
Times
OF OUR LIVES
JANE WATERTON

Growing older is not for Sissies



Chapter 1

WINTER

“DAMN, BLAST AND BLOODY HELL!”

Allie Richards walked down the corridor of her best friend Meg Sullivan’s cottage and leant against the bedroom doorframe, surveying the large, sunlit room which currently resembled the site of a small cyclone. Clothes, magazines and newspapers tumbled from chairs and covered the floor.

“Meg, what on earth are you doing?” Allie asked, looking at the mess strewn from one end of the room to the other. “Surely it’s too early for spring cleaning!”

“I’m looking for something, or at least I was when I started this process,” Meg grumbled as she swept her hand through her hair. She slumped unceremoniously on the bed, causing a mini avalanche of magazines to cascade to the floor. “Now all I’ve done is make a huge mess and...oh, it doesn’t matter,” she muttered, kicking at the magazines.

Moving aside a pile of clothes, Allie sat on the bed and put her hand on Meg’s arm.

“Meg, what’s wrong? You have been out of sorts for months, and I’m really starting to worry about you.”

“Nonsense, I’m perfectly fine,” Meg said, sitting up straight.

Allie shook her head, crossing her arms. “No, it’s not nonsense. It’s as if you’re only half here. You’re not eating

properly, you've started sleeping in the middle of the day, and I haven't heard you make a sarcastic remark for ages. Something's bothering you, and as your oldest friend I think I have a right to know what it is."

Meg rose from the bed and started to tidy up the room.

"Honestly, Allie," she snapped, "I'm just a little tired. There's no need to make a song and dance over it. Besides, I thought you said I needed to be less sarcastic and more... what was the word? Oh yes, *empathetic*." Meg rolled her eyes. "Now you're complaining. Sometimes I swear you are never satisfied."

Allie studied her closely. After more than forty years of friendship, she knew that no amount of pushing could get Meg to talk about anything until she was ready.

"All right," she said, raising her hands in surrender. "If you say so, I shall believe you."

Meg nodded. "Thank you. So, now that we have that out of the way, what brings you to my inner sanctum? Please tell me it's to whisk the two of us off to one of your delicious lunches and a bottle of wine."

"Well, actually I'm here to see if you're up for a game of golf? The links are free for two hours and if you need any more persuasion, I believe that Helen has gone into town for the afternoon, so we'll have the course to ourselves without any interruptions."

"Well, praise the Lord and grab the clubs," Meg said with relish. "Imagine being able to play a game of golf without dear Helen offering her totally inappropriate advice! Sounds like an opportunity too good to miss. We should call in and see if Bella and Pat are up for a foursome. Why don't we

incorporate both ideas and all go out for dinner tonight as well?”

Allie frowned. “Well, I’m not sure about them. Bella wasn’t feeling too well this morning, and I think she and Pat are having a quiet day.”

Meg huffed, waving her hand dismissively. “Honestly, a game of golf and a night out would do Pat good. I know Bella’s not well, but Pat can’t look after her twenty-four hours a day. She needs time to herself as well.

Allie raised an eyebrow. “Meg, you know...”

“Oh all right, I know. I just think that Pat needs to get out more.” Before Allie could reply, Meg pushed on, “Oh, let’s not argue about it. The day’s a-wasting. Now, I just need to find my clubs and glasses.”

“Your glasses are on top of your head, and your clubs are in the hall stand.”

Allie watched with a smile, as Meg touched up her lipstick and ran a comb through her short hair. Even now in her late sixties, Meg’s striking looks had not diminished. Her tall, svelte body was a direct result of personal pride and a regular exercise regime.

“Lord, looks like another visit to the hairdresser next week,” Meg muttered, staring critically at her reflection. “I swear these grey hairs are conspiring to make me look old. Why couldn’t I have been blonde like you? No-one notices if you go grey.”

Allie grinned. “I always wanted to be tall and gorgeous with long, straight, black hair and instead, here I am. Why is it that we are never satisfied with our lot?”

“Damned if I know, but I guess that’s what makes life interesting. And just for the record, you are gorgeous,” Meg added, giving Allie a quick kiss on the cheek.

Taking advantage of Allie's surprise, Meg shepherded her into the hallway, closing the bedroom door and picking up her keys from the sideboard. "Well, let's go. I'll sort that mess out when we get back."

Meg began to close the front door, but Allie caught her arm. "Don't forget your clubs."

As Meg turned to reply, she suddenly paled and slumped against her friend.

"Meg, are you alright? What's wrong?" Allie asked, tightening her grip. She could feel the slightest of tremors as a look of panic flashed across Meg's face.

"Sorry, yes, I'm fine." Meg blinked and took a couple of deep breaths, shaking her arm from under Allie's hand.

"Are you sure? I think you need to go and lie down..."

Meg straightened to look at Allie directly. "I said I'm fine. Just one of those silly dizzy attacks. For heaven's sake, stop fussing."

Taking another deep breath, she let herself back into the cottage and grabbed the clubs from the hall stand, then closed the door firmly and marched past Allie and down the path without another word.

Bewildered, Allie stood for a moment watching her storm off before collecting her clubs and following.

* * *

At the clubhouse, Allie looked over the beautifully tended nine-hole course and thought again how lucky she was to be here. She still remembered the morning, six years ago, when Meg had rung her, full of enthusiasm after reading an article about OWL's Haven, a lesbian retirement home situated in

Berry on the NSW South Coast, insisting they drive down and see it.

“So, which of us is teeing off first?” Meg asked as they walked towards the first hole.

“Oh, you can. I’m happy to just potter along behind you,” Allie said lazily, enjoying the feel of the sun on her back as she watched the birds skim the grass looking for insects.

Meg addressed the small white ball. Gripping her club, she raised it for the swing, then brought it down to connect perfectly.

Both women watched as it arced towards the fairway, landing just to the right of the sand trap.

“Great shot, Meg.”

Allie carefully placed her ball on the tee, concentrating on the distant flag in the vain hope that her vision might somehow communicate itself to the ball. She swung her club and it hit with a resounding *whack!* Unlike Meg’s, her ball veered sharply and went into the rough. She had only started playing golf recently, as a way of getting more exercise, but Meg had quickly recognised and begun coaching her natural talent.

“Damn,” said Allie crossly. “I’m still pulling to the right.”

Meg shook her head. “Your stance is still not quite right and it’s putting you off balance as you strike the ball.”

The two women started to walk to the fairway, pulling their clubs behind them. Despite Meg’s dizzy turn, she had elected not to take a golf cart, preferring the exercise. A pair of kangaroos stood and watched them approach, their ears flicking, alert to danger. Deciding that the women meant them no harm, they continued grazing.

“What a glorious day!” Allie exclaimed, walking briskly to keep up with Meg’s long strides. “Days like this, it feels good just to be alive. I am so glad you talked me into moving here.”

“Well, break into song and I may have to kill you. I don’t think I could stand a game accompanied by a Doris Day sing-along.”

Allie stopped and grinned at Meg. “Glad to see you back to your normal, feisty self. I was becoming concerned.”

“So glad to be able to reassure you,” Meg answered drily.

“Well, you have to admit, you have been unusually quiet lately.”

“I thought we’d discussed this earlier. Now are we playing golf or getting ready for a Dear Abby session?” Meg snapped.

Allie smiled. “It’s your shot, I believe.”

“I still can’t believe I had to persuade you to move here,” said Meg. “Personally, I thought it was a gift from heaven. I mean, did you honestly want to spend your days in a mixed home, with decrepit old men wherever you turned? It still gives me the shudders even thinking about it.”

Allie leant on her club, watching her friend make another excellent drive. “You know I’m not as adventurous as you. I just had to give it some thought.”

Meg sighed, shaking her head as they walked over to Allie’s ball. “You and your thinking, Allie. It was always the same with your relationships. You’d meet someone and by the time you decided they checked all your boxes, they’d have lost interest and found someone else. Sometimes you have to just jump in and stop being so damned scared.” Seeing the look of hurt on Allie’s face, Meg stopped. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap; it’s just that, sometimes I think you

miss so much by hanging back and not taking a chance. You only get one life, Allie. You've got to stop standing in the shadows and get out there."

"I know, Meg. You never get tired of telling me." Allie kicked her golf ball hard. "And just for the record, I had lots of girlfriends." At Meg's raised eyebrow, she huffed. "Alright, well, maybe not lots, but I had a few. However, never let it be said that you ever let a chance go by. At least I had a relationship that lasted longer than three weeks."

The two women glared at each other.

"Touché," Meg said quietly.

Mortified, Allie walked over to her. "I'm sorry, Meg, that was a really cheap shot." She blew out a breath. "Why are we even arguing about this? What's done is done and we're both here now, which is what's important."

Meg stared off towards the green for a moment. "Well, you've kicked your ball halfway to the green, so that's about four strokes you've conceded." Turning, she looked at Allie thoughtfully. "You know, the way you kicked that ball, maybe you should think about taking up soccer instead."

Both women started to laugh, their anger forgotten.

"Oh sure, I can just see me doing that. If someone kicked the ball towards me I'd run a mile."

Deciding to abandon their game in favour of giving Allie more practice on her swing, they went back to the driving range, where Meg dropped a ball at Allie's feet and took her through the dynamics. As Allie raised her club and twisted, Meg shook her head.

"No, that's where you're going wrong! You're twisting too far and taking the power out of your shot."

At Allie's confused look, Meg moved into position behind her. She put her arms around Allie to grab her club,

settled her hips snugly into Allie's bottom from behind and pushed forward.

"Stop sticking your bottom out," Meg said. "You need to keep a straight line as you bring the club up and back down."

Holding Allie's hands over her club, she demonstrated what she meant and her hips followed Allie's into the twist. As she repeated the motion, Allie started to giggle, breaking Meg's concentration.

She pulled away and asked, "What exactly is so funny?"

Allie stopped laughing long enough to take a breath. "I'm sure it must look like we are up to something quite salacious. Anybody watching would think we are more than just good friends."

Meg considered Allie for a long moment.

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" she said lightly, turning away. "Keep practicing. It's the only way you're going to learn."

Half an hour later, after Allie's fourth successful drive, Meg applauded.

"Well done. How does that feel now?"

Allie grinned. "I think I've finally got it. You're right, it's all in the twist."

"I think that calls for a drink," Meg said.

As she packed up, Allie noticed Meg flexing her left hand.

"Getting arthritis, old girl?" she asked with a smile.

Meg stiffened. "What are you all of a sudden, my personal physician?"

Meg's tone brought Allie up short. She narrowed her eyes and stopped what she was doing. "Meg, are you going to tell me what's going on with you? First you have that attack of whatever it was this morning, and now your hand

is bothering you. For heaven's sake, if something's wrong just tell me!"

Meg hesitated before turning to her friend, a stony expression settling over her features. "I have no idea what you are talking about. I had a slight dizzy turn this morning, probably from not having had enough breakfast, and now I have a blister on my hand from the new gloves. Honestly, Allie, I'm perfectly fine and you need to stop carrying on like some old woman. Now, if it's all right with you, I am going back to my cottage to have a shower and change. Thanks for the game."

Allie blew out a breath. As she walked slowly back to her own cottage, she pondered how on earth she was going to get to the bottom of Meg's behaviour.

Chapter 2

SEATED ON A BLANKET UNDER the shade of a large tree overlooking the verdant golf course, Bella Fiorisi and her partner Pat Campbell were taking advantage of the surprisingly warm late winter's morning. Bella watched as Pat unpacked their basket, taking out a thermos and a container of snacks.

"You know, I think the worst of the winter weather may be over," Bella said. "I'm getting so heartily sick of the cold. I can hardly wait for some warmth and sunshine again."

Pat tucked a rug gently around Bella and eased herself down next to her. Taking Bella in her arms, Pat settled them against the tree.

"You do know you say that every spring?" she teased.

"Well, it's true. There is something so magical about spring, seeing the buds appearing, feeling all that new life just waiting to explode. Even the air smells different." Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, taking in the scent of the freshly mown grass and the sounds of the birds in the tree above them.

"So, are you feeling OK?" Pat asked.

Bella nodded. "It's so wonderful to no longer feel sick from the radiation treatment." Sitting up, she turned to Pat. Placing her hands on either side of Pat's face, Bella leant in.

“But not nearly as good as being told they believe the cancer has gone,” she whispered.

Pat leant her forehead against Bella’s. “So, explain to me again why you want to go ahead with the chemo? I just don’t understand why you would put yourself through that treatment. It makes no sense.”

Bella dropped her hands and felt her good mood quickly evaporating. She desperately wanted Pat to understand, and they had been arguing the pros and cons constantly since she’d made the decision several days ago. She felt if she had to explain it again she would go crazy.

“*Cara*, I need to do this. I’ve tried to explain, but sometimes I think you just don’t want to hear me. The treatment will give me added protection, just in case there is something the doctors can’t see. What is so damn hard to understand about that?” Bella asked, moving out of Pat’s arms and wrapping the rug tightly around her shoulders.

She watched as Pat picked up a leaf and started shredding it.

“I want to help. I want to understand and support you, but...” Pat faltered.

Bella shook her head. “I’m tired, Pat. I really can’t talk about this anymore. Let’s not ruin this lovely morning. Please, *cara*.”

Hearing voices in the distance, both women looked across as Meg and Allie pulled their golf clubs towards the course. Bella watched them banter, Allie’s laughter and the obvious playfulness of the moment helping to ease her mood.

They watched quietly as the women set up for their game. Meg’s swing was strong and sure, and Bella followed the small white ball as it arced gracefully before falling on the fairway.

“Meg’s a damn fine player,” Pat said quietly. “I don’t know why she never played professionally.”

“You know, *cara*, sometimes people do things, like play golf, just for fun,” Bella replied lightly.

Pat gave a small smile. “Are you possibly suggesting that I might have a compulsive competitive streak?”

“Mmmmm...maybe just a tiny bit,” Bella agreed. “You know, you should start playing again. You played every week before I got sick and now you don’t play at all. Meg and Allie would love you to join them, and you need a break from caring for me. I can manage by myself for a few hours.”

Bella watched the emotions play across Pat’s face and felt her heart sink. Since her treatment had begun, Pat had rarely left her side morning or night. Frustrated and increasingly irritated by all the fuss, Bella was at a loss for how to relieve the growing pressure. In an attempt to break the bleak mood that was threatening to ruin their morning, she once again moved close and leant her head on Pat’s shoulder.

“Tell me our story?” she asked quietly.

Pat looked down at her with a smile. “How many times have we told this story to each other?” she asked, gently stroking Bella’s face.

“I could hear it a million times and never grow tired of it. You tell it and suddenly we are young again. Please, *cara*, just once more.”

Pat took her hand, and Bella saw the love in her eyes.

“Well, you’d better get comfortable,” Pat advised. “It’s a long story.”

Bella sat up and repositioned herself against her lover’s chest.

Wrapping her arms securely around Bella, Pat began the story she had told so many times before. “Forty-five years ago, we were both lucky enough to be working for the same company in Melbourne. You were the director’s secretary and I had just been hired in the warehouse. One morning, not long after I started, I was asked to drop some paperwork upstairs. The person I had to deliver it to was away, and someone suggested I leave it with you.” Pat paused, smiling as her memory replayed the familiar scene.

“I will never forget the first time I saw you sitting at your typewriter. You looked up and smiled at me and it was as if I forgot how to breathe. You were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.”

Bella chuckled at the memory. “*Cara*, I remember wondering if you were ill. You stood there, not saying a word, just staring at me. And then you just pushed this paperwork at me and fled before I could say a word to you.”

Pat shrugged. “Well, I was so incredibly awkward and shy, I just wanted the ground to swallow me up.”

“But you persevered,” Bella reminded her.

Pat laughed. “Oh yes, but that’s because I couldn’t get the memory of you out of my head, and I realised I needed to be braver. I kept trying to find reasons to take paperwork upstairs. I would ‘accidentally’ bump into you at lunch time; if you smiled at me, my day was so much brighter, and when you went on holidays, I was miserable.”

“Meanwhile,” Bella interrupted, “I was trying to quietly find out who this handsome, shy woman was. Every time I tried to talk to you, though, you ran away.”

“I was falling in love with you and had no idea how to deal with it,” Pat murmured into Bella’s hair

“And you never said a word to me,” Bella whispered.

Pat shrugged again. “It never occurred to me that you might feel the same way. I was terrified you would find out and laugh at me.”

Bella turned and prodded Pat gently. “Until the night of the storm, when you drove me home and I kissed you. Then you weren’t so shy,”

“Oh, is that so?” Pat raised an eyebrow. “And just exactly who’s telling this story?”

Bella laughed. “OK. I was just moving to the good bit.”

“Well, it wasn’t easy, was it?” Pat asked, settling them back against the tree. “Your strict Italian family almost had you on a curfew. I look back on that period and still wonder that they didn’t discover we were lovers. I was so terrified they would find out and your brother would shoot me, or that someone at work would find out and we would both get sacked.”

“And it wasn’t just them,” Bella reminded her. “Remember when we finally moved to Sydney? We thought we would be able to live freely, but even there it was a life of hidden nightclubs and dinners at close friends’ houses. It was so hard to know who we could trust. Telling our straight friends and colleagues that we were flatmates; having to pretend to another life. It all felt so cheap and dirty. And in the background, so many friends who lost their jobs, their children, got arrested and beaten up. When you look at life now, it’s hard to believe that we all lived in that constant fear.”

“Remember our first Sydney Mardi Gras?” Pat asked.

Bella nodded, squeezing Pat's hand. "You were watching the parade and crying. When someone asked you why, you said it was because you were so happy."

"I couldn't believe it. Everything we fought for was right there, marching in all its flamboyance down Oxford Street. It was as if we had made it through all that pain and uncertainty and come out stronger and happier than we could ever have dreamt possible."

Bella turned. Taking Pat's hands, she chose her words carefully. "You know, that's how I feel about my cancer. I need to fight this, *cara*, with everything I have in me. It may not be enough, but if not, I need to know I gave it everything I could and have no regrets." Seeing the growing panic her words were causing, she softened her tone. "You and I have been through so much together. If I could spare you this pain I would, but the truth is, I can't do this without you."

"I just hate that it will continue to make you so sick," Pat said, anguished.

Bella once again leant back into Pat's arms. She felt the sun on her face and wished that time would just stop, allowing them to stay in this moment forever.

"We are nearly there, *cara*. We have to believe that this will be the turning point for us."

Bella felt the solid body of her lover as Pat took a deep breath. A moment passed before she heard the whispered words against her ear. "Well, if that's what you really want, I will be beside you every step of the way."

Chapter 3

SPARROW HOPKINS SAT IN THE small rotunda, gazing out into the surrounding gardens. Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees, creating patterns on the well-manicured lawns. Several gardeners were working on the nearby flower beds, and a slight breeze brought with it the rich aroma of freshly turned earth.

Sparrow looked down at the intricate embroidery in her lap. Her grandmother had first taught her this delicate art when she was a child and she'd never lost the love for it. She'd always found the practice soothing, allowing her mind to wander whilst stitching glorious works of art.

As she sewed, Sparrow thought back over the last twelve months. Being at OWL's Haven, had given her so much joy. The warm welcome she had been shown by the community had revived her personality and for the first time in years, she felt genuinely happy.

Callie, one of the resident cats, wandered in and rubbed her sleek tortoiseshell body against Sparrow's leg. Theoretically, she belonged to Louise and Caro, but her sociable nature had various residents trying to claim her as their own. As for Callie, she managed to share herself with

everyone whilst graciously declining to belong to anyone, a feline trait that Sparrow greatly admired.

Bending down, she stroked the soft fur, smiling as Callie rolled over for a tummy rub.

“Hello there.”

Sparrow looked up to see Daphne Williams standing at the entrance.

“Hello,” she replied with delight. Noticing Daphne’s hesitation, Sparrow beckoned her in.

“I’m not intruding, am I?” Daphne asked, taking a seat on the sofa next to her.

Sparrow shook her head. “No, not at all, Callie and I are just enjoying the day.”

Callie rose and walked over to observe the willie wagtails swooping around the garden.

Daphne shook her head, watching the cat. “She hasn’t got a chance of even getting near those little fellows. They’ll drive her crazy and as soon as she gets close, they’ll fly off laughing.”

Callie’s tail flicked as the birds swooped even closer to the bougainvillea growing around the sides of the rotunda.

“Sounds like my first girlfriend.” Sparrow chuckled.

Intrigued, Daphne turned to face her, leaning back and stretching her long legs out in front of her. “Really? That sounds like a story. What happened?”

Recommencing her stitching, Sparrow smiled. “I was in my mid-twenties and had only recently accepted I was gay. I’d had a few liaisons, but was waiting to be romanced and wooed. We met at a party and at the end of the evening she made a huge song and dance about wanting to take me out. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. Honestly, I thought I was

going to have to leave town. She plied me with chocolates and flowers, took me out to dinner, tried to convince me that I was the only girl for her. I'd heard rumours about her 'love them and leave them' history, so I resisted for as long as I could, but I was young, and she was incredibly good looking and very funny. I did so want to believe everything she told me. She was in the Navy and was stationed nearby. All very hush-hush in those days, though. Couldn't let on that she was a lesbian. Finally one night, after a particularly romantic evening and rather too much wine, I said yes."

Sparrow looked at Daphne, who was watching her intently.

"Well it was quite amazing for about four weeks; I fell head over heels in love with her. But then the phone calls and dinner invitations slowed and the flowers stopped altogether. The next thing I knew she was chasing some other young woman, and I was left nursing a broken heart."

"Damn," said Daphne softly.

Sparrow nodded. "Damn indeed. I was so cross with myself. I should have known it wasn't a serious relationship for her, but...well, you do rather hope, don't you?"

Bored with the birds, Callie strolled back over and leapt nimbly onto the sofa between the two women.

Daphne gave the cat a gentle scratch. "So what happened next? Did you meet someone else?"

Embroidery forgotten, Sparrow looked into the distance as she remembered. "Well, you never think you are going to recover from your first love, do you? But several years later I fell in love with the most wonderful woman, and the two of us had such a life together. We travelled the world and saw things I'll never forget. Over twenty years together; then one

day, out of the blue, she comes home and says she's leaving. No ifs, buts or maybes. Despite me begging her, she refused to tell me why, and I never found out the reason." Sparrow looked across and saw the shock on Daphne's face. "She had been quite ill several months before, and I often suspected that she might have discovered she had a terminal illness and couldn't bring herself to tell me. After she left, despite all our efforts, neither I nor any of her friends were able to find her. In the end, I just stopped looking."

Daphne released a breath. "How the hell did you cope?"

Sparrow smiled sadly. "I nearly went crazy wondering if it was something I had done; I didn't think I'd ever be the same again." Taking up her embroidery once more, Sparrow continued, "Still, one thing I have learnt is that no matter how much you might not want it to, life goes on. So, after three years of feeling sorry for myself, I picked myself up, dusted myself off and decided I had better get back into life. My friends, of course, wanted me go out and try to meet other women, but it was all a bit silly. I was too old to go through all that dating routine again, and I wasn't meeting anyone who I felt even remotely attracted to anyway, so after several failed attempts, I just stopped accepting invitations." Sparrow grimaced as she remembered the many awkward encounters. "I spent the next fifteen years alone. Not unhappy, but..." she paused, looking directly at Daphne, "not alive, not like I feel here. It was as if I was just...going through the motions. Now, when I look back, I don't recognise that me. She feels like someone else. Does that make sense?"

Daphne nodded thoughtfully. "Absolutely. I've always thought that there's something about OWL's that allows you

to rediscover your spirit. I think it happens to all the women when they first arrive. It's the magic of being surrounded by a community of lesbians. It's okay to let down the guard rails of our emotions, because finally, we're safe. No-one is going to be offended by what we do or say, no-one is going to be titillated by our affection. We are surrounded by our people, women who love women. Why wouldn't our spirits soar?"

As they gazed at each other intently, Sparrow felt goosebumps brush her skin.

Callie stood, bumping her head against Daphne's hand.

Blinking, Daphne stood abruptly and looked at her watch. "Heavens, I should go. I have to call in on some friends...organise a fishing trip," she stammered.

Perplexed by the sudden change in Daphne's demeanour, Sparrow rose too.

Daphne gazed at her shyly. "Thank you for sharing your story with me. You're an incredibly brave woman."

Sparrow shook her head at the compliment. "I'm just glad I'm here now," she admitted as Daphne turned to leave.

Daphne stopped, looked back and gave Sparrow a sweet smile. "So am I."

TO CONTINUE READING,
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