if she suggested he tried colonic irrigation every time he confessed to being tired. I like coffee, but not as an enema. Let's have another cup.'

Angela poured more coffee for them both and they sank into silence. Their mother was one of those people whom everyone felt they were lucky to have. And while they were both devoted to her, they would have found it easier if she'd been someone else's mother. To the rest of the world she was 'charmingly eccentric' and extremely charismatic. To her daughters, she was highly critical, with standards they could never live up to. But it was hard to moan about a mother who was on the surface so wonderful.

Later that day, when Julia phoned her, she found her mother was indeed full of enthusiasm for the canals. 'I've just had a young man staying with me who lived on a narrow boat while he was at uni.' Julia's mother was prone to picking up the slang of younger, if not current, generations. 'He said the vibes were far out.'