

Extract from “More to Life than This”

Chapter 1

‘We’re far too young to be doing this, Jeffrey.’ Kate looked round the crumbling village hall and put her equally crumbly fruit cake down beside her tepid cup of tea.

‘What?’ Her husband looked up from the bright yellow book of National Open Gardens.

‘This.’ Kate gestured at the peeling paintwork. She lowered her voice. ‘Everyone else in here is potential Zimmer-frame material.’

Her husband peered over his glasses at her. ‘It’s not that bad. You do exaggerate.’

‘Can you see anyone here who isn’t likely to be in the Post Office next Tuesday, drawing their pension – apart from us?’

Jeffrey surveyed the room. He took off his glasses and had a closer look. His mouth twisted uncertainly. ‘We’ve just caught them at a bad time.’

‘I think we’re the ones who are at a bad time.’

At this, he put down the book with a sigh and folded his arms. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘We’ve turned into trainee pensioners.’ She tugged her dark hair back from her forehead with a frustrated jerk, showing the spark of her vivid blue eyes in their full glory. ‘We can’t walk a hundred yards without feeling faint and needing to be resuscitated by Battenberg, angel layer cake and tea with too much milk.’ Kate picked up her cup and put it down again disconsolately. Her husband looked puzzled. ‘But I thought you were thirsty?’

‘I am thirsty – but that’s not the point. We are in the prime of our lives,’ she said emphatically. ‘We should still be passionate about things.’

‘I’m still very passionate!’

She flopped back in her orange plastic chair, causing it to wobble on its rickety legs. ‘About what?’

‘I liked that bubble pond and splashy fountain thing in the last garden – Whatsit Cottage,’ he ventured, scanning the book to find it, without success. ‘Didn’t you think it was nice?’

‘And that’s being passionate?’ Kate picked up a fragment of her cake and tossed it in her mouth. ‘We’ve not yet climbed the hill to forty and we’re behaving as if we’re ready for our first saga holiday.’

A hurt look flashed across Jeffrey’s face. ‘Don’t you enjoy nosing round other people’s gardens?’

‘Yes, I do. But perhaps I’d enjoy doing something else more.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like rollerblading or windsurfing or rock climbing.’

Her husband frowned at the dregs of cold tea in his pale green utilitarian china cup complete with designer chip. ‘You’ve no sense of balance for rollerblading. You hate getting wet and you don’t like heights.’

‘Well, something else then!’

‘The children enjoyed our outing today,’ he reasoned.

‘Doesn’t that worry you?’

‘No, I think it’s rather nice.’ He smiled benevolently in their direction.

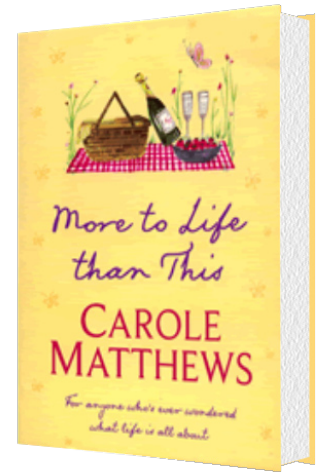
Kate followed his glance to the Women’s Institute home-made produce stall, where a cornucopia of hand-written labels and cellophane-wrapped sponge cakes graced a wonky trestle table. ‘They’re looking at home-made jam,’ she said disbelievingly. ‘They’re ten and twelve years old and they’re looking at home-made jam – happily.’

‘Well, what’s wrong with that?’ Jeffrey asked.

‘Look at them. They don’t argue. Ever. They play nicely together. They sit and watch Neighbours without fighting over the channel changer. And I can’t get a twitch of interest out of them for the lust of Heartbreak High.’

The father of Joseph and Kerry Lewis cracked his knuckles, a tried and tested indicator of supreme exasperation.

‘I mean,’ she continued drearily. ‘When did we last have to go up to their schools and be



lambasted about their disruptive behaviour?’

‘Never!’

‘My point, exactly.’

‘What do you expect?’ Jeffrey’s brow creased in consternation. ‘We’ve brought them up nicely. Would you rather they were behind the bike sheds dropping Es or shooting up heroin?’

‘They should be old enough for a bit of illicit smoking, at least. I’ve searched both of their bedrooms and there’s nothing. Nothing.’ Kate flicked back her mop of raven hair. ‘Sonia said Andrew’s got three copies of Playboy and a packet of multi-coloured condoms, ribbed for extra sensitivity, hidden under his bed already.’

‘He’s eleven years old!’ Jeffrey looked disgusted. ‘Isn’t she the one with the problem, not us?’

Kate ignored him. ‘They shouldn’t be like this, Jeffrey,’ she went on, her eyes troubled. ‘They’re quite happy to be dragged round looking at gardens with their parents on a Sunday afternoon when they should be locked away in their bedrooms, playing computer games and trying to find pornography on the Internet. They actually like fresh air.’

‘It isn’t a crime.’

‘It isn’t normal either.’

‘What were you like at their age?’

‘Little Miss Goody-Two-Shoes,’ she said miserably. ‘I couldn’t move an inch for fear of incurring my parents’ disapproval. I was nurtured to death in a meticulously kept semi-detached emotion-free box.’

Jeffrey smiled sadly. ‘I was the same,’ he said. ‘It was called good parenting then – in the days before social workers were invented. They did their best.’

‘That’s not what I want for our children,’ she sighed. ‘I want them to be free to make their own mistakes, I want them to run before they can walk and do what they want to do, not what they think they’re expected to do!’

‘They’re young. They’re still finding their feet. Give them time.’

She pointed surreptitiously at them. ‘But jam, Jeffrey, jam. We have two middle-aged children and it’s all our fault.’

‘I know you worry about this but let’s not have a fight today.’ He reached out and took her hand. This wasn’t the first time that Kate had made these kind of noises, and Jeffrey didn’t want to cause a scene. ‘They’re all right,’ he said gently, ‘really they are. Perhaps they’ll be late developers.’

‘I must have potty trained them too young,’ Kate said. ‘It causes them to be repressed as adolescents. I read it in Parent and Child magazine. They’re too perfect and it’s all because I was fed up with lugging truckloads of Pampers from the supermarket.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, you’re a wonderful mother! You should be proud of them.’

‘I know.’ Her voice wavered.

Jeffrey stood up, causing his chair to screech across the wooden floor. The roomful of pensioners looked up from their iced cherry fancies and glared at him. He smiled apologetically. ‘Let’s make a move,’ he told his wife. ‘We seem to have exhausted the delights that Great Brickworth gardens have to offer.’

Kate picked up her cardigan from the back of the chair and slipped her hand in his as they walked to the door. ‘I’ve spoiled the afternoon now, haven’t I?’

He squeezed her hand. ‘Of course you haven’t.’

The children fell in step behind them. ‘Can we have some jam, Mummy?’

‘We’ve got a cupboard full of it at home.’

‘Yes, but this has big lumps of strawberry in it,’ Kerry insisted. ‘Not like that horrible processed stuff from Sainsbury’s which is full of artificial colour and preservatives and probably gives you me.’

‘Why don’t you make jam any more?’ Joe asked.

‘I’ve been busy.’ Doing what? ‘I’ll make some this week,’ Kate promised.

‘Great!’ They raced ahead into the sunshine.

It was one of those sweltering Mediterranean-type days with an impossibly blue sky – one of those days when you can believe global warming is really happening and isn’t just something made up by bored scientists to keep themselves in a job. And yet as they began to walk back to the car, the welcome heat that was searing into the skin of her arms singularly failed to bring any

warmth to Kate's soul.

'You're quiet,' Jeffrey said.

'Sorry.'

'You know,' he fiddled with her fingers, 'I think this is more about you feeling restless than anything to do with the children. They're perfectly content.'

'I know.' She squeezed his fingers back. 'I wish I could feel so delirious at being fobbed off with the vague promise of home-made jam.'

'Maybe you should stop thinking about making jam and do something more interesting. Get out more.' He stared at the lane ahead of them. 'I know you've not been finding things easy recently.'

She stopped and looked at her husband. Her other half. Jeffrey was so sure, so confident, so at home with himself. If he was her other half, why didn't he make her feel whole any more? Where had their oneness gone? The children didn't need her, either. Not like they used to. They loved her, as Jeffrey did, but they didn't need her. So long as there was a meal on the table, clean socks in the drawer and someone to drive them around in the car, they were perfectly self-sufficient individuals. She had been a wife and mother for longer than she cared to remember – even longer than Richard Whiteley had hosted Countdown. They'd had the best years of her life and now she no longer knew who she was. Her brain had been sucked dry by domestic duties until she felt like one of those sad women on TV ads who get their meagre kicks out of sniffing the fresh lemon tang of their new-improved fabric conditioner. Suddenly, the fulfilment she had experienced from being the hub of her family had flown out of the window, along with the ability to drink more than two glasses of wine without getting pissed and endure more than two consecutive late nights. The feelings of doubt and insecurity that had been bobbing below the surface of her consciousness broke water. 'Do you think I'm boring, Jeffrey?'

'Of course I don't.'

'I do.' She snapped a stem from the lavender bush that cascaded over the weathered stone wall next to them and twisted it in her fingers, inhaling its soothing scent. 'I've nothing interesting to say these days. My whole life revolves round the home. I feel like a hamster on one of those little treadmill things. I scurry around wearing my legs out for no good purpose. My week is spent shopping and cleaning and cooking and making sure that the kids are washed and ironed and ready to go to school. I do nothing for myself.'

'You go to the gym with Sonia.'

Kate gave a sad little laugh. 'It's not exactly the meaning of life, is it?'

Jeffrey turned to her and the look of bewilderment on his face churned her insides. 'I had no idea you were so unhappy,' he said quietly.

'I'm not,' she said. 'Truly, I'm not. It's just that . . .' Suddenly her throat had closed and there was a nasty hot stinging behind her eyes. 'It's just that . . .' She gulped the tears away. 'There must be more to life than this.'

'What more do you want?'

I want to feel alive again. She trailed her hand along the rough stone, enjoying the pain on her soft skin. Anything rather than the numbness there was inside. 'I used to wake up in the morning wondering what new challenges the day ahead would hold. I couldn't wait to get out of bed! Now I just wonder how much of the ironing I'll be able to get through before the kids come home and need feeding. I don't measure my pessimism by whether a wine glass is half-full or empty – the ironing basket is my gauge.'

She turned to Jeffrey, but the expression on his face said that he was lost when it came to sorting out her problems. She was the sorter-outer in their household. The lawnmower breaks – Kate fixes it. The washing machine floods – Kate mops up after it. The goldfish dies – Kate digs the hole, buries the fish and provides the tissues for the weeping children. Kate also arranges replacement goldfish, having trawled half the pet shops in the surrounding area for its identical twin.

'What do you want to do?' he asked, with the air of a man who isn't sure whether he really wants to know the answer.

'Perhaps I should get a job,' Kate said. 'I don't even know what I could do. Shorthand, telex machines and manual typewriters were all the rage when I was last in an office. I'd have to update my skills. How would I cope?'

'You could do something completely different.'

'Like what? I don't even get the time to think about what I might be able to do.'

She was a nineties woman. Wasn't having it all the key to the meaning of life? What did all

mean, exactly? She'd got the big house, the nice car, the executive professional husband, the 2.4 children and the cupboard full of Fruit 'n' Fibre. What was she supposed to want now? A taxing job and the joy of juggling home plus career and doing neither well? Voluntary work? Would two days a week in an Oxfam shop reeking of old clothes make her feel like a valuable part of the human race again?

'Maybe you need to get away by yourself for a few days,' Jeffrey suggested. 'I don't know, maybe to a health farm or something. Have some quality thinking time.'

'Go away?' Kate was shocked. 'Without the children?'

'It's not unheard of.'

'Without you?'

'It might help.' Jeffrey didn't look convinced that it would.

It might help or I might decide I never want to come back again. Where would I go? What would I do? Who would remember to feed the cat?

'It's a thought,' she said uncertainly. 'Would you mind?'

'Of course not.' They'd reached the car – a top of the range Mercedes supplied by Hills & Hopeland Chartered Accountants. Jeffrey blipped the remote-control central locking and the kids leapt inside. He turned and scuffed his thumb across her chin. 'Not if it makes you happy again.'

The tears threatened to splash out of her eyes, a bit like the bubble pond that Jeffrey had so admired and she had thought was so pathetic. She got into the car, swallowing down the emotion that had lodged in her throat. Jeffrey slid in next to her. How could she feel so far away from this man who was physically so close to her, a man she had known for over half of her life. He patted her knee gently. 'The kids and I could manage without you.'

'Could you?' It came out more bitterly than she intended.

'For a few days,' he said with a smile that was as sweet and as uncomplicated as Gary Lineker's.

That smile had been the reason she married him.

Jeffrey swung the car into the narrow country lanes and the car purred effortlessly along. Kate looked at her husband as he concentrated on the road. He was a good man. Kind, thoughtful, a bit intense. He had what her mother called 'intellectual good looks', which essentially meant he wore horn-rimmed glasses. His brown eyes were gentle, but you could never quite tell what was going on behind them. His face was smooth and youthful, with a high intelligent forehead that could be attributed to the steady retreat of his fair hair. 'Staid' was his middle name. Jeffrey was the sort of man who could work the video recorder – all of it. Even the special functions that no one ever used and were written half in Chinese and half Latvian. He knew how the self-timing oven worked, how to record a new message on the ansaphone and had read the manual supplied with every piece of electrical equipment in the house. From cover to cover. He liked having thirty-two equally spaced drapes in the lounge curtains and was even known to count them on occasions. Over the years she too had become accustomed to a certain amount of regularity in curtain folds.

In the back of the car the children were smiling like a pair of Rubens cherubs. They started to sing Ten Green Bottles. The countryside whizzed by. The canary yellow fields of rapeseed, a sprinkling of scarlet poppies in the hedgerows, birds flitting from telephone wire to telephone wire.

'And if one green bottle should accidentally fall . . .'

That's just what she felt like. As if she was teetering on top of a wall like an unsteady bottle, waiting to see how long and how far the fall would be, and how much the process of being smashed would hurt. She looked at her handsome husband and her beautiful children and a cold shiver ran down her spine as she wondered if anyone else ever felt as if they were living in an Enid Blyton story.

Chapter 2

'You look really fed up,' Kate observed as she towelled her hair dry, grateful that the changing rooms were, for once, warm and not too smelly. It might be one of the most exclusive health clubs in the area, but even the lady members were still prone to bouts of cheesy-footedness.

'I am,' her friend Sonia agreed.

'What is it? Sex or Weight Watchers?'

'Weight Watchers. I've put on half a stone.'

'Half a stone?' Kate looked at her friend in dismay.

'Since last week.' Sonia collapsed on the bench, stuffed her sweaty T-shirt in her holdall and pulled on her knickers.

'How did that happen?'

'I was permanently hungry.'

'I thought you could eat unlimited vegetables.'

Sonia glanced sheepishly at her friend. 'How was I supposed to know that Cadbury's Caramel wasn't a vegetable?'

'Sonia!' Kate laughed.

'I hate you,' her friend said vehemently, shoe-horning herself into her jeans. 'You just don't understand what it's like. You're the only woman in the world who has trouble keeping weight on.'

'I look after myself.'

'So do I,' Sonia protested.

'The difference is I look after myself with a healthy diet and exercise.' Kate looked at her sagely. 'You look after yourself with Mars Bars and Bacardi and Coke.'

She came and sat down next to her friend, struggling to pull her leggings over her damp skin. 'I really don't know why you worry,' she said comfortingly. 'You look great, Son.'

'I've put heaps of weight on over the years.'

'Not that much, surely?'

'I used to weigh seven pounds, three ounces.'

Kate laughed. 'Well, I think you look good as you are.'

Her friend hung her head and examined her pink Nike trainers intently. 'I feel I have about as much sexual allure as a Fray Bentos Steak and Kidney pie.'

'Are things no better between you and Kev?'

'He still views sex as a non-participant sport, if that's what you mean.'

'Oh, Sonia.'

'Do you know,' she said lightly, 'a vigorous sex session burns off a hundred and sixteen calories. That's equivalent to one whole Hob Nob. I try to use it as part of Kevin's calorie-uncontrolled diet. It adds a whole new dimension to "Do you fancy a quick cup of tea and a Hob Nob, darling?"' She looked sadly at Kate. 'He just never takes me up on it.'

'Jeffrey and I are no different,' Kate admitted. 'We'd rather watch Inspector Morse than make love these days.'

'That's really sad,' Sonia commiserated. 'I can't stand John Thaw.'

'Sex isn't everything in a relationship.' Kate didn't sound convinced, even to her own ears. Their bed seemed to be getting wider and wider as the gulf between them grew. Jeffrey treated her like his favourite sister, not like the red-hot love machine that she felt burning inside her. 'It's important to have companionship, shared interests and mutual respect.'

'If you believe that, you'll believe anything,' Sonia snorted. 'I'd rather have a good bonk any day of the week. Or every day of the week,' she added after a moment's thought.

Kate rested her elbows on her knees and put her head in her hands. Her legs felt leaden, even after the hour of 'Lean-Burn, High-Octane' stepping and they matched the heavy feeling that permeated the rest of her body. Why didn't she enjoy anything any more? She always seemed to feel vaguely detached, as if none of this was really happening to her – and everything felt like such an effort. When had her get up and go, got up and gone?

'I'm thirty-five years old,' she complained, 'and already I feel I'm on the slippery slope of middle-age.'

'You're exactly middle-aged, if you believe the Bible. All we get is three score years and ten – if we're lucky.'

'Thanks, Sonia, that makes me feel a lot better.'

Sonia slipped a shapeless jumper over her head. 'Look,' she said kindly, 'you shouldn't think of yourself as thirty-five. Think of yourself as two seventeen-and-a-half-year-olds rolled into one. That's much more fun.'

Kate shook her head sadly. 'There must be more to life than this. Jeffrey's working harder and harder just to stand still. The days seem to melt into one another in an endless stream of drudge.' She twisted towards her friend, just as Sonia was surreptitiously removing a squashed Toffee Crisp from the pocket of her jeans. She stopped guiltily, caught in the act.

'I'm depressed now,' she informed Kate. 'And my sugar levels are dangerously low after all that exercise.'

Kate didn't even hear her. 'Do you know how pathetic my life is? I've even started to worry that my floating candles will sink.'

'Sad,' her friend agreed.

'I have developed an addiction to watching small scented candles in assorted pastel shades glide serenely across ornate bowls of tapwater. I feel suicidal when I see them starting to tilt halfway through dinner, plunging Delia's Beef in Designer Beer into darkness.'

Her friend regarded her with pity.

'And they always do sink,' Kate continued. 'I feel my negative vibes influence them. It's karma.'

'It isn't, it's the Titanic principle. One heavy object, one expanse of water, one impending disaster.' Sonia proffered a bite of the Toffee Crisp. Kate declined. 'You're lucky that you have so little to trouble you.'

'I know, I should be grateful, shouldn't I? I should be happy.'

Sonia met her eyes. 'But you're not.'

'No. It's not that I don't love Jeffrey,' Kate said hastily.

'Hm. That particular sentence usually precedes goodbye and a dramatic slamming of the door.'

Kate sniffled miserably.

'So what are you going to do about it?' Sonia prompted.

Kate tilted her chin decisively. 'I have decided to confront my velvet-lined rut of a life, take it by the throat and give it a thorough shaking!'

'I constantly feel like doing that to Kev,' Sonia conceded. 'And, pray tell, how is this "thorough shaking" going to proceed?'

Kate hesitated. 'You'll laugh.'

'I won't.' Sonia held up her Girl Guide salute. 'May God strike me dead!'

'Promise?' Kate took a deep breath. 'I've booked myself on a week's T'ai Chi course at Northwood Priory.'

Sonia looked at her po-faced. 'T'ai Chi? Isn't that what ancient Chinese pensioners do in the parks?' Sonia pressed her lips together and tried to look suitably serious.

Kate said defensively, 'Yes. It's a Chinese system of exercises that promote physical and mental well-being. It happens to be very trendy at the moment.'

'And Alvin Stardust's all the rage too.'

'It's not funny,' Kate said irritably. 'I'm leaving Jeffrey, the kids and the Dyson bagless vacuum cleaner behind and I'm doing something for me!' She pointed at her chest. 'I'm going to have a week away from them all to think about what I want from life.'

'We could go up to London together,' Sonia suggested. 'We could see The Chippendales, get drunk on Bacardi and Coke at ten quid a throw in some trendy bar, and then bop till we drop at one of those sweaty nightclubs filled with Arab tourists.'

'You make it sound so appealing, Sonia.'

Kate picked up her bag and slung it on her shoulder. Sonia followed, struggling to keep up as Kate crashed through the swing doors; passing a litter bin, she greedily licked her Toffee Crisp wrapper before throwing it away.

'When did you last let your hair down?' she shouted. 'That's all you need.'

'I don't want to let my hair down. I want to find myself.'

They had reached their cars. Usually, the light nights filled Kate full of energy that had her digging the garden borders until bedtime, but this year even the long hot summer days and balmy nights had failed to lift her spirits. Could you get post-natal depression ten years after the children were born?

'Take me with you.' Sonia's voice broke into her thoughts.

'No.'

'Go on, go on, go on!'

'No way.'

'It'll be great crack!'

Kate leaned on the roof of her BMW. 'I don't want "great crack". I want some quiet time to think about things.'

'I'd like some quiet time too,' Sonia insisted. 'Let me come – please.'

'No.'

'I can do quiet.'

'You can't. And anyway, I want to be alone.'

'You sound like bloody Zsa-Zsa Gabor.'

'It was Greta Garbo. And you still can't come.'

'When are you going?'

'I'm not telling you.'

'You'll miss me.'

Kate smiled. 'I know I will.' She opened her car door. 'Don't be cross with me, Sonia. I need to do this by myself.'

'Well, personally,' her friend said sulkily as she flounced across the car park, 'I don't see how waving your arms around for a week just outside High Wycombe is going to change anything!'

