Lovereading.co.uk

Passing Shadows

Della Galton

Published by Accent Press

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

Maggie could feel the familiar tension coiling in her stomach as she locked her front door, the key slippery in her fingers. She wiped her hands on her jeans, picked up the cellophane-wrapped spray of white roses and was just turning when she heard the sound of running footsteps on the unmade road that fronted her cottage, followed by a woman's breathless voice.

The woman, grey-haired and with a vibrant yellow straw bag flapping from one arm, appeared, panting heavily, in her front garden.

"Oh, I'm so glad I caught you," she gasped. "You are the animal rescue woman, aren't you, dear? They said in the pub I'd find you here." She paused for breath and added in a bemused voice, "You don't look a bit like I expected."

Maggie smiled and wondered what she was supposed to look like. As well as the jeans, which had started off black, but were now faded to grey, she was wearing a cream tee-shirt – one of the few she owned that didn't have a flippant slogan on the back, in deference to where she was going. She'd meant to be smarter. She'd clipped back her unruly brown hair and sprayed it within an inch of its life, but she hadn't been able to find any more suitable clothes in her wardrobe. Probably because most of them were stuffed in the laundry basket and laundry was way down her priority list at the moment.

"I thought you'd be older," her visitor gasped. "And bigger – stronger – you know."

"I'm stronger than I look," Maggie murmured, wondering what she was letting herself in for. Lots of people who turned up at the sanctuary seemed surprised when they saw her. She wasn't sure what she was supposed

to look like. Evidently not tall and slightly built – she hadn't been called beanpole for nothing at school – and most people were amazed when she told them she was twenty-seven, not seventeen.

"Are you all right?" she asked gently, because the woman's face was scarlet with exertion and there were beads of sweat below the silver rims of her glasses. "Where have you run from?"

"Oh, only a little way – my car's parked down on the main road. He flew straight at me, you see. I didn't have a hope of stopping."

"A bird?" Maggie said, concerned, because birds rarely survived run-ins with cars. "Do you know what sort of bird he was?"

"Blooming great thing – I was lucky my window wasn't open, he'd have been in the car then and I'd probably have crashed it. I don't know what kind he is, I don't know anything about birds, see. He's not dead though, he was fluttering about on the grass verge. I couldn't get anywhere near 'im. Tried to attack me, he did." She was already backing away down the path. "You will come, won't you?"

"Yes, of course I'll come. It was good of you to stop." Maggie caught up with her visitor, torn between not wanting to rush her – she was elderly and still out of breath – and worry about getting to the injured bird before a predator did. Mind you, not being able to get 'near 'im' sounded promising. The bird couldn't be too badly hurt if it was still trying to defend itself.

"I hope I'm not holding you up, dear. You were just on your way out, weren't you?"

"Yes, but it's okay, you're not holding me up. I was on my way to see someone, but we didn't have a set time." That was the understatement of the year, Maggie thought,

swallowing down a mixture of regret and relief that she had an excuse to put off the confrontation for a little longer. She grabbed a small animal transporter and a net from an outbuilding on her way past and followed the woman back along the lane.

She'd been expecting a buzzard – there were dozens in the Wiltshire countryside – but as they got closer to the stricken bird, she realised it was bigger than a buzzard. A lot bigger and not the right colour, either. It had chestnut feathers and a pale-coloured head, almost white. Maggie frowned, racking her brains. She'd had a friend at vet school who was really into birds. They'd often spent nights chatting about wildlife and about how to recognise the different birds of prey. This bird had distinctive yellow legs and a yellow beak.

The memory of a photograph in Ellen's bird book slid into her mind and her face cleared. "I've never seen one of these before, but I think it might be a red kite," she told her companion, with growing excitement. "They're virtually extinct in England. You see them a lot in Wales, though."

"Well, if he was emigrating for the winter, Salisbury wouldn't be too far out of his way, would it? Perhaps he got blown off course." Maggie suppressed a smile, as the woman, whose geography was obviously a lot better than her knowledge of birds, eyed her anxiously. "You watch yourself, dear. Mind his claws. Poor little lamb's none too happy – not that I can blame 'im for that." She hung back. Maggie approached cautiously with the net.

'Poor little lamb' were the last words she'd have used to describe the kite. Proud and beautiful certainly, but this bird of prey was far from a 'little lamb'. Maggie felt a surge of admiration as the bird glared at her and tried to rise in flight, but only succeeded in toppling sideways on to the grass verge. Its wingspan must have been a couple of

metres and she knew that netting it without injury to either of them was going to be tricky, if not impossible.

She contemplated heading back to the Red Lion and enlisting some help. On the other hand, the pub would have been open an hour by now, which was long enough for the die-hard drinkers to be on their fourth pints of real ale. The last thing she needed was a crowd of rowdy onlookers who fancied themselves as bird experts following her down here.

Deciding to have a go on her own, she edged forward. If she could restrain the bird with the net, she might be able to get close enough to immobilise it without frightening it into hurting itself further or injuring herself.

Luck was on Maggie's side for once. When the bird felt the net, it flapped angrily, tried to back its way out and ended up trapped against the fence that edged the fields of fat golden hay bales beyond the road. Taking care to avoid the lethal talons and wickedly hooked beak, Maggie tightened the net, and the bird, no longer trying to escape but shrieking furiously, let her get close enough to touch.

Sweat dripped into her eyes as she crouched on the grass verge and, talking softly all the time, let the bird get used to her presence. "All right, my sweetie, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to check out that wing. You are a beauty, aren't you."

When a car door slammed close by, Maggie assumed the woman had decided to wait in her car, but then she heard a voice. She glanced up and saw a man in jeans and denim jacket heading her way.

Great, that was all she needed. An interfering passer-by.

"Can I help?" He paused a few feet away, which she supposed was better than blundering in and frightening her prospective patient.

"I'm fine," she muttered, wiping sweat out of her eyes. "Don't make any sudden movements, I don't want it scared. And please don't come any closer."

"I wasn't planning on it." His voice was wry and now she could see him properly she had an impression of a strong, angular face, fair hair that was slightly too long and cool, grey eyes.

He looked perfectly sober too, which was a relief.

"I thought you might have broken down," he added, hunkering down on the grass verge, his movements slow and controlled. "That's why I stopped."

The bird fluttered, aware of his presence, and, distracted, Maggie nodded. "You could do something to help, if you don't mind. You could open the door of that cage for me and pass it over very slowly."

"Sure." He did as she said and inched the transporter across the grass towards her.

There was one sticky moment when she was edging the bird into it and the woman, who Maggie had forgotten all about, clapped her hands in excitement and shouted out, "Well done, dear! Good for you!"

The bird fluttered wildly and extricated a leg from the net and Maggie was only just in time to snatch her fingers out of slicing distance of its talons. She drew the net gently back into place, latched the transporter with a sigh of relief, wiped her face once more with the back of her hand, and stood up slowly.

The man who'd stopped to help glanced at her. "Nice work. What will you do now – take it to a vet?"

"No need, I can sort it out myself. I think the wing's broken, but it's not irreparable. It just needs strapping up for a while. If it survives the shock of all the human contact, it'll be fine. I'm trained as a vet," she added, which

was true. She'd expected raised eyebrows, which was how people usually reacted, but he just nodded thoughtfully.

"Good luck."

She smiled at him. "Thanks. And thanks for your help."

"Pleasure." He gave her a little nod and headed back to a white Toyota, which was parked behind the woman's car.

"He was a nice young man, wasn't he, dear? I'm Dorothy by the way. Dot to my friends." The woman's sunny smile told Maggie that she was now included in Dot's circle of friends. "I'll give you a lift back up the lane, shall I?"

"It's probably better if I walk," Maggie said. "Less stressful for our friend here than going in a car. It's not far."

"Well, if you're sure, dear." Dot's voice was dubious. "I think it's wonderful what you do. I'm so relieved, I can't tell you. I felt awful when I hit him. I wasn't going very fast. I never do around these country lanes."

"It's all right," Maggie reassured her. "There's not a lot you can do when they fly straight into you." She wondered if she should ask Dot back for a brandy – she could have done with one herself. And then she remembered she had a prior engagement. She'd been putting it off all day; she was amazed she'd managed to forget about it.

"Well, I'd like to give you a donation, dear. It's the least I can do after putting you to all this trouble."

Maggie shook her head, taking in for the first time her companion's appearance. Grey hair, which was coiled in a tight bun, kind, faded blue eyes, a face creased with years of worry and navy blue trousers shiny with age. Living on a pension, Maggie decided. "No, don't worry," she

murmured. "Thanks again for coming to find me. Lots of people wouldn't have stopped."

She watched the woman drive away and then lifted the transporter, which wasn't much heavier with the bird in it than it had been when it was empty. She would settle her patient in more permanent accommodation and leave it alone for the night. Then she really should get going before dusk fell. She'd rather have dealt with a dozen birds of prey than go where she'd been heading before Dot had interrupted her, but there could be no more putting it off. Bracing her back slightly and feeling a little guilty that she even wanted to put it off, Maggie quickened her step until the lights she'd left on in her cottage came into view.

Chapter Two

Having settled the bird and left it water Maggie locked up the converted pigsty, which she referred to lightly as 'the hospital block', and went to collect the white roses she'd abandoned by her front door. Then she strolled along the quiet roads past untidy hedges that spilled out like overgrown mops of hair, revelling in the peace and enjoying the clear honey-coloured light that preceded sunset.

Ten minutes later, she was letting herself through the lichen-covered gate of the churchyard, aware of the small wooden thud as it swung shut behind her. She walked slowly along the mossy, cobbled path between the graves. It seemed rude to run through a cemetery, disrespectful somehow, and however much she longed for this visit to be over, she didn't want to offend anyone. These people, whose headstones rose higgledy-piggledy from the ground on either side of her, seemed almost like friends, their names were so familiar, and she'd often wondered about their lives.

Who was John Taverstock? Pillar of the community, respected councillor, father of seven, grandfather of eleven. Maggie pictured him in the Red Lion, which had been the heart of the village for a couple of hundred years. He'd probably have drunk real ale, Tanglefoot or Pilgrim's Pride, standing with his back to the open fire and a little frill of froth on his moustache. She was sure he'd have had a moustache, a black curly one like Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot.

And was Renie happy to be reunited with her Bert, after twenty years of separation? Her family certainly seemed to think so. Maggie paused to trail her fingers over the twin cherubs on Renie Johnstone's final resting place.

She knew all she was really doing was putting off the moment of confrontation. Silly to still think of it as a confrontation, yet a year of coming here hadn't made things any more bearable than they'd been in the beginning.

Sighing, she continued on past the McTaggarts, Evie and Benjamin, whose grave was always decked out with carnations – pink ones, which seemed out of place somehow, more of a wedding flower. And then she was in one of the most peaceful parts of the cemetery, shaded as it was by a giant oak. Its leaves were caught halfway between summer and autumn. Soon they would fall, but for now they shone gloriously orange in the liquid golden light of the September sunset.

She halted, her heart pounding, by the gleaming milk-white headstone with its marble angel, wings folded peacefully and head bowed, eyes cast forever downwards.

Elizabeth Clarke
16 September 1948 – 21 September 2002
Rest In Peace

Such a simple epitaph for such a complex woman, Maggie had thought at the time, but she'd been unable to think of anything else to say. She'd always had trouble knowing what to say to her mother. And when she'd died so unexpectedly just after her fifty-fourth birthday, it had suddenly been too late for words.

"Hi, Mum," she whispered, pausing for a few moments and feeling a little shiver run across her bare arms. It still felt odd to be talking to a grave, as if her mother could somehow hear her from beneath six foot of soil. And why should she be listening in death, when she had never

listened in life, Maggie wondered, as she knelt on the dusty earth.

She laid the white roses on the grave and stroked their petals, feeling their cool perfection beneath her fingertips. Silken and unscented, so perfect on the outside, but with something vital missing. Like Maggie's childhood had been. She'd had everything she'd ever wanted, in material terms. Her own pony, piano lessons, swimming lessons, ice- skating lessons and a string of childminders to take the place of her mother, whose hotel business paid for it all. On the outside she'd had an idyllic, rural upbringing, which she knew that her school friends, with the exception of her best friend, Sarah, who was far more perceptive than most, had envied madly. But she'd have swapped it all for the chance to have spent more time with her mother instead of being looked after by strangers.

She sat back on the warm ground and hugged her knees to her chest. Arleston Court Hotel had been a business, not a home. And the biggest regret of her life was that she'd never really known the woman who now lay beneath this Wiltshire soil, and now she never would.

"The sanctuary's coming along well," she murmured. "I rescued a red kite today, a bird of prey – beautiful..." She tailed off because even as she spoke, she could see the disappointment in her mother's dark eyes and hear her voice in her head, contemptuous and impatient. "Oh, for God's sake, Maggie. Most people grow out of wanting to save the world when they're about twelve."

Guilt washed over her. It left a deep uneasiness in her, even now, knowing that her mother would have been furious to know that she'd sold the family business and spent her money on the old farm cottage and its few acres of scrubby land. But she'd gone ahead and done it anyway,

rebelling after her mother's death in a way she'd never quite dared to do while she was alive.

Which probably meant she was weak, she thought, swiping a stray tear from her eye, although she didn't really know if the hard knot of grief in her chest was down to guilt, or pain because she'd never been allowed to get close to her mother. Never been allowed inside the barriers her mother had erected.

"Your father would have stayed if it wasn't for you," she'd told Maggie once. "He never wanted kids. He had big plans. Thought kids would get in the way. Pity he didn't hang around to see how wrong he was." She'd smiled at the young Maggie as she'd spoken and with the benefit of hindsight Maggie knew her words were intended to be a comfort, not a rejection. But it hadn't felt like that at the time. Her parents would have stayed together if it hadn't been for her. That still hurt. It hurt desperately.

She let the tears fall for a while. She often cried here when she was alone, although strangely she'd shed no tears at the funeral. Perhaps she was still hoping for absolution, she thought, rising slowly to her feet, wanting desperately to be away from this place of shadows, which seemed to encapsulate all that had been wrong in her life for so long.

She hurried back through the churchyard, her eyes so blurred with tears that she didn't see the man until she'd collided with him.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled, glancing up into startled grey eyes that softened immediately as he looked at her.

"No problem. Hey, are you all right? No, you're not, are you?"

It was him, the man who'd stopped to help her earlier. Recognition softened his voice and Maggie bit her lip, embarrassed to be caught in tears. She wanted to run past, but he was blocking the path so she stayed where she was,

trying to sniff inconspicuously and wishing he'd leave her alone.

He looked vaguely familiar. She'd thought so earlier, but now she was less distracted it was more apparent. Perhaps he worked in the village. Perhaps he was one of the shop owners she'd approached about sponsorship for her sanctuary.

It was his eyes, she thought, frowning. His grey eyes were comfortingly familiar, yet she was almost sure they hadn't met before today.

"We must stop meeting like this," she muttered, trying to bring some levity into the situation, but spoiling it when she had to wipe more tears from her face with the back of her hand because she hadn't brought a hanky.

"People will talk." He finished the phrase for her, rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief. "I'm not following you – in case you were wondering – I've been visiting my grandparents. They're in that plot over there." He gestured with the hanky and then handed it to her. "Here, use this."

She took it, grateful that he hadn't claimed to know how she felt or offered any of the usual platitudes. Practical help she could deal with. Anything else would have felt like an intrusion.

He waited while she blew her nose, not looking at her, but not looking embarrassed either, as if he was quite used to dealing with sobbing women. Even through her distress she thought how kind he was. She racked her brain to work out why he was so familiar.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked, when she was in control of herself again.

"I didn't. But it's Finn. Finn McTaggart. I'm not local, although I did spend quite a bit of time down here when I was younger – my grandparents retired here – but Dad and

I still live in Nottingham. We're here to sort out their house and I thought I'd pop by, say hello to them. You know how it is."

She nodded. "I'm Maggie Clarke. I know your grandparents – well, what I mean is that I know their grave, I pass it every time I come. Pink carnations." She stumbled to a halt, aware of how inane she must sound. He put the carnations there, of course, and she had just trampled like an idiot over his feelings.

"I've been visiting my mum," she mumbled, feeling her face burn. "It's a year today since..." She tailed off, unsure what else to say to him. It felt slightly surreal, standing in the swiftly gathering mosquito-edged dusk crying in front of a stranger. She twined the damp handkerchief around her fingers and wondered whether she should offer to give it back. "Well, thanks for the use of this."

"Keep it," he said, his eyes sympathetic. "And believe me – it does get easier, Maggie. I promise."

"Right," Maggie said, touched by his kindness, but anxious to get away. She was beginning to feel supremely embarrassed that he'd seen her in such a state. He'd think she wasn't capable of looking after herself, let alone running an animal sanctuary. Annoyed with herself, she looked back into his eyes, her gaze steady.

"Well, thanks again," she muttered, relieved when he moved out of her path. "I'd better get going."

Finn watched her hurry back along the moss-covered path and reflected wryly that after two chance meetings he should have taken the opportunity to ask for her number so he could see her again. Except that at neither time would it have been appropriate.

Then he chided himself for assuming she'd be interested in him – whatever the circumstances. He'd thought she was lovely earlier and she was, even with her nose red from crying and the strands of her long dark hair that had escaped from their clips in a scatter around her face. Her eyes, almost black with pain, had looked haunted, and even though everyone was vulnerable when they were visiting their lost loved ones, he'd sensed that she didn't usually 'do' vulnerability.

He'd had to fight back the urge to put his arms around her slender shoulders and hold her tightly. He told himself he'd have felt the same towards any woman so obviously in need of comfort, but he suspected it wasn't true.

"Forget it," he muttered crossly. Why on earth would she take a second look at him? She'd barely taken a first look, he reminded himself, as he watched her fumbling with the latch on the gate and tear up the road. She'd been too preoccupied with rescuing the bird and this time she'd been too blinded with grief to see where she was going, poor kid. She was young to have lost her mother. He hoped she had a father back home, someone else who was supporting her through it. Losing a parent was terribly tough. He waited until she was out of sight, sensing her need for distance, and then strolled back to his grandparents' cottage, which was less than a quarter of a mile from the cemetery.

He still thought of it as theirs, even though they'd left it to his father when they'd died within weeks of each other, eight months earlier.

"You took your time, lad, thought you'd got lost," Albert greeted him from the front garden where he was puffing furiously on a roll-up, and Finn realised that his father must feel the same. His grandmother had never let anyone smoke in the house.

"I bumped into a girl in the churchyard. I saw her earlier too," he added, frowning, and deciding not to tell Albert about the bird rescue, as the only birds he was interested in came fully plucked, cooked and with gravy.

"Oh, aye – you were supposed to be sorting out graves, not chatting up women."

Finn watched him draw on the thin roll-up so deeply that the burning end shot towards his fingers and he had to drop it on the path.

"That stuff will kill you one day," he said mildly. "I wish you'd pack it in."

"Too late now. I reckon I've done all the damage I'm going to do."

Finn doubted that very much, but his dad could be a stubborn old fool where his health was concerned.

"And I wasn't chatting her up. She was upset. She was visiting her mother's grave."

"Ah," Albert said, and promptly shut up.

One nil to me, Finn thought without much satisfaction, as he pushed past his father and into the house. The mention of mothers worked every time. But he'd have given a lot for things to be different.

He was reading the paper when Albert came into the back room.

"Shall I do us some burnt sausage and chips again for tea or shall we risk the pub?"

"The pub, I think," Finn said, glancing up. "I could do with a pint of Guinness."

And he could ask the landlord about Maggie, too, he decided, as they strolled down to The Red Lion. Mike would know who she was. He knew everything that was going on in the village and was an incorrigible gossip.

He looked pleased to see them, too, Finn saw, as he pushed open the heavy oak door, lowering his head as they

stepped into the dark beamed interior. They weren't here often enough to be classed as locals, but often enough for Mike to know what they drank.

"Usual, is it, gentlemen?" he queried, grinning through his salt and pepper beard and rubbing his hands together. He'd have looked more at home behind the bar of a seafaring pub strung with fish nets holding plastic lobsters, Finn had often thought. Captain Bird's Eye. Deciding against asking about the girl in the cemetery, he carried their pints to the table where his father sat. He didn't want it to get back to her that he'd been asking and it more than likely would if he said anything to Mike.

"Do you two want the wood burner on?" Mike called after him. "It's a bit chilly once the sun goes down, isn't it?"

"No, you're all right," Albert said, lighting another rollie, and blowing out a thin plume of smoke, as Finn settled opposite him.

It was a nice pub, he thought, trying to decide if it had changed since the last time they'd been down. No. The Red Lion probably hadn't changed much in the last couple of hundred years. It was a piece of English heritage, with its thick cob walls, ancient beams and big old fireplace. Not at all like their local, back home, which was a working man's club, with pitted tables and faded velveteen seats that you sank into when you sat down because the springs had long since gone.

The walls of the Sheaf of Arrows were dotted with black and white pictures of football teams that no one had ever heard of. The walls of the Red Lion sported ancient hunting prints and a couple of faded water colours. Above the bar hung a banner printed with the words *A good wine should be drunk and not worshipped. A good landlord*

should be worshipped and not drunk. Finn decided this summed up this particular landlord perfectly.

"So, what's the verdict, son?" Albert said, blowing a smoke ring towards the fireplace and interrupting Finn's musings. "Do we let the place go to rack and ruin for lack of funds, or do we cut our losses and put it on the market?"

"It's yours. What do you want to do with it?" Finn murmured, even though he had a pretty good idea that he already knew. His father had never really taken to the countryside. He was much happier in his terraced two-up two-down in Nottingham, steeped in traffic fumes and noise and surrounded by tarmac. He'd never been one for open spaces and 'wild animals', as he called them – which covered everything from rabbits to cows.

"I think we should get it on the market," Albert said. "I could buy my place then. Might even get enough for you to put a deposit down on a little place yourself."

"Yes," Finn replied, without enthusiasm. As far as he could see, his grandparents had had the right idea. Who wanted to live in the city when they could be surrounded by clean air and rolling fields? Ever since they'd died and left his father the cottage, he'd harboured the faint hope that he could somehow raise the funds to buy it from him and move down here. He was sure he could get work locally – he could turn his hand to most things. And in his spare time he could paint.

It was a pipe dream, really. Cottages in Arleston, even tiny ones which needed a lot of money spending on them, didn't come cheap. He knew his dad couldn't afford to sell it to him for much less than the market value. Not unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life scrimping and saving, which Finn was determined he wasn't going to do. Consequently, he hadn't ever raised the subject.

"Course – you've probably got better memories of the place than me, eh, lad?" Albert said slyly, tapping his rollie over the ashtray and missing so that ash scattered over Finn's beer mat instead. "Wild, drunken Christmas parties, if my memory serves me right."

"I was young and foolish then. It was a one-off," Finn said, frowning, "Which is the reason Gran never forgot it."

"She never forgot it because you were sick all the way up her stairs." Albert drained his pint triumphantly, leaned forward and tapped his empty glass on the table. "Want another one? It's my round."

"I'll get them," Finn said, escaping to the bar because that was one night he particularly didn't want to remember and certainly didn't want to discuss. He'd had the worst hangover of his life the following morning. Being sick all up the stairs hadn't been good – but it had been a fairly minor crime in the scheme of things.

The Christmas party had been held in someone's house on the outskirts of the village. He'd been drinking with a group of lads in the Red Lion and when the pub had closed they'd invited him along. The alcohol had been flowing freely and Finn had drunk far more than he was used to. He vaguely remembered leaving the party with a really pretty blonde, who'd been younger than him. He wished he could blank out the rest of the evening, but he couldn't. He'd hated himself for weeks afterwards. Not because the girl hadn't been willing – she'd been just as keen as he was to find a field where they could 'get to know each other better'. But he'd known they were both too drunk to have really known what they were doing. And it wasn't Finn's style to have one-night stands.

What had made it worse was that he'd had to leave for Nottingham the following morning, which meant he hadn't had time to see her again. What would he have said if he

had, he wondered? 'Sorry' or 'thanks' or maybe even, 'what did you say your name was?' He doubted they'd have seen each other again. A few minutes of fumbled love-making in a freezing, muddy field wasn't the best start to a relationship.

He'd never seen her since, which he supposed wasn't all that surprising. Arleston wasn't a tiny village; there was no reason to bump into her even if she had been a local, which he'd doubted. Local girls probably didn't have one-night stands at parties. Unfair though it was, they'd probably end up the subject of nasty gossip. Like him, she'd probably been far from home and had simply done too much celebrating and got too full of Christmas spirit, quite literally.

He sighed and headed back to their table with the drinks. Maybe his father had a point about it being best to cut all ties with the place. Nottingham was home. It was where his mates were, where his roots were, and very probably where his future lay. Moving to the countryside, swapping his job at the factory and trying to paint for a living, were all pipe dreams. Fleetingly he thought about Maggie again and rationality kicked in. Another pipe dream. There were plenty of attractive women in Nottingham.

"I think you're right, Dad," he said, clunking their pints on to the knotted wooden table and watching a thin trail of froth spill down one of the glasses. "You should put it on the market – we don't get a lot of use out of it, do we? Do you want me to nip down the estate agents in the morning?"

"Aye, thanks, lad. You're better at all that malarkey than me."

Albert's grey eyes lit briefly with warmth and Finn thought with a mixture of regret and relief that it was probably for the best.