

## **Puzzling**

Rosa had just heard the sad news that her much-loved uncle Angus had died suddenly and peacefully at home at the age of 89. This news brought back memories of their annual weekend visit to his mansion, as he called it, to celebrate his birthday. As the younger relatives grew up and moved away others came along to balance the numbers so there was always a good turnout. These events were always great fun, the wine flowed as did the love and the children had a great time exploring his large house. Uncle Angus delighted in puzzles and never a visit went by when he didn't set us scurrying around trying to solve them.

She continued to read the solicitor's letter which said that uncle Angus had requested one last get together before the property was put up for sale. We didn't imagine that he had much other than the house as he was always so generous in life, with gifts, not loans he stipulated, to help various relatives out of the occasional financial hole. As this would be the last opportunity to visit the old place we squeezed into our mini and drove down to Devon on the stipulated date, the sun shining brightly and a lovely fragrant cooling breeze taking the edge off the heat. My sister and her family lived nearby so were first on the scene and welcomed us at the door, George and his partner arrived soon after, and over the next hour the rest of the gang arrived in dribs and drabs. Mrs Mackenzie, uncle's housekeeper, circulated with refreshments as we were chattering about memories of our uncle. We were then called in to the dining room where the large mahogany table had been draped in fine linen, with the best china, silverware and glass laid out for us to use, rather than admire behind the locked glass cabinets. As always Mrs Mackenzie had done us proud, the food was delicious and the servings large and, with the freely flowing wine, it was not surprising that our cheeks were glowing. Everyone went to bed happy, ready to see what the next day would bring.

Mrs Mackenzie had laid out a buffet for breakfast and when she came around with fresh tea and coffee she gave each of us an envelope, as per the solicitor's instructions she told us. While we tore open the envelope, 'neat Eric' as he was affectionately called, drew out a letter opener from his commodious jacket and neatly sliced through the fold. Almost as one we read the contents and then looked at each other quizzically. 'Message in the bottle' was all it said, then we laughed this cryptic clue a last hurrah from uncle Angus. We only had a day to find this message and solve the puzzle. Knives clanked on plates, spoons on bowls as breakfast was abandoned and the search began. Poor Mrs Mackenzie looked on as her cupboards were ransacked for bottles, and every room and cabinet was thoroughly searched, but we all came up empty. We returned to the lounge. George picked up the decanter of rather fine Merlot to replenish our glasses when it struck us there was one place we hadn't looked – the cellar. Then we had to hunt for the key before we could clatter down the stairs into uncle's pride and joy, his wine collection. There must have been at least sixty or seventy bottles carefully stored in the chill of this brick basement. Eric reminded us that we should not shake the bottles and spoil the wine so gingerly bottle by bottle was removed and inspected but again no message – another dead end.

Suddenly Eric squealed, 'I think I've got it. You know that with Uncle Angus nothing was ever straightforward - 'message in a bottle' is an anagram of 'able seaman's got it'.

'Ok' we replied, 'but how does that help?'

'Don't you remember that ventriloquist doll dressed as a sailor. I think he stowed it in the attic when he got tired of it'

We moved as one to the top of the house and, after a rummage among the stuff in the clutter of this large space, we found the doll under a sheet, and tucked in his uniform jacket pocket was an envelope addressed to those that found me. Eric opened it and read: 'To all my family who have shown me such love and have turned up I hope you will each take one item to remember my love for you, together with an equal share of my estate. Love, and remember have fun, Uncle Angus.'