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Fern Britton

Coming Home



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‘A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.’

Amy Tan

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The cats for keeping me company.

And you for reading my books. I hope this one is okay.

With love
Fern xx

PROLOGUE

Trevay, 1993

The house was still.

Her heart was hammering – she could hear it in her ears, hear her breath whistle in her nostrils.

She tried to quieten both.

In the dark of her bedroom, she strained her ears to listen for any noise in the house.

The church bell rang the half hour. Half past eleven.

She'd gone up to bed early, her mother asking her if she was feeling all right.

'Yeah. I'm fine.' She'd shrugged off the caring hand her mother had placed in the small of her back.

'If you're sure?' Her mother let her hand rest by her hip. 'Is it your period?'

She had hunched her shoulders and scowled at that. 'I'm just tired.'

'Ella and Henry had a lovely day with you on the beach,'

said her mother, bending her head to look up into her daughter's downcast eyes. 'You're doing so well.'

Sennen shrugged and turned to head for the stairs. Her father came out of the kitchen. 'Those little 'uns of yours asleep, are they?'

'She's tired, Bill,' replied her mother.

'An early night.' Her father smiled. 'Good for you.' She could feel her father's loving gaze on her back, as she ascended the stairs. She wouldn't turn around.

'Goodnight, Sennen,' chirped her mother. 'Sleep tight.'

Her parents had finally gone to bed almost an hour ago and now she picked up the heavy rucksack she'd got for her fifteenth birthday. It had been used once, on a disastrous first weekend of camping for the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze award. Even now the bone-numbing cold of one night in a tent and the penetrating rain of the twenty-mile hike the following day made her stomach clench. Back home she refused to complete any more challenges and dropped out. She used Henry as an excuse. He had just started to walk and her mother expected her to come home from school every weekend and do the things a mother should do for her child. On top of that she was expected to work hard for her exams. Why the hell would she want to learn how to read a map and cook a chicken over a campfire as well?

And then Ella came along.

Sennen had sat in the summer heat of the exam hall, six weeks from her due date, hating the kicks of her unborn child, hating being pitied by her teachers.

She rubbed a hand across her eyes and tightened the straps on the rucksack. What a model daughter she had been. Two babies by a father unknown and now she was leaving. Leaving them, her A levels, her over-indulgent liberal leftie

parents who had supported her through it all – and leaving Cornwall.

She hovered on the landing outside Henry and Ella's room. She didn't go in. She knew she would never leave if she saw them, smelt them . . . She kissed her hand and placed it on their nameplates on the door. Downstairs, she tiptoed through the hall. Bertie the cat ran from under the hall table with a mew. She put her hand to her mouth to stop her startled cry then bent down to tickle him. 'Bye, Bert. Have a nice life.'

Slowly she turned the handle of the downstairs loo and edged in carefully, making sure that the rucksack didn't knock over the earthenware plant pot with its flourishing spider plant. Bert came with her and she had to nudge him out with her boot before closing the door behind him. The front door was too noisy to leave by.

The loo window always stuck a little and the trick was to give it a little thump with your palm. She held her breath, listened for any noise from upstairs. Nothing. She wound the small linen hand towel around her fist. It took three good pushes, each stronger than the last before the window swung open, noiselessly.

She threw the rucksack out first and then carefully climbed out after it.

She pushed the window shut and stood in the moonlit, tiled courtyard. In a corner was Henry's little trike and in another, Ella's beach pushchair. She had meant to take both in in case of rain, but had forgotten. She looked up to the night sky. Cloudless. It would be a dry night.

She picked her way over the sandpit, held in a wooden box that her father had made for her when she was little and now given fresh life to with a coat of scarlet paint, and made

her way to the gate. The hinge creaked a little, but before it had shut itself she was already gone. Around the corner, down the lane and out to the bus stop by the harbour.

PART ONE

Adela's Only Love

1



Pendruggan, 2018

Kit Beauchamp stirred the tomato soup in front of him. 'When will your brother get here?'

Ella put her bowl down on the kitchen table and sat opposite him. 'Why? Nervous?'

Kit looked up into Ella's golden eyes. 'Should I be?'

'He'll adore you,' she reassured him. 'And if he doesn't, you'll know about it pretty quickly.'

'Oh blimey.' Kit really was nervous.

Ella loved that her boyfriend was taking this meeting seriously. Her brother was the only family she had left. His opinion counted for everything. She picked up her spoon and replied, 'Tomorrow lunchtime. He's getting the early train down from Paddington. Should be at Bodmin by about one.' Ella pushed curls the same colour as her soup behind her ears and dipped her spoon into the steaming bowl. She sipped and burnt her top lip. 'Ow.'

'Careful,' Kit said, blowing on his own spoon.

Freckles bounced across her face as she opened her mouth to fan cool air onto her burning tongue.

Kit tore at the centre of his crusty French roll and handed her some. 'It'll cool you down.' She took it gratefully.

For a couple of minutes neither spoke, quietly enjoying their simple lunch.

'I suppose,' frowned Kit, 'I don't want to make a bad impression.'

Ella giggled. 'I think Henry is the one who needs to be more worried. He can be a total arse.' She pulled Kit's hand over the table and rubbed it against her cheek. 'You'll be the brother he never had.'

Kit let his hand trail her cheek and chin. 'He's very important to you, isn't he?'

She blew on another spoonful of soup and nodded. 'We are the last of the Tallons.'

Kit wiped the final crust of bread around his bowl. 'Why do you think the solicitor wants to see you both?'

'The usual, I expect. Mum has either hidden herself so well that she doesn't want to be found, or she's dead.' Ella put her spoon down. Kit saw the lost child in the woman in front of him.

'He'll find her,' he said with a certainty he didn't feel.

'I don't know.' Ella sighed. 'Pass me your bowl.'

'I'll wash up,' he said glancing out of the window and looking at the sky. 'Fancy a walk? The dogs could do with one. Or are you too tired after all that vacuuming for your brother?'

Ella looked over at Terry and Celia who were lounging in their separate beds looking as disdainful as only Afghan hounds can.

'Well, Doggies? Fancy a walk?'

Terry managed a discreet waft of his feathery tail while

Celia sighed and raised an eyebrow. 'What a pair of lazy gits,' laughed Ella. She put her arm out to Kit as he passed on his way to the sink. 'But can it be to Trevay? I need to pick up some steak to make pasties for Henry tomorrow.'

Henry couldn't wait to get out of London. When the most recent solicitor's letter had arrived last week he had managed to wangle a decent chunk of leave in Cornwall. He wasn't too bothered about the letter. Another routine meeting. He and Ella had had so many since their grandmother had died. The problem lay with his unreliable, irresponsible mother who had left him and Ella when they were just tiny. He had been about two and Ella just over one. She'd disappeared to God knew where for God knew what whim and never come back. It had left Granny and Poppa heartbroken. Not to mention Henry, who still had vague memories of his mother. Sitting on her lap, being folded into her arms . . . *Stop it*, he told himself. *Hopefully the solicitor would tell him and Ella that his mother was lost forever, or dead. Either would be fine with him. Then at last they could sort out Granny's estate and move on with their lives.*

He returned his attention to the work on his desk. Two reports to finish, three phone calls to make and a handover to his colleague on how to deal with any issues that might arise in his absence and then – he rubbed his hands gleefully – Cornwall here he came.

Ella and Kit closed the door of Marguerite Cottage and waved at their nearest neighbour, Simon Canter, the vicar of Holy Trinity Church.

'Good afternoon,' Simon greeted them as he walked through the churchyard. 'Beautiful day. Enjoy it.'

'We will,' Ella called back.

He was right. It was a lovely day and as she waited for Kit to open up the car and load the dogs, Ella took time to absorb the moment. The Pendruggan village green with its cluster of old and new homes around it. Above her, tiny white cloud puffs floated in the bluest of skies. The smell of gorse on the wind, bringing with it the light rumble of surf on Shellsand Beach.

'Come on. Jump in,' said Kit, jangling the keys of his slightly aged car.

She climbed in. 'It's a day to be happy.'

'It's always a day to be happy for me,' he replied reversing out of the short drive.

She laughed. 'You're always so bloody happy. It's exhausting.'

'I'm a glass half-full man.'

'Don't I know it. My healthy scepticism, hoping for the best expecting the worst, balances us perfectly.' She waved and smiled as she spotted Queenie, owner of the village store and harbinger of all news, taking a quick fag break outside her shop. 'Queenie, however, is on permanent standby for disaster. Like Henry.'

Kit shoved the car into first gear and set off around the village green towards Trevay. 'So your brother's a miserable sod, then?'

'Yep. But he cheers up when he has beer inside him.'

'I'm the man for that job.'

They drove in friendly silence up the dappled lane that took them past their local, the Dolphin Pub and out to the top road headed towards Trevay.

Ella had always loved this road, even as a child living in Trevay with her brother and grandparents. She unwound the window and watched as the trees and small cottages gave way

to high hedges with gateways offering tantalising vistas of the sea beyond. As the road reached its highest point the trees and farms opened to acres of green fields, with the glittering Atlantic below, crashing onto the rocks of the headland that sheltered her childhood village.

The final descent into Trevay revealed the busy harbour with its working fishing fleet tied up on the low tide. How she loved this place. How she had missed it when her old family home had been sold as a bed and breakfast business.

'Which way?' asked Kit as they got out of the car.

'Over to the headland?' Ella was opening the hatchback boot and putting Celia and Terry on their leads. 'These two can run around safely over there.'

The walk took them up the steep hill to the left of the harbour, past the Pavilions Theatre and onto the coastal path. The view from here was breathtaking. Jagged, slate-layered cliffs fell to the rolling boil of a gentle sea. Celia and Terry were unleashed and ran like cheetahs through the gold and purple of gorse and heather, forcing the shy skylarks to take to the wing and sing their beautiful song.

Kit pulled Ella towards him by the collar of her jacket and kissed her. 'Happy anniversary,' he said.

'Happy anniversary, my love.' She kissed him back. 'How many months is it now?'

'Five.'

She sighed. 'Five months. The best five months of my life.'

'And mine, sweetheart.' He kissed her nose and they walked on hand in hand. 'Fancy dinner out tonight? I mean five months is a hell of an anniversary, isn't it?'

'I've got to make the pasties for tomorrow. Henry will be disappointed if I don't.'

'Okay. How about coffee and a cake when we get back to Trevay?'

'Done.'

They walked and talked and threw Celia and Terry their balls until all four of them were ready to go back to the car.

'They'll sleep well tonight,' said Kit, shutting them in the boot.

'We all will.' Ella took off her jacket. 'I'm ready for that cake too.'

The Foc'sle was an old-fashioned teashop on the quay, two doors down from the Golden Hind pub.

'We could have a quick pint if you want?' said Ella.

'Much rather have a pot of tea.' Kit perused the slightly sticky, laminated menu. 'How about a cream tea? You need fattening up.'

'Do I?' She fluttered her eyelashes winsomely.

'Yes, indeed,' he said seriously. 'Being as lovely as you takes up many more calories than the average person. Fact. All that smiling and thinking kind thoughts is almost aerobic.'

'Well, in that case . . .' She nudged his knee under the table with her own. 'I can always do some exercise . . . at bedtime. You could join me if you wanted.'

'Oh, Miss Tallon,' he shrieked, pretending to be shocked, 'Just because you are a blazing firework of a woman with marmalade curls, you think you can do what you want with me?'

Ella giggled, 'Yes.'

'Then I am helpless, pulled by a current so strong I can't resist. Do what you will, but . . .'

She raised an eyebrow and in a deep voice said, 'Yes?'

'Be gentle with me.'

'Can I help you?' asked the middle-aged waitress with a name badge saying Sheree, who was standing over them.

Without missing a beat, Kit said, 'Two cream teas, please.'

The pasties didn't get made that night after all. When Ella came down in the morning the remnants of a chicken salad and a bottle and a half of wine were winking at her from the coffee table in the sitting room, reminding her of the evening they had spent curled up together, talking about everything and anything.

As she collected up the plates and stubs of candles she thought back to what they had talked about last night.

Ella wanted to talk about her plan to offer short painting courses for locals and holidaymakers. 'The cliffs, the harbour, the church. There's so much here for little children. We could go to the beach and find shells to paint or pebbles to paint on. That would be fun.'

'Like your granny did for you? Revisiting your childhood?'

'Oh.' Ella was anxious. 'Is that a bad thing?'

'Not at all,' Kit reassured her. 'It's lovely, and I think taking the little darlings from their parents for a couple of hours is a wonderful thing – for the parents.'

She flapped her hand and took another sip of wine. 'What about you? When are you going to get on the cliffs and paint?'

'I've got that portrait of Lindsay Cowan to finish, with her cat, dog and horse.' He rubbed his eyes. 'She's lovely, but what she sees as handsome, intelligent companions, I see as bloody pains in the arse. The cat is a toothless bag of bones, the dog stinks and growls at me and the horse farts and tries to bite me. But,' he topped up his glass, 'she pays well.'

'When you're done with her,' Ella lifted her hands and began to draw in the air, 'I want you to paint a huge canvas

of a darkly rolling sea with stars twinkling and a lighthouse flashing across the waves. It'll be perfect above the fireplace.'

'One day,' he put his glass down and kissed her knee, 'that's exactly what I shall paint for you.'

Ella's hand was around his shoulders as he lay his head in her lap. The candlelight flickered warmly creating a cosy cocoon. 'This is nice,' she said sleepily.

'We won't be able to do this tomorrow. Your brother will be here and Adam will be back.'

'Oh yes.'

'And the day after, you might find out what happened to your mum.'

'Yes.'

'What do you think happened to her?

'A million things. I have spent my whole life thinking about her and why she left. Sometimes I want her to come back and other times I hope she's dead. It would be easier. I could build a picture of a mum I want. Not a phantom built from questions.'

Ella wondered if what she had said last night was true. She felt no anger towards her missing mother. Just a need to know why. She took the dirty plates and glasses from last night and stacked them into the dishwasher before putting the kettle on for a pot of morning tea. As she waited for it to boil, she tidied the rest of the sitting room, plumping cushions, opening the curtains to the early sun and picking up a chewed slipper and a rubber chicken, both toys left by Celia and Terry.

She heard both dogs yawning from their room next to the kitchen and went to let them out. Terry came out, then sat scratching like any human man under his armpits and Celia strode out as if she was wearing thigh-high boots.

'Good morning,' said Ella.

The Afghan hounds ignored her and, pushing through her legs towards the kitchen door, took themselves into the garden.

Leaving the back door open, knowing there were no escape routes from the garden, she took a tray of tea up to Kit.

He was propped up against his pillows, waiting for her.

'And how is the mistress of the house today?'

Ella gave a little bob of a curtsey, and as she put the tray down and went to climb into bed, the phone rang.

'Leave it,' said Kit.

Ella picked it up. 'Hello? Henry, where are you? Okay. Lovely. Can't wait to see you.' She smiled at a scowling Kit. 'And Kit can't wait, either! Bye. Love you.'

Kit watched her as she put the phone down. 'I suppose this means I'm not going to see your ankles, Ruby?'

She grinned at him. 'There's always time for ankles, m'lord.'

'Ow!' Ella squeaked, putting the hot baking tray down quickly.

Kit, coming downstairs freshly shaved and smelling delicious, popped his head into the kitchen. 'You okay?'

'The tea towel was a bit thin and I burnt myself on the pasty tin.' She ran her fingers under the cold tap. 'I'm fine.'

'They smell good,' said Kit checking his watch. 'Anything I can do?'

She looked at him over her shoulder. 'I just want you and my brother to get on well. It would mean so much to me.'

She looked so anxious, cheeks pink from cooking, hair caught up in a bun with a pencil allowing curls to escape over her ears, and her singed fingers under the tap. Kit got a clean tea towel and went to her. 'Here, let me dry your

hand.' He turned the tap off and gently wrapped her hand, kissing the tips of her fingers as he did so. 'Of course I'll like your brother. But will he like me?'

Ella began to laugh. 'Well, he will if you take him to the pub!'

'I think I can manage that.'

The rattle of a taxi in the drive heralded Henry's arrival.

'He's here!' Ella ran to the front door and opened it. 'Henry!' She charged out of the house and ran at him, smothering him in a hug and kisses. 'I've missed my bro.'

'Whoa, let me pay the driver,' he said, disentangling himself as best he could.

As he got his bag from the back seat and handed the driver his fare, he saw a man he assumed must be Kit. He gave him a quick scan. Thirtyish. Checked shirt and shorts. Nice tan. Looked okay.

He put his bag into his left hand and extended his right. 'You must be Kit. Henry.'

'Henry. Good to meet you.' It was Kit's turn to run a discerning assessment of Henry.

Long legs. Expensive jeans and jacket. White open-necked shirt. Flash watch. But he looked okay.

Ella looped her arms through each of the boys' and dragged them into the house. 'Welcome to Marguerite Cottage.'

Inside the hall, Henry dropped his bag on the flagstones and looked around him. 'Very nice, Ell's Bell's.'

'Come into the garden. Tea? Coffee? I could make a jug of Pimm's?'

Henry followed her through the lounge with Kit, and out through the double doors into the pretty garden. 'You have landed with your bum in butter, haven't you, Ellie? Very nice.'

'Yes, I have.' Ella replied, squeezing her shoulders to her

ears and grinning in delight. 'And I've got pasties for you. Homemade.'

'Fancy a pint?' asked Kit.

'Do I?' Henry smiled. 'With an offer like that, if Ella doesn't marry you, I will.'

Ella was mortified and dug Henry in the ribs. 'Shut up.'

'Just saying,' he said, clutching his side. 'Will the pasties keep for an hour?'

'Yes. Go on. They'll keep. I'll take your bag up to your room. You're in Kit's studio. For now.'

'I'll take it up later. It's heavy.' He opened it and hauled a bulging carrier bag out. 'Here, take this bag – it's got a huge pile of post for you. When you left me in London I didn't think you'd be falling in love and not coming back.'

Ella couldn't keep a blush from her cheeks. 'God, you are so embarrassing.'

Kit saved her. 'Neither of us expected to fall in love, but we did. I love your sister very much.'

Henry half closed his eyes and weighed up this open declaration. 'Good on you. Don't muck her about or I'll flatten you.'

'Fair enough.' Kit smiled. 'Now, how about that pint? Ella, do you want to come?"

'No thanks. You two go and get to know each other. I'll make myself a Pimm's and have a look through the post Henry's brought.'

She waved the boys off with their promise to be only an hour, or so, and took the Waitrose bag of post to the garden.

Getting a glass of Pimm's, she settled herself at the garden table and sifted through the mail.

The piles in front of her grew tediously. Catalogues. Charity requests. Bank statements. A postcard from an old school friend

now living in Peru. Pension firms. Insurance firms. Funeral savings plan. And, a letter from a publisher. Months before she had written and illustrated a children's book called *Hedgerow Adventures*. She had hoped that her departed granny would guide her to a fruitful contract. She opened the envelope.

Dear Miss Tallon,
Re Hedgerow Adventures
Thank you for your submission. Unfortunately this is not the sort of book we would publish. We will return the manuscript under separate cover,
Yours *etc* . . .

She sat back and blew out a long breath of frustration.

'Granny,' she said, 'you got me excited for a moment. Ah well. C'est la vie.' She picked up her Pimm's and took a long, cool, self-commiserating mouthful.

Her phone buzzed. It was Henry.

'Hi, Henry, is everything okay?'

'Have you looked at your emails?'

'No, I've been going through the post. So much crap . . .'

'Check them now,' he said urgently.

'Okay, hang on.' She put her phone on speaker and looked at the screen. There was an email waiting to be opened. 'I've got it. It's from Granny's solicitor.'

'Open it.'

She did so and as she read it her heartbeat began to accelerate 'Oh. My. God,' she whispered. 'It can't be true.'

'It *is* true.' Henry's voice was gruff with anger.

Ella's hand was shaking as she gripped the phone. Swallowing hard to stop any tears she said, 'Our mother is alive?'

'Yes,' said Henry. 'And she wants to see us.' He was having

difficulty keeping the shock from his voice. As soon as he had read the message, relaxing with a pint on the Dolphin's oak bar and chatting to Kit, he'd excused himself and gone to the relative privacy of the pub car park to phone Ella.

He was scuffing the gravel with his shoes. 'I can't believe she's got the nerve.' He bit his lip, his face the definition of rage and pain. 'After all these years.' He pushed his free hand into his floppy fringe and pulled his hair. 'She's bloody alive. Well, I can tell you now, we are not seeing her.'

Ella sat down. 'But she's our mother.'

'Ha! She lost the right to call herself that years ago.'

'Henry, this is shock talking, we need time to think about it.'

'No, we don't. There's only one reason she'd come back. Because Granny's solicitor has told her that Granny is dead and that she is in for an inheritance. That's all there is to it.'

Ella loved her brother very much, but she didn't always agree with him. 'It must have been a shock for her to hear that. Her mother dead, her father too.'

Henry snorted and ran his hands through his floppy blond hair. 'Well, it was a bit of a shock for me too, you know, when I heard that my mum had run away. I was only two.'

'I know.' Ella looked at the garden she and Kit had started to plant. 'I can't imagine how she could leave you. She knew you. It was easier for me. I was just a baby. She didn't have time to know me. I don't have a clue what she was like . . . and that's why I'd like to see her.'

Henry sat on the wall of the pub's entrance, all the adrenalin leaving him. 'I don't know what to think. I was hoping they wouldn't find her. Or if they did, that she had died.'

'Don't say that!' Ella flopped into her squashy sofa. 'Is Kit still with you?'

'He's inside. I saw the email and came out to tell you first. He doesn't know.'

'Come home. The pair of you. Come home now.'

Ella had been hugging herself with joy just ten minutes ago. How quickly everything can change for the worse.

Ella took Henry's bag up to Kit's small studio and put it next to the single bed. It was getting on for late afternoon and through the open window a blackbird was singing in the magnolia tree. Instantly anger rose in her. How dare the bloody birds be so happy while her world was turned upside down? She shut the window with a bang, making the bird fly off. Good riddance, she thought to herself.

Downstairs she heard Kit's car pull up. She ran down and opened the front door.

Kit was looking serious, as if there had been a terrible accident and he now had the responsibility of the fallout. Which he had, she supposed.

Henry was pale and blowing out his cheeks in a childhood mannerism that always signalled upset.

'Hi,' she said softly.

Kit came to her immediately and put his arms around her. He felt the softness and sweetness of her incredible red curls then stood arm's length from her, his hands on her shoulders. 'You okay?'

She shook her head and at last felt hot tears springing to her eyes. 'Not really.'

Kit shepherded brother and sister into the kitchen and made them sit down. 'You both need a drink. Tea or alcohol?'

Ella settled for a cup of tea while Henry and Kit had large gin and tonics.

'Right,' said Kit, pulling out a chair from the table and sitting down. 'Tell me exactly what has happened.'

Ella looked at Henry. 'Do you want to tell him?' she asked.

Henry shrugged in reply and looked at his hands clenching the icy glass.

She looked at Kit. 'The solicitor has found our mother and she wants to see us.'

Kit was looking at her attentively. 'What do you think she wants after all this time?'

'Granny's money,' said Henry, flatly.

'Or,' said Kit trying to sound positive, 'she might be coming because she wants to see you two, after all she hasn't seen you for . . .'

'Almost twenty-five years.' Henry picked up his glass and drank.

Ella swallowed hard. 'The thing is, Henry has memories of her. Nice ones, I think.'

Henry grunted.

'They had had time to get to know each other. It was much more painful for him.' She looked at her brother. 'I should think.'

Henry said nothing but looked at the floor.

'Whereas I don't remember anything about her. I mean she left when I was only just over a year old,' said Ella, still watching Henry. 'That's why I want to see her.'

Henry glared at her. 'Really?'

Ella twiddled her fingers anxiously. 'I want to know what she looks like. Do we look alike? What she's been doing? Why did she leave us?' She wiped her nose as a tear ran down her cheek. 'Everything, really.'

Henry was angry. 'She's one selfish cow who doesn't deserve

to be listened to. I wouldn't be surprised if she's lied through her teeth anyway. She might not even *be* our mother. Just some strange woman who thinks she could get lucky. I wouldn't believe a word she said.'

'But, Henry, we must try. Then decide whether we want to be friends or not.'

'Friends? What are you talking about? She's a madwoman. We don't know anything about her. Correction, we know that she had two children by the time she was seventeen and she never told her own parents who the father – or fathers – were, and despite Granny and Grandad being kind and supportive to her, she ran away in the night and never looked back. What kind of person does that?'

'A sad person?' Ella said quietly. 'A person who finds themselves in a really hard place at the start of their adult life and can't cope. People run away all the time. Every day. She was not in her right mind.'

'Why didn't she come back?' demanded Henry.

'She was scared,' Ella said. 'Once you've done something like that, maybe there is no coming back.'

Henry gave a short laugh. 'Really? Not to have any curiosity about how your children turned out? Not even to see your own parents? Who, in case you had forgotten, never recovered from the worry of what might have happened to her?'

Ella drained her cup of tea, gripped by a sudden anger at his unkindness. She scraped her chair back and took her cup to the sink. She kept her back to her brother. 'Have you no empathy?' There was a tea bag in the sink. She fished it out and put it into the food bin. 'She was just a young girl, Henry. One who had got herself in a mess and she wanted to change that.'

'By walking out and leaving her shit to be cleared up by her parents?' sneered Henry. 'Brilliant.'

Kit, who had been listening to all this quietly, now intervened. 'You two getting angry with each other isn't going to help.'

'Oh, shut up. You know nothing about it,' said Henry, waving his hand dismissively.

'I know Ella,' Kit replied calmly, 'and I agree with her. You both need to meet this woman and find out who she really is. If you don't like her after that, then fine. It's over. You can all move on.'

Ella softened and, walking to Henry's chair, put her arms around his neck and hugged him. 'Kit's right.'

Henry clasped his sister's hands and pulled her closer to him. 'It hurts . . .' He spoke quietly.

'I know,' she said.

'Was it me?' His voice caught. 'Was it my fault?'

Ella took her arms from his neck and knelt by his side. 'How could it be your fault. You were only two. It might have been my fault. I was the final straw. A second mistake.'

Henry's tears began to fall. He angrily wiped them away. 'I hate her, Ellie. I don't want to see her and I don't want you to see her either.' He took her upturned face in his hands. 'Promise me you won't see her? I couldn't bear it.'

Ella saw the pain in her brother's eyes and made her decision. 'I promise I won't see her for as long as you don't want me too. But I can't promise that I'll never want to see her.'

He nodded and let his hands drop. 'Thank you,' he answered simply.