

Copyrighted Material

I

Spring 2015

Alice Kent turned up the volume on her car radio as Eric Clapton, playing her favourite number, 'Layla', came on.

She was speeding down from Bristol to her mother's funeral in Totnes and she was late, delayed by wafflers at the meeting this morning. Now she'd have to go straight to the church in Dartington instead of meeting up with her family first. As that would give her enough time not to be late for the service, she relaxed a little and sang along with Eric.

Her mother, Sally Kent, had died of cancer ten days earlier. Alice had taken leave from work so she could nurse her mother for her last weeks and, sad as it was for her mother to die relatively young at seventy-five, Alice knew she was glad to go.

'I've had a good life,' she said one morning, as Alice was brushing her hair. 'A wonderful husband, the two best daughters any mother would want, and three grandchildren. But it's time for me to go now,

Copyrighted Material

Alice. I don't like being in pain, or people taking care of me. I just want peace.'

As much as she was going to miss her mother, and she felt as if her heart was being pulled out, Alice understood it was for the best. She knew it had been agony for her once ebullient, active mother to lie in bed, and know she was never going to get any better. She just hoped her sister, Emily, and her father, Ralph, could see it that way.

Alice was thirty-five, tall, slender and dark-haired. She always thought of herself as single, rather than divorced: her marriage at twenty-one had been a travesty she didn't care to dwell on. Friends always remarked on her being so capable, and while she knew that was true, that she could handle anything thrown at her, she wasn't sure she wanted to be described as such. To her it suggested plodding, dull and unimaginative.

Now and again she analysed herself. Was her inability to fall head over heels in love an indication of dullness? There had been several lengthy relationships since she'd left her husband, but not once had she ever felt she could die for a man. Now she'd come to the conclusion she wasn't cut out for permanence, which was perhaps just as well as she could never say when exactly she'd be home.

She loved her small flat in Bristol's Clifton village, and she had many friends of both sexes. Mostly she felt she had everything a girl could want. But deep

Copyrighted Material

down she still hoped for the love affair that would turn her life upside-down.

As she came off the A38 at the Dartington and Totnes turn-off, she glanced into her mirror. There, almost hanging on to her bumper, she saw a black Jaguar with a male driver.

When people tailgated her she always wished she had a pop-up neon sign in the back window, saying, 'Get back, asshole', to flash at them.

She slowed down, pulling as far to the left as she could to let him pass her. The road ahead soon became narrow and winding with many overhanging trees, and she wanted him gone instead of annoying her for the rest of the journey to the church. But he didn't pass her: he stayed right on her tail.

As she approached St Mary's she realized she had at least fifteen minutes before she needed to be there, so she drove on past, into Dartington, negotiated a roundabout at speed and pulled up on the forecourt of a shop.

Looking behind, she saw she'd lost him. He must have gone straight on into Totnes.

Rather pleased with herself, she drove slowly back to the church. The sun had come out on the drive down from Bristol, and it had been good to see lambs in the fields and primroses on some of the grass verges. It had seemed a very long winter, made worse

Copyrighted Material

by the knowledge that her mother was dying. But it was good that the sun chose to shine today, bringing back memories of Sunday school at St Mary's with Emily, the Christmas and Easter services with their parents.

In the last two years her mother and father had started to attend church every Sunday. She and Emily had wondered why – they had never seemed particularly religious before. Maybe it was because of the cancer: perhaps their mum had hoped that having a word with the Almighty each week would help.

There were at least twenty vehicles in the car park already, and a few people smiled at her, but Alice didn't stop to speak to anyone. She went straight up to the church to await the hearse and her family. Standing in the spring sunshine, looking out across fields, she felt at peace for the first time in weeks. She knew that the service, the hymns and the vicar speaking of her mother would make her cry, and it would be hard to watch her father and Emily grieving too, but she was focusing on her mother's last request: 'Be glad for me that it's almost over, Alice. I've had my life. Get on with your own now, and tell Ralph and Emily to do the same.'

The hearse approached, and the remaining people outside the church scuttled inside. The doors of the second car opened and her family spilled out.

Dad looked teary-eyed, as did Emily, whose three

Copyrighted Material

children, Ruby, Jasmine and Toby, bounded up to Alice.

‘We were worried about you,’ Ruby said. Alice and Emily had recently nicknamed her Miss Sensible: although she was only ten she was motherly and very bossy.

‘I was afraid if I came out to the house, you might have left already,’ Alice said, taking the hands of Ruby and Jasmine to get them to follow the pall bearers into the church. She kissed her father, and left Mike, her brother-in-law, to go in with him, Toby and Emily.

The service was sad, but at the same time uplifting. Some of Sally’s friends had decorated the church with an abundance of flowers, and it looked so pretty with sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows. Each of the pew ends had a posy of spring flowers pinned to it, more like a wedding than a funeral.

The Reverend Henry Dawes had known Sally well and managed to bring a little humour into his eulogy by speaking of Sally’s enthusiasm for jumble sales. He reminded them of when she’d put on an old lady’s pink corset over her clothes, and a fancy but battered hat, then kept them on for the whole day.

Sally had chosen a poem to be read, and asked that Mike read it, as she knew that neither Ralph nor

Copyrighted Material

Alice nor Emily would get through it without crying. It began:

Weep not for me though I have gone.
Grieve if you will, but not for long.

It was typical of their mother that she wanted them to celebrate her life rather than mourn. In fact, in the past she'd often joked that she wanted Queen's 'Killer Queen' played at her funeral. They'd laughed with her about it, but once they were planning the service it didn't seem right.

Alice glanced sideways at her father several times, but though his lower lip quivered, he was holding it together, as was Emily. The interment would be the testing time. Alice didn't like the idea of burials, but her mother had been saying for years that that was what she wanted, so it had to be done. Alice and Emily had dressed her themselves in the coral-coloured kaftan Sally had loved, and fixed two glittery hair slides in her platinum-blond wig. Both daughters had wanted to keep her wig, but they knew that Sally would have been furious if they didn't put it on her, with full makeup and nail varnish that matched the kaftan. As she would have said, 'One has to keep up standards.'

She had looked beautiful in her simple white coffin but, then, she'd been a beauty as a young woman. Even age and cancer couldn't destroy that.

Copyrighted Material

The interment was more painful than the service. Alice was all too aware of the horror on the grandchildren's faces when they saw the deep hole in the ground and realized that was where their beloved granny was bound.

For Alice it was the finality that was shocking. She'd never hear her mum's peeling laugh again, never feel the warmth of her hugs. They hadn't seen eye to eye very often – in fact they'd had some terrible rows – but they had loved one another.

It was only once the roses had been dropped into the grave, the last prayer said and people had started to move away that Alice noticed the tall, thin man with a deep tan. She knew instinctively he was the driver of the Jaguar earlier, although she'd only seen him in her rear-view mirror.

He was looking right at her too, and she nudged Emily to ask if she knew who he was.

'I've never seen him before,' Emily whispered back. 'But Mum knew all kinds of odd bods – she never gave up on flirting.'

Alice smiled. It was quite true: Sally had been a flirt, and could persuade men to do anything for her, from checking the tyre pressures on her car to carrying her shopping. She once said she couldn't understand why any woman would want to work for a living when she could marry a man who would keep her at home in style.

Copyrighted Material

Alice was the regional manager of a group of hotels and worked long hours. She had immense responsibility but she rarely got any acknowledgement for all she did. Her male counterparts, however, were treated as if they could walk on water. Sometimes it even crossed her mind that a life like her mother's, just being the little woman at home, able to go out for girly lunches and shopping trips when she fancied them, might be very pleasant.

'Dad, do you know who that dark, thin man is?' she asked, nodding towards the man. 'He was driving right on my tail earlier today.'

'Never seen him before. Just one of your mother's admirers, I expect,' he said, with a faint smile. 'Go and ask him, Alice. You're allowed to do that at funerals, and if he is an admirer you'd better ask him back to the house.'

Alice approached the man. 'Hello . . . I wondered where you fitted into my mum's life.'

'We were friends years ago,' he said. 'I was down here on business last week and saw the obituary in the local paper. I just wanted to pay my respects and perhaps have a chat with you and your sister.'

'Come along to the house, then,' she said. 'We'd love to talk to you about our mum.'

'I feel that would be an imposition,' he said. 'But could you both meet me for lunch tomorrow at the Seven Stars?'

Copyrighted Material

Alice took that to mean he was an old flame, and was being respectful to her father. ‘I can come,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure Emily can, though. She has three children. What time?’

‘Would one thirty be okay?’

‘Fine, I’ll see you there. I must go now, though. My father needs me.’

‘How odd,’ Emily remarked. They had been back at the house for nearly two hours and between pouring drinks, passing round food and chatting to people, Alice hadn’t had a moment until now to tell her sister about the man in the churchyard.

‘I forgot to ask his name,’ Alice admitted. ‘But do come, Em. I’m dying to know how he fits into Mum’s past.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got loads of stuff to do, though I’m really intrigued. I was only thinking just now that there isn’t one person here today from before her marriage to Dad. When I went through her address book to inform people, there wasn’t anyone I didn’t know – or, at least, no one I hadn’t heard Mum mention.’

Alice frowned. Now she came to think of it, their mother had never talked about her life before she’d met their father. She would have been well over thirty when she married him – how odd she didn’t mention those earlier years.

Alice, 2015

The following morning at eleven thirty, Alice opened the door to Emily. She had only just finished clearing up after the wake. Emily and her family had gone home at about ten, but Alice and Ralph had had a few more drinks and listened to music Sally had loved. Now Alice was intending to do a little shopping before she met the mysterious stranger.

‘Have you changed your mind about coming with me to the lunch, Em?’ She doubted that was the case as her sister was wearing an ancient baggy sweatshirt and torn jeans. Her hair didn’t look brushed either: she’d just caught it up on top of her head with a clip. She’d always been a scruffy girl so it had been amazing to see her in a suit for the funeral.

‘Do I look like I’m going out to lunch?’ Emily laughed. ‘I’ve got a zillion things to do, as I said yesterday. I only popped round to see if Dad wanted anything as I’m going to Morrisons. You can tell me about this chap later.’

Their father was coming down the stairs. He said
Copyrighted Material

hello to Emily and added that he didn't need anything. 'There's enough leftovers to keep me going for several days.'

'I'm meeting someone for lunch, Dad,' Alice informed him. 'Is it all right if I leave my car on the drive? Then I'll go straight back to Bristol.'

Ralph's best suit was back in the wardrobe, and today he was ready for gardening in cords and a much-darned old blue sweater. For a man of seventy he looked good, especially considering what he'd been through recently. Tall, fit, thick greying hair, and the kind of rugged face anyone would love. She was happy to see the gardening clothes: they meant he had no intention of moping indoors while the sun was shining.

'Aren't you going with Alice?' he asked Emily.

'No, I'm not. Too much to do at home.'

'I was so proud of you two yesterday,' he said, with a smile. 'But as lovely as you both are, I'm welcoming some time alone now. If anyone else asks me how I'm holding up, I might scream! I'm off to potter in the garden and enjoy the silence.'

Both girls knew he meant what he said. He was what some people called a 'new man'. From an early age they'd watched him pick up the reins when their mum went off on cookery, pottery, yoga and goodness knew what other courses. He could change a nappy, soothe a squawking baby and cook remarkably good

Copyrighted Material

meals, which was just as well because when Sally wanted to do something more than be a homemaker, she just disappeared.

Throughout her sickness he'd done practically all the chores, and never a word of complaint. He was also happy in his own company, often joking that he met a better class of person then.

'Okay, Dad,' Emily said, and planted a kiss on his cheek. 'If you start to feel like Billy No-mates, just shout and I'll come over – or come to us anytime.'

Ralph agreed and disappeared out of the back door. Emily hugged Alice tightly. 'Let me know how this lunch goes,' she said. 'And remember, no SGD.'

Alice laughed. SGD stood for Sadness, Guilt and Duty, the trio that often came along with the death of a relative. They had made a pact that they wouldn't give in to any of it.

'We both did our duty in the past weeks,' Emily reminded Alice. 'Mum was always good at burdening us with guilt, so I'm not wasting any more on her. Maybe a little sadness, though – at least for appearances' sake.'

Alice hugged her younger sister tightly. It was good that neither Emily nor their father was making out that Sally had been a saint: there had been times when all three had been astounded by her selfishness, callousness and her indomitable assurance that she was

Copyrighted Material

always right. When close relatives died people often tended to turn them into saints.

‘You have fun with the handsome stranger,’ Emily said, as she opened her car door. ‘Just make sure you tell me all. It will be interesting to hear his memories of Mum. You know I never trusted her completely?’

‘You didn’t?’ Alice was shocked.

‘No. She avoided all leading questions. She fudged anything that happened before we were born. She told me she didn’t even remember when she first came to Totnes, or why she had only one photo of her and Dad’s wedding. Most women love to talk about their wedding, even if it wasn’t all they’d hoped for. I think theirs must have been a quick register-office job. But why couldn’t she admit that?’

‘You’re making something out of nothing, Em.’ Alice laughed. ‘Yes, it probably was a quick wedding with no trimmings. Perhaps she was pregnant with me, and back then people were funny about that. Although I’ve never seen their marriage certificate, have you?’

Emily shook her head. ‘Finding Mum had lied about her age wasn’t really a surprise, and I’ve got a feeling there might be a great many more.’

‘Go on with you.’ Alice sniggered. She had found it funny that their mother had knocked four years off her age. ‘Once I turn forty, I’m going to lie about my age too. Give my love to the kids and tell them I’ll be down again soon.’

Copyrighted Material

She waved from the gate until Emily had driven away, then turned to look behind her at the spacious Georgian house, over two hundred years old, in the Bridgetown area of Totnes. Ralph had been born in it, and it had passed to him after the death of his parents. Apart from a new modern kitchen and an extra bathroom, it was virtually in its original state, attractive and quirky. As a young girl she had liked to curl up on one of the deep window seats at the front of the house to read and watch people going past. She knew her father would never go into sheltered housing: he was fiercely independent and deeply suspicious of all things that were supposed to help seniors.

Alice went back into the house and, through the French windows in the sitting room, she could see her father pulling out weeds from a border. Just the way he moved told her he was happy to be alone, with no more calls from upstairs to fetch this or that and no one asking him what he was doing. He'd had a hard time when Sally had become sick: she had treated him like a slave. Sometimes he looked dead on his feet, and she'd snap at him if he didn't get whatever she wanted quickly enough.

Alice made him some coffee and cut him a slice of chocolate cake a neighbour had made and took it outside to him. 'I'm going out now, Dad. I'll be back to collect my car, but I won't come in and disturb

Copyrighted Material

you. Put your feet up later, have a snooze. I'll ring you tomorrow to see how things are.' She put the coffee and cake on the table by the garden bench, then went over to hug him. 'Love you, Dad,' she said, into his neck, as they embraced. 'You look after yourself now and rest a bit. I'll come down again as soon as I can.'

He caught hold of her forearms. 'You've done more than enough for me recently. I can cope alone, Alice. I don't want you turning into a mother hen.'

Alice looked into his soft brown eyes and her heart melted. She knew she was lucky to have such a good father. He'd never let her down. He'd always been there at school open evenings, sports days, plays and concerts. He had always welcomed her friends, helped with homework, and didn't lecture her when she left her husband, despite the amount he'd spent on the wedding. In fact, he came up to Bristol when she moved into her flat, bringing his own camp bed with him, so he could help her decorate and build some shelves. He didn't believe in recriminations. In his view a little talk about a problem always solved it.

'There's as much chance of me being a mother hen as there is of me being a Hollywood actress.' She laughed. 'Now I must be off. There's a few shops I want to check out before lunch.'

*

Copyrighted Material

Alice loved Totnes, but it wasn't until she moved to Bristol that she realized how much she liked the city's alternative vibe, the many wacky people who lived here, and the fascinating outlets that sold everything from handmade shoes in brilliant colours, to strange artwork and hippie-style clothes alongside quaintly old-fashioned shops that had been there for ever. The shops in Clifton were quirky too, but in a more sophisticated way. Alice felt that Totnes was a far more honest town.

She bought a framed print of a piece of cherry pie and custard for her kitchen, and an interesting patchwork jacket, which was half the price it would have been in Clifton. Then she made her way back down the hill to the Seven Stars.

The dark stranger was sitting at a table tucked into a corner. He rose to greet her and introduced himself as Angus Tweedy. 'I was remiss not to give you my name yesterday,' he said, as he shook her hand, 'but it was all a bit rushed.'

He got her a gin and tonic, and then they ordered food, a prawn salad for Alice, steak and kidney pie for Angus.

Alice noted he was well spoken, no discernible regional accent, and he was fastidious: he wore a fresh-looking pink and white striped shirt and a well-cut grey suit. His black shoes were highly polished, and looked expensive.

Copyrighted Material

‘I like to eat well at lunch,’ he said. ‘Much better for the digestion than overloading it in the evening. Your mother never ate much. I often thought that was why she was such a butterfly brain.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Alice said indignantly.

‘Oh, come now.’ He laughed. ‘I’m sure age hadn’t changed her. She could flit from one subject to another, one theory to the next in the blink of any eye.’

Alice didn’t want to admit it, but it was true. So many times she had tried to have a serious conversation with her mother, and she’d turn it into something else. It was also true she didn’t eat much. But, then, she was vain and wanted to keep slim.

‘Okay, maybe,’ Alice said. ‘So, tell me, Angus, what do you do for a living, or are you retired now?’

‘I retired a year ago. I had a plant nursery. I specialized in exotic trees, tree ferns, olives and the like, but lifting heavy trees is a young man’s game, so I sold my business. I thought I’d miss travelling to Italy and Spain for plants – I made a lot of friends in the trade – but I’m enjoying having no more anxiety and the freedom to do whatever when the mood takes me. I like fishing and long walks.’

The waitress brought their food, which looked very good.

‘So where do you live?’ Alice asked.

‘In Wales, near Monmouth.’

Copyrighted Material

Alice felt they'd pussyfooted around long enough. 'So why don't you get on with what you wanted to tell me? I assume you have an agenda.'

'Yes, I have,' he said gravely. 'Though I would've liked more time to get to know you before I charge into it.'

'Well, I'm sorry, Angus, but time is something I'm short of,' Alice said. 'I've got to get back to Bristol this afternoon. So fire away. As I don't know you, I doubt you can say anything to upset me.'

'I think I can. You see, you are my daughter.'

Alice froze with her glass halfway to her mouth. 'Don't be ridiculous,' she said sharply, after a few moments. 'What a very stupid thing to claim!'

'I wish I could say I was joking,' Angus said, 'but in 1980 I married your mother when you were on the way. Emily came two years later. The following year, I was convicted of bigamy and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.'

For a moment or two Alice was too shocked by this bombshell to respond. The room seemed to spin and she felt cold, then hot. Surely this couldn't be true.

'You married our mum when you were already married?' she asked eventually, after the room had stopped moving, and her brain said she must have misheard what he'd said. 'Tell me you're joking. Though it's in very poor taste.'

Copyrighted Material

‘No joke, not for anyone,’ he said dolefully. ‘The absolute truth. But should you wish to look it up on the internet you will find at the time of my trial I had two daughters, Alice aged three, and Emily one, and had married Fleur Faraday three and a half years earlier, though her real name was Janet Masters. You are my daughters.’

‘Our mother was never called Fleur,’ Alice said. ‘You’ve got your wires crossed.’

‘She’d abandoned her real name, Janet Masters, by the time she was sixteen, in favour of Fleur Faraday. She became Helen Tweedy on our marriage. You and Emily were Tweedys, of course. As soon as I was arrested, even before I was convicted, she changed her name again to Sally Symonds. Later, after her marriage to Ralph Kent, she became Sally Kent, and he legally adopted you two so you are now Kents.’

The shock of what he had said faded and was replaced with confusion and anger. ‘You bastard,’ she hissed at him. ‘Even if this is true, what sort of man would pick the day after my mother’s funeral to tell me? What planet are you on? Did you imagine I’d fall at your feet and call you Daddy?’

She leaped up, making the table rock. ‘I’m going. Don’t even think of following me.’

‘Sit down,’ he said quietly. ‘Why would I tell anyone something as shameful as being a bigamist if it wasn’t true?’

Copyrighted Material

‘Because you’re a sick bastard,’ she snapped. But what he’d said, however strange, had the ring of truth, so she perched on the edge of her seat as if ready for flight. She didn’t think she could eat a thing. ‘Okay, we can check that out. But why would you come to Mum’s funeral and try to see us, if it wasn’t just to make mischief?’

‘Make mischief? All I’ve done is told the truth. I doubt Fleur even told the man you call your father the truth about herself. She was the Queen of Lies. So plausible, too. But I didn’t come here to try to destroy your image of your mother. I’m glad she found a good man to take care of you and Emily. But I felt you should know the truth.’

‘Why tell us now?’ Alice asked. ‘Why not ten years ago, or keep quiet for ever? Are you hoping we might desert Ralph just when he needs us most? What sick game are you playing?’

At that he looked hurt and sad, but Alice didn’t care.

‘There is no game. I believe that you will both become better people from knowing the truth about me and your mother. I didn’t attempt to tell you before because I knew she would go on the attack, hurt her husband and you two girls. That was what she always did when cornered. I admit I was a weak fool to marry two women.’

‘So why the hell did you do it?’ Alice interrupted.

Copyrighted Material

‘You seem intelligent enough. You must have known you could be found out.’

‘I often ask myself that question, but Fleur was very forceful, and she wanted the security of marriage when she learned you were on the way. She knew I was married. I didn’t deceive her. All her problems stemmed from lack of security when she was a small child.’

Silence fell. Alice picked up her knife and fork again because Angus was eating his lunch as calmly as if nothing shocking had been said. It was surreal. Like some sort of dream that didn’t make sense. She began to eat.

‘But what about your true wife?’ she asked, after a few minutes. ‘Didn’t her feelings count? Did you have children together?’

‘Yes, we have a son. I was a representative for a china and glass company back then, and I had to travel from Wales to London a lot, which was where I met Fleur. I didn’t set out to be unfaithful to my wife, but Fleur flirted with me, and I was bewitched by her.’

‘Bewitched!’ Alice’s scorn was like a laser, forcing Angus to look away. ‘That’s the sort of thing people claimed back in the Dark Ages. Are you saying our mother cast a spell on you?’

‘That’s just what it was like,’ he said, voice trembling. ‘I was several years younger than Fleur, a country boy

Copyrighted Material

who had married his childhood sweetheart at seventeen. I wasn't worldly. Gwen, my wife, was the only woman I'd ever kissed until Fleur, let alone anything else. Looking back, I can't imagine why she made a play for me. I was a success at my job, I had a good salary, and people said I was handsome, but in the circles she moved in, there were far richer, more successful men than me. I suspect it was my naivety that was the attraction. She enjoyed watching me lose my head over her.'

There was a weird sense of logic in what he'd said. He was either as naive as he claimed, or a clever con man, but she felt it was the first. 'I can understand the affair,' Alice said, her tone icy. 'I know people can be swept up in the moment. It's the marrying bit I can't get my head around. So, you flitted between two women. Did Gwen know about Fleur?'

'She didn't find out until I was charged with bigamy,' he said, with a helpless shrug. 'I was away working so often it seemed entirely possible to keep both women. It worked too, at least until after Emily was born. Fleur never questioned me about Gwen – she seemed perfectly happy with the arrangement, me going back to Wales at the weekend. As for Gwen, her life was the same as it was before Fleur. I always loved Gwen, and that never changed, not then or now. I might seem a cruel, heartless man, but I was

Copyrighted Material

never that. If anyone was cruel, it was Fleur. She soon picked herself up after I was arrested. But perhaps she'd already met Ralph Kent.'

Out of loyalty to her mother Alice felt unable to admit that she knew her to have been malicious. If anyone had ever slighted her, even in the smallest way, she retaliated like a striking cobra. She and Emily had felt the full force of their mother's fury. She liked people to obey her, agree with her, and stand by her even when she was in the wrong. When Alice was at university, she asked once if she could go to a friend's for Christmas. Sally agreed, in a frigid voice, but she punished her afterwards by refusing to let her come home for the Easter holidays. It was only because Ralph had put his foot down that she was allowed to come home for the summer. Even then she barely spoke to Alice.

'So did Gwen throw you out?'

'No, she was terribly upset, of course, and embarrassed because it was in the papers. But she's old-school. She had promised in church for better or worse, so she stood by me. When I came out of prison, she said we must draw a line under it, and we're still together, happily so.'

'She sounds saintly,' Alice said, with a touch of sarcasm. 'That's more than you deserve.'

There were so many more questions she wanted answers to, but she needed to consider what line to

Copyrighted Material

take to get the most information out of him. Besides, she had to go back to Bristol, and to decide how much of this she was going to tell Emily. Mike and she were having a few difficulties in their marriage, and something like this might make the situation much worse.

Yet it wasn't just her and her sister who would be affected: Ralph would be devastated, and if Emily's children got wind of it, how would they deal with it?

'I think you've told me enough for one day, Angus,' she said. 'But give me your email address, and in due course I'll contact you again.'

They finished the meal in a strained silence. Alice had the feeling Angus had been expecting emotion, and probably thought she was a cold fish, but she had never been one for public displays of her feelings and, besides, she needed advice before she spoke to this man again.

It was a strained leave-taking. Alice politely shook Angus's hand, and he held on to hers for far longer than was necessary. He said he had booked a room in a hotel on the moors and intended to do some walking before he went back to Wales. It was only then that she got a really good look at his eyes. They were hazel, an almost identical colour to hers and Emily's, but the shape was different: theirs were slightly

Copyrighted Material

bulbous, his deep set, almost hooded. They shared his pronounced cheekbones too.

Yet whatever she thought of him as a man – ‘weak’ was the word in the forefront of her mind – his eyes were the type she associated with kindness. She also sensed he was truthful, without guile.

Janet, 1950

‘I hate both of you,’ Janet muttered to herself, as she cowered behind the lavatory in the backyard of Dale Street. ‘I wish you’d been killed in the war.’

She knew the last remark was a bit stupid as she was only five when it had ended and couldn’t remember it anyway. But she clearly recalled a day shortly before William Masters was due home on leave from sea. Mrs Lovett, who lived next door, was talking to another neighbour and Janet overheard what they were saying: ‘There’ll be hell to pay when William finds out about Janet. But Freda deserves all that’s coming to her,’ Mrs Lovett said.

When she asked her mother why there would be hell to pay, all she got was a shaking until she admitted where she’d heard it. Her mother’s shakings were terrible, so fierce Janet thought her head might fall off, and always ended with a brain-rattling slap too.

Her memory of meeting her father, William Masters, for the first time a few days later was not a good one. The big man’s face was all snarly, like a dog

Copyrighted Material

preparing to bite. She was sent out to play immediately and had to assume that the man she thought of as her daddy didn't like the look of her. He had been at sea when she was born and ever since.

Grown-ups who didn't like her were not unusual: her mother, Granny and the mad woman who shouted at all children when their ball hit her window were consistently grumpy. But there were others who could be nice one day, and nasty the next. She got the idea, though, that Daddy didn't even want her in the house and one evening Granny collected her while he was in the pub. She said Janet was to stay with her for a little while until the dust settled.

The 'little while' lasted two years and ended with Granny dying. Janet heard she'd had a heart attack while she was at school, but no one explained what that meant. Her teacher just told her she'd better go straight home to her mum.

By then she was seven and some things were clearer than they had been at the end of the war. She had learned that William Masters was not her father, and that her mother was what people called 'loose'. That meant she had made baby Janet with another man. That was why William Masters didn't like her. Perhaps, too, it was why he and her mother drank a lot. Going home really scared her: she knew it would be a lot worse than living with Granny.

Granny's house was messy and smelt of boiled fish

Copyrighted Material

for the cat. But she made good dinners and cakes. Janet's clothes were always washed and ironed, her shoes cleaned, and on occasions, usually when Granny had been drinking, she was even affectionate.

The two-up-two-down house in Dale Street in Chatham, where her mother lived, might not smell of boiled fish, but it was dark, cold and unwelcoming. All the houses in Dale Street were much the same: two floors on their side, but across the street they were three floors and reached by steep steps. No one had a front garden, and as very little sunshine came into the long, narrow street, it had a gloomy, sinister appearance. This impression was enhanced by the gaps in the terrace where bombs had dropped during the war, now filled with weeds and rubbish.

Janet often explored the area on the outskirts of Chatham, where she saw lovely newer houses, with sparkling windows, fresh paint and gardens bright with flowers. She liked to pretend she lived in a particularly pretty bungalow that had a green-tiled roof, leaded window panes and a shiny red front door. It had two silver birch trees either side of the garden path. Beneath one of them sat a couple of pottery gnomes. She would chat to her imaginary friend Becky, and as she got to the gate of the house she'd say, 'I must go in now. Mummy will have tea ready, but I'll ask her if you can come next week.'

Copyrighted Material

She imagined hot crumpets with strawberry jam, and fancy cakes on one of those two-tier cake stands, like they had in Patricia's Pantry down in the town. Not that she'd ever been inside the tea shop, but she always looked through the window. She also imagined Mummy wearing a pink twinset and pearls, and a checked pleated skirt. She would smell of lovely scent and would hug Janet as if she'd been gone for days, not just a few hours at school.

The truth was that her mother had rarely come to Granny's house to see her in the last two years, even though it was only a ten-minute walk away. She never hugged Janet, and smelt of cigarettes and fried food. Janet suspected that washed and ironed clothes or regular meals wouldn't be forthcoming from now on.

Yet the very worst thing of all about going home was Him. On the rare occasions she'd seen him in the last two years he'd made his feelings about her quite plain.

Clearly, he was furious that she now had to live in the same house: when her mother opened the front door, she told Janet to get up to the box room and stay there.

Within minutes he was ranting, his voice loud and harsh, and Janet shook in her shoes. 'Tell me why I should be expected to keep another man's kid? Fuck me, Freda, you've got some neck! Why didn't you get

Copyrighted Material

rid of the little bastard? You must have known no man would be happy to come back from war and find his wife had been having it off with someone else.’

Freda responded in a loud but wheedling voice. ‘I couldn’t help it. I was lonely while you were away and really scared when they bombed the dockyard. He was kind to me, and I know I shouldn’t have gone with him, but I couldn’t help myself and it was only once.’

‘Once, twice, a hundred times, what difference does that make? You were scared! Well, what about me on a minesweeper never knowing when the ship would be blown up or torpedoed? I was cold and wet most of the time and the only thing that kept me warm was the thought of you waiting for me when it was all over. Why didn’t you get rid of it?’

Janet frowned. Did he mean kill her when she was a baby, or dump her on someone else’s doorstep?

‘I would’ve done, but I couldn’t find anyone to do it. And don’t tell me you didn’t go with any girls while you were away. I had to go to the clinic because you gave me the clap when you come home.’

Before Janet could even ponder what the clap was, she heard a thud and a crash and guessed he’d hit her mum so hard she’d knocked something over.

‘If you had the clap, you got it from some fancy man, not me,’ he roared. Another thud and her mother

Copyrighted Material

screamed, then more thuds and screams until eventually she was silent.

He left, slamming the door behind him. Janet went cautiously downstairs and found her mother lying on the kitchen floor.

She had no idea what to do, but after sitting there for some time wondering if her mother was dead, like Granny, she went next door and got Mrs Lovett.

Mrs Lovett was a big woman, not so much fat, just wide and tall. She had five children and a wiry little husband who worked on the docks. Everyone in the street tended to run to her when they had a problem, be that childbirth or their old man had given them a battering. It was said she had a big heart: during the war she had taken in many people who'd been bombed out, or so Janet had heard.

'No, she's not dead, sweetheart,' she said, leaning over Freda. 'But if that man carries on this way, she'll soon be joining her ma in the grave.' She dragged Freda up onto a fireside chair and began dabbing the blood off her face. 'Have you had your tea, Janet?' she asked. On hearing that she hadn't, Mrs Lovett told her to go next door and ask Myrtle, her eldest, to give her a bowl of soup and some bread. 'I'll patch yer ma up and get her up to her bed. You come back when you've had some soup and I'll make up a bed for you.'

The soup was lovely, reminding Janet that Mrs

Copyrighted Material