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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Second Bride

Written by Katharine Swartz

Published by Lion Fiction

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# The Second Bride

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After spending her childhood in Canada and then three years as a diehard New Yorker, Katharine Swartz now lives in the Lake District with her husband – an Anglican minister – their five children, and a Golden Retriever. She enjoys such novel things as long country walks and chatting with people in the street, and her children love the freedom of village life – although she often has to ring four or five people to figure out where they've gone off to!

She writes also under the name Kate Hewitt, and she always enjoys delivering a compelling and intensely emotional story. Find out more about her books at www.katharineswartz.com.

# The Second Bride

## Tales from Goswell

Katharine Swartz



LION FICTION

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*Dedicated, as ever, to the lovely people of St Bees, who gave me and my family as kind a farewell as they did a welcome. Although we no longer live there, we still count it as a home. Also dedicated to my father, George Louis Berry, who did not live to see this book in print, but was always a tremendous encourager of my writing.*

*Other titles by Katharine Swartz*

The Vicar's Wife

The Lost Garden

Far Horizons

Another Country

A Distant Shore

Down Jasper Lane

The Other Side of the Bridge

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# PROLOGUE

There is no letter, no address or greeting, nothing at all save for the single slip of paper that she slides out of the envelope, a sense of dread curdling like old milk in her stomach even though she has no idea, not yet, of what she holds.

Carefully she unfolds it, the paper cheap and scratchy, the stark lines of black ink written in a firm and unshaking hand. It takes her a moment to see what it is – an official document, or at least a copy of one, the columns darkly scored. *Sarah Mills, Aged twenty-two, River Cottage, Kendal.* She catches her breath as she reads the next lines: *Cause of Death: General Debility.*

"Love?"

Her husband's voice floats up the stairs of their little terraced house, kind and questioning, and her fingers clench on the paper as guilt washes over her in a scorching tide.

"Just a moment." She scans the lines again. *Date of Death: 24 May 1872.* Two months ago. Two months ago Sarah had breathed her last – how and why? And who had sent this to her? Realization ices inside her. Someone has wanted her to know. This slip of paper is an accusation, as loud as a spoken threat, as frightening as a raised fist, a judgment handed down by some unknown witness.

*It's your fault Sarah died.*

She couldn't know that. She had no idea why Sarah had died, and yet… she has so much to atone for. So much to regret. When she'd seen Sarah last, she'd been healthy and whole, robust if resigned. She'd been twenty-one years

old. When she'd seen Sarah last, she'd been rescued by her. Saved.

The sound of her husband's heavy, familiar tread on the narrow staircase has her slipping the copy of the death certificate into her apron pocket. She rises from her seat by the window and straightens her dress, taking a deep breath and tucking a few stray wisps of hair back into her bun. Her heart thuds.

"I'm coming," she calls, her voice trembling slightly, and she hurries from the bedroom, trying to push the terrible knowledge of that certificate from her mind. She's been good at that, too good, perhaps, at pretending the past hasn't happened. That she's a new person, a different person now, one with a husband and child she loves and adores. She won't let that certificate and its awful knowledge threaten what she holds dear.

The next morning, after her husband has gone off whistling to his carpentry workshop, the breakfast dishes have been scrubbed and put away and the dirty water poured out into the courtyard in back of the kitchen, she climbs up the narrow stairs to the little attic room at the top of the house. It is meant for a maid, if they had a maid, but her husband's work as a carpenter means she does all the housework, even the heavy scrubbing and washing, herself. And once she'd insisted she would have a maid when she married.

Grimacing faintly at her own childish folly, she thinks again of Sarah. Sarah had had to do all the washing and scrubbing, soaking shirts and old-fashioned collars until her hands were cracked and red from the harsh lye soap she made herself, and then having to starch the collars into hard points, spending hours with the heavy flat irons. Had the never-ending round of housework contributed to her death? *General Debility.*





The little room is cramped and airless, the cobwebbed eaves brushing her head, the one tiny window looking out onto rolling hills that lead to a slate-grey sea, churning and restless even on this summer's day, yet no less beautiful.

She remembers her arrival two years ago, how desperate and afraid she was, yet clinging to the one frail thread of hope that Sarah, in her generosity, had offered her. She'd clutched her single case, its side banging her knees, as Ruth had met her at the train and led her up the narrow, winding street, the smell of coal fires on the damp sea air. She'd glimpsed the sea, a twinkling promise behind the row of whitewashed cottages, and her heart had lifted. She'd always loved the sea. Back in Kendal there had only been the river, hemmed in on every side by the looming fells, so sometimes it felt as if the earth was enclosing her, a giant's teacup.

Now she crouches in the centre of the room, the slip of paper clutched in her hand, a dozen different memories tumbling through her mind, making her mouth tremble as she keeps the useless tears at bay. Sarah silently sweeping up broken crockery, her face set in determinedly placid lines. Sarah sitting slumped at the kitchen table, her head resting against her hand, her eyes fluttering closed, her other hand reaching out to Lucy, always to Lucy. Sarah pressing a rail ticket into her hand, her lips drawn tightly together, her eyes dark and troubled.

*Go. It's the only way.*

But had it been? *Had it been?*

It would be wiser to burn the death certificate, and with it her links to her old life in Kendal, those awful memories, the endless sense of reproach and the childish anger and hurt, but she knows she can't. It feels like a sacrilege, yet another betrayal of Sarah. But neither can she keep the thing, its stark

lines a potent reminder of who she'd been, what she'd done. *Who had sent it? Who knew?*

With shaking fingers she pries up an old floorboard, a jagged splinter piercing deeply into her thumb, the pain feeling right and clean, somehow just, and then she slides the folded certificate into the dark, musty space underneath.

Dust rises in the air and motes danced in the sunlight streaking in from the window, making her cough. All around her the house is still and silent, waiting for the thing to be done. In the distance she sees the glint of the sea, a twinkling flash before the clouds cover the sun and all turns grey again.

She presses the floorboard back down and breathes a sigh of mingled regret and relief. It is finished.

"I'm sorry, Sarah," she whispers, pressing her hand against the floorboard, a farewell, the only memorial she can offer for a woman she's never had the decency or courage to thank. Silence stretches all around her, feeling accusing now rather than expectant, and with a quickly drawn breath she rises from the floor and then hurries from the room, closing the door firmly behind her.



CHAPTER ONE

# Ellen

"Oy, love."

Ellen Tyson looked up from the third kettle she'd boiled that morning, slapping a smile on her face as one of the three builders who was redoing the little attic room lumbered into the kitchen.

"Yes?"

"Found this under the floorboards. Thought you might like to have a look."

"Under the floorboards…?" Ellen took the scrap of paper, brown and wrinkled with age, with a puzzled frown. "What is it?" she asked as she opened it. The builder just shrugged. "Sarah Mills… this is from 1872!" She looked up as if suspecting a practical joke, and the builder shrugged again. "Must have been under there a good while, then," he said. "That's milk with two sugars, yeah?"

"Right." The kettle switched off and Ellen scanned the paper again; it looked like some sort of death certificate. "River Cottage, Kendal," she murmured, flummoxed at how such a thing would end up under the floorboards of a cottage in Goswell.

As the builder tramped back upstairs she put the scrap of paper aside, her mind on the more pressing matter of brewing yet more cups of tea for the thirsty builders so she could get back to her own work waiting on her laptop on the kitchen table.

*This will be worth it,* she reminded herself as she loaded another tray with mugs of milky, sugary tea and headed up two floors of narrow stairs to the tiny attic room they were having redone as her home office. After decades of working at the kitchen table or on the sofa, always having to stuff her papers in a drawer or a file folder and tidy her laptop away, she couldn't wait for her own space.

"A room of one's own," she murmured with a small smile, even if it was a far cry from that now. The little attic room had been nothing more than a storage area for the twelve years they'd owned the house, filled with bins of baby clothing and Christmas decorations, a dressmaker's dummy Alyssa had picked up when she'd briefly been thinking of doing a course on fashion before she'd settled on a more sensible English degree.

Last week all of it had been trundled out to the new shed in the back of the garden, and Ellen had swept the room clean in preparation for the builders arriving. She didn't know why she'd bothered; within minutes they'd filled the place with dust and tarps as they'd plastered walls and pried up floorboards.

But in a couple of weeks she would have a brand-new room, with proper walls and varnished floorboards, heating and electricity, and a view, if you crouched and angled your head in a certain way, of the sea. Her home office. Her new beginning as a full-time freelancer after twelve years of snatching both time and space and always feeling hassled and harried.

Latching onto that hopeful thought, Ellen called up the stairs to the builders, just in case one of them was heading down with a ladder or something. They'd had a near-collision on the stairs yesterday; Ellen had only just managed to keep the tray aloft, although hot tea had slopped all over her fingers.





"Thanks, love," one of the men said as he hefted all three mugs in one hand and began passing them around. "We'll have another brew in an hour if you're putting the kettle on?" he added with a lift of his eyebrows, and Ellen smiled.

"Of course."

As she went back downstairs the phone was ringing, and with a sigh for her abandoned laptop –she'd managed all of two pages that morning – she reached for the phone, nearly tripping over their black Labrador, Pepper, who had been her nervous shadow since the builders had arrived, tail wagging in hopeful expectation of a walk to escape the hammering and clatter.

"Hello?"

"Ellen?"

"Alex?" Ellen reached down to give Pepper a reassuring pat as she registered the unusually sharp note in her husband's voice. He'd only left home a couple of hours ago, and he hardly ever called from work. As a research chemist at the nearby nuclear power plant, he worked in a high security clearance area that didn't allow for phones or emails. The most she could hope for was a flirty text at lunchtime, although come to think of it, she hadn't had one of those in quite a while. "What's up?"

"Nothing," he said a touch too quickly, and the vague sense of unease that had been skirting the fringes of her mind since she'd picked up the phone now settled heavily into her gut.

"Why are you calling, then?" she asked, trying to sound reasonable rather than panicked, or at least starting to panic. She couldn't remember the last time Alex had called from work. Maybe when she'd been pregnant with Sophie and he'd been worried she'd go into labour.

Alex blew out a breath. "I just wanted to make sure you're going to be home tonight."

"Home tonight? Where else would I be?" With a ten-year-old daughter who needed help with homework, at least two bedtime stories, and an ever-lengthening tucking-in time, Ellen spent nearly every night at home. It was Alex who often worked late, despite his intention of having "flex" hours. But she wasn't going to nag him about that, not now anyway. She knew he tried his best both to provide for their family and be there for the children. "Is something going on?" she asked.

"No… not really. I just wanted to make sure we could talk tonight."

Ellen gave a slightly shaky laugh. "You're starting to scare me, Alex."

"It's fine," he assured her. "We just need to chat. I've got to go now. I shouldn't have been calling, anyway. You know how they are about security."

"Yes…" Before she could say a proper goodbye he'd hung up, leaving her with a dial tone and a thumping heart. Pepper nosed her thigh impatiently and Ellen gave her another half-hearted pat. *That had been weird.*

Admittedly, they'd been the proverbial passing ships these last few months, with Alex working long hours on a special project, and she… well, she'd been busy just with normal life. Keeping house and home going, not to mention body and soul. With Alyssa halfway through her first year at uni and Sophie starting to think about secondary schools, as well as her freelancing stepping up a notch and the volunteering she did with school, not to mention walking the dog at least twice a day… there hadn't been much time for romantic dinners, or even normal conversations.

Sighing, Ellen glanced at her laptop and decided she





could manage a few more pages of her latest proofreading assignment. It was slow-going, a scholarly article for an economics journal, and the dense writing sometimes gave her a headache, but at least she could charge twenty-five pounds an hour, and she had almost that amount of time before the builders would want yet another cuppa.

She tried not to think about Alex's strange phone call for the rest of the day, but there must have been some sign of worry on her face, for her friend Jane Hatton, whose daughter Merrie was best friends with her Sophie, noticed it from twenty paces as they met on the high street for the school pick-up.

"What's wrong?"

Ellen gave a laugh and shook her head. "Why do you think something is wrong?"

"Because I know you," Jane returned as they went together up the steep little lane that led to the village's primary school. From the top of the lane you could see the village stretching down to sheep fields which led straight onto the sea, sky-blue on this May day. Ellen breathed in deeply, enjoying the view and the moment of sunshine, wanting to dispel the vague worries that she'd been trying to keep at bay all afternoon.

"Seriously, Ellen," Jane asked as they leaned against the stone wall and waited for the children to emerge from the school, tumbling down the stairs like puppies in pinafores. "Is something up?"

Ellen shrugged. "Nothing more than the usual. Builders everywhere, trying to get some work done, Pepper constantly under my feet…"

"Come to ours if you like," Jane offered. "You know we've acres of space. You could set up an office in one of the spare bedrooms—"

"I can't," Ellen cut her off, although the invitation was tempting. Jane and her family lived in the old vicarage, a massive Georgian edifice with eight bedrooms and even more fireplaces. They'd been doing it up slowly and were almost finished. Ellen had to suppress a serious pang of house-envy whenever she went over there. "The builders need their tea, after all."

"They could bring a flask—"

"I want to keep them happy. And Pepper would go ballistic without me home all day." Ellen smiled and straightened as the school doors opened and its first occupants were gleefully released. "Really, it's fine. I'm just having a bit of a moan over nothing." She wasn't about to tell anyone, not even Jane, about Alex's phone call. Not at least until she knew more herself.

"Mummy!" Sophie came running towards her, ginger plaits flying behind, and Ellen's heart squeezed with love. It was impossible to remain even the slightest bit gloomy with her golden girl around.

Sophie tackled her around the middle and Ellen let out a startled *oof* that morphed into a chuckle as her daughter tilted her head up to her and put on the cuteness with a huge, gap-toothed smile.

"Can Merrie come over today, please, please, pretty please, with sugar on top?"

Ellen thought of the plaster dust that had drifted down the stairs and coated every surface of every bedroom in fine white grit, as if someone had upended a bag of flour, or several, in every room. She'd decided not to bother dusting until they were done, but it was on its way to becoming a health hazard. She'd almost bitten into a dust-covered apple this afternoon before she'd noticed. "I don't know, Soph. The builders are still there…"





"Sorry, Sophie, but we can't," Jane interjected. "Merrie's got swimming lessons today."

Merrie made a face and Sophie, visibly deflated, her mouth pulling down at the corners in a tragic frown.

"You have a career on the stage," Ellen teased as she tugged gently on one of her daughter's plaits. "Another time, all right? When the house isn't in such a state. The pair of you live in each other's pockets as it is." Now that they were a bit older, Merrie and Sophie ran down the high street from one house to the others most weekends and many weekday afternoons. Neither Ellen nor Jane minded laying an extra plate for supper, and they'd both said how thankful they were their daughters were such good friends.

Ellen said goodbye to Jane and Merrie as they turned in the opposite direction, up to the narrow, terraced house on the high street that she and Alex had bought twelve years ago, right after they'd got married.

They'd been so happy then, irrepressible with hope, Alex having fallen in love with Goswell in this remote corner of Cumbria along with Ellen and her daughter, Alyssa, then only five years old.

Ellen remembered when they'd closed on the house, a falling-down wreck with "bags of potential" according to the overly optimistic estate agent. Alex had taken a photo of them all in front of the rusty gate, the sea sparkling in the distance. Ellen had stood there with her arm loped around Alyssa's shoulders as she'd grinned at her new husband and had thought, *I will always remember this moment. I will remember how perfectly happy and blessed I am.*

But why on earth was she thinking about that moment now, almost as if she wouldn't get another one? Muttering under her breath, Ellen wrestled with the gate's still-rusty

latch. She was starting to feel positively maudlin. Alex might just want to talk about their half-term holiday, three weeks away and as yet unplanned and undiscussed. Maybe he had a surprise in store – a trip to Tenerife, or at least Devon. She pictured them both sprawled in deckchairs on a warm, white beach, Sophie building sandcastles. Maybe Alyssa would come for the weekend, work on her tan. Ellen liked the thought of them being all together again.

"Mummy, what's all that noise?" Sophie asked as she skipped into the kitchen. Upstairs it sounded like the builders had taken a pneumatic drill to the floor and Ellen watched dust shake loose from the kitchen rafters, drifting gently down onto the slate floor, with a sigh.

"Just the building work, Sophie,' she said as she switched on the kettle. No doubt it was time for another round of tea.

"Ugh, there aren't any biscuits." Sophie peered into the empty tin before shooting her mother a look that managed to be both mournful and accusing. "Don't you go shopping on Wednesdays?"

"Usually," Ellen answered. "I didn't have time today." She reached for a browning banana from the neglected fruit bowl on the kitchen table and wiped the plaster dust off the peel. "You'll have to make do with this."

She handed Sophie the banana, glancing at the slip of aged paper she'd pushed aside that morning. That death certificate. Ellen reached for it, flicking it open and scanning the lines once more.

"What's that?" Sophie asked, standing on her tiptoes to peer over Ellen's shoulder.

"Watch the peel, Soph." Ellen removed a banana peel from her shoulder and lobbed it into the bin. "One of the builders found this under the floorboards upstairs."





"But what is it?" Sophie asked around a mouthful of mushy banana.

"A death certificate, I think." At Sophie's confused expression, Ellen clarified, "A report someone, a doctor most likely, wrote out when a person died."

Sophie's mouth turned down at the corners. "Someone died?"

"A long, long time ago," Ellen reassured her. "No one we know." She glanced at the paper again. "Sarah Mills. Aged twenty-two," she mused. "So young, even for back then."

"Back when?"

"1872, moppet." Ellen tugged on her daughter's plait. "I wonder how it ended up under the floorboards. I guess we'll never know."

"You could show it to Merrie's mum," Sophie suggested. "She loves all that old history."

"So she does," Ellen agreed with a laugh. "Jane would eat this kind of thing up with a spoon.' A few years ago her friend had found a shopping list from the 1930s in the old vicarage, and had spent months researching the history of the house and discovering who had written the list. "I'm not quite as curious as she is, though."

The kettle switched off and Ellen dropped the death certificate back onto the worktop next to the microwave, where all the random paper they accumulated ended up – school notices, village magazines, till receipts that Ellen thought might need saving. Every couple of months she'd toss the whole lot into the bin, most of it unread and untouched.

"You should still show it to her," Sophie insisted.

"I will," Ellen promised. "Now, how about getting your reading book out?" The homework had been due two days ago.

Five hours later, Sophie was tucked up in bed after three chapters of her childhood favourite, *The Magic Faraway Tree*, and Ellen was back downstairs, a wary, surprised pleasure rippling through her at the sight of the kitchen cleaned, the big pine table scrubbed, and the pot that had held their supper's bolognaise sauce soaking in the sink. Even better, Alex had opened an unusual midweek bottle of wine and was pouring two glasses as Ellen came into the room.

"This is a treat," she said as she accepted a glass. No doubt this was in all preparation for their big talk, which had grown in import in Ellen's mind throughout the day, and certainly solidified now, with all this special treatment. She couldn't remember the last time Alex had cleaned the kitchen. He hadn't said anything beyond the basics since he'd arrived home an hour ago, just as they were finishing tea. Somehow she had a feeling he wasn't going to spring a self-catering cottage in Devon on her.

"What's the occasion?" she asked lightly, and Alex shrugged, not meeting her gaze as he took a sip from his own glass.

"Thought we could do with a bit of relaxing."

"Oh, yes?" Ellen moved into the conservatory that led off the kitchen, and had been one of their first improvement projects after they'd bought the house. She loved the octagonal-shaped room with its shabby sofas, rattan tables and a view on every side of their tangled garden that stretched downhill to the beck that emptied into the sea.

She sank onto one of the sofas, tucking her knees up under her as she gazed out at the garden now lit up by the last of the sun's fading rays.

The grass needed mowing and the flowerbeds were rampant with weeds. Once she'd enjoyed mucking about in the garden; after they'd bought the house she and Alyssa had





discovered a huge tangle of overgrown raspberry bushes in the back, and had spent that first, sweet summer picking all the juicy berries. It had motivated Ellen, albeit briefly, to plant some fruit and veg and attempt to have the kind of motherly, pioneering spirit that she quite liked the idea of but had often eluded her in the busy chaos of raising children, keeping a cleanish house, and attempting to make ends meet.

The veg patch had become overgrown years ago, and last summer Alex had dug it up and grassed it over, which Ellen had had to admit looked better, even if she'd felt a bit nostalgic for the days of composting and sowing seeds, followed by the seeming magic of sprouting plants.

"So what did you want to talk about?" she asked. A few sips of wine had given her enough courage to ask the obvious question.

Alex didn't answer right away, which made the bands of tension tighten around Ellen's head. What on earth did he have to tell her? "Alex?" she prompted. "Don't keep me in suspense here. I've had all day to imagine what could possibly be so important you had to ring me from work, and none of it has been good.'

He sighed, the sound long and weary, and raked one hand through his sandy hair. The flyaway strands went in every direction, making him look like the proverbial mad scientist. Usually Ellen would have smiled at the sight, but now she felt too keyed up. "Well?" she asked, impatience edging her voice despite her desire to sound levelheaded and reasonable.

"Sandra rang today."

For a second Ellen didn't know whom he meant, which was ridiculous because there was only one Sandra in their lives. Sandra Tyson, Alex's ex-wife. Ellen had never met her, never even seen a photo of her. Alex hadn't brought any with

him, and that had been fine by Ellen. More than once she'd been tempted to look up her profile on Facebook, but she'd resisted, deciding that ignorance, if not exactly bliss, was better. She preferred acting as if Sandra didn't exist at all.

Sandra had left Alex years –well, *a* year – before they'd even met. Alex never spoke of her except to say Sandra had decided she didn't want to be married any more, and cut Alex completely out of her life. He'd accepted a job up in Cumbria while Sandra had stayed in Manchester, and Ellen didn't think he'd spoken to her in years.

"Why on earth has Sandra rung you?" she asked.

"She wanted to talk about Annabelle."

*Annabelle.* Ellen stared down at her wine as a prickling, uncomfortable sense of guilt crept over her. Annabelle, Alex's daughter from his first marriage. She had to be seventeen now, a year younger than Alyssa. Ellen hadn't seen her in ten years, and as for Alex… maybe the summer before last?

In the early years of their marriage, Annabelle had visited for one weekend a month and Ellen had done her best to make the little girl feel welcome. She knew all too well the pain of a father walking away from a daughter, as her ex-husband, Jack, had walked away from Alyssa, with barely a backward glance, after those first few years. Ellen didn't even know the last time Alyssa had seen or talked to her father.

She hadn't wanted that for Annabelle, and had done everything she could think of to make her stepdaughter feel like a welcome part of their little family. She'd made her favourite meal – some bizarre lentil casserole, since Sandra and Annabelle were both strict vegetarians – and bought princess sheets for Annabelle's bed. She'd even découpaged, rather inexpertly, a box for the toys Annabelle kept with them for those endless, awkward weekends.





Nothing Ellen had done had seemed good enough for Annabelle. The casserole remained uneaten by everyone, the princess sheets weren't the right kind of princess, and her ideas for fun outings condemned as babyish or boring. Ellen understood Annabelle's resistance to her father's second wife; of course she did. It was both expected and natural for any child to feel suspicion and resentment towards her father's new family. Still, it didn't make being the good-intentioned yet still-wicked stepmother any easier. With Annabelle she could never win.

Then, when Annabelle was seven, she'd come for an entire summer holiday. Sandra, a professor of Women's Studies at the University of Manchester, had been taking a sabbatical somewhere exotic, no children allowed, and she'd blithely traipsed off to who-knew-where while Alex went down to Manchester to pick up his reluctant daughter, all sullen eyes and sulky silences.

The holiday had been endless, rainy and cold as only a Cumbrian summer could be. Ellen had arranged trips for Annabelle and Alyssa to the farm park in Carlisle and the zoo near Keswick; despite the lure of such outings, Annabelle had remained unenthused as she made countless comparisons to Manchester, where everything was shiny and perfect and, if you were to believe Annabelle, paved in gold.

"It never even bloody rains in Manchester, does it?" Ellen had savagely asked Alex, and he'd stared at her, nonplussed, oblivious as only a right-brain scientist could be, to the emotional currents crackling through the house, charged and dangerous. Alyssa, after an initial foray into friendship, had chosen to ignore Annabelle, and the summer descended into a stand-off of tense silences and snippy exchanges between the two girls. Ellen, eight months pregnant and rather

miserable herself, had felt like throwing it all in – or maybe just Annabelle, who had been so sneeringly unimpressed with everything, nothing good enough, Goswell considered the dullest place ever, the food and furniture and everything Ellen had to offer tatty and stupid and, Annabelle's favourite word at the time, *vile*. Ellen had started the summer with smiles and ended it by gritting her teeth to keep from screaming.

Alex had been working all the time on an important research project, often coming home after the girls were in bed. The holiday they'd planned in Devon had been cancelled because Ellen developed pre-eclampsia in the last month of pregnancy and had to stay in bed – yet another complication to an already difficult summer. It felt as if everything that could went wrong, and when Annabelle had finally gone back to Manchester, it felt as if the house itself breathed a sigh of relief, its very rafters relaxing.

That autumn Sandra had tartly informed Alex that from then on he could visit Annabelle in Manchester. Annabelle would not be coming to Goswell again. Ellen had heard Alex's terse replies and wondered what Annabelle had told her mother about Goswell, about Alyssa, about her. It burned to think that Alex's ex-wife assumed his daughter had been mistreated under Ellen's care, but she let it go. She was a few days off her due date and her blood pressure was already worryingly high. She couldn't add Sandra to her list of anxieties. In any case, she didn't particularly want Annabelle coming back to Goswell, either.

Now, however, all those memories made her cringe a little bit in shame. When Annabelle had first come to stay she'd been *six*. Had Ellen really expected a child that age to appreciate her attempts to make her welcome? Perhaps Ellen should have made *more* of an effort, thought of more ways to include





Annabelle in their family. She could have overlooked the sneering slights; they'd been so *obvious*. Of course Annabelle had felt threatened. Why hadn't Ellen been able to look past the surly sullenness to the hurting child underneath?

But then Sophie had come along and somehow it had been easier to let Annabelle slip from her mind, to let Alex have his weekends away, and then to soothe her guilty conscience with generous gift cards for birthdays and Christmas, and the occasional awkward three seconds' chat on the phone when Annabelle rang Alex, a rare occurrence in itself.

At some point, the trips he took to see her became more and more infrequent; Annabelle had school trips and too much homework and holidays with Sandra, and weekends down south kept getting put off. Ellen couldn't actually remember the last time Alex had seen her.

"So," she asked, and took another sip of wine. "Why did Sandra want to talk about Annabelle?"

Alex hesitated for a moment, his gaze on the twilit garden, and Ellen tensed. She had no idea what to expect. "She's moving to New York."

"Annabelle…?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"No, Sandra." His breath came out in a hiss of impatience, making Ellen feel rebuked. "Sandra's moving to New York to take up some position with a university there, and she wants Annabelle to stay in England to complete her A-Levels. She only has one more year after this."

Even then Ellen didn't quite get where Alex was going. Maybe she didn't *want* to get it, because surely it would be obvious to anyone with half a brain. But she just looked blankly at him and said, "So…?"

"So she wants Annabelle to live with me. Us. Until she finishes school."

"Live with us?" Ellen stared at him, trying not to let how appalled she was show on her face. "You mean… for a whole year?"

"Yes." Alex hunched a shoulder defensively. "She is my daughter, Ellen. As much as Sophie is."

Ellen blinked, hurt, though part of her recognized that she shouldn't be. What Alex had said was both true and fair. She just didn't like it. She had no idea what Annabelle was like now, but if the last visit was anything to go by…

She wrapped her arm around her knees as she stalled for time and tried to marshal her thoughts. "When did you last see Annabelle?" she asked, and Alex's expression closed up. Too late Ellen realized how her question could sound like a criticism. "I mean…" she tried to explain, but then only trailed off lamely.

"It's been a year," he said stiffly. "A little over. Last Easter, it was."

"Last Easter?" Why did she not remember this?

"I saw her during a business trip to Manchester. Anyway, the important thing is what happens now. She needs to stay in England and complete her A-Levels."

"But she's in the middle of them, isn't she? She must be doing her AS exams right now—"

"They're mocks, they don't count because of the new reforms, and she can come right after. Get stuck in as soon as possible and do the final year here."

"But what if Copeland Academy doesn't offer her subjects? Or uses different exam boards—"

"It's not ideal," Alex cut across her, his voice tight. "But then, Sandra's never been particularly thoughtful about things like that." He pressed his lips together, clearly not wanting to say any more, and it occurred to Ellen that in twelve years of





marriage Alex had never criticized his first wife. He'd barely mentioned her at all. And while she'd thought she preferred that, right now she realized how. much she didn't know, hadn't wanted to ask about. About Sandra, about Annabelle, about Alex's first marriage. She certainly didn't want to ask now.

"Well…" Ellen blew out a breath and tried to rally. Annabelle was seventeen, and from the sounds of it, her mother was practically abandoning her. She needed a place to stay, and that place was here. It had to be. "Of course she can stay here. What A-Levels is she doing? I can look into what Copeland Academy offers. And I suppose she can stay in Alyssa's bedroom, although it will be a tight squeeze when she's home from uni." Which was a massive understatement. Alyssa's bedroom could barely fit in her bureau and bed. Getting another set in there would take a miracle of engineering.

A look of relief passed over Alex's face and he visibly relaxed "Thanks, Ellen, for understanding." He reached over and squeezed her knee. "I know it's not ideal, but…"

"It's fine," she returned, giving him a reassuring squeeze back and ignoring her own lingering unease about the whole situation. "Totally fine. Your daughter needs you, Alex. Of course we'll welcome her."