

Cookham To Cannes

Brent Tyler

Also by Brent Tyler
Same Circus Different Clowns (book 2 of this series)

www.southoffrancelife.com

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Cover Design Debbie Tyler

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Whilst this book is based on actual events and my life, some names have been changed to protect the privacy and identity of those involved.

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For Debbie

Chapter 1

Our little business had collapsed and we, that's my wife Debbie and I, were sitting in our local pub, spending money that we could ill afford. It somehow seemed the right thing to do. Being cooped up in a small house all day, worrying about the future without popping out every now and again for a drink or two can drive a person insane. Debbie would often say,

'What about the landlord? He keeps phoning.'

'Let him do the worrying for a change,' I would reply. 'We've got enough problems of our own.'

It was December – the snow was falling heavily. Locals in their wellies, thick jumpers and scarves fought with the door to get in and then wrestled with it again to stop it from slamming. Rubbing hands together and with puffed-out, ruddy cheeks they'd order their drinks. Christmas was upon us and, much like the turkeys at the farm just down the road, we weren't looking forward to it. We'd given up trying to analyse where it had all gone wrong. We just knew that it had and that we must move on, but to where and to what exactly? We were in our mid-forties, we had no money, no income and an eviction notice just around the corner. In the space of a couple of months we'd gone from just about being able to make ends meet to having absolutely nothing, and what was worse, we had no idea how to deal with the situation. Our world had been turned completely upside down.

We'd sit in the pub a couple of times a week, Debbie with homemade pâté, toast and a glass of rosé, me with a bowl of chips and a pint. Then, after a few minutes' silence we began to sound like the vultures in *The Jungle Book*:

'What are we going to do?'

'I don't know. What do you want to do?' And so it went on.

We'd racked our brains to the point where we really couldn't think straight anymore. When your bank account is virtually empty and you're also in the middle of a deep recession, life is tough. Being unemployed at any time is the worst job in the world – you've got all of the stress of a normal job but no salary to go with it.

We'd thought of just about everything to get us out of the situation. Debbie was, and still is, a fantastic cook and I'd had a lifetime in sales, but no one was hiring. Restaurants were closing at a rate of ten a day and all the advertised sales jobs were commission only. We scoured the local Job Centre vacancies for work but there was nothing, absolutely nothing, or at least nothing that we could do. There was plenty for engineers, plumbers, electricians, supply teachers, nurses and so on, but very little for us – at least not enough to keep body and soul together. When we weren't looking through the local paper, we were trawling the Internet in the makeshift office at the front of our freezing house.

We'd spent hours, days, searching everywhere to no avail, until one day Debbie, who was sitting at her computer, stumbled across an advert in a magazine which read: *Helpers wanted south of France. Free accommodation in return for a few days' work a week – one day on, one day off.*

‘Brent!’ she shouted. Moments later I appeared, struggling to walk in my several layers of clothing and checking periodically to see if there was still any movement in my toes.

There was no heating in the house, not because we hadn’t paid the bill but, when turned on, there was a terrible smell of gas. As we weren’t talking to our increasingly irate landlord, who would have refused to pay for an engineer to come out anyway, we froze – and unfortunately, so did the house. We watched the damp inside the fitted wardrobes in our bedroom make its way rapidly up the walls. Condensation penetrated the double glazing, the wallpaper began to peel off and the plumbing had packed up, which was exactly what *we* wanted to do – pack up. To add insult to injury, a letter arrived that day addressed to our landlord from HMG, detailing his heating allowance for the winter.

‘He’s in bloody Spain,’ I shouted, ‘and has been for years! The bastard should be reported.’ We later learned it would have made no difference whatsoever because, due to some quirk of British law, it was legal to claim the money if you were a UK citizen of pensionable age, no matter where in Europe you lived.

‘Look,’ said Debbie excitedly, ‘we’ve always talked about living in the south of France and this might just be our chance. I mean, what have we got to lose?’

‘Nothing, actually,’ I replied, looking down at the pile of red bills that were on the desk. The phone rang. ‘Withheld, don’t answer it,’ I said. ‘Never good news.’

The next morning, she rang the person who’d placed the advert and some time later had secured us board and lodgings at a mobile home park in Mandelieu, a small town not far from Cannes. ‘Blimey, that was easy!’ I said.

‘Apparently, not too many people want to go and work in the winter,’ Debbie replied. ‘Everyone wants to be there in August, by which time my love, hopefully, we’ll have really nice jobs. Come on, we need to get going.’ For the first time in a very long while, there was no sadness behind her smile. Debbie had made her mind up and was off to mark our arrival date in France on the calendar on the wall. I put the cynical thought out of my mind that it had happened far too easily and was now looking forward to our arrival date, 21 February 2010.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, as Debbie started to write feverishly on a piece of A4 paper.

‘Making a list of everything we need to get there. Grab a seat, come on.’

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Unless you can think of anything better. Anyway, might do us the world of good. A change is as good as a rest and all that. Get thinking.’ For hour upon hour we wrote down everything that we could think of to get us on our way. The first and most obvious hurdle was money. Quite simply, we didn’t have any – certainly not enough to get us to the south of France and then, how much would we need just to get by? Poring over our map of France, we calculated, recalculated and calculated again everything from miles per gallon to stop-off points, to a daily food allowance as well as the exact date by which we’d need to find a paying job.

For the first time in what felt like ages, Debbie wasn't just motivated, she was very optimistic, too. She spoke that evening of all of the places she'd visited in France with her family when she was a young girl. Her mother and father had owned an apartment in La Grande Motte, a seaside town just outside Montpellier. She talked with great fondness about the beach, the restaurants and the happy times that she and her brother and sister had spent by the pool at an apartment block called *Le Club*.

'You'll love La Grande Motte,' Debbie said, enthusiastically. 'Literally translates to "The Big Sod"! It's right on the sea and next to the Camargue too,' she added, pointing to a large area of green on the map. 'The Camargue's famous for its wild horses and there are flamingos too,' Debbie explained.

'Flamingos in France? What the hell are flamingos doing in France? That's a bit of a hike!' I said.

'Never really thought of it like that,' Debbie replied. 'You've got to see it to believe it. And look, there's Aigues-Mortes. That's nice. Spent some lovely times there, too. It's a beautiful, old, walled city – full of artisan shops and restaurants on every corner. I can't wait.'

There was still the thorny subject of money, but we surmised that eight weeks was enough time to beg, borrow or steal the three thousand pounds we needed. We put an advert in our local newspaper to sell what we either couldn't take with us or didn't want to put into storage. Bargain hunters came and went until we were left with a huge office desk and a television that didn't work. We had also advertised some of our more expensive items on an online auction site, but there was no joy there. There were bits and pieces that we really didn't want to get rid of but, as we needed the money, we were prepared to let them go at a reasonable price. Unfortunately, our idea of what was reasonable was poles apart from the prospective buyers.' So we began the task of deciding what would fit in our car to take with us, what to put into storage and what to throw out.

The amount of clutter we had accumulated was frightening.

'Bloody hell, Debbie!' I shouted.

'What's up?' she replied.

'Five years of marriage it's taken us to get this lot together and it looks like someone's been fly-tipping in our garage!' Debbie laughed. We went to visit various storage companies to see who would give us the best deal. At the same time, we bought all manner of packing materials, tape guns and marker pens.

Soon enough, what could be packed in cardboard boxes was neatly stacked on one side of the garage along with garden pots of various sizes, a water feature, a bird table and a power drill that, to this day, I have absolutely no idea how to use. There were holes all over the kitchen wall where I'd attempted to put up shelves, but whenever I'd tried to use the drill, the wall just crumbled, leaving messy cavities and an even messier floor. I gave up.

Debbie, however, was in her element. She's an extraordinarily organised person; she's incredibly methodical and has a photographic memory when it comes to where things are in the house, which can be very useful. What is not quite so useful is that although she can pack a box of books with military precision, what she could not grasp then, and still cannot now, is any concept of a box's weight once full. She'd line all the boxes up on the floor like little soldiers, fill one, tape it up, label it and proudly march

off to the next without any idea as to who was going to lift it, or how – it simply didn't cross her mind. We packed, unpacked and repacked the car, trying to maximise every inch of available space for the journey ahead.

All this activity must have seemed strange to our retired neighbours, to whom we had said nothing about our plans. It wasn't that we didn't get on with them; in fact, quite the opposite. It was simply that although they were not great friends of our landlord, they had agreed to keep an eye on his property in his absence. Quite how much contact they had with him we didn't know, but we didn't see any point in taking the chance of antagonising him any further. It was obvious that his patience had finally run out as a day or two later we received an email from him saying that he had had enough of the rental market and was putting the house up for sale forthwith. We would be contacted by one of the local estate agents in the very near future and we'd be expected to assist with facilitating any would-be buyers.

True to his word, the next day the estate agent arrived, declaring,

'I can't see much happening before Christmas. Daft time to put a house on the market, if you ask me. Can I smell gas?' and off he marched around the house with his tape measure and Dictaphone. He was right about one thing – not a soul came to see the property until the new year and even then there was a lot of rubbing of chins and scratching of heads.

'There's a lot of work needs doing to this place,' I'd hear them say. 'Doesn't look like much has been done to it since the sixties. Not sure if I've got the time or money for this.' They came, they went, but it didn't seem like anyone was interested.

It was January, bitterly cold. We still hadn't managed to get enough money together for our trip and, like many people, we hadn't been able to afford to buy each other a Christmas present. What little money we made from the sale of our household goods had gone on packing, a deposit for our storage and the late payments that we'd accrued on our car finance. We tried just about every avenue we thought open to us but no one was going to lend to people in our situation. We scoured the Internet, the newspapers, made numerous phone calls but it was becoming abundantly clear that our options had all but run out.

Our families weren't rich and we really wanted to avoid asking friends because it just didn't feel right. We hated the thought of letting them down in the event that it all went wrong but in the end we had no choice.

I'd put off many times making the phone call that was our last hope but it seemed that I simply couldn't delay it any longer. Pete and Jen had become great friends over many years. Pete was a senior manager at an international building firm and was highly respected – so highly that year after year, even though of pensionable age, they wouldn't let him retire. Jen, a highly sought-after seamstress, was contracted to most of the exclusive boutiques in the area. They both knew what it was like to struggle financially and had worked hard for every penny they had. It was tough to make that call.

'I can't believe I'm having to do this,' I said to Debbie. 'Are you sure there's no other way?'

'We've tried everything else,' she replied. 'I don't think we have any choice.'

Reluctantly, I picked up my mobile from the desk.

'Jen, it's Brent. I'm sorry, but...?' A few minutes later, I came off the phone. I looked at Debbie and smiled. 'She said yes, they'll lend us the money.' Tears began to roll down Debbie's face as she ran towards the bathroom.

'Don't worry,' I remember Jen saying as she passed me an envelope full of cash a few days later. 'It's not as if you're leaving the country. Oh, actually you are!' She laughed.

An hour later we had said our goodbyes and I returned to our freezing cold house with the final but most important piece of the jigsaw. In a few days' time, thanks to our very dearest friends, we'd be heading to the south of France.

'Look, Debbie,' I said, waving the envelope triumphantly in the air, 'we've got it!'

'I can't believe they lent us all of that money,' said Debbie.

'I can. Pete will have thought it was worth it just to get rid of us.'

The next day we went to say goodbye to Debbie's mother in Henley. We met in Café Rouge where, somewhat ironically, the staff could speak just about any language except French. Marlene had been a real pillar of support for us when we were suffering. She'd get the bus from Henley to Cookham, bringing us food parcels and job adverts that she'd cut out of the local paper. I had thought that our last coffee with her might have been an upsetting one but it was anything but – we were all very positive.

'I'm sure everything's going to be fine,' she said. 'A fresh start is exactly what you need. Besides, if you don't do it now, you'll never do it. Not like you're getting any younger, is it?' She laughed.

'Thanks for that,' I said.

'Oh, shut your noise,' Marlene replied. 'Cheers. *Vive La France!* Oh, and before I forget, here's a card for you but don't open it until you get on the ferry. Now, you'd better get off if you've got an early start in the morning and don't forget to call me when you arrive.'

'Can't we just give you three rings?' I said.

'No you bloody well can't! And look after my daughter. Now, if you don't mind, I've got a crossword to do,' she said, picking up the *Daily Telegraph*. 'Bye-bye my love,' she whispered to Debbie, who leant over to give her a kiss.

Wow, that was easier than I thought, I said to myself as Debbie and I climbed into the car. On the way back we stopped to pick up a pizza and a couple of bottles of wine to raise a toast to not just our last night in Cookham, but also our last night in England for what we hoped to be a long time to come. We sat in our candlelit lounge, staring at the now bare walls and watching the condensation run down the windowpanes. Huddled together and wrapped up in several layers of clothing, we tucked into our four cheese pizza and sipped cheap wine from plastic cups.

'Last night of doing this,' I said through chattering teeth. 'This time tomorrow we'll be somewhere in France.'

‘Thank God for that,’ replied Debbie. ‘I don’t think I could face another night in this freezing bloody house. Here’s to Pete and Jen. Cheers.’

We’d planned to be out of the house early the next morning, around six-thirty. However, things took a little longer than expected. We were finally ready to go about an hour after we’d hoped. The sun was up and so were our neighbours. We had bought them a card which had a picture of an elderly couple sitting on a park bench. The caption read: *Age really doesn’t matter...unless of course you’re a cheese*, which I thought they’d find amusing. We liked Harry and Rosie immensely, but thought it best not to say goodbye in person, so although I could see their lights on in the kitchen and cigarette smoke billowing through the small window in their lounge, as Debbie turned the ignition in the car, I quietly slipped the envelope into their letter box, slunk into the passenger seat and gingerly closed the door.

We made our way down the drive, joined the main road and turned right into a small parade of shops. I got out of the car with another envelope containing the keys to our house and a letter explaining that we had left Cookham for good. I put the envelope through the estate agent’s door and, soon after, Debbie and I were back on the road, heading away from our sleepy village in rural Berkshire.

Chapter 2

The heavens opened as we made our way along the M25; the windscreen was getting pelted with all kinds of debris thrown up from the tyres of the heavy goods vehicles in front. The sky was dark, headlights were on and we were pootling along at about forty miles an hour. I was glad we hadn't booked a ferry ticket in advance, otherwise I might soon be panicking that we'd be late and, consequently, have to pay twice. OK, it was only thirty-five pounds but every penny was precious. Rather pleased with myself, I put my head back, closed my eyes and tried to drift off, but I couldn't. I was far too excited to sleep. Instead, I opened up the map of France and began to study it intently.

From Calais we'd be coming down the motorway to Reims and carrying on to Dijon, where we hoped to find somewhere to stay overnight. The next day we'd drive past Lyon, Avignon, Aix-en-Provence and eventually we'd arrive in Mandelieu. With a fair wind, we'd estimated that it should take about eleven and a half hours to get from one end of France to the other, so we'd easily make our scheduled time of five o'clock to arrive at our new home and meet our future employers. I couldn't wait.

Just before midday we pulled up at the ferry terminal. I got out of the car and walked over to the P&O ticket office.

'One way to Calais, please,' I said, my thirty-five pounds at the ready.

'Certainly. That's one hundred and five pounds. Cash or card?'

'Excuse me,' I replied. 'It says thirty-five pounds on your website.'

'That's if you book in advance.'

'How far in advance?'

'Twenty-four hours.'

'You're kidding. Hang on, I'll be back in a minute.' I then went and stood in the queue at the Sea France desk, only to be told the same thing. Ten minutes later I went back to the car. 'Maybe we should just check into a cheap hotel for the night and book it from there,' I said.

'By the time we've done that and had something to eat,' reasoned Debbie, 'we'll be no better off. Let's just get on with it.'

Half an hour later we were standing on the deck of the ferry in the face of a biting wind. Gazing for some time at the white cliffs of Dover slowly disappearing into the distance was our way of saying goodbye. I fiddled with my keys and removed the spare one to the front door to Sunnyside that I had forgotten to give to the estate agents. I threw it with great enthusiasm into the sea. A short while later we sat down in the lounge area.

'Shall I open it?' said Debbie, taking the envelope which her mother had given her out of her handbag.

'Why not?' Inside was a good luck card containing a twenty-pound note. Marlene had written, 'Hope this helps. Bon voyage. Love, Mum.'

Within a couple of hours, we'd crossed a fairly choppy channel. We drove down the ramp, out of the port and onto the main road, arriving soon after at our first French roundabout. The only question was, which way to go round? There was a sign that told us that we didn't have priority coming onto the roundabout, contrary to what many people had told us, but nothing was telling us which way to go, clockwise or anti-clockwise.

'I think,' I started, but before I had the chance to get my words out, Debbie had put her foot down and was off, having made the right choice. I'd never driven in Europe before and found it very strange. Being in a right-hand drive vehicle, Debbie was close to the kerb and, as the passenger, I found myself towards the middle of the road, facing the oncoming traffic with no control whatsoever over my destiny. 'Bloody hell!' I shouted as a lorry came hurtling towards us, missing my door by what felt like only millimetres. 'Christ, that was close,' I said, closing my eyes and breathing a sigh of relief.

Debbie said nothing. She'd driven in France before and knew exactly what to expect.

One of the first things I noticed was that the *autoroutes* were as smooth as silk – not a pothole in sight. Whether this confidence in their roads encouraged the French to drive faster, I don't know, but tailgating was rife. We were going along at a mere seventy miles an hour and were being passed, two lanes to our left, by four or five cars, all bumper-to-bumper. One touch of the brakes and there would have been a major pile-up.

With nothing much else to do, I reached for the GPS. I changed the distance we had to travel from miles to kilometres, fiddled around with every option possible, ate almost a complete bag of liquorice allsorts and then spent an hour or so staring blankly at the *Daily Telegraph* crossword. We played the alphabet game. We named as many animals, countries and bands beginning with the letters a,b,c and so on until we ran out of categories. Time went very quickly and before we knew it we were on the outskirts of Dijon.

'Hurrah!' I shouted. 'We're here!'

'We've still got a bit of time before we need to stop,' Debbie said. 'It'll make tomorrow's journey a bit shorter and, besides, I'm not really tired yet. Why don't you see where the next biggest town is after Dijon?'

I grabbed the map, opened it up and laughed.

'What's so funny?' asked Debbie.

'You couldn't make it up.'

'Couldn't make what up?'

'The next biggest town is a place called Dole!'

That was it. There was no other place we could possibly stay. Sniggering like a small schoolboy every time I saw the sign, we eventually came off the motorway.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw, on the sloped roof of a rather large building and in very big neon lights, a sign that read 'Buffalo Grill'. Opposite, there was an Etap hotel offering rooms for only forty-five euros per night, so we were rather pleased to have found a hopefully cheap meal and room for

the night. Moments later we had booked into a non-smoking room that reeked of smoke and were soon making our way arm-in-arm to the restaurant.

We received a warm welcome from the front-of-house manager, who politely asked us to wait by a statue of a six-foot Indian chief. This also turned out to be the place where all the diners' children would come to collect a balloon before going home. Shortly afterwards we were sitting in a comfy leather-seated booth, usually reserved for four people, and gazing at the menu.

'Ribs, they've got ribs!' said Debbie, excitedly. 'What are you going to have?'

'Looks like either burger or horse,' I said, trying to keep a straight face.

'You wouldn't!'

'Eat a burger? Has been known.' We ordered a *pichet* of rosé and waited for our food to arrive.

Over dinner we sat and talked about the day's events and how we were glad to have left Sunnyside behind. We wondered what the faces would have been like at the estate agent's when they opened the envelope and found our keys. We had a pretty good idea; we also imagined how our landlord would have reacted when he heard the news of our sudden departure.

At the same time, we were eagerly anticipating what was waiting for us when we arrived in Mandelieu. Just before we finished eating, Debbie said,

'We have done the right thing, haven't we? I mean, we're not going to regret this?'

'Regret swapping a freezing cold house and a load of nasty phone calls for the south of France? I wouldn't have thought so, would you? That burger was delicious,' I said, looking at my empty plate.

'Monsieur, encore un pichet, s'il vous plaît.'

An hour or so later and feeling fully replenished, we strolled back to the hotel, stopping at the car on the way to make sure that anything that looked remotely valuable was covered by our duvet.

The next morning came around sooner than I had imagined. We'd managed to get a good night's sleep, so much so that ours was one of the last cars to leave the car park. The sun had burst through the clouds on a crisp February morning and once again we were in the car heading south.

Debbie drove us past Lyon and Avignon and I drove her mad with my random outbursts of *Sur le Pont D'Avignon*. Only knowing the first four words, I made the rest up as I went along. Soon, we started to see signs to places that we recognised – Cannes, Nice, Marseille to the left and Montpellier to the right.

'I wish we were heading towards Montpellier,' said Debbie, ruefully. 'La Grande Motte's just down the road from there.'

'Won't be long,' I replied. 'We'll be there sooner than you know it.'

As we continued, I remember thinking that there was a great deal of snow around for this part of the world. The mountains in the distance were, of course, capped but that was to be expected. What wasn't quite so expected was that the fields surrounding the motorway were white. The sun, however, was just beginning to thaw everything out and it felt warm. The temperature gauge on the car's dashboard read 20°C, not something I was accustomed to in early February. I could get used to this, I thought.

An hour further into the journey we took the exit to Cannes and were heading along the coastal road towards Mandelieu. It was getting dark and there was nobody about. A few spots of rain were beginning to fall on the windscreen and we were both getting quite tired. The long drive was finally catching up with us. We were very much looking forward to sitting down with a glass of wine in what we hoped would be a warm house.

Chapter 3

'It's somewhere along here,' said Debbie as we pulled over on a quiet, isolated country lane, 'and if she tells me one more time that I have reached my final destination SHE is going through the window where she'll meet hers. Turn that bloody thing off!'

We drove up and down the road several times, turning into many different driveways, apologising as we shone our headlights through various lounge windows. Eventually we came to an unmarked long drive with a wooden hut either side of an open barrier. I got out of the car. As I peered through the darkness, there it was – a faded sticker, no larger than a playing card, peeling away from a window in of one of the huts. '*Cannes Vacances*,' the barely-legible sign read.

'This is it,' I said to Debbie, who had wound down her window. 'Can you put the headlamps on full?'

'Sure. Wait a minute, I'll join you,' she replied, opening the car door.

For a few moments, we stood next to each other and said nothing. We stared along a concrete road lined with mobile homes. We were at the main entrance but could see more rows to our left and right. Some looked quite well looked after with cream exteriors, sloping roofs, solid windows and wooden terraces. There were others of a similar style but not so well cared for and then there were the two-tone beige and brown corrugated iron shacks, belonging to a bygone age. There were a couple of cars that we could see, one of which had its windscreen caved in but not completely shattered, as well as a massive groove that ran along its bonnet where something very heavy had obviously fallen on it. Twenty-foot-high cypress trees swayed in the breeze, guttering rattled off the sides of some of the homes and the odd see-through green plastic carrier bag tumbled past our feet. We tried to look inside the windows of the huts, but they were lined with thick, stained, floral curtains. In the distance we watched the flickering street lamps from the main road and heard cars driving through the rain, which was then coming down quite steadily.

I glanced towards Debbie, trying not to look at her directly. I knew exactly how she was feeling.

'Let's do it,' I said, picking up the phone. 'It's Brent and Debbie. We're here.'

We continued to study our surroundings, still saying nothing to each other and then, out of the darkness, we heard a woman's husky voice say,

'So you found us all right then? Sorry about the weather. Not usually like this. It's the first time we've had snow in seven years. Never mind, follow me. I see you've got a carful, so I'll walk in front.' We had just met Pauline, the owner's wife.

As the headlights reflected on her bright-yellow plastic coat, wellies and matching hat, we were beginning to get a much clearer picture of where we were going to be living for, at least, the next couple of months. Driving very slowly, we passed between a row of mobile homes and then a shower block, some toilets and a small plot of land, no doubt waiting for the next home to arrive. Randomly placed standpipes added to the landscape. Some of the homes were enclosed by small hedges, others had

decking, but most just had a car port. As we approached the end of the central drive, Pauline motioned to us to park outside one of the older-looking beige and brown homes. 'I'll just go and get Paul,' she said, and not long after we were being given the briefest of tours of our new home by a friendly-looking Yorkshireman, around twenty years our senior.

'Either of you smoke?' he asked, licking the paper of a cigarette that he'd just rolled.

'No,' Debbie replied. 'Sorry.'

'Don't blame you,' Paul replied. 'Filthy habit.' He chuckled. 'I'd give it up myself but there's a really cheap *tabac* in the village. That's my excuse anyway,' he said, putting the cigarette behind his ear. 'Look, we're all going for a pizza about seven – be a good chance for you to meet everybody. See you in about an hour. We'll come and knock for you. In the meantime, if you've got any problems, give us a shout.' He smiled, put his coat over his head and went out into the darkness.

Debbie grinned. 'You won't get lost in here,' she said. She was referring to my appalling sense of direction when in new places. We'd rented two or three houses in the time that we'd been together and in each one I'd proudly announce that I was off to the kitchen and would then land up in the bedroom or the lounge, anywhere in fact but where I had intended going. This used to amuse Debbie greatly. Here, however, it was impossible, even for me. There were only three rooms. Immediately inside the front door was one space comprising the kitchen, dining and sitting area. To the right was the bedroom, complete with double bed and wardrobe, and to the right of that there was a shower and toilet, housed in the smallest space imaginable. I put our impossibly heavy suitcase on the bed and, while waiting for further instructions, I went to check out what appliances there were. There was a click, click, click, click as I tried to light the small gas fire mounted on the wall.

'Have we got any matches?'

'No. Try the kitchen drawer. If there are any, that's where they'll be!' Debbie shouted from the bedroom.

'Don't you just hate being right all the time?' I said as I opened the drawer. A few minutes later we were warm. I'd got the cooker working and had managed to get a signal on the portable TV – until it started to spit with rain, and then there was no TV at all. The shower was even worse – there was no pressure at all. The water came out at no more than a dribble.

'Don't worry,' said Debbie, 'I'm sure Paul can fix it.' I wasn't so convinced.

Just before seven there was a knock at the door and soon after we were walking towards the site exit, accompanied by Paul and Ruth.

'That's a lovely dress,' said Debbie.

'Thank you,' replied Ruth. 'Still had the original ticket on it when I bought it. The thing is, I get all my clothes from charity shops. I can't remember the last time I bought a new dress. This one, a fiver. You wouldn't know, would you? I'll tell you something, if I'd met Paul years ago, he'd be a millionaire by now.'

Paul laughed. 'She's probably right,' he said.

‘Do you come here every year?’ I asked.

‘Been coming here for the last three,’ he replied. ‘Don’t get paid anything but Bob pays for our golf, which is really expensive here. Seventy euros per person. We play at least once a week, so works out at about five hundred euros a month, which is OK.’

‘Paul,’ said Debbie, ‘I know we’ve only just got here but there’s a problem with our shower. It just dribbles.’

‘The pressure to these vans is terrible, love, but don’t worry,’ he said. ‘In a few weeks they’ll put the water on in the shower block for when the new visitors arrive. Until then, there’s not much I can do about it. Sorry.’

As we crossed the road, we glimpsed, hidden behind some overgrown bushes, a very run-down-looking restaurant. The grubby windows, though large and potentially inviting to passers-by, were covered in posters advertising events long since gone. Christmas menus, details of summer barbecues, as well as many other scraps of paper advertising local events were still displayed and old pieces of sellotape that had turned yellow with age had not been scraped away.

The unoiled front door squeaked loudly as it was opened and sprang back sharply when let go. Being the last of the four of us to enter, I just managed to get my hand out of the way before losing my fingers.

‘Forgot to mention that,’ said Paul with a smile. ‘Everything’s a bit like that round here. At least you’ll know for next time.’

Inside, standing in a circle next to the bar, was a small group of people awaiting our arrival.

‘Hello, I’m Bob,’ boomed a rotund and jolly character who we took to be the owner of the site. He introduced us to his wife, Pauline, who we’d met earlier when we arrived, and also to the other people who would be joining us for dinner, some of whom were helpers, some family and others who we were never to see again. Such was their interest in us and tales of back home that Debbie and I found ourselves being quizzed in two separate groups. Occasionally we’d glance through the small crowd and give each other a reassuring smile.

Our new-found friends were doing everything they could to make us feel welcome. It was such a change from the barrage of unfriendly phone calls and letters to which we had become accustomed when we were in the UK.

Half an hour or so later, our group of around sixteen sat down next to the window at a long, wobbly wooden table. Debbie was at one end and I the other. Those sat next to a leg tried to steady it with a folded napkin or an empty Rizla packet. The waiter then brought tatty menus, cutlery that didn’t match and an assortment of well-used and now almost opaque wine glasses. As I looked around, it occurred to me that money hadn’t been spent on the place in years. The black-and-white-checked lino was heavily stained and cracked and the tired walls hadn’t been washed, let alone repainted, in a very long time.

At the far end of the restaurant was a small bar, a glass-fronted fridge containing soft drinks and an extremely old chest freezer with Wall's Ice-cream emblazoned on the front. The only source of heating was a portable Calor gas fire which, as the evening progressed, made its way closer towards the bar, where the owner's wife was dispensing drinks. In front of our table was a counter, behind which a young man, dressed in a white, food-stained t-shirt and tatty jeans, was busily rolling out dough that he sprinkled with different toppings, ready for the pizza oven.

Towards the middle of the restaurant there was a large table covered with all manner of paperwork, a calculator, a copy of the local newspaper and a packet of cigarettes. Sitting at that table was a tall, pot-bellied man wearing a pair of tracksuit bottoms, some heavy duty flip-flops and a faded rugby shirt that just covered his navel – until he reached up to adjust the dial on the television that was suspended above where he was sitting.

Bob turned to me. 'Do you drink rosé, Brent?'

'I've been known to have the odd glass or two, Bob – usually in the summer, though.'

'It's always summer here, boy.' Bob smiled. 'I'll tell you something else, the rosé in this region is fantastic, amongst the best in France. And there's nowhere better to get it than in this place. You wouldn't think so, would you? Love to know where they get it from. Won't tell me, though, will they? Very secretive, the Frenchies. Now, what are you going to have to eat?'

'Haven't really made my mind up. Any suggestions?'

'The calzone for me – every time. You should try it. Don't mind a bit of spice, do you?'

'I quite like it actually.'

'Did you hear that, Paul? Brent's going for the calzone. He's not like you, you big girl!'

And so the banter went back and forth with the volume of laughter increasing steadily with the amount of alcohol consumed. Eventually, dragging himself away from the TV screen, the owner took our order, which included Bob's request to make his and mine extra hot. I had no idea what a calzone was and my wife, who could have told me in an instant what Bob had just convinced me to eat, was at the other end of the table. As I had no way of asking her subtly, and I didn't want to show my ignorance to the rest of the group, I sat there hoping that whatever came out of the kitchen would be mild enough to be edible.

I was just beginning to really unwind after what felt like a very long few days, when suddenly there was a loud bang from somewhere behind me, followed by an ear-piercing scream from one of the lady diners. As I turned round, the biggest ginger cat I'd ever seen, who had somehow managed to clamp all four of his paws to the window, was looking angrily into the restaurant. This was clearly not something new to the regular customers, who were very soon shouting 'Pssst!' and waving menus furiously at the window.

'You all right, Brent? You've gone a bit pale. I'm Brian, by the way,' said a kind-looking chap in his sixties. 'We get a lot of feral cats around here. Don't feed them, mind, you'll only encourage them.'

They're not dangerous. They can't harm you as long as you've had your jabs. You have had your jabs, haven't you?

I nodded back politely, wondering what jabs he meant exactly. Had rabies been eradicated in France? I had no idea.

'That's all right then,' he said and then carried on his conversation with the others.

'You'll be seeing a lot of him,' Bob told me. 'He only comes down here in the winter. It's far too hot for him in the summer at his age. He's worked with me for years. You'll like him, and his wife, Janice, is lovely, too.'

As I was getting hungry, I was glad to see the food arrive. I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't a giant pizza folded into the shape of a Cornish pasty. Not only was it big, it was also hot – very hot. I really like spicy food and I'm no stranger to the occasional vindaloo but this was hotter, much hotter. When Bob said they made calzones especially for him, there seemed to be a good reason for it – very few people would be able to eat it. I took one bite and my eyes began to water, my nose started to run and my tongue was on fire.

'Great, isn't it, Brent?' Bob said. 'I knew you'd like it. Do us a favour. Before you get stuck in, go and get a couple more *pichets* of rosé and tell Marie-Anne it's for me. Good lad.' I took a huge glug of water, got up and headed towards the bar. '*Deux pichets de rosé, s'il vous plaît, madame, pour Bob.*'

'*D'accord.*' Marie-Anne winked at me and stooped below the bar, where she turned the tap on a five-litre box of rosé labelled 'Pays du Languedoc' and filled two medium-sized, glass *pichets*. My knowledge of France wasn't great, though I felt fairly certain that the region was somewhere over towards the west and not around the corner from where we were, as Bob had suggested, but it really didn't matter. As long as Bob felt that he was being properly looked after, that was really all he or his fellow diners wanted.

'Good boy,' said our host before continuing to shout his conversation towards the other end of the table. We hadn't been sitting down long and not only had I not managed to eat another bite of the calzone but I was also struggling to keep my eyes open.

'You haven't eaten much, Brent. Not hungry?'

'Just really tired, Bob, do you think I could finish this later?'

'Of course. No problem. Michel, can I have a box for Brent? Looks as though Debbie's done all right,' he said, peering across the table at Debbie's empty plate. 'You go and get your heads down. See you in the morning. If there's anything you need, give Paul a shout. They're off now, everybody!' Bob said, announcing our departure. We left to the cheery sounds of our new friends saying, 'Nice to meet you,' and 'See you in the morning. Bye.'

Outside, it was tipping down. With coats over our heads, we steadily made our way back to our van.

'What are you looking for?' Debbie asked, as I began to rummage through the kitchen cupboards as soon as we got in.

‘Something to eat. I’m starving.’

‘Shame. Do you want me to make you something to eat? I can do you an omelette. Won’t take a minute.’

‘No, you’re OK,’ I said, picking up a loaf of bread. ‘Tell you what though, that man is not human. I’d hate to be his insides – must be torture. I bet you won’t see him much before coffee-time, tomorrow.’ I’d just finished a ham sandwich and was about to go to bed when there was a light tap, tap, tap on the door.

‘Hello, you two. Did you have a good evening?’

‘Yes, thank you, Ruth, great,’ I replied. I heard Debbie yawn from the bedroom.

‘Paul and I just thought we’d pop in for a quick glass of wine. Didn’t get much chance to talk to you at dinner. He forgot the corkscrew. Won’t be a minute. Not too late, is it?’

‘Of course not,’ I said. Debbie came out the bedroom and forced a smile.

When Paul arrived, we all sat around the table and listened to his army stories, which he repeated. When he’d finished those he talked about his cleaning company that he had sold and after that I didn’t remember much. Both time and alcohol evaporated very quickly and at some point in the early hours we said goodnight to our new neighbours. As Debbie locked the front door I collapsed face down on our bed and slipped into a very welcome, drunken sleep.