

CHAPTER ONE – BEACH HUT BLUES

*'Happy Birthday to me, Happy Birthday to me,
Happy Birthday, dear Alpha, Happy Birthday to me!'*

Alpha O' Mara took a nip of brandy from her silver hip flask. She was forty years young today. Didn't the American writer *Gertrude Stein* say "We are all young inside?" Alpha grinned, tossing back her raven-black curls. So she did, bejayzis! If Alpha (and Gert) saw forty like that, then *that* was how forty would feckin' be! (Alpha liked to say 'feck' and 'bejayzis'. It reminded her of her Irish roots. It made her feel earthy, raw, *writerly*.) Alpha was fully aware that all writers should feel writerly – *and then they should write*.

Alpha breathed deeply and stared out onto Hove Esplanade from her beach hut, sitting in her deck chair, her pink laptop *Madeleine* perched on her lap. Tiny droplets of sea-spray tickled Alpha's face as winter waves bashed against the groyne and she reflected on her forty years to date. Armed with a Drama degree, she had hurled herself into the London media world: Fringe theatre then years as a TV Researcher and Producer of TV Reality shows, then the life-style move to Brighton ten years ago. Time off to sprog, then a Literary assistant at *Flackett & Partners* helping other Writers write. Helping other writers succeed.

But never quite helping herself.

Alpha had written short stories for lesser known Womens Mags, but was aware that she had never really followed her dream. And the dream was this: she, Alpha O'Mara, would become 'une ecrivaine', a sophisticated writer, reclining in her literary salon in the deepest French countryside – *la France profonde*. Romantic, tortured, misunderstood, Alpha would relish her role as a lady novelist, or *l'ecrivaine*, and play it to the very hilt!

Saying 'feck it' to *Flackett*, Alpha had recently handed in her notice. Scary but liberating, even if Will, her long-suffering husband, had strongly advised against it.

Will?

Alpha sighed and pulled out her hip flask, taking a quck slug of brandy. She wanted to get some real *passion* back into her marriage as Will had withdrawn from her these last two years as their financial worries had deepened. Alpha was hoping the move to France would revive their sixteen-year old marriage. They would rediscover the inner flame of their love that had become so buried. “Inner flame”? Bejayzis? Had she just *said* that? She giggled and pushed back her short black curls. “Gypsy black” her grizzled Irish grandfather Patrick would say pulling hard on his pipe, wheezing loudly. Scanning the silver-slate horizon, Alpha breathed in hard. She tapped into *Madeleine*’s screen.

‘Scarlett surveyed the desolate winter Esplanade. It was time to leave her beloved Brighton beach, pack up, fly south and follow the seagulls.’

‘Wrack, wrack!’ A huge seagull circled overhead, squawking loudly. Alpha, frowning at the interruption, shouted up: ‘Piss off, will ya? Writer at work!’

Plop!

Alpha’s sunglasses were splattered with stinking, white goo. Another seagull circled around, joining seagull number one, maybe because of sightings of *Chocolate Croissant*es, or maybe because all the seagulls in Brighton that day knew that what Alpha was writing in her beach hut was complete and utter seagull shite. This felt like *Alpha*’s last chance to nail down her literary credentials and her agent, Troy, was waiting for something special from her. Even Brighton’s seagulls were now dumping on her from a great height!

Alpha sprang out of her deck chair doing ‘V’ signs up at the seagulls, unaware that a couple of pale and fashionable London émigrés, dressed in black and rake thin, were walking past her beach hut. She bellowed up at the Brighton sky-rats. ‘Feck off, will ya? I don’t need anyone else to shit on me, yer feckin’, feathered freaks! Feck off!’

The pale, fashionable couple raised two sets of city-sophisticated eyebrows and walked off snickering to each other. Unaware they had been watching, Alpha smiled over weakly at them. She placed her laptop *Madeleine* back on her knees. Now ...? Where was she?

‘Scarlett surveyed the desolate winter weather and decided then and there it was time to leave, leave behind her beloved Brighton. The seagulls were ...?’

“Scarlett?” Is that the name of your alter ego, darling? *Scarlett O'Hara*, by any chance? A low, sophisticated, plummy voice from the next door beach hut. `Drinking at 10.00 o'clock and call yourself a writer, Alpha? I was onto chapter fifteen by this time of the morning. Talent without application is worthless! Worthless!’

Dad?

Alpha took a long, hard look at the ghost of her dead father sitting in a deckchair in front of the next door beach hut, arms folded across his belly. Struck dead by a heart attack at the age of seventy-four, twenty years ago, Raymond had left Alpha to scatter his ashes. (Her mother, Geraldine, an eccentric and well-meaning Irish painter with a love of pink champagne, had passed, as the Americans would say, when Alpha was sixteen.) Raymond had achieved a lot in his life, thirty-nine novels, all prize-winning, all published. She sighed deeply.

A very hard act to follow.

Placing his cup and saucer on the ground, Raymond looked at Alpha over his glasses, balanced perilously on his bulbous nose. He chuckled warmly. ‘So what’s this about moving, my darling? Baling out of Blighty, are we?’

Alpha turned to her father. She *did* love him, she did, but he could be so smug and pompous that she sometimes wished Raymond would simply *stay* dead. ‘We’re leaving, Dad, and nothing you can say about sticking to this lousy, recession-rotten island is going to make a bit of difference. Cameron and crew have cut everything they can get their crumby hands on, even Will’s Architects practice. We’re heading south!’

‘You never should have given up your position at *Flackett & Partners*, darling, as you are just starting out as a novelist and it can be a very rocky road. I was lucky to be commissioned after my publisher had seen my very first paragraph and I never looked back after that. I kept rolling ‘em out! One after the other after another!’

Alpha could feel her heckles rising. *Nothing* was going to ruffle her on her birthday. Not even a self-imagined Ghost! ‘So you keep telling me, Daddy dearest. I was going insane at *Flackett’s*, my creativity stifled. This move to France is a risk, but life is about talking risks. You are always saying that, Dad, so stop harassing me. I’m *trying* to write here!’

Raymond tapped his nose knowingly. 'Trying but not actually *writing*? You have swallowed a popular myth that all great writers wrote inebriated, darling. Did *Shakespeare*? Did *Tolstoy*? *Oscar Wilde*? Those writers understood routine and self-discipline!'

Alpha snapped shut *Madeleine* and walked into her beach hut and started tearing down all her rejection letters from various publishers she had pinned up just to make her feel *writerly*.

Time for change. Real change!

Alpha crumpled up the letters and tossed them into the air, the breeze now carrying them out towards the sea. A seagull swooped down, scooping up a crumpled letter in its beak and dropping it into the foam, the sea drawing it into its swell. Alpha laughed, amazed. 'Look at that, Dad? A sign from Heaven. The seagulls are moving to France too!'

'Bah! We don't do religion, you and I, but that's the spirit. No point wallowing in failure, bunny. Writing is a craft and it takes time. *Time!*'

Folding away her deck-chair, Alpha grinned fondly at her dead Father. She slammed shut the beach hut door, locking it.

Raymond raised an eyebrow. 'Selling that hut for a pretty penny, I imagine?'

'Giving it to Fanns. She needs it more than me, Dad.'

'Another of your wounded birds? You always were a soft touch, giving your birthday presents away to your friends at school. Your pocket money too, you goose!'

Alpha fixed her father with a knowing look. 'You were always good at giving presents too, Dad, but just not so great at everything else.'

Raymond held his hands up in mock horror. 'Bad father alert! Shoot me!'

'Fanns is forty-one and sleeping on friends' sofas. She will stack the hut with booze and bonk her brains out, but who cares? I'm outta here!'

Raymond was grinning eagerly. 'Where are we off to then, bunny?'

'La France! We're following the seagulls, dad. Bought an old Manor house south of Angouleme and north of Bordeaux. Taking Dex and Maisie, an incredible life experience for them, naturellement. Thomaz, the au pair is coming as well as is Pip, with his missing ball.'

'Good Lord? Your Au Pair only has one ball?' Raymond rolled his eyes.

'Pip our pooch has a missing ball. The vet can't find his second one. Guess it's up there somewhere!' Alpha grinned at her father.

A self-styled Hove 'yummy' Mummy strode past, pushing her stroller, wrinkling her brows in amusement as she saw Alpha talking to herself: another eccentric Brighton writer?

Alpha flashed her crooked smile at the woman. Summing up her dead father had been a bit self-indulgent but she had wanted more time with her father who had always been absent, locked away writing or in Europe on his book tours, and then had died too soon.

Make up time.

'Ahem?' Raymond was now in a white linen suit, a straw hat on his head. He hauled up a battered leather suitcase and saluted, his large, bulbous nose gleaming in the winter sun. 'The vineyards of Bordeaux await us, mon capitaine. Let's go - On y va!

This wouldn't be easy. Alpha gulped hard. 'Dad ... ? You're not coming with us this time. This is my French dream. And you and I have spent a lot of time together recently. I'm sorry!'

Raymond's jaw dropped. 'Not coming with? B-b-but, bunny? I adore France, the wine of the Bordeaux region, *les moules, les huitres*, the plumpest oysters in France, the Charentaise women. I am a legendary Francophile! Not c-c-coming?'

Alpha felt a lump leap into her throat. 'It's my fortieth birthday today, Dad, and you didn't even remember? And I'm yer only child? You used to be so good at presents!'

'I have little else to do *but* remember? Being dead is beastly boring!' Raymond now twinkled at her warmly. 'I have left you something in your basket, Birthday Girl. Seemed apt!'

Alpha went to get her butcher's bike propped against the side of her beach hut. She noticed a French phrase book in her basket. *Filthy French and how to Swear like a Legionnaire.*

French slang – 'L'argot' as the French called it – what fun!

Alpha giggled and looked over but Raymond was gone. She would miss the old goat, she so would. Now it was time for some separation.

Time to define herself!

Alpha hauled herself onto her bike, placing her laptop and book in the basket at front. She started to sing as she cycled down Hove Esplanade towards Brighton.

Happy Birthday to me, Happy Birthday to me,

Happy Birthday, dear Alpha – Happy Birthday to me!

The candy coloured beach huts flashed past Alpha on her left, the sea surfing up on her right. Alpha felt powerful as she rode her bike along the Esplanade. She was soon to be a citizen of France – *La France!* Alpha felt brave, sure of herself, happy to be cycling on the *No Cycling* part of the Esplanade, relishing in her new found rebellion. She was soon to be a citizen of 'La France', a land of romance, wine and freedom! An old lady shook her walking stick at Alpha from her beach hut. 'No cycling on the Esplanade. Read the bleeding sign!'

Alpha waved over, smiling. *Nothing* could unsettle her today. She was a French *femme female*, a fearless Resistance fighter, riding away on her bike from the German army, hot on her heels, the wind willing her onwards! Alpha grinned as she zig-zagged along the Esplanade. This being a writer thing was fabulous. Metaphors, synonyms, parables were tumbling out!

She was unblocking, bejayzis?

She laughed, the sea spray on her face. 'Look out Dad, I'm yapping at yer literary heels!' It would so be *easy* to write in the French countryside. *Realms* of the stuff would ooze out, a veritable literary unburdening of Alpha's soul! Life had got far, far too stressful of late. Seagulls, parking wardens, creditors all crapping on them daily. Hardly surprising that all passion with Will had been knocked into a cocked hat. Now it was time to live "La Vie en Rose", follow the dream and revive their marriage!

There was also the promise of *Raoul*. Alpha giggled as she cycled. For the last twenty three years this Franco-Spanish gigolo (who had whisked away eighteen-year old Alpha's virginity under a fishing boat on the beach at Cannes) had become the *symbolic idea* of the very *essence* of living in France: *freedom and romance!* Memories of this salt-and-sun-kissed rogue and their night of passion on her French gap year, made Alpha shudder. Raoul, she dimly remembered, had moved to the Southern Charente to be a carpenter, his 'gigolo' days over.

She would take the 'Raoul idea' and weave it into her marriage. Her passion plan in France!

Alpha whizzed on, weaving around people on the Esplanade. 'Out of my way, yer sad feckers with yer smug, over-priced houses and yer fancy, schmanzy ways. Make way for Alpha O'Mara, Novelist extrodinaire! The next ... *JK Rowling!* No, not her, she's everywhere! The next ...? *Elizabeth Gilbert!* Naa? Too schmaltzy? The next *Peter Mayle?* No, he's too cheesy! The next ...*sheyutt?!*'

Zig-zagging around a couple of high-heeled Transvestites taking a stroll arm in arm, Alpha was forced to yank her handlebars to the left, cycling at speed into a crowd of Paparazzi, charging across the Esplanade in pursuit of an unseen celebrity. Flying off her bike into the throng of foul-mouthed Paps, Alpha toppled off her bike, landing hard on the tarmac.

A red-face Photographer bellowed over. 'Ya fucking tart! Blocked me shot of Katie, didn't ya?' Super-doooper 'Celeb', *Katie Price* and Entourage jogged past. They waved over benignly from behind gigantic, celebrity-sized shades as Alpha, abandoned by the Paparazzi, stood bruised and shaking.

What would she have to do to achieve her own fame and celebrity?

Looking up into the sky, a fluffy pink cloud formed. Alpha O' Mara, award-winning Novelist, dressed in red velvet, gliding up some stairs to receive the *Booker Literary prize*. There was her darling hub and kids, dressed up in evening wear like those cute kids at the Oscars, in the front seats clapping their hearts out. A booming voice as the crowd cheered: 'And the *Booker Prize* for First Novel goes to (drum roll, drum roll!) ... *Alpha O'Mara!*'

'Be smiling please, lady?'

Voof!

A group of Polish tourists flashed cameras in Alpha's face – she had been papped! A screech from the other side of the Esplanade – *Katie Price! Over here!*

Alpha cycled off, her mood altered. The sea was lashing and churning, crashed down angrily on the pebbles, dragging them back towards France. She was leaving Brighton, wrenching herself away from this sweet, sticky rock of a city. What would people be like in the French countryside? Grim peasants with hair lips, spitting Xenophobic filth at all incomers?

Was moving to France with a reluctant husband, two kids, a dope-smoking Au pair and a Pooch with a missing bollock a giant leap of faith? She would just have to trust in the Lord.

Being an avowed atheist, Alpha O' Mara realised she might be doomed.

The winding, narrow streets of Brighton's shopping Laines were buzzing as yapping, snapping tourists, glamorous mums and media folk mixed with fire eaters and mime artistes. As she pushed her bike through the crowds, Alpha could feel herself losing confidence. Her beloved Brighton was in her soul, more state of mind than city. She felt at home amongst this bunch of glamorous misfits. Leaving Brighton & Hove was not going to be easy.

Leaving the girls would be worse.

Today was the day to tell her Brighton bezzies, her loyal worker bees that their Queen was leaving. Alpha chained her bike to a lamp post and entered the *Komedia*, the famed Comedy Cafe, scanning the sophisticated crowd of lunchers.

'Baby-cakes? Over here, darling!' Fanny, or Fanns, skinny, tall, designer glasses lopsided, a rumpled, forty-one year old *Amy Winehouse*, was as charmingly aristocratic as she was alcoholic.

Mags grinned at Alpha, pushing back her short, immaculate, pink bob. Short, squat and square, Mags was a *Tate & Lyle* sugar cube of compact, fierce intelligence. A Solicitor with attitude, Mags never missed a trick, her brown eyes sparkling with humour.

'Beach hut keys, Fanns. Take care of me hut!' Alpha tossed them to Fanns and sat down. 'What number bottle, girlies?'

Mags cackled, picking some spinach from her front caps and filling Alpha's glass.

Fanns squealed with excitement, taking the bunch of keys, her eye-lashes batting fiercely. 'Ooo? A place of one's own? A home! But, darling, why ...?'

Alpha grinned, knocking back her wine. 'Everyone needs a home. We are all but snails slithering around on the earth's surface. You heard it here first, girls!'

A handsome, blonde, German waiter glided over. 'Hello, please? What will you be having, ladies?' The Waiter, a Teutonic god of muscular perfection, flashed his perfect white teeth.

Fanns, desperately single and shamelessly flirtatious, batted her false eyelashes at him, undeterred by her twenty year lead on the waiter. 'Vee would like to have *you!*'

Alpha groaned. 'Give the guy a break, Fanns? The fettucine, please, and forgive these badly behaved Brighton belles.'

The German waiter smiled confused. 'Bells, plizz? Zee Christmas bells?'

Mags leaned into the Waiter. 'Don't listen to that old tart!'

'Zee tart is lemon today. I will bring!'

The girls giggled as the waiter moved off. Putting her glass down slowly, Alpha took a deep breath and took both their hands. 'Girls? I'm going to give it to you straight.'

Mags and Fanns leaned in, breathing hard, their nostrils flaring in unison.

Alpha gulped very hard. 'I'm ... ? We're, we're ...? 'Oh, fuck it - we're leaving Brighton!'

Fanns rolled her eyes dramatically as only an out of work Actress-cum-Temp-cum seamstress-cum-Fashionista-cum-Mistress-cum-Anything-anyone-wanted could. Fanns' black false eyelashes had some taking her for a Transvestite, but her long legs and arms which she would wrap around unsuspecting males like a glamorous tarantula, had most realising that Fanns was all woman, albeit a very needy one. 'Leaving us, baby-cakes? Where, darling? Not ...?' Fanns rolled her eyes and lowered her voice. '*Worthing?*'

Worthing was the place beyond Shoreham where the three women hoped never to end their days. Alpha shook her head. 'Not Worthing, never Worthing! We're moving to France!'

Mags squeaked. 'B-b-but what about us? You and Will are the only family we've got!'

Fanns nodded, a false eyelash crumpling as tear drops formed. 'She's right, baby-poops! Without older sis to tell us off for drinking and shagging too much, where will we be?'

Mags nodded, going pale. 'Class of '91, the three Musketeers and all that. You were the only one to graduate, Alphie. We were too bloody hungover! You were the one who got married and the one to sprog. Now look at us? A couple of dried up old tarts, wombs barren - fucked up fucking forty-somethings!'

'Fortysomething? Speak for yourself, Maggot!' Fanns frowned, horrified.

A lump in her throat swelling up, Alpha squeezed their hands. 'You'll be fine, girls, really. You'll fly out and see your *D'Artagnan* in her 'Manoir.' Think of all those gorgeous French men ripe for the picking? Think of *Gerard Depardieu* and ...?'

Mags slowly grinned, her beady eyes twinkling. '*Belmondo, Delon!*'

Fanns licked her lips. 'Goody, yes! There's *Aznavour, Johnny Halliday, Sasha Distel?*'

'Isn't he dead, *Sasha Distel?*' Mags frowned, her familiar drunken squint appearing.

Alpha stood up. 'A toast to the Brighton Belles, bonded by their love of bonking, boozing and everything bastardly. To us!'

The three women clinked their glasses as the German Waiter loomed up, balancing three plates of lemon tart. As Alpha waved around her glass, she knocked one of the plates out of the Waiter's hand and sent the third plate flying into Fanns' lap. A shrieking Fanns, dripping in lemon tart, was surrounded by handsome Waiters, swooping like seagulls, their white cloths, wiping this way and that. Fanns gurgled happily as the Waiters wiped her down. 'Heavenly!'

The three friends stared at each other, the truth sinking in. They hugged each other and began to wail in unison. The German waiter and the others watched, mystified as the tarts (human and lemon) were crushed and crumpled.

'Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!'

The chattering *Komedia* crowd looked over at the tangled, mass of arms and legs. Alpha beat back tears. She was going to miss the girls, but she was a plane on the runway, about to take off. The metaphors mixed uneasily with her fourth glass of *Shiraz*.

Mags scrambled up onto the table, her short skirt rucked up to reveal straining designer suspenders watched eagerly by a bald, seventy-something man at the next table.

One female luncher eagerly nudged her friend. 'A new *Komdia* Stand Up Comic? Fab!'

Mags raised a glass. 'To Alpha, the Queen bee of our Hove Hive and the most fabulous writer who has never, ever completed a novel! To the French fucking dream, *La Vie en wotnot?* Oh fuck ...?!'

Mags was wobbling around on the table as the *Komedia* crowd cheered. The blonde Teutonic god and two other two Waiters circled around the table, attempting to break Mags' fall. It was ugly, very ugly but Alpha shook her head, laughing and crying, as Mags collapsed onto the German waiter, who heroically

broke her fall as the lunchers applauded him. This was the *Komedia* after all, the home of Brighton comedy and all things funny. Alpha wiped her eyes quickly. Life was funny too. Sad and funny.

Just like her friends.

44 Rutland Villas, Hove, was not going to be an easy place to leave. A large, rambling Edwardian house, one street back from Hove Esplanade, surrounded by other houses painted pastel pinks and pale yellow, standing proud in the leafy road. Their house looked sad today.

Did houses have souls, Alpha wondered? It was as if this house *knew* they were packing up and leaving it behind. Her stomach started to grumble as she wheeled her bike along the pavement. Her head was starting to pound from her drinking dramas with the girls.

The door opened as she knocked and a tall man of forty-five with dishevelled, dirty blonde hair, drooping grey eyes and a warm grin stood there. Will looked proud to be covered in dust. 'Danger. Men at Work. Architect and Au Pair packing boxes. Happy Birthday, my sweet!'

She was starting to feel excited. Alpha wheeled her bike into the corridor. 'Are we really doing this, Will? Make it real? Bear hug, please!'

Will scooped her up into his arms. A warm and reassuring place to be. Will was the best at making things *real*. 'You wanted this, birthday girl! We are going for it, even if it's ...?'

'Even if it's what, Will?' Alpha scanned Will's long, handsome face.

Will suddenly sighed, smiling sadly. 'Even if it's a shot in the dark?'

Alpha sighed. She was Ms. Glass half full and Will, Mr. Glass half empty. Will was capable of draining her quicker than she, herself, could drain a glass of Merlot!

Will called up to Thomaz, their surly, stunning, Czech Au pair. 'Thomaz? How are we doing up there? I'm bringing up more boxes!'

Maisie, Alpha's nine-year old daughter, screeched into the hall on her silver mono-cycle, her sandy-bobbed hair swinging this way and that. 'Mumzee? We're moving to France! No more school – *ever!*'

Alpha laughed warmly, ruffling her daughter's hair. 'French teacher gone, Maisie?'

Maisie nodded, following Alpha into the kitchen. Alpha looked round the empty kitchen and took a deep breath. All pots and pans, glasses, painted pottery wrapped and neatly in boxes.

'Boring Miss Brigstoke is never to return! Dex was showing off his French as always. Why does Dex have to be so good at everything, Mumz?'

'No one's good at everything, baby. Do your affirmations!' Alpha liked to think she could balance mothering and her writing career, although she did have a suspicion her parenting skills were pretty damned car crash.

'I am great, I am great! Can you write me some new affirmations, Mumola? Bit boring these and I know I'm great!'

'You are great and we're baling out of Brighton today!' Alpha shooed Maisie away as Thomaz, the Czech Au Pair, came in, struggling with a huge cardboard box. He slammed it down, huffing and puffing dramatically, pushing back his drooping fringe.

'Hello, Alpha? How is going your birthday?'

Alpha didn't want to be sucked into Thomaz's twenty-something angst today. 'Great, thanks, Thomaz. Hey, you're really doing well! What time the removal men are here?'

'Six thirty. Could I go clubbing tonight or is Thomaz being a crazy boy?' Thomaz did a bad boy pout, ready to pose for the next *Calvin Klein* advert. Thomaz was a morose irritant, self-obsessed and vain and a stunningly handsome Czech male.

'Thomaz is crazy. Don't go there, Thomas. Or clubbing!'

Thomaz sighed sadly. Alpha wondered if he were a bit stoned? A friend had left a bit of home-grown marijuana in their garden after a late night dinner party and Thomaz had confessed to her that he had smoked it all. Alpha got confused as it was a veritable Czech pot-boiler, more confusing than a daytime TV Soap.

And there was then the five hour soul-bearing of Thomaz's family problems: the alcoholic father, the mother's decline into heroin addiction, the sister's stint as a prostitute ... or was the *father* a prostitute?

She could never remember!

'You are so good for me here, Alpha, a family from the family. I never had the family, as you know. It was ...? How do you say? The total fucking family breakdown!'

Alpha nodded but didn't want to get sucked into Czech psycho-babble and her head was pounding from her boozy lunch with the girls. Thomaz grabbed another empty box and strode off purposely. Dex bounced down the stairs as Alpha walked into the hall. Dex, sandy haired and freckled, was becoming handsome and at twelve had inherited her own gutsy 'let's do it' attitude to life.

'Excited, Dex?' Alpha grinned at Dex.

'Kind of. Had to say 'goodbye' to the boys today. Didn't enjoy that. Sam made a speech and Hector gave me a special CD.'

Alpha gulped hard. She was pulling the kids away from their peer groups and a good school.

Jeez? She hoped this move to France was the right decision?

'How was your birthday lunch with the girls, Mum? Had a few drinkies?' Dex grinned.

'We had a few. Okay – we had lashings of the stuff. But I'm a bad example, remember, Dex. Whatever I do, do the opposite, ok? Go get Mumz a couple of *Nurofens*, chip face!'

"Chip face?" You lost the plot, Mum?' An empty box whizz past them and crashed just feet away from where Alpha was standing. She shrieked as Dex shouted up. 'You lost the plot too, Dad?'

Will grinned down from the third floor, leaning over the banisters. 'Hoping to find it France, Dex, and hope Mum finds it too! Box for all your books, beauty!'

Confetti started to rain down on Alpha. Alpha looked up, laughing. 'Confetti?'

'Found it in an old shoe box. Bought it for our wedding but never used it, remember? We're shooting in the dark!' Will pushed back his dirty blonde hair. He looked happy.

Alive again.

Will hadn't been happy or alive for some time and his Architect's business going bust, as customers pulled in their recession seat belts, had drained Will of all his energy. Alpha stared hard at him. France would breathe new life into their marriage.

The Passion Plan would work and the novel would be written. France would breathe new life into everything!

Maisie appeared in the hall and danced around in the falling confetti, chanting her affirmations. 'I am great, I am great! Dad, Mumz, Thomaz and Dex are great too. We're baling out of Brighton, everyone! We're baling out of Brighton!'

Alpha O' Mara laughed hard and grinned up at Will: they were moving to France!

CHAPTER TWO – MOODY MOTHER-FUCKERS

Inside the Games room on the Ferry, Will and Thomaz were sipping beers and playing on a giant Play Station. A windswept Alpha tumbled in the door, leading Maisie by the hand, wiped clean from puking on the top deck.

Will smiled warmly at Alpha. 'Hey babes? Thomaz is beating the stuffing out of me!'

'Please don't say "stuffing!" I am splattered in the remains of Maisie's *Big Mac* and fries!'

Will laughed. 'No more Big Macs where we are going, guys. All snails, lettuce and grated carrots.'

Thomaz carried on playing Play Station with Dex.

Ptang! Ptang!

'*Big Macs* are everywhere, Dad. Heard of Globalisation?' Dex grinned.

Alpha smiled, her good mood returning. 'Shall we go on deck, Will? The sun is setting.'

Will nodded and Alpha felt her heart leap a little.

Day one of the Passion Plan!

Sneaking off on deck, Alpha lead Will by the hand. The sun was setting indeed and it was magical, all burnt orange hues and milky pink reds. Will put his arm around Alpha's shoulders as they leaned on the hand rail and sighed veru deeply, his grey-owl eyes widening.

'Why are we moving to France, remind me, babes? Recession? Depression? What?' Will sighed deeply, a Willo-style sigh. Very 'Well of Despair.'

Bejayzis? Alpha could feel Will's negative energy draining her out once again.

But she would pursue the Passion plan!

She dug her elbow into Will's ribs and leaned back against the railings, her head tilted upwards, her lips pursed. 'Willo? A sunset, a beautiful woman and no ... kiss?'

Will grinned and leaned in and gently placed a peck on her lips.

The Peck.

'The Peck' was what Alpha had christened Will's comfortable, passion-less kiss which always left her wanting. Alpha puckered up her lips and leant back against the railings dramatically. She closed her eyes, *Bette Davies* in *Now Voyager*. 'Ravish me, Will. Ravish me!'

Nothing.

Alpha snapped opened one *Bette Davies* eye to see Will, hanging over the side, quietly vomiting. Will lurched up and smiled weakly, wiping the corners of his mouth with his sleeve. 'Passion killer. Ugh? Sorry, babes!'

Alpha shook her head, laughing and groaning, and turned to look out at the twinkling lights of the French mainland. The lights of the port of Caen were twinkling seductively at her.

La France!

A land where novels were written, and marriages were revived.

Alpha O'Mara was about to become the 'lady writer', L'ecrivaine, reclining gracefully in her study, writing the novel of the decade!

She rolled her eyes with excitement and inhaled the salty midnight air.

The waitress at *F'Lunch* raised her eyebrows.

Will, Dex and Thomaz had loaded up their *Hors d'oeuvre* starter plates high and were wolfing down their food. Alpha, hungry and irritable, hissed at her family. 'Slow down, guys? Two more courses coming!' Alpha and Maisie had foregone the *Hors d'oeuvres* in order to wait for their *Steak Frites* which were yet to arrive. Will grinned, shovelling food into his mouth.

Alpha groaned, her stomach turning somersaults and she surveyed the prim and proper, polite French couples, daintily eating their salads.

The French were so odd, bejayzis?

So measured, so mechanical in their movements – *so correct*. A different tribe altogether than the messy, stressy Brits. The French couples all ate in unison, lifting their knives and forks lifting in clock-work precision. Alpha sighed wearily.

Was this move to France really such a good idea?

An uptight Waitress loomed up, all starch white, mock-Parisienne uniform, raising her eyebrows as Will wolfed down his *Hors d'oeuvres*. She raised a plucked, French eyebrow. 'Yer 'usband 'eez, ow you say, Madame? Ungree!' The Waitress wrinkled her nose in distaste, spying the mess of chips, salad and vegetables piled high on Dex's plate. 'Did Maman not feed you in Eengland? Oh, la, la? La petite fille, your leetle girl, 'eez also tres ungree, Madame!'

Weak with hunger, Alpha glared at the Waitress, putting on a sour French accent. 'Zee leetel girl is 'ungree', as she is waiting to be served her feckin' Steak Frites!'

Will, Thomaz, Dex and Maisie stopped mid-forkful.

Le silence! A big doggy-do-doo silence.

The Waitress recoiled, spluttering and scuttled to another table, yielding her note-pad.

Will did a slow hand-clap. 'Good for Mum! That woman was getting up my nostrils too. What do we think the 'F' before the 'Lunch' in '*F'Lunch*' stands for?'

'F-ing Lunch!' Alpha groaned. 'The French always nick our best British words, like 'lunch' and put the 'F' word in front of them. Let's sue 'em!'

'You sure socked it to that poor Waitress, Mum!' Dex snorted with laughter.

Thomaz spoke up. 'We shouldn't fall into the stereotypical national types. This could be the racism, no?'

'He's right, Madame Le Penn!' Will twinkled at Alpha.

The *Steak Frites* arrived, courtesy of another Waiter, and Alpha and Maisie fell on their food like whirling dervishes. Dessert arrived soon after, a delicious array of *Mousse au Chocolat*, *Mille Feuilles* and air-whipped *Meringues*. Alpha was starting to melt. The food in France was fabulous at least – even if some of the people *weren't!*

The sour-faced Waitress loomed up again, a bow-suited Manager at her elbow. She pointed at Alpha with her pencil, her pinched face pale with anger. The Manager gave a little cough. He wasn't enjoying this one bit. 'Excusez-moi, madame? 'Eet is, my, er? Duty, to 'eenform you that, you, er? You must, please, feeeneesh your, er, meal and, er, leave!'

Alpha rolled her eyes in shock. French diners were staring over, muttering neatly behind their napkins at the English causing a commotion and in their sacred lunch hour too?

Sacre bleu!

Alpha waved over and smiled over at the diners. She was starting to enjoy being in the limelight. 'The food was mediocre, Monsieur, and the service affreux! Frightful!'

A shocked gasp and the Restaurant went quite. A dog could be heard howling outside.

Had they had left Pip in the car – *merd?!*

The Waitress narrowed her eyes, waiting angrily to be paid.

The Manager was reeling as Dex stepped in. 'Ma mere ne veut pas payer l'addition parce qu'elle n'est pas contente. Pas du tout contente, Monsieur!' Dex beamed proudly. They wouldn't be paying their bill as his mother wasn't happy. *Not at all!*

Outside, Alpha exploded with laughter as she chased Dex and Maisie across the car park. It had been snowing, a soft, white winter blanket gently covering the Car Park. It looked magical and the sudden gift of the snowflakes reminded them all what was great about life. 'You cocky tyke, Dex? I had forgotten what morose, mother-fuckers the French can be!'

'You will fit in fine in France, Mum, and that's two pounds in the swear box, by the way – "mother-fuckers" counts as two!'

Shazaam!

Will fired a snowball at Alpha. Alpha squealed and scooped up some snow and aimed Will. *Douf!*

'Gotcha, mister!' She was enjoying this.

Will laughed, darting to the ground to scoop up more snow. 'Loud mouth Mum does it again. The spirit of Trafalgar was with you, babes!'

Shazaam!

'Someone had to make a stand!'

They all laughed hard and fell about, the snow silently pit-patting down on them. Life in France was going to be a challenge, but Alpha's troops were fed and ready for all battles to come.

Snowballs over, Will revved up the engine as they all bundled in the car. The sky was darkening with a fearsome blizzard on the way, but no one cared as they were fed and happy.

They had survived their first French dispute at *F'lunch* with their dignity intact.

Angleterre un point, La France, nul!

"Le Manoir" didn't disappoint and, if anything, was even more beautiful than it had first appeared in the video that the Dutch owners, a pair of supposed Reiki healers, had sent them.

When Alpha had seen the video of "Le Manoir", it had been love at first sight and their fate had been sealed. Now they were here, snow melting, the sun beaming down, and standing on the huge gravelled drive, looking up at this vast Manor house that was now theirs.

The Basque red wooden shutters were pinned back proudly, the black roof pointed roof commanding its fleet as it sat firmly on the cream, flagstone walls. A proud Galleon, "Le Manoir" rose up to sail across the endless, optimistic blue sky. Alpha beamed happily. She would be the 'Capitaine' of this noble ship!

Manicured green lawns wrapped themselves seductively around the house, with topiary hedges lining the various pathways, weaving this way and that. A barn and outbuildings stood near and huge, black iron gates, crafted by some ancient hand, secured the grounds. With a kidney-shaped pool, its fresh-water filter system humming gently in the background, one could see the views of surrounding fields.

They had arrived.

This was their Garden of Eden and they were Adam and Eve, reborn into a heavenly place!

Beaming, Alpha turned to Will. 'We've done it, Willo. We've moved to France! Happy?'

'You know me, babes. If you're happy, I'm happy!' Will stared at her, his soulful grey eyes widening with excitement but, Alpha noticed the Willo-style reserve was still there.

Why couldn't Will just be plain, old-fashioned happy? Happy-style Happy, bejayzis!

Alpha sighed and left Will and Thomaz unpacking and Dex and Maisie running around the grounds, delighted with their new home and tiptoed into her new study, pushing open the carved wooden door. She gasped loudly, reeling backwards.

Bliss beyond bliss!

There was her study. Alpha's eyes flicked eagerly around the room with its carved, patterned ceiling and wooden parquet floors. With its eighteenth century marble fireplace and ancient chandelier, the study was painted a gentle cream. A pair of French doors led out onto a paved terrace overlooking the lawns. Here, she would be the next *Simone de Beauvoir*, the very *George Sand* of the Charente!

Alpha pinched herself: had she died and woken up in Writer's Heaven?

'Mum, look at me, I'm flying, flying!' Maisie was bouncing up and down on her giant trampoline just outside the study.

Alpha called out through her open French windows, grinning hard. 'I'm flying too, Maisie! I'm flying too!'

Two days later, all major boxes unpacked, Alpha, armed with a *Cafe au Lait* and a couple of *Pain au chocolats* was ready to go. Now back in her study, Alpha sat down eagerly at her desk. There was *Madeleine*, her darling pink laptop, all perky and keen and ready to start work. Tapping into her files, Alpha found the file 'Novel' waiting for her to commence her gentle art of creation. Her study would be her haven, a literary womb from which she would call up her muse, unburden her soul and ...?

Tap! Tap!

Alpha, surprised, spun around on her office chair. *An intruder?*

'Hello, Good English? Anyone in the home?' Franke, the former owner of "Le Manoir", a Dutch *Rutger Hauer* look-a-like, with his white blonde hair and tanned skin, was knocking at her French Windows. She girded her loins. Franke, a supposed 'Reiki' healer, an imposing fifty-something of huge stature, beamed at her revealing perfect teeth in a broad jaw. Alpha narrowed her eyes. What was Franke's racket? She didn't trust 'healers' one bit. Franke smiled at her beatifically, his corn blue eyes revealing his lascivious nature as they flicked up and down Alpha's body. 'Liking our home, Alpha?'

Our home? How dare this Dutch prophet call "Le Manoir" *his* home?

Alpha raised herself up high. She was the new "Madame du Manoir" and would act accordingly! 'We're loving *our* new home, Franke. Loving it! But we're all so, so busy. Chaos everywhere and I have a novel to write. Must get on!'

This should get rid of the double-dealer Healer?

Centuries of Dutch Sea-faring and Merchant Trading was coursing through Franke's veins and he stood firm, his white robes flowing, open leather sandals rooted to the spot.

'Netje, my wife, is here, picking her plums from her trees. She so loves this special place. Do you love our special place, Alpha?'

Alpha was imploding. Netje, Franke's wife, was *still* here, picking "her plums?" They were *their* plums, goddamnit! *Theirs!* Yes, *her* plums, Will's plums, Dex and Maisie's plums and if he so wanted, Pip the Pooch's blimmin' plums! (She winced, knowing full well that her pooch was one 'plumb' short, soon to be sorted by the Vet.) Alpha put on her emphatic look. 'Must be so sad for Netje to leave this place, Franke, that's to *leave* the place. The big '*au revoir*' and all that. So very, very painful, you know, to sod off, to *go!*'

Something flickered in Franke's eyes and he was steely-cold *Rutger Hauer* in his Android scene from *Blade Runner*. Franke sucked his teeth, and sat down on her pink *chaise longue*. Alpha imploded, her eye's widening.

Sacrilege? She hadn't yet graced her Writer's chaise longue herself yet!

Franke smiled, a tint of menace on his tanned lips. 'Some bizniz to discuss, Alpha. Let's have the coffee, ya? Now, the field at the front in front of the gates? It will be necessary for you and Will to buy

it from me as Montigeaux our builder, is planning to build a factory at the front. If you don't buy this field you are, fucked up the bottom. Biznizz clear, ya?'

Quelle blimmin' horreur?

Franke softened, his ice-blue eyes turning cornflower blue again. 'It's only 40,000 euros, Alpha. As Montigeaux and his sons, your builders at the gates, couldn't raise the money to buy this house, they now want to make, how do you Brits say? The merry, bloody hell!' Franke laughed, healer-ishly, at his own joke as Alpha imploded. The 'dream' with all its purity, 'La Vie en Rose', the 'good life', was tarnished with the cut-and-thrust of deals and grubby money.

Menacing French, peasant builders lurking and a Dutch 'healer' putting pressure on her to buy an expensive large field?

Quelle horreur!

Alpha raised herself up, stomach in, buttocks clenched. 'We will just have to take that risk. Oh, looky, there's Will?' She called out through the open French windows. 'Willo, darling? Franke and Netje are leaving now, saying goodbye to their home, that's former home. Come and say *goodbye* and *au revoir*. The big 'cheerio', Willo!'

Alpha always called Will 'Willo' in times of desperation. Will waved over, putting down a wheel barrow laden with boxes, getting into his new role as 'groundsman.' Thomaz was swaying around under the weight of an enormous wooden box.

Bejayzis? Was Thomaz stoned? Just what she needed right now, a stoned Au Pair!

Franke shot a look back at Alpha, walking through the French doors out onto her terrace. 'Careful about Montigeaux. If a man makes me the good offer, what can I do, Alpha? Montigeaux will build New York sky-sraping out there! Let me know when we can have coffee and cud the chew.'

She would chew *Franke* up, so she would! Why didn't Franke just sod off back to Holland and *heal* people! Alpha stared at her blinking file and sat down again in her swivel chair. Where was she? She breathed slowly. She would drop all the *Scarlett O'Hara* stuff for now. Time for something more contemporary – more 'now-ish.' She started typing.

Novel. From Brighton to Bordeaux.

'The country was being run by a human Android called Cameron. Times were grim and the double-dip recession was deepening. Their business had gone belly up in Brighton and Bella and Jamie slumped over their kitchen table, knee deep ...'

Hmm? Alpha slowly chewed her pen. Loud voices outside her study. *British* voices? *Merd?* *They had come to France to get away from the British!*

Alpha emerged from her study onto her terrace with its ornate iron-work railing. Will was talking to a forty-something Brummie builder and his thirty-something wife, all neat jeans and pristine white trainers. Will waved over. 'Hey, babes? Don and Sandy, our neighbours have dropped in for lunch!'

Alpha glared at Will and she walked down the stone steps that led from her terracotta-tyled terrace onto the gravel drive. She muttered to herself. 'Writers don't *do* lunch!'

Will smiled weakly with a look of a man who would climb the gallows later.

Sandy, a sandy haired Brummie in her mid-thirties with a desperate smile and long 'sandy' hair, bounced over. Alpha clocked her quickly. She knew the type - a *Desperate Housewife* type! 'I bumped into your man at the *Inter Marche* and we had a good old natter, eh, Willy boy?' Sandy bounced from foot to foot, tossing her head around, a flirtatious mare. 'Don't you miss *Marks & Spencers*, Alpha? You can't get the little bits you need out here?'

Don nodded, dropping doggy eyes widening. 'I miss *Tesco's*, me. And me *Jammy Dodgers*. Don't like the bacon out here, do I, Sand? What do they call them? "Lardons"?''

'Large ones? Oooo? Got a mouth like a gutter, has Donald!' Sandy flicked her hair around like a mad mare on heat, screeching with laughter. Don roared with laughter and whacked Will on the back as Sandy rolled her eyes and shrieked.

Alpha, horrified, stared hard at them: were these people on *drugs*?

Will smiled politely. 'Got another four boxes to sort out in the barn. Alpha will rustle up something French and wonderfully rustic for your lunch. The good life, eh?'

Bejayzis, Will? The guillotine it was!

Sandy squealed in delight. 'The Good life, "La Vien en Rose" means 'the pink life', you see, people. We're living the pink life. Madame Montigeaux, your builder's wife, is teaching me how to speak like a right little Froggy!'

'Alpha has fantastic French. Give us a linguistic twirl, babes?'

'I'm not a performing parrot, Will!' Alpha groaned, batting away a fly.

'Ooo-er? A marital brewing?' Sandy giggled, enjoying the tension in the air.

Don smiled affably. 'You met the nutty Lou-Lou, yet? He's a rum character eh, Sand?'

'Lou-Lou! Yer' typical French farmer, that one. He's a bit like that Gerry Actor. Gerry Depar-wotsit?'

'*Gerard Depardieu!*' Alpha raised an eyebrow. A life-long 'film buff' she couldn't resist.

'Lou-Lou can be a bit scary. Swears and curses like a right loony when he's on his tractor and swings a shot gun around too!' Alpha's eyes widened.

Lou-Lou, the farmer, scared off the beastly, boring Brits? Nice going, Lou-Lou!

Don whacked Will on the back. 'You and Oi need to down some pints, Willy boy. Jeff at the *Bar du Marche* puts on a good keg. Curry night Fridays!'

Alpha had never considered herself a snob and prided herself in carrying on the merry heritage of the 'champagne socialism' of her dead parents. Not a snob – no, no!

Until this very nano-second.

'We're more into 10 euro French lunches, Don. We're on the hunt for places the other Brits don't reach. We *are* in France after all!'

Sandy's fake smile crashed revealing a desperately sad, confused woman. 'Ooo-er? Hark at Alpha? Aren't we grand?'

Will rolled his eyes at Alpha. His message was very clear.

Keep it friendly. Don't make enemies in the first week. Please?

Sandy now hissed into Alpha's ear, the stench of rotting eggs emanating from her mouth. 'There is a strict code of conduct with us Brits out here. *No one*, that's no one, must cross the line. Crystal clear, bab?' A cloud was reflected in Sandy's gold-rimmed glasses and they glinted in the sun, tinged with a touch of menace. Unnerved, Alpha pulled back, wretching at Sandy's rotten breath.

'Boxes to unpack, best get on, people!' Will clapped his hands together.

Don and Sandy stared glumly at Alpha as Will walked off across the gravel.

Sandy smirked. 'What we havin', then, bab? Alphabet soup?'

Don collapsed, howling at Sandy's joke, whacking Alpha hard on the back.

Nightmare!

All her good intentions hit the deck. Lunch with the Brits, and beastly, boring blimmin' Brummie Brits at that. Alpha sighed deeply as they crossed the crunchy gravel

Life in France was going to be more British than she realised.

Alpha felt sluggish. Four hours of utter hell as Sandy bored Alpha witless with tales of ghastly Brits, all missing *Marks & Spencers*, unable and worse, unwilling, to learn French, lonely, isolated and huddling together in droves.

It felt like drowning in honey.

Thinking about drowning, Alpha suddenly felt the urge to swim.

Her own swimming pool? Wowza? She couldn't get over that!

Grabbing a towel from the top of one of the boxes near the small barn that lay to one side of "Le Manoir", Alpha skipped over the gravel drive. She looked across the huge lawn with the sunken pool at one end, fringed with purple lavender bushes and saw Thomaz lurking at the back of the barn near some bushes.

Funny?

An out-of-tune *Simon & Garfunkel* song wafted over in the breeze.

'Like a Bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down! I will lay me doowwwwwn!'

She would 'lay Thomaz down' if he carried on howling like a castrated mongoose! Alpha called out. 'Gardening, Thomaz? Am having the first swim of the season!' She stopped in her tracks suddenly as her eyes flicked across the view. This was *their* view.

Alpha's view.

The massive lawn and the meadow at the back merged into the horizon, where undulating Charentaise hills curved up and down and the terracotta roofs of farm buildings peaked temptingly over the gentle slopes of the landscape. Alpha pinched herself.

Was she really *here*?

Had she stumbled onto a film set and morphed into French film film star *Catherine Deneuve*? *Deneuve*, the blonde goddess of all things *Dior* and sophistication, was full of mystique and glamour. Her 'nom de plume', her writing name, should be *Alpha Deneuve*! Giant cornflowers, recovering from a frosty Charentaise winter, swayed gently in the spring breeze. Alpha grinned smugly. She was living the dream, bejayzis?

The dream!

'Living the dream? Bit of a cliché that, darling? Why aren't you hard at it in your study?'

Catherine Deneuve sashayed off set, a petulant star in protest. Alpha spun round, eyes darting across the lawn. The voice continued. 'Over here. Perfect spot! Can watch my grand-children jolly around in the pool and take a nap when I need one!'

Alpha slowly circled the large Bay tree to find Raymond, her dead Dad, reclining in his summer whites on a wooden *chaise longue*. Her jaw dropped.

'Dad? You shouldn't be here? This is *my* dream and you are not invited to share it!'

Raymond adjusted his straw hat. He looked hurt, his bulbous nose glowing from a day in the winter sun and his voice cracked slightly. 'You ... don't want me here, Alpha?'

'C'mon, Dad? You knew the deal? I made it very clear back in Brighton.'

Raymond dropped his head. He walked behind the Bay tree and disappeared from view.

Silence.

Some birds swooped across the sky. Raymond's voice was barely audible. 'It's so lonely this being dead thing. And beastly dull! Your dead dad loves conversation, books, culture, art, a Renaissance man. He loves life, Alpha, life!'

The pool filter system was humming away softly and the water was sparkling. Alpha spun round, parallel with Raymond, who was blowing his nose on a spotty handkerchief, his hat awry. She would,

as the new “Maitresse du Manoir” and as noble and beautiful as icon and *Dior* muse, *Catherine Deneuve*, show tender mercy! ‘Ok, Dad. Stick around for now, but, big but, vamoosh when I tell you!’

Raymond nodded eagerly and flashed a lopsided grin, one that had charmed women all his life and launched a thousand book tours. ‘Phew! Felt I was drowning!’ Raymond was suddenly in a Victorian-style, striped bathing costume, ready to take the plunge.

Alpha shrieked as Raymond skipped down the pool steps. ‘Yer nearly seventy four, Dad? You could have a stroke, for feck’s sake?’

‘Already dead, sweet pea!’ Raymond flopped into the pool and doggy-paddled across the pool, a child’s plastic water wings now on his arms. Alpha laughed and rubbed her eyes.

Wow? She was letting go?

This is why they had come to France, this is what was meant letting go meant.

Stopping Time.

Raymond was now dry, his crumpled, white suit and straw boater back on. He twinkled at her. ‘Stop dreaming and start working on your writing. Writing is a craft. It takes time and toil. Look at that farmer toiling over there in the field? That man is working to eat, Alpha. Not dreaming, but *working*. The view may beautiful, but you can’t *eat* the view!’

Alpha wrinkled her brows, nodding, but was distracted by the noise of a tractor, plowing up the earth at the end of their field. Raymond inhaled. ‘I will take my hat off to you. This place is heavenly and a darn sight better than a grizzly, wet winter in Brighton. Not sure how you pulled it off, the Brighton creditors yapping at your heels but then, life can be bonkeroonis!’

“Bonkeroonis?” Did you just make that word up, Dad?’ Her dad was always making up words and characters. Alpha remembered his “Alla Wiggley-Bottom” stories, a girl with long, auburn plaits who was always climbing down holes and getting up to mischief. Alpha had realised then she wanted to make up stories too – *to write!*

She gulped slowly She wanted to be hugged by her father, the man who had always eluded her but had been her protector when she had had nightmares or believed there were witches hiding under her bed.

She missed him badly but she couldn’t hug him? He was a ghost and would vaporise!

Raymond gently cleared his throat. 'We need to toughen you up, bunny. You have a novel to write as someone has to pay for all this beauty. A year from now and your manuscript must be on my desk!'

The tractor was coming nearer. Raymond waved his stick, indicating the rolling fields. 'Sheer toil is the very cornerstone of life, Alpha. If honest graft doesn't work, then simply take a risk!'

Voof!

With that, Raymond was gone.

Alpha breathed hard, confused. But what an *incredible* view? She was Eve in her very own Garden of Eden!

A waft of lavender floated upwards into Alpha's nostrils as she inhaled and grinned slowly.

Time to take a risk!

Lou-Lou's tractor had vanished from the horizon. It was incredibly warm for late Feb, more like an English April. Alpha giggled and slipped behind the giant bay tree near the pool.

No one around? Perfecto!

Alpha whisked off her clothes, wrapping the towel around her naked body. She could see the steam rising off the crystal clear water and gingerly took a first step, dropping her towel as she tip-toed down the stone steps. She launched herself, diving head first through the waves. Alpha shrieked and laughed as she swam. 'Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite!'

Alpha O'Mara had arrived!

She was suddenly swallowing mouthfuls of water. "Not waving, but drowning", as her favourite poet, *Stevie Smith*, once wrote.

Alpha was no longer alone.

She flapped her arms under water, panicking and covering her maidenhood. A huge bear of a man who was standing on the pool's edge watching Alpha swim naked, and he was rocking with laughter.

Nooooooooooooo? Merd!

Alpha burst up through the water, spluttering hard and struggling for air.

'Oh laaa? Une grand poisson dans la piscine?' Lou-Lou roared, patting his belly.

Alpha wasn't happy being naked and less happy about being called a "big fish." She stood upright, her hands covering her boobs, goose-pimples spreading over her naked body as she trembled. Lou-Lou,

the scary farmer was flapping her towel around. It was Lou-Lou, a huge man of around forty with a black short black beard, ruddy face and black twinkling eyes.

Clasping two hands over each naked breast, Alpha shrieked. A spluttering Lou-Lou, held out her towel, looking the other way as he advanced, a nervous Matador, unable to look at the approaching Bull. Alpha grabbed the situation by the horns, whisking away the towel offered by Lou-Lou. Wrapping the towel around her, she climbed up the pool's steps, her teeth chattering from the cold. 'Bonjour, Monsieur Lou-Lou. Je suis La Maitresse du Manoir!'

Raymond popped out from behind the Bay tree, waving his arms around frantically behind Lou-Lou. 'Never, ever say "Maitresse!" Never, ever! They all have Mistresses out here and the French have a state recognised 'Mistress hour', cinq-a-sept! Five to seven! No affairs, darling, or your novel, and your life, will turn to gobbledeegook!' Raymond was gone.

Voof!

"Gobbledeegook?" Alpha giggled in amazement as Lou-Lou kissed her outstretched hand.

"Gobbledeegook?" Uh?" Lou-Lou laughed loudly, towering over her, a warm, grizzly bear, his woollen work hat and dirty jeans hiding a ready wit. He grinned at Alpha admiringly, his black eyes flicking up and down her towel-wrapped body.

Alpha shivered hard. 'Je m'appelle Alpha!'

'Alfa? Alfa Romeo? Brum-brum!' Lou-Lou gripped an imaginary steering wheel, as if driving in as racing-car rally at *Le Mans*. 'Brum, Brum, mon Alfa Romeo!'

Alpha started to giggle. A crap joke from a French farmer, but strangely funny?

What was happening here? Brighton with its frothing Lattes suddenly seemed a long way away.

Suddenly embarrassed, Alpha bellowed towards the house. 'Willooooo?' Her Knight in shining armour came bounding over the lawn.

Will, grinning, thrust out his hand at Lou-Lou and an *Entente Cordiale* broke out between the French and English. Alpha saw her chance to escape as the two men cracked open the bottle and she darted away, running across the lawn, towel wrapped around her. It was late February but a sort of *summer* was

emerging. Alpha realised that she felt happy and *happy*, with the stress of their move and their near-escape from creditors, wasn't a feeling she had felt for a long time.

Happy? Wowza?

Alpha walked into the kitchen, with its flagstone floors and large, stone Charentaise fireplace, where Thomaz had built a small log fire, now crackling away cheerfully. 'Thomaz? You've made a fire? How genius!'

'I make the try, Alpha! I want the children happy here!' Thomaz beamed proudly.

Alpha grinned and beamed at Dex and Maisie, tucking into steaming potatoes and *Steake Haches*, fresh French beef burgers. Maisie shook the tomato ketchup bottle and squealed. 'Merci, maman. Merci! See? I can talk French now. Where's Dadums?'

'Talking to our farmer, Lou-Lou. He's a brilliant character!'

Dex raised an eyebrow. 'Cool. Hey, get a load of this?' Dex was brandishing the *Filthy French and How to Swear like a Legionnaire* book. Dex read slowly, cracking up. '*C'est vraiment la zone ce bled, qu'est-ce qu'on peut s'y faire chier!*' This place is a compete dump, you could really get bored shitless here!'

Alpha swiped at Dex, giggling. Dinner on, happy children, a bottle of *Pineau*, the sweet local brandy, chilling in the fridge. Pip scuttled across the smooth terracotta tiles of the kitchen and Alpha scooped him up and hugged him. A warm and silly fur ball, bless him!

She felt younger, brighter, and *sexy*. Yes, *sexy*, goddamnit! A bit of flirting with Lou-Lou had made her feel like *Brigitte Bardot*.

It was time for reinvention now she was forty. Reinvention French style!

She would bleach her black curls blonde, wear pale lipstick and sexy black eye liner and sashay her way through her new life, a walking 'homage' to *Brigitte*, the woman who put the 'la bombe' into 'bombshell!' It suddenly felt good to be alive and even better to be alive in France. Alpha giggled to herself, wrapping her towel around her body.

France - milles points. Angleterre – zero!

CHAPTER THREE – TO MARKET, TO MARKET!

“To market, to market, to buy a fat pig,

Home again, home again, jiggedy jig.

To market, to market, to buy a fat hog,

Home again, home again ...?”

Alpha turned round to Dex and Maisie seated in the back of Will's car. The sun was shining, and her hair, now bleached white-blonde, was swept up into a *Brigitte B*-style chignon. She was wearing black, heavy sixties eyeliner and pouty pale lipstick. How blimmin' *Bardo-esque* was that?

Dex stared back at Alpha. French school was on Monday and it was looming large.

Alpha smiled warmly at them both: she so wanted her babies to be ok in the French snake pit they were about to enter. “To market, to market to buy a fat hog” and then what? It is very important that we keep your English up. Don't want you guys banging on about what a great guy Napoleon was and staring, blank faced at the mention of Nelson, eh?

“To buy a fat hog. Home again, home again, jiggedy jog!” You should know that, Mum. writers are meant to be clever and know everything.' Dex raised a glum eyebrow

Maisie looked at Alpha with big, sad doe eyes. 'I'm a fat hog, Mumz!'

'Maisie, that's crazy talk? Keep saying your aphorisms, baby. “I am a special and unique girl and there is no one else in the whole universe like me.”

'Apart from a “fat hog!”' Dex grinned, his mood brightening.

Will gave Alpha a sideways smile as he proudly gripped the steering wheel of his old Citroen that he had bought from Lou-Lou. Will looked browner, less the pale city Architect and more rustic French farm hand, denim shirt rolled back to reveal tanned forearms.

Nice!

Three weeks in the French countryside was having a good effect on him. Alpha massaged his neck as Will purred like a tiger. She suddenly wanted to do naughty things to Will. *Very* naughty things. Sort-of 'Ooo, la, la' things, dressed up as *Bardot* in a red Bordello outfit, leather whip at the ready as she straddled Will and ... ?

Sacre bleu?

'Wow?' Will slowed down as the car lurched forwards, his eyes widening. A man, wearing a tattered French Foreign Legion uniform, was standing at one side of this high, long road that swept down majestically into Chalez. The man, tall, rake thin, greasy black hair pushed under his dirty, peaked cap, was standing to attention, ready to salute.

Will laughed, amazed. 'Ok, people, for once I have the goss! This is 'Two Planks', Lou-Lou told me, whom the locals say is 'two planks' short of a roof. Two Planks is a well loved member of the Chalez community.'

Two Planks saluted them. Alpha laughed, charmed. 'That is *so* French? What a character, bejayzis? Don't have to make anyone up for my novel!'

Maisie waved back at Two Planks out of the back window. They all laughed in amazement. Maisie, cheered up, beamed at her mother. 'I'm not a fat hog. I'm beautiful, special and a unique girl and the only Me in the whole wide universe!'

Dex cackled. 'You and Two Planks both. Unique!'

Grinning to herself, Alpha inhaled the fresh spring air, This *was* 'La Vie en Rose' where the pleasures were sure and simple.

The Good Life in France had surely begun!

It was Friday, and Chalez Market was in full throttle. Red-faced, sun-burnt Brits were wrapped up in their *Marks & Spencers* padded jackets, tentatively tooting their horns at old French ladies pulling along trolleys stuffed with fruit and vegetables, as they attempted to reverse their huge 'people carriers' into small, French parking places just outside the local supermarket.

Chalez Market knew no shame, stalls were set up here, there and everywhere and if people's cars were blocked in by the colourful wares and tables, then so be it. This was Chalez in 'La France Profonde', deepest France. Chalez was a working market town, stripped back, sleeves rolled up and searingly honest. It was what it was and apologised to no one.

Alpha was bouncing along, having just bought a large, straw basket. She was feeling *deliciously* French, her now bleached-blonde, her rolled-up 'chignon' proudly intact at the back of her head, her stripy French t-shirt hugging her generous (*Bardot-esque*) curves.

She giggled at the sight of the nervy, red-nosed Brits blinking nervously into the Chalez sun, feeling smug that she had spent her Gap Year slumming in French cafes in Nimes, learning slang, the French *L'Argot*, smoking, snogging and sneering and dunking warm *Croissantes* into huge *Cafe Au Lait*s, frothing coffees in large, gold-rimmed cups.

The memory of that night with the salt-kissed Raoul under the wooden fishing boat in Cannes also stirred deep within her.

Alpha gurgled happily. Time to sashay through the market as if starring in *Et Dieu Cree La Femme*, Bardot's seminal movie: *And God Created Woman*. Alpha was Bardot.

Nice feeling!

Dex was at her elbow, Will and Maisie in the *InterMarche*, the local Supermarket. Alpha spotted Dex's teacher, making a bee-line for them, the spooky Madame Beaufriere, the Head of Discipline at the local school.

Dex, engrossed in *Filthy French*, laughed loudly as he read: "Women loved him even though he's nothing to look at and no better in the brains department. He's got a dick a foot long!" "*Les gonzesses l'adorent bien qu'il soit pas bien beau et guere plus malin: il parait; qu'il a un engine d'un pied de long!*"

Madame Beaufriere, sixty three, stern, nearing retirement, pink eyes blinking behind her black shades, hissed and reeled back. Alpha, gasping, jabbed Dex in the ribs, and flashed her 'charm-em' Air Hostess smile as she nervously pumped the Teacher's cold, reptilian hand. 'Ah, Madame Beaufriere? Enchante, Madamd Beaufriere! Comment ca-va, Madame Beaufriere?'

Translation? '*Gush: Madame Beaufriere! Enchanted, Madame Beaufriere!*'

Dex shrivelled as Madame Beaufriere loomed over him, more jailer than teacher. Madame Beaufriere gripped Dex's hand. 'Bonjour, Dexter. L'ecole commence la semaine prochaine!'

'Yes, Madame. That will be great ... er, yes, perfect - parfait!' Dex bravely spluttered.

Madame Beaufriere drew herself up, hissing loudly. 'En Francais, Dexter, en Francais. En Francais toujours. Vous etes en France maintenant!' Madame Beaufriere glided off, adjusting her black shades, telling Dex to speak French all the time now as he was in France.

Dex gasped. 'Couldn't I be home-educated, Mum? You could do it – you're clever! Forget what I said earlier. That Beaufriere woman gave me the feckin' heebies!'

'Dexter? Watch your mouth? You sound like a drain!'

'Hypocrite, Mum! Your mouth is the filthiest sewer in the whole of France!'

'Oooo? Another domestic, Alphabet? Better than *Hollyoaks*, eh, Don? Love the peroxide – very *Diana Dors!*'

Alpha imploded, all things *Bardot* blasted away. *The Brummie Bores?* She really *was* in French Farce mode now!

Don whacked Dex hard on the back. 'If this young man is anything like our Toby, he will be dropping out of school and smoking the local whacky-backy!'

Sandy was spluttering with embarrassment. 'Don't be a daft brush, Donald!' Four Brits hovered behind her. Sandy, reeling, addressed the assembled crowd. 'Madame Alphabet here is a writer. Madame Alphabet also has an Au Pair – he's ever such a hunk! Can you set me up on a date with him? Got a butler and no doubt servants, too? The Grand Lady writer, eh?'

Dex stepped in. 'My mum's a great writer. The best, in fact!'

Alpha gasped. She adored her son - more than ever at that moment.

'Ooo? Feisty boy? Bit like you, eh, Alphabet?' Sandy flicked her hair around, unnerved.

An elderly man, sprightly for sixty-five, stepped forward, grinning eagerly. He barred his teeth, revealing large, sharp front incisors.

Alpha recoiled: *A Vampire?*

'Oh, goody! I'm a writer too. We can compare notes!' Ronald, a former 'Doctor' leaned in.

'Ronald Hartington. Meet Sue, my lady wife ... come on, bunny?' Ronald dragged Sue, grey, wispy hair

unkempt, towards Alpha. Alpha clocked Sue's large front incisors - did these people really have 'Vampire' teeth? Were they blood-suckers or what?

Scary stuff!

Sue, a shaking Alcoholic looking far older than her forty years, stuttered nervously as Alpha and Dex reeled back from her pungent smell of alcohol. 'Are you really called Alphabet? That's so fascinating, it r-r-reminds me of ..?'

'The Alphabet?' Dex grinned.

'Dexter? Go find the others - now!' Alpha shooed him off and shook Sue's hand, as Ronald pumped Alpha's other one. Sandy shoved another couple towards Alpha, her eyes darkening behind her gold glasses. 'Meet your neighbours, Alphabet? Beth and Jeremy, our besty friends. Moving into the barns at the bottom of your field. Opening a Gite complex like you but theirs is organic!'

Enter Beth of Bath!

Beth, moved towards her, boring holes into Alpha's eyes. She was tall - annoyingly taller and slimmer than Alpha – and worse, younger - a heaving cleavage on display, a woman in her mid thirties. Beth's smiled a superior smile, her brown 'doe' eyes and rosy cheeks glowed healthily. Sue and Donald, the 'Alkie Vampires' shrank back, humble 'courtiers' to this undoubted 'Queen'.

Beth of Bath. Beth la Bete. Beth, as Alpha would call her, the very Beast of Darkness!

Beth purred powerfully, her tall body blocking out the sun, her voice soft and low. 'A writer? How nice!'

The colours in the market were starting to blur, the reds, burnt oranges and saffron yellows from the African spice stall mixing uneasily with the bright greens of the giant marrows and courgettes of the groaning fruit stalls. Alpha felt her jaw freeze. It always did this when she was faced with a block of human negativity. 'Yes, writing it's nice. So ... nice?'

Who was this holistic nightmare of a woman? Alpha could feel herself draining of her very life-blood.

Beth stared at Alpha, her soft brown eyes flickering, her smirk steady, her gaze pure.

'I run a Book Group. We may need you, Alpha.'

Alpha nodded, no longer in control of her own face? Bejayzis? What was happening here?

Alpha felt herself morphing into the *Witch* in *The Wizard of Oz*, shrinking back from the pail of water as Beth, a fresh faced *Judy Garland*, loomed triumphantly over her. Beth purred loudly. 'We hear you are from Brighton? Jeremy and I are from a village outside Bath – a place where children can still be children. Your son is clearly a city boy with city problems.'

Sandy, Don, Roland and Sue, gazed adoringly at their Queen nodding in agreement.

Alpha smiled weakly. 'Don't you think kids all swear now. It doesn't mean so much as it did. Sure we all did when younger?'

Sue, the Alkie wife snorted, alcohol running fiercely through her veins. 'I bloody did and Ron, you swear like a fucking pig!'

All drew back, gasping, as Beth, flashed her baby brown eyes at Sue, her displeasure clear.

Ronald stammered, smoothing his greasy strands of hair over his bald pate, the wind suddenly disrupting them. 'She's j-j-jjoking, Beth - aren't you, chicken? Must be the Pineau we tried last night! Time for your nap, old girl!'

Sue shrank back, back into her mouse-hole, giggling drunkenly. Twenty years younger than her husband, Sue smiled, a woman deperate, trapped and lonely.

Beth turned to Alpha, fixing her with her steady, powerful gaze. 'We're converting the barns at the bottom of your field. Monsieur Lou-Lou is helping us. A sweet-heart, bless him!'

'Beth's taming scary bear Lou-Lou. Teaching him English 'an all!' Sandy gushed, a vile flatterer in Queen Beth's Court

Beth purred smugly. 'Oh, he's not so scary, Sandy. Lou-Lou had a very tough childhood in the slums of Bordeaux, poor lamb, but we are working through that.'

Was Beth Lou-Lou's therapist or what? Lou-Lou was her discovery not Beth's!

Beth turned to address another 'Courtier' lurking near. 'Come and say 'hello', Jeremy?'

Jeremy, a male so neutered that he had no visible back-bone, stepped forward. His pale face was as milky white as his ashen hair. He smiled weakly at Alpha, his voice soft and cracking. 'Hello there. I'm Jeremy. You will see me clambering over the roofs with Lou-Lou. Or tinkering around with my cars?'

Beth nodded for Jeremy to step back into the shadows. 'Our Book Group, Alpha? We meet in the *Bar du Marche* in Chalez at seven o'clock, last Thursday of each month. Be there!'

Beth was in total control.

Alpha gulped hard, her throat running dry. Raymond, her dad, was suddenly hissing in her ear: 'Come on, darling? Show 'em what you're made of. Be brave!'

'Will do!' Alpha raised herself up high.

Time to meet her Maker!

'Sorry, people, but I must focus on my own book. I ran a Book Group in Brighton and they always end up as drunken orgies. People spilling their guts and having affairs. Group therapy for screwed up people really!'

Shocked gasps from Don and Sandy, Ronald and Sue. Breath, or rather, Beth, widened her soft, dewy eyes with alarm, reeling as Jeremy steadied her arm from behind.

Beth from Bath was not happy!

French house-wives and little old ladies in black shawls, were haggling over oranges and lemons, herbs and spices and all seemed to freeze. Chalez market was at stand still. Sandy, Don, Ronald and Sue stared on in terror, their jaws dropping in unison.

Alpha had crossed a line with their Queen!

Beth spoke very slowly, as if to a demented childn, her baby-brown eyes hardening. 'You are clearly not used to life out here, Alpha, but you will learn. We all help each other out here. Our one rule that no one, that's *no one*, ever breaks. Are you understanding me?'

Alpha, spluttering, unravelling, could see Will, Dex and Maisie – the Cavalry arriving!

Hooray! Hurrah!

Will was suddenly there, touching Alpha's arm. Will started pumping arms, taking the heat off. All unfroze and the market traders and shoppers eagerly resumed their conversations. A blaze of colour returned to Chalez market. Will smiled warmly at Alpha.

'Got a quote from the vet for taking out Pip's missing ball. The little pest has to be neutered!' Will grinned and stuck his hand out to Beth as she reeled back from this handsome man. Beth purred, staring doe-fully at Will.

'Mr. Alphabet, no doubt?'

'You got it. A 21st century man in crisis, as my wife takes my lead role as the dominant species. An Alpha female, of course!'

Alpha clocked a triumphant smirk on Beth's lips as she was giving Will a full view of her ample bosoms. Will grinned, his eyes flicking across Beth's breasts. Alpha gasped.

Was Will looking at Beth's bosoms, bejayzis?

She hissed at Will under her breath. 'Yer feekin' dead, mister!'

Don and Sandy turned to leave leaving. Sandy hissed at Alpha, flicking her hair around. 'See you later, Alphabet-gator!'

Beth smiled at Will, fluttering her baby-brown eyelashes. 'Alpha says she hasn't got time to join our Book group, which is sad, as moving to France is about re-discovering the good things in life. Perhaps you would like to join us, Will?'

The Alkie Vampires leaned in, eager Courtiers in the Court of Good Queen Beth of Bath. Beth purred at Will. 'We need some more men and you seem like a thinking, caring man, Will.' 'I like to think I care, Beth, but sometimes life and my darling wife get in the way! But hey, why not?' Will laughed, flattered. 'I read, when I'm not fixing lawn-mowers and painting shutters, that is!'

Alpha reeled back in horror. Feckerama? Will was flirting with this boobed-up, organic babe from Bath!

Beth beamed. 'Lovely stuff! You could help us restore our Organic gites, Will? Jeremy will teach you how to thatch - learnt that from Lou-Lou, haven't you, poppet?'

Will chuckled. 'If I can help with your roof, I will, but am a novice, so be warned!'

Beth shot a pitying look at Alpha and turned, gliding off through the market, her neutered, whipped dog of a husband following at her heels. Will smiled at Alpha.

'Seem like nice people, babes? Good to be friendly with the neighbours, eh?'

'"Nice people?" Will? "Nice people?!" You are so feekin' naive! The Wife of Bath isn't 'nice.' She's ready to eat you alive and those Alkie Vampires will suck ya bones feekin' dry!'

Alpha turned on her heels, dragging Pip behind her, hot tears of hot anger springing into her eyes.

'Sorry, kids – really sorry but I'm walking back!'

Dex nudged his Dad to pay up. 'Two 'fecks', makes two pounds in the swear box!'

Alpha's *Brigitte Bardot* day had gone belly up. She stormed off through the market, her bleach-blonde chignon unravelling, her make up smudged as she angrily rubbed away tears of anger. Her husband had been drawn in by this nightmare of a woman – and *worse*, these people were their neighbors, lurking at the bottom of their meadow?

She had met her nemesis and the woman was a power-crazed, organic Saint!