

The Number One Bestseller

KATE MORTON



One

Rural England, a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, a summer's day at the start of the nineteen sixties. The house is unassuming: half-timbered, with white paint peeling gently on the western side and clematis scrambling up the plaster. The chimney pots are steaming and you know, just by looking, that there's something tasty simmering on the stove top beneath. It's something in the way the vegetable patch has been laid out, just so, at the back of the house; the proud gleam of the leadlight windows; the careful patching of the roofing tiles.

A rustic fence hems the house and a wooden gate separates the tame garden from the meadows on either side, the copse beyond. Through the knotted trees a stream trickles lightly over stones, flitting between sunlight and shadow as it has done for centuries; but it can't be heard from here. It's too far away. The house is quite alone, sitting at the end of a long dusty driveway, invisible from the country lane whose name it shares.

Apart from an occasional breeze, all is still, all is quiet. A pair of white hula hoops, last year's craze, stand propped against the wisteria arch. A teddy bear with an eye patch and a look of dignified tolerance keeps watch from his vantage point in the peg basket of a green laundry trolley. A wheelbarrow loaded with pots waits patiently by the shed.

Despite its stillness, perhaps because of it, the whole scene has an expectant, charged feeling, like a theatre stage in the moments before the actors walk out from the wings. When every possibility stretches ahead and fate has not yet been sealed by circumstance, and then –

‘Laurel!’ A child’s impatient voice, some distance off. ‘Lau-*rel*, where are you?’

And it’s as if a spell has been broken. The house lights dim; the curtain lifts.

A clutch of hens appears from nowhere to peck between the bricks of the garden path, a jay drags his shadow across the garden, a tractor in the nearby meadow putters to life. And high above it all, lying on her back on the floor of a wooden tree house, a girl of sixteen pushes the lemon Spangle she’s been sucking hard against the roof of her mouth and sighs.

It was cruel, she supposed, just to let them keep hunting for her, but with the heatwave and the secret she was nursing, the effort of games – childish games at that – was just too much to muster. Besides, it was all part of the challenge and, as Daddy was always saying, fair was fair and they’d never learn if they didn’t try. It wasn’t Laurel’s fault she was better at finding hiding places. They were younger than her, it was true, but it wasn’t as if they were babies.

And anyway, she didn’t particularly want to be found. Not today. Not now. All she wanted to do was lie here and let the thin cotton of her dress flutter against her bare legs, while thoughts of him filled her mind.

Billy.

She closed her eyes and his name sketched itself with

cursive flair across the blackened lids. Neon, hot pink neon. Her skin prickled and she flipped the Spangle so its hollow centre balanced on the tip of her tongue.

Billy Baxter.

The way he stared at her over the top of his black sunglasses, the jagged lopsided smile, his dark teddy-boy hair . . .

It had been instant, just as she'd known real love would be. She and Shirley had stepped off the bus five Saturdays ago to find Billy and his friends smoking cigarettes on the dance hall steps. Their eyes had met and Laurel had thanked God she'd decided a weekend's pay was fair exchange for a new pair of nylons—

'Come *on*, Laurel.' This was Iris, voice sagging with the day's heat. 'Play fair, why don't you?'

Laurel closed her eyes tighter.

They'd danced each dance together. The band had skiffed faster, her hair had loosened from the French roll she'd copied carefully from the cover of *Bunty*, her feet had ached, but still she'd kept on dancing. Not until Shirley, miffed at having been ignored, arrived aunt-like by her side and said the last bus home was leaving if Laurel cared to make her curfew (she, Shirley, was sure she didn't mind either way) had she finally stopped. And then, as Shirley tapped her foot and Laurel said a flushed goodbye, Billy had grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him and something deep inside of Laurel had known with blinding clarity that this moment, this beautiful, starry moment, had been waiting for her all her life—

'Oh, suit yourself.' Iris's tone was clipped now, cross. 'But don't blame me when there's no birthday cake left.'

The sun had slipped past noon and a slice of heat fell through the tree-house window, firing Laurel's inner eyelids cherry cola. She sat up but made no further move to leave her hiding spot. It was a decent threat – Laurel's weakness for her mother's Victoria sponge was legendary – but an idle one. Laurel knew very well that the cake knife lay forgotten on the kitchen table, missed amid the earlier chaos as the family gathered picnic baskets, rugs, fizzy lemonade, swimming towels, the new transistor, and burst, stream-bound, from the house. She knew because when she'd doubled back under the guise of hide-and-seek and sneaked inside the cool, dim house to fetch the package, she'd seen the knife glinting by the fruit bowl, red bow tied around its handle.

The knife was a tradition – it had cut every birthday cake, every Christmas cake, every Somebody-Needs-Cheering-Up cake in the Nicolson family's history – and their mother was a stickler for tradition. Ergo, until someone was dispatched to retrieve the knife, Laurel knew she was free. And why not? In a household like theirs, where quiet minutes were rarer than hen's teeth, where someone was always coming through one door or slamming another, to squander privacy was akin to sacrilege.

Today, especially, she needed time to herself.

The package had arrived for Laurel with last Thursday's post, and in a stroke of good fortune Rose had been the one to meet the postman, not Iris or Daphne or – God help her – Ma. Laurel had known immediately who it was from. Her cheeks had burned crimson, but she'd managed somehow to stutter words about Shirley and a band and an EP she was borrowing. The effort of obfuscation was lost on Rose,

whose attention, unreliable at best, had already shifted to a butterfly resting on the fence post.

Later that evening, when they were piled in front of the television watching *Juke Box Jury*, and Iris and Daphne were debating the comparative merits of Cliff Richard and Adam Faith and their father was bemoaning the latter's false American accent and the broader wastage of the entire British Empire, Laurel had slipped away. She'd fastened the bathroom lock and slid to the floor, back pressed firm against the door.

Fingers trembling, she'd torn the end of the package.

A small book wrapped in tissue had dropped into her lap. She'd read its title through the paper – *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter – and a thrill had shot along her spine. Laurel had been unable to keep from squealing.

She'd been sleeping with it inside her pillowcase ever since. Not the most comfortable arrangement, but she liked to keep it close. She *needed* to keep it close. It was important.

There were moments, Laurel solemnly believed, in which a person reached a crossroads; when something happened, out of the blue, to change the course of life's events. The premiere of Pinter's play had been just such a moment. She'd read about it in the newspaper and felt an inexplicable urge to attend. She'd told her parents she was visiting Shirley and had sworn Shirley to deepest secrecy, and then caught the bus into Cambridge.

It had been her first trip anywhere alone, and as she sat in the darkened Arts Theatre watching Stanley's birthday party descend into nightmare, she'd experienced an elevation of spirits the likes of which she'd never felt before. It

was the sort of revelation the flush-faced Misses Buxton seemed to enjoy at church each Sunday morning, and while Laurel suspected their enthusiasm had more to do with the new young rector than the word of God, sitting on the edge of her cheap seat as the lifeblood of the onstage drama reached inside her chest and plugged into her own, she'd felt her face heat blissfully and she'd *known*. She wasn't sure what exactly, but she'd known it absolutely: there was more to life and it was waiting for her.

She'd nursed her secret to herself, not entirely sure what to do with it, not *remotely* sure how to go about explaining it to someone else, until the other evening, with his arm around her and her cheek pressed firmly against his leather jacket, she'd confessed it all to Billy . . .

Laurel took his letter from inside the book and read it again. It was brief, saying only that he'd be waiting for her with his motorcycle at the end of the lane on Saturday afternoon at two thirty – there was this little place he wanted to show her, his favourite spot along the coast.

Laurel checked her wristwatch. Less than two hours to go.

He'd nodded when she told him about the performance of *The Birthday Party* and how it made her feel; he'd spoken about London and theatre and the bands he'd seen in nameless nightclubs, and Laurel had glimpsed gleaming possibilities. And then he'd kissed her, her first proper kiss, and the electric bulb inside her head had exploded so that everything burned white.

She shifted to where Daphne had propped the little hand mirror from her vanity set and stared at herself, comparing the black flicks she'd drawn with painstaking care at

the corner of each eye. Satisfied they were even, she smoothed her fringe and tried to quell the dull sick-making sense that she'd forgotten something important. She'd remembered a beach towel; she wore her swimsuit already beneath her dress; she'd told her parents that Mrs Hodgkins needed her for some extra hours in the salon, sweeping and cleaning.

Laurel turned from the mirror and nibbled a snag of fingernail. It wasn't in her nature to sneak about, not really; she was a good girl, everybody said so – her teachers, the mothers of friends, Mrs Hodgkins – but what choice did she have? How could she ever explain it to her mother and father?

She knew quite certainly that her parents had never felt love; no matter the stories they liked to tell about the way they met. Oh, they *loved* each other well enough, but it was a safe old-person's love, the sort expressed in shoulder rubs and endless cups of tea. No – Laurel sighed heatedly. It was safe to say that neither had ever known the *other* sort of love, the sort with fireworks and racing hearts and physical – she blushed – desires.

A warm gust brought with it the distant sound of her mother's laughter, and awareness, however vague, that she stood at a precipice in her life made Laurel fond. Dear Ma. It wasn't her fault her youth had been wasted on the war. That she'd been practically twenty-five when she met and married Daddy; that she still trotted out her paper boat-making skills when any of them needed cheering up; that the highlight of her summer had been winning the village Gardening Club prize and having her picture in the paper. (Not just the local paper, either – the article had been

syndicated in the London press, in a big special about regional happenings. Shirley's barrister father had taken great pleasure in trimming it out of his newspaper and bringing it round to show them.)

Ma had played at embarrassment and protested when Daddy stuck the clipping on the new refrigerator, but only half-heartedly, and she hadn't taken it down. No, she was proud of her extra-long runner beans, *really* proud, and that was just the sort of thing that Laurel meant. She spat out a fine shard of fingernail. In some indescribable way it seemed kinder to deceive a person who took pride in runner beans than it was to force her to accept the world had changed.

Laurel hadn't much experience with deceit. They were a close family – all of her friends remarked upon it. To her face and, she knew, behind her back. As far as outsiders were concerned, the Nicolsons had committed the deeply suspicious sin of seeming genuinely to like one another. But lately things had been different. Though Laurel went through all the usual motions, she'd been aware of a strange new distance. She frowned slightly as the summer breeze dragged strands of hair across her cheek. At night, when they sat around the dinner table and her father made his sweet unfunny jokes and they all laughed anyway, she felt as if she were on the outside looking in; as if the others were on a train carriage, sharing the same old family rhythms, and she alone stood at the station watching as they pulled away.

Except that it was *she* who would be leaving them, and soon. She'd done her research: the Central School of Speech and Drama was where she needed to go. What, she wondered, would her parents say when she told them that she

wanted to leave? Neither of them was particularly worldly – her mother hadn't even been as far as London since Laurel was born – and the mere suggestion that their eldest daughter was considering a move there, let alone a shadowy existence in the theatre, was likely to send them into a state of apoplexy.

Below her, the washing shrugged wetly on the line. A leg of the denim jeans Grandma Nicolson hated so much ('You look cheap, Laurel – there's nothing worse than a girl who throws herself around') flapped against the other, frightening the one-winged hen into squawking and turning circles. Laurel slid her white-rimmed sunglasses onto her nose and slumped against the tree-house wall.

The problem was the war. It had been over for sixteen years – all her life – and the world had moved on. Everything was different now; gas masks, uniforms, ration cards and all the rest of it belonged only in the big old khaki trunk her father kept in the attic. Sadly, though, some people didn't seem to realize it; namely, the entire population over the age of twenty-five.

Billy said she wasn't ever going to find the words to make them understand. He said it was called the 'generation gap' and that trying to explain herself was pointless; that it was like it said in the Alan Sillitoe book he carried everywhere in his pocket, adults weren't supposed to understand their children and you were doing something wrong if they did.

A habitual streak in Laurel – the good girl, loyal to her parents – had leapt to disagree with him, but she hadn't. Her thoughts had fallen instead to the evenings lately when she managed to creep away from her sisters, when she

stepped out into the balmy dusk, transistor radio tucked beneath her blouse, and climbed with a racing heart into the tree house. There, alone, she'd hurry the tuning dial to Radio Luxembourg and lie back in the dark, letting the music surround her. And as it seeped into the still country air, blanketing the ancient landscape with the newest songs, Laurel's skin would prickle with the sublime intoxication of knowing herself to be part of something bigger: a world-wide conspiracy, a secret group. A new generation of people, all listening at the very same moment, who understood that life, the world, the future, were out there waiting for them . . .

Laurel opened her eyes and the memory fled. Its warmth lingered though, and with a satisfied stretch she followed the path of a rook casting across a graze of cloud. *Fly little birdie, fly*. That would be her, just as soon as she finished school. She continued to watch, allowing herself to blink only when the bird was a pinprick in the far-off blue, telling herself that if she managed this feat her parents would be made to see things her way and the future would unfurl cleanly.

Her eyes watered triumphantly and she let her gaze drop back towards the house: the window of her bedroom, the Michaelmas daisy she and Ma had planted over the poor, dead body of Constable the cat, the chink in the bricks where, embarrassingly, she used to leave notes for the fairies.

There were faint memories of a time before, of being a very small child, collecting winkles from a pool by the seashore, of dining each night in the front room of her grandmother's seaside boarding house, but they were like

a dream. The farmhouse was the only home she'd ever known. And although she didn't want a matching armchair of her own, she liked seeing her parents in theirs each night; knowing as she fell asleep that they were murmuring together on the other side of the thin wall; that she only had to reach out an arm to bother one of her sisters.

She would miss them when she went.

Laurel blinked. She would *miss* them. The certainty was swift and heavy. It sat in her stomach like a stone. They borrowed her clothes, broke her lipsticks, scratched her records, but she would miss them. The noise and heat of them, the movement and squabbles and crushing joy. They were like a litter of puppies, tumbling together in their shared bedroom. They overwhelmed outsiders and this pleased them. They were the Nicolson girls: Laurel, Rose, Iris and Daphne; a garden of daughters, as Daddy rhapsodized when he'd had a pint too many. Unholy terrors, as Grandma proclaimed after their holiday visits.

She could hear the distant whoops and squeals now, the faraway watery sounds of summer by the stream. Something inside her tightened as if a rope had been pulled. She could picture them, like a tableau from a long-ago painting. Skirts tucked into the sides of their knickers, chasing one another through the shallows; Rose escaped to safety on the rocks, thin ankles dangling in the water as she sketched with a wet stick; Iris, drenched somehow and furious about it; Daphne, with her corkscrew ringlets, doubled over laughing.

The plaid picnic rug would be laid out flat on the grassy bank and their mother would be standing nearby, knee-deep in the bend where the water ran fastest, setting her latest

boat to sail. Daddy would be watching from the side, trousers rolled up and a cigarette balanced on his lip. On his face – Laurel could picture him so clearly – he'd be wearing that customary look of mild bemusement, as if he couldn't quite believe his luck that life had brought him to this very place, this very time.

Splashing at their father's feet, squealing and laughing as his fat little hands reached out for Mummy's boat, would be the baby. Light of all their lives . . .

The baby. He had a name, of course, it was Gerald, but no one ever called him that. It was a grown-up name and he was just such a *baby*. Two years old today, but his face was still round and rich with dimples, his eyes shone with mischief, and then there were those deliciously fat white legs. Sometimes it was all Laurel could do not to squeeze them too hard. They all fought to be his favourite and they all claimed victory, but Laurel knew his face lit up most for her.

Unthinkable, then, that she should miss even a second of his birthday party. What had she been playing at, hiding in the tree house so long, particularly when she planned to sneak away with Billy later?

Laurel frowned and weathered a hot wave of recriminations that cooled quickly to resolution. She would make amends: climb back to the ground, fetch the birthday knife from the kitchen table and take it straight down to the stream. She'd be a model daughter, the perfect big sister. If she completed the task before her wristwatch ticked away ten minutes, she would accrue bonus points on the imagined score sheet she carried inside her always. The breeze blew

warm against her bare sun-browned foot as she stepped quickly onto the top rung.

Later, Laurel would wonder if it all might have turned out differently had she gone a little more slowly. If, perhaps, the whole terrible thing might even have been averted had she taken greater care. But she didn't, and it wasn't. She was rushing and thus she would always blame herself in some way for what followed. At the time, though, she hadn't been able to help herself. As intensely as she'd earlier craved to be alone, the need now to be in the thick of things pressed upon her with an urgency that was breathtaking.

It had been happening this way a lot lately. She was like the weather vane on the peak of the Greenacres roof, her emotions swinging suddenly from one direction to the other at the whim of the wind. It was strange, and frightening at times, but also somehow thrilling. Like being on a lurching ride at the seaside.

In this instance, it was injurious, too. For in her desperate hurry to join the party by the stream, she caught her knee against the wooden floor of the tree house. The graze stung and she winced, glancing down to see a rise of fresh blood, surprisingly red. Rather than continue to the ground, she climbed back into the tree house to inspect the damage.

She was still sitting there watching her knee weep, cursing her haste and wondering if Billy would notice the ugly big scab, how she might mask it, when she became aware of a noise coming from the direction of the copse. A rustling noise, natural and yet separate enough from the other afternoon sounds to draw her attention. She glanced through the

tree-house window and saw Barnaby lolloping over the long grass, silky ears flapping like velvet wings. Her mother wasn't far behind, striding across the meadow towards the garden in her summery home-made dress. The baby was wedged comfortably on her hip, legs bare beneath his playsuit in deference to the day's heat.

Although they were still a way off, through some odd quirk of the wind current Laurel could hear quite clearly the tune her mother was singing. It was a song she'd sung to each of them in turn, and the baby laughed with pleasure, shouting, 'More! More!' (though it sounded like 'Mo! Mo!') as Ma crept her fingers up his tummy to tickle his chin. Their focus on one another was so complete, their appearance together in the sun-drenched meadow so idyllic, that Laurel was torn between joy at having observed the private interaction and envy at being outside it.

As her mother unlatched the gate and started for the house, Laurel realized with sinking spirit that she'd come for the cake knife herself.

With every step Laurel's opportunity for redemption receded further. She grew sulky, and her sulkiness stopped her from calling out or climbing down, rooting her instead to the tree-house floor. There she sat, stewing darkly in a strangely pleasant manner, as her mother reached and entered the house.

One of the hula hoops fell silently to hit the ground, and Laurel took the action as a show of solidarity. She decided to stay where she was. Let them miss her a while longer; she'd get to the stream when she was good and ready. In the meantime, she was going to read *The Birthday Party* again and imagine a future far away from here, a life

where she was beautiful and sophisticated, grown-up and scab free.

The man, when he first appeared, was little more than a hazy smudge on the horizon, right down at the furthest reach of the driveway. Laurel was never sure, later, what it was that made her look up then. For one awful second when she first noticed him walking towards the back of the farmhouse, Laurel thought it was Billy, arrived early and coming to fetch her. Only as his outline clarified and she realized he was dressed all wrong – dark trousers, shirt sleeves and a black hat with an old-fashioned brim – did she let herself exhale.

Curiosity arrived hot on the heels of relief. Visitors were rare at the farmhouse, those on foot rarer still, though there was a vague memory at the back of Laurel's mind as she watched the man come closer, an odd sense of *déjà vu* that she couldn't place no matter how hard she tried. Laurel forgot that she was sulking and with the luxury of concealment surrendered herself to staring.

She leaned her elbows on the windowsill, her chin on her hands. He wasn't bad looking for an older man and something in his posture suggested a confidence of purpose. Here was a man who didn't need to rush. Certainly, he was not someone she recognized, not one of her father's friends from the village or any of the farmhands. There was always the possibility he was a lost traveller seeking directions, but the farmhouse was an unlikely choice, tucked away as it was so far from the road. Perhaps he was a gypsy or a drifter? One of those men who chanced by occasionally, down on their luck and grateful for whatever work Daddy

had to give them. Or – Laurel thrilled at the terrible idea – he might be the man she'd read about in the local newspaper, the one the adults spoke of in nervous strains, who'd been disturbing picnickers and frightening women who walked alone along the hidden bend downriver.

Laurel shivered, scaring herself briefly, and then she yawned. The man was no fiend; she could see his leather satchel now. He was a salesman come to tell her mother about the newest encyclopedia set they couldn't live without.

And so she looked away.

Minutes passed, not many, and the next thing she heard was Barnaby's low growl at the base of the tree. Laurel scrambled to the window, peering over the sill to see the spaniel standing to attention in the middle of the brick path. He was facing the driveway, watching as the man – much closer now – fiddled with the iron gate that led into the garden.

'Hush, Barnaby,' her mother called from inside. 'We won't be long now.' She emerged from the dark hall, pausing at the open door to whisper something in the baby's ear, to kiss his plump cheek and make him giggle.

Behind the house, the gate near the hen yard creaked – the hinge that always needed oiling – and the dog growled again. His hair ridged along his spine.

'That's enough, Barnaby,' Ma said. 'What's got into you?'

The man came round the corner and she glanced sideways. The smile slipped from her face.

'Hello there,' said the stranger, pausing to press his handkerchief to each temple. 'Fine weather we're having.'

The baby's face broadened in delight at the newcomer and he reached out his chubby hands, opening and closing them in excited greeting. It was an invitation no one could refuse, and the man tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket and stepped closer, raising his hand slightly, as if to anoint the little fellow.

Her mother moved then with startling haste. She wrested the baby away, depositing him roughly on the ground behind her. There was gravel beneath his bare legs and for a child who knew only tenderness and love the shock proved too much. Crestfallen, he began to cry.

Laurel's heart tugged, but she was frozen, unable to move. Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. She was watching her mother's face, an expression on it that she'd never seen before. Fear, she realized: Ma was frightened.

The effect on Laurel was instant. Certainties of a lifetime turned to smoke and blew away. Cold alarm moved in to take their place.

'Hello, Dorothy,' the man said. 'It's been a long time.'

He knew Ma's name. The man was no stranger.

He spoke again, too low for Laurel to hear, and her mother nodded slightly. She continued to listen, tilting her head to the side. Her face lifted to the sun and her eyes closed just for one second.

The next thing happened quickly.

It was the liquid silver flash Laurel would always remember. The way sunlight caught the metal blade, and the moment was very briefly beautiful.

Then the knife came down, the special knife, plunging deep into the man's chest. Time slowed; it raced. The man cried out and his face twisted with surprise and pain and

horror; and Laurel stared as his hands went to the knife's bone handle, to where the blood was staining his shirt; as he fell to the ground; as the warm breeze dragged his hat over and over through the dust.

The dog was barking hard, the baby wailing in the gravel, his face red and glistening, his little heart breaking, but for Laurel these sounds were fading. She heard them through the watery gallop of her own blood pumping, the rasping of her own ragged breath.

The knife's bow had come undone, the ribbon's end trailed onto the rocks that bordered the garden bed. It was the last thing Laurel saw before her vision filled with tiny flickering stars and then everything went black.

Two

Suffolk, 2011

It was raining in Suffolk. In her memories of childhood it was never raining. The hospital was on the other side of town and the car went slowly along the puddle-pitted High Street before turning into the driveway and stopping at the top of the turning circle. Laurel pulled out her compact, opened it to look into the mirror, and pushed the skin of one cheek upwards, watching calmly as the wrinkles gathered and then fell when released. She repeated the action on the other side. People loved her lines. Her agent told her so, casting directors waxed lyrical, make-up artists crooned as they brandished their brushes and their startling youth. One of those Internet newspapers had run a poll some months ago inviting readers to vote for 'The Nation's Favourite Face', and Laurel had come second. Her lines, it was said, made people feel safe.

Which was all very well for them. They made Laurel feel old.

She *was* old, she thought, snapping the compact shut. And not in the Mrs Robinson sense. Twenty-five years now since she'd played in *The Graduate* at the National. How had that happened? Someone had speeded up the damn clock when she wasn't watching, that's how.

The driver opened the door and ushered her out beneath the cover of a large black umbrella.

‘Thank you, Mark,’ she said as they reached the awning. ‘Do you have the pick-up address for Friday?’

He set down her overnight bag and shook out the umbrella. ‘Farmhouse on the other side of town, narrow lane, driveway at the very end. Two o’clock still all right for you?’

She said that it was and he gave a nod, hurrying through the rain to the driver’s door. The car started and she watched it go, aching suddenly for the warmth and pleasant dullness of a long commute to nowhere special along the wet motorway. To be going anywhere, really, that wasn’t here.

Laurel sized up the entry doors but didn’t go through. She took out her cigarettes instead and lit one, drawing on it with rather more relish than was dignified. She’d passed a dreadful night. She’d dreamed in scraps of her mother, and this place, and her sisters when they were small, and Gerry as a boy. A small and earnest boy, holding up a tin space shuttle, something he’d made, telling her that one day he was going to invent a time capsule and use it to go back and fix things. What sort of things? she’d said in the dream. Why, all the things that ever went wrong, of course – she could come with him if she wanted.

She did want.

The hospital doors opened with a whoosh and a pair of nurses burst through. One glanced at Laurel and her eyes widened in recognition. Laurel nodded a vague sort of greeting, dropping what was left of her cigarette as the nurse leaned in to whisper to her friend.

Rose was waiting on a bank of seats in the foyer and for a split second Laurel saw her as one might a stranger. She was wrapped in a purple crocheted shawl that gathered at the front in a pink bow, and her wild hair, silver now, was roped in a loose plait over one shoulder. Laurel suffered a pang of almost unbearable affection when she noticed the bread tie holding her sister's plait together. 'Rosie,' she said, hiding her emotion behind jolly-hockey-sticks, hale and hearty, hating herself just a little as she did so. 'God, it feels like ages. We've been ships in the night, you and I.'

They embraced and Laurel was struck by the lavender scent, familiar but out of place. It belonged to summer-holiday afternoons in the good room at Grandma Nicolson's Sea Blue boarding house, not to her little sister.

'I'm so glad you could come,' Rose said, squeezing Laurel's hands before leading her down the hallway.

'I wouldn't have missed it.'

'Of course you wouldn't.'

'I'd have come earlier but for the interview.'

'I know.'

'And I'd be staying longer if not for rehearsals. The film starts shooting in a fortnight.'

'I *know*.' Rose clenched Laurel's hand even tighter, as if for emphasis. 'Mummy will be thrilled to have you here at all. She's so proud of you, Lol. We all are.'

Praise within one's family was worrisome and Laurel ignored it. 'The others?'

'Not yet. Iris is caught in traffic and Daphne arrives this afternoon. She'll come straight to the house from the airport. She's going to call en route.'

'And Gerry? What time's he due?'

It was a joke and even Rose, the nice Nicolson, the only one who didn't as a rule go in for teasing, couldn't help but giggle. Their brother could construct cosmic-distance calendars to calculate the whereabouts of faraway galaxies, but ask him to estimate his arrival time and he was flummoxed.

They turned the corner and found the door labelled 'Dorothy Nicolson'. Rose reached for the knob then hesitated. 'I have to warn you, Lol,' she said, 'Mummy's gone downhill since you were here last. She's up and down. One minute she's quite her old self, the next . . .' Rose's lips quivered and she clutched at her long strand of beads. Her voice lowered as she continued. 'She gets confused, Lol, upset sometimes, saying things about the past, things I don't always understand. The nurses say it doesn't mean anything, that it happens often when people . . . when they're at Mummy's stage. The nurses have tablets they give her then; they settle her down, but they make her terribly groggy. I wouldn't expect too much today.'

Laurel nodded. The doctor had said as much when she rang last week to check. He'd used a litany of tedious euphemisms – *a race well run, time to answer the final summons, the long sleep* – his tone so cloying that Laurel had been unable to resist. 'Do you mean, Doctor, that my mother is dying?' She'd said it in a queenly voice, just for the satisfaction of hearing him splutter. The reward had been sweet but short-lived, lasting only until his answer came.

Yes.

That most treasonous of words.

Rose pushed open the door – 'Look who I found, Mummy!' – and Laurel realized she was holding her breath.

There was a time in Laurel's childhood when she'd been afraid. Of the dark, of zombies, of the strange men Grandma Nicolson warned were lurking behind corners to snatch up little girls and do unmentionable things to them. (What sort of things? Un-*men*-tionable things. Always like that, the threat more frightening for its lack of detail, its hazy suggestion of tobacco and sweat and hair in strange places.) So convincing had her grandmother been that Laurel had known it was only a matter of time before her fate found her and had its wicked way.

Sometimes her greatest fears had balled themselves together, so she woke in the night, screaming because the zombie in the dark cupboard was eyeing her through the keyhole, waiting to begin his dreaded deeds. 'Hush now, little wing,' her mother had soothed, 'It's just a dream. You must learn to tell the difference between what's real and what's pretend. It isn't always easy – it took me an awfully long time to work it out. Too long.' And then she'd climb in next to Laurel and say, 'Shall I tell you a story, about a little girl who ran away to join the circus?'

It was hard to believe that the woman whose enormous presence vanquished every night-time terror was this same pallid creature pinned beneath the hospital sheet. Laurel had thought herself prepared. She'd had friends die before, she knew what death looked like when it came, she'd received her BAFTA for playing a woman in the late stages of cancer. But this was different. This was Ma. She wanted to turn and run.

She didn't, though. Rose, who was standing by the bookshelf, nodded encouragement, and Laurel wrapped herself within the character of the dutiful visiting daughter. She

moved swiftly to take her mother's frail hand. 'Hello there,' she said. 'Hello there, my love.'

Dorothy's eyes flickered open before closing again. Her breaths continued their soft pattern of rise and fall as Laurel brushed a light kiss on the paper of each cheek.

'I've brought you something. I couldn't wait for tomorrow.' She set down her things, withdrawing the small parcel from inside her handbag. Leaving a brief pause for convention's sake, she started to unwrap the gift. 'A hairbrush,' she said, turning the silver object over in her fingers. 'It has the softest bristles – boar, I think; I found it in an antiques shop in Knightsbridge. I've had it engraved, you see, right here – your initials. Would you like me to brush your hair?'

She hadn't expected an answer, not really, and none came. Laurel ran the brush lightly over the fine white strands that formed a corona on the pillow round her mother's face, hair that had once been thick, darkest brown, and was now dissolving into thin air. 'There,' she said, arranging the brush on the shelf so that light caught the flourish of the D. 'There now.'

Rose must have been satisfied in some way, because she handed over the album she'd taken from the shelf and motioned that she was going down the hall to make their tea.

There were roles in families; that was Rose's, this was hers. Laurel eased herself into a remedial-looking chair by her mother's pillow and carefully opened the old book. The first photograph was black and white, faded now with a colony of brown spots creeping across its surface. Beneath the foxing, a young woman with a scarf tied over her hair was caught forever in a moment of disruption. Looking up

from whatever she was doing, she'd lifted a hand as if to shoo the photographer away. She was smiling slightly, her annoyance mixed with amusement, her mouth open in the articulation of some forgotten words. A joke, Laurel had always liked to think, a witty aside for the person behind the camera. Probably one of Grandma's many bygone guests: a travelling salesman, a lone holidaymaker, some quiet bureaucrat with polished shoes, sitting out the war in a protected occupation. The line of a calm sea could be glimpsed behind her by anyone who knew that it was there.

Laurel held the book across her mother's still body and began. 'Here you are then, Ma, at Grandma Nicolson's boarding house. It's 1944 and the war's nearing its end. Mrs Nicolson's son hasn't come home yet, but he will. In less than a month, she'll send you into town with the ration cards and when you return with the groceries there'll be a soldier sitting at the kitchen table, a man you've never met before, but whom you recognize from the framed picture on the mantel. He's older when you meet than he is in the picture, and sadder, but he's dressed the same way, in his army khaki, and he smiles at you and you know, instantly, that he's the one you've been waiting for.'

Laurel turned the page, using her thumb to flatten the plastic corner of the yellowing protective sheet. Time had made it crackly. 'You were married in a dress you stitched yourself from a pair of lace curtains Grandma Nicolson was induced to sacrifice from the upstairs guest room. Well done, Ma dear – I can't imagine that was an easy sell. We all know how Grandma felt about soft furnishings. There was a storm the night before and you were worried it would rain on your wedding day. It didn't, though. The sun rose and

the clouds were blown away and people said it was a good omen. Still, you hedged your bets; that's Mr Hatch, the chimney sweep, standing at the bottom of the church stairs for luck. He was all too happy to oblige – the fee Daddy paid bought new shoes for his eldest boy.'

She could never be sure, these past few months, that her mother was listening, though the kinder nurse said there was no reason to think otherwise, and sometimes as she went through the photo album Laurel allowed herself the liberty of invention – nothing too drastic, only that when her imagination led away from the main action and into the peripheries, she let it. Iris didn't approve, she said their mother's story was important to her and Laurel had no right to embellish, but the doctor had only shrugged when told of the transgression, and said it was the talking that mattered, not so much the truth of what was said. He'd turned to Laurel with a wink. 'You of all people shouldn't be expected to abide by truth, Miss Nicolson.'

Despite his having sided with her, Laurel had resented the assumed collusion. She'd considered pointing out the distinction between performance on stage and deception in life, telling the impertinent doctor with his too-black hair and too-white teeth that in either case truth mattered, but she'd known better than to argue philosophy with a man who carried a golf-stick novelty pen in his shirt pocket.

She moved on to the next page and found, as she always did, the series of her infant self. She narrated swiftly across her early years – baby Laurel sleeping in a crib with stars and fairies painted on the wall above; blinking dourly in her mother's arms; grown some and tottering plumply in the seaside shallows – before reaching the point where

reciting ended and remembering began. She turned the page, unleashing the noise and laughter of the others. Was it a coincidence that her own memories were linked so strongly with their arrival, these stepping-stone sisters: tumbling in long grass; waving from the tree-house window; standing in line before Greenacres farmhouse – their home – brushed and pinned, polished and darned for some forgotten outing?

Laurel's nightmares had stopped after her sisters were born. Or rather, they'd changed. There were no more visits from zombies or monsters or strange men who lived by day in the cupboard; she started dreaming instead that a tidal wave was coming, or the world was ending, or another war had started, and she alone had to keep the younger ones safe. It was one of the things she could most clearly remember her mother saying to her as a girl: *Take care of your sisters. You're the eldest, don't you let them go.* It hadn't occurred to Laurel back then that her mother might be speaking from experience; that implicit in the warning was her decades-old grief for a younger brother, lost to a bomb in the Second World War. Children could be self-centred like that, especially the happy ones. And the Nicolson children had been happier than most.

'Here we are at Easter. That's Daphne in the highchair, which must make it 1956. Yes, it is. See – Rose has her arm in plaster, her left arm this time. Iris is playing the goat, grinning at the back, but she won't be for long. Do you remember? That's the afternoon she raided the fridge and sucked clean all the crab claws Daddy had brought home from his fishing trip the day before.' It was the only time Laurel had ever seen him really angry. He'd stumbled out after his nap, sun-touched and fancying a bit of sweet

crabmeat, and all he'd found in the fridge were hollow shells. She could still picture Iris hiding behind the sofa – the one place their father couldn't reach her with his threats of a tanning (an empty threat, but no less frightening for it) – refusing to come out. Begging whoever would listen to take pity and *please, pretty please* slide her the copy of *Pippi Longstocking*. The memory made Laurel fond. She'd forgotten how funny Iris could be when she wasn't so damn busy being cross.

Something slipped from the back of the album and Laurel fetched it up from the floor. It was a photograph she'd never seen before, an old-fashioned black and white shot of two young women, their arms linked. They were laughing at her from within its white border, standing together in a room with bunting hanging above them and sunlight streaming in from an unseen window. She turned it over, looking for an annotation, but there was nothing written there except the date: May 1941. How peculiar. Laurel knew the family album inside out, and this photograph, these people, did not belong. The door opened and Rose appeared, two mismatched teacups jiggling on their saucers.

Laurel held up the photo. 'Have you seen this, Rosie?'

Rose set a cup down on the bedside table, squinted at the picture, and then smiled. 'Oh yes,' she said. 'It turned up a few months ago at Greenacres – I thought you'd be able to make a place for it in the album. Lovely, isn't she? So special to discover something new of her, particularly now.'

Laurel looked again at the photo. The young women with their hair in side-parted Victory rolls; skirts grazing their knees; one with a cigarette dangling from her hand. Of

course it was their mother. Her make-up was different. *She* was different.

‘Funny,’ Rose said, ‘I never thought of her like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Young, I suppose. Having a laugh with a girlfriend.’

‘Didn’t you? I wonder why?’ Though of course the same was true of Laurel. In her mind – in all of their minds, apparently – their mother had come into being when she’d answered Grandma’s newspaper advertisement for a maid of all work and started at the boarding house. They knew the basics of before: that she’d been born and raised in Coventry, that she’d gone to London just before the war began, that her family had been killed in the bombings. Laurel knew, too, that the death of her mother’s family had affected her deeply. Dorothy Nicolson had taken every opportunity to remind her own children that family was everything: it had been the mantra of their childhood. When Laurel was going through an especially painful teenage phase, her mother had taken her by the hands and said, with unusual sternness, ‘Don’t be like I was, Laurel. Don’t wait too long to realize what’s important. Your family might drive you mad sometimes, but they’re worth more to you than you could ever imagine.’

As to the details of Dorothy’s life before she met Stephen Nicolson, though, she’d never forced them on her children and they hadn’t thought to ask. Nothing odd in that, Laurel supposed with mild discomfort. Children don’t require of their parents a past and they find something faintly unbelievable, almost embarrassing, in parental claims to a prior existence. Now, though, looking at this wartime stranger, Laurel felt the lack of knowledge keenly.

When she was starting out as an actress, a well-known director had leaned over his script, straightened his Coke-bottle glasses and told Laurel she hadn't the looks to play leading roles. The advice had stung and she'd wailed and railed, and then spent hours catching herself accidentally-on-purpose in the mirror before hacking her long hair short in the grip of drunken bravura. But it had proven a 'moment' in her career. She was a character actress. The director cast her as the leading lady's sister and she garnered her first rave reviews. People marvelled at her ability to build characters from the inside out, to submerge herself and disappear beneath the skin of another person, but there was no trick to it; she merely bothered to learn the character's secrets. Laurel knew quite a bit about keeping secrets. She also knew that was where the real people were found, hiding behind their black spots.

'Do you realize it's the youngest we've ever seen her?' Rose perched on Laurel's armrest, her lavender fragrance stronger than before, as she took the photograph.

'Is it?' Laurel reached for her cigarettes, remembered she was in a hospital and took up her tea instead. 'I suppose it is.' So much of her mother's past was made up of black spots. Why had it never bothered her before? She glanced again at the picture, the two young women who seemed now to be laughing at her ignorance. She tried to sound casual. 'Where did you say you found it, Rosie?'

'Inside a book.'

'A book?'

'A play, actually – *Peter Pan*.'

'Ma was in a play?' Their mother had been a great one

for games of dressing up and ‘Let’s pretend’, but Laurel couldn’t remember her ever performing in a real play.

‘I’m not sure about that. The book was a gift. There was an inscription in the front – you know, the way she liked us to do with presents when we were kids?’

‘What did it say?’

“‘For Dorothy.’” Rose plaited her fingers together under the strain of recollection. “‘A true friend is a light in the dark. Vivien.’”

Vivien. The name did something strange to Laurel. Her skin went hot and cold, and she could feel her pulse beating in her temples. A dizzying series of images flashed across her brain – a glistening blade, her mother’s frightened face, a red ribbon come loose. Old memories, ugly memories, that the unknown woman’s name had somehow unleashed. ‘Vivien,’ she echoed, her voice louder than she intended. ‘Who is Vivien?’

Rose looked up, surprised, but whatever she might have answered was lost when Iris came blasting through the door, parking ticket held aloft. Both sisters turned towards her mighty indignation and therefore neither noticed Dorothy’s sharp intake of breath, the look of anguish that crossed her face at the mention of Vivien’s name. By the time the three Nicolson sisters had gathered at their mother’s side, Dorothy appeared to be sleeping calmly, her features giving no hint that she’d left behind the hospital, her weary body, and her grown daughters, slipping through time to the dark night of 1941.