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The Bad Apple

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Chapter One

Coventry, 1959

With a muttered curse, Louise Hart elbowed the stiff door open, wrinkling her nose at the overpowering smell of stale urine in the hallway of the block of flats. She blinked in the harsh electric light, for although it was only five o'clock the streets outside were already pitch black. A gang of Teddy boys huddled in the far corner of the hallway, laughing, drinking and smoking. They were often to be found there, seeking shelter from the weather, and usually looking for trouble.

She hoped that tonight they would let her pass without comment. She had just walked two miles from her part-time cleaning job in the city centre and was frozen to the bone. But no, as soon as they saw her, they began to elbow each other and snigger.

'Ere, love,' one of them called, running his hand down the leg of his drainpipe jeans. 'If yer feelin' the cold we could warm yer up a bit. What do yer say? 'Ow's about a flash o' yer tits!'

Louise ignored them as best she could, but their comments followed her up the staircase, echoing off the cold concrete walls. Tonight she was just too weary to give them a tongue-lashing. She didn't even bother to try the lift. It hadn't worked for days and she had no reason to believe that tonight would be any different.

By the time she reached the second landing the sound of the youths was muffled and she breathed a sigh of relief. Just two more flights to go and she would be home. Fumbling in her bag, she produced the key and let herself in.

'Don't bother takin' yer coat off. Yer goin' straight back out again.'

Louise frowned at the tone of her husband's voice as she shook the melting snow from her chestnut hair and shut the door behind her. Her hands and feet were blue with cold. She had been looking forward to a cosy night in by the electric fire with Davey, her nine-year-old son, who was sitting quietly at the table, his eyes twitching nervously.

One glance at Paul told her he had other plans. He was pacing up and down the length of the small living room, running his hands distractedly across his thick Bryl-creemed hair as he puffed on a Woodbine.

'Couldn't I just have a few minutes to thaw out?' she asked, trying to keep the annoyance from her voice as she flashed Davey a reassuring smile.

Paul stopped his pacing and strode towards her through a haze of smoke, his whole attitude menacing as he ground his cigarette out in an ashtray. 'If there were

time fer that I wouldn't have asked you to go straight back out again, would I, yer silly cow?' His voice became cajoling. 'Look, love, I know it's wicked out, but this won't take long an' then yer can come back in an' put yer feet up. All I want yer to do is deliver a little parcel fer me.'

As she glared at him his manner became threatening again. 'Don't look at me like that! I'm yer husband an' yer should do as I say. In fact, yer *will* do as I say else you'll be bleedin' sorry.'

He grasped her arm and dragged her into the bedroom. Afraid of upsetting Davey any more than he already was, she went meekly, but once inside she shook him off and stood up to him, her blue eyes flashing. 'I told you the last time you asked me to deliver a parcel that I wasn't going to do it again and I meant it, Paul. I bloody meant it! Why can't you deliver it yourself? And why can't you tell me what's in the damn things?'

Crossing to the window he drew aside the curtain and peered fearfully down into the street four floors below. 'Look – it's better if yer don't know, I wouldn't ask yer to do it if I weren't desperate. An' as fer why I can't take it meself . . . let's just say as I have me reasons. The bloke yer deliver the parcel to will have some money ready an' waiting' fer you. If I ain't got that money by the time another certain bloke comes callin' tonight . . . I may as well tell yer now – we won't be stayin' here fer Christmas. At least, not all in one piece.'

'Oh Paul, who is it you owe money to this time? We're not going to have to move again, are we?' It seemed that

every time they started to settle somewhere Paul got himself involved in some shady deal or another that forced them to move on. Now here he was telling her that it was about to happen again.

Hearing the anger in her voice he rounded on her. 'That's what I just fuckin' said, ain't it? Are yer bleedin' deaf as well as daft?' Crossing to the double bed, he yanked a small package tied in brown paper from under a pillow and after rummaging in the back pocket of his jeans produced a slip of paper with an address scrawled on it. He thrust them both towards her with a trembling hand. 'Here – this is where I want yer to go. They'll be expectin' yer – it shouldn't take yer long. The place is only in Counden. Yer can be there an' back in no time if yer get a bus from Pool Meadow.'

'No!'

It was the first time she had ever dared to openly defy him and for a moment his mouth gaped in amazement, then he sprang forward and before she could move he drove his fist into her face. Blood gushed from her nose as she crashed back against the wall and slid to the floor. A million fireworks seemed to explode behind her eyes and she had the sensation of floating. Through a haze of pain, she became aware of Davey standing in the doorway, sobbing uncontrollably. 'Dad, Dad – stop it! Leave me mam alone.'

Louise painfully pulled herself up from the floor and gently propelled the sobbing child back into the other room. 'It's all right, Davey. You go back in there.'

Once he'd gone her shoulders sagged. Defeated, she

held her hand out for the parcel. 'All right, you win. But I warn you. You're going to do this one too many times.'

He yanked a handkerchief from his pocket and awkwardly tried to dab at the blood that was trickling down her face, his tall muscular frame towering over her. 'Here, look – I'm sorry. I didn't mean—'

She smacked his hand away, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. 'Just make sure you keep an eye on Davey while I'm gone.' She snatched the paper and the parcel from his hand in a single movement and stormed out of the bedroom.

Once in the small lounge, she forced a smile to her face as she told Davey, 'Don't worry, love. Everything is going to be just fine. Now you be good for your dad until I get back, eh? I shan't be gone long.'

He nodded, his terrified eyes fixed on the bruise that was already appearing across her eye. She fleetingly thought of taking him with her, hating the thought of leaving him in the flat with his father, but as she remembered the conditions outside she instantly dismissed the idea. She fought the urge to cry; now was not the time for self-pity. Davey was in a bad enough state as it was after the scene he had just witnessed, and the sooner the parcel was delivered the sooner she could get back to him.

She left the flat and started to make her way unsteadily down the concrete stairs, for once oblivious to the graffiti scribbled across the walls. Only then did the tears that she had held back swell in her throat as a picture of Paul's glazed eyes floated in front of her. When he'd married her he'd promised her the world: once she would

have come home from work to a warm meal and a kind word – so where had it all started to go wrong?

Pausing, she sniffed, and pulled herself together with an effort as anger overcame her hurt. Gingerly she lifted her hand to touch her swollen eye. It seemed to be closing by the second, but then she had survived worse.

She flounced past the youths in the hallway with murder in her eyes and sensing her mood they let her pass without comment.

The stiff door clanged to behind her and once again she was outside in the bitter cold. She stood for a second and looked around at the deserted streets. For as far as her eyes could see, highrise tower blocks stretched up into the sky like giant scars on the landscape, emphasising the frailty of the small prefabs that nestled between them. Built after the war as temporary accommodation on bombsites, the latter were being only now systematically pulled down to make way for yet more tower blocks. Even the snow could do nothing to hide the ugliness around her, and sighing, Louise trudged through the snow to the bus station in the heart of Coventry city centre.

Almost an hour later Louise found the house Paul had sent her to. Rummaging in her pocket she brought out the slip of paper he had given her and checked the address in the weak light from the street-lamp. Yes, this was the right place, but the house was in darkness.

It was a fairly unassuming house, set in a terraced row with nothing much to distinguish it from the houses on

either side. In the road behind her a group of runny-nosed children were rolling snowballs, dodging the odd car. Apart from them the road was deserted. The door to the house opened directly onto the pavement. Louise tapped at it. No answer. She tapped again – a little harder this time as she stared at the dark windows, causing the children to pause and look across at her. The net curtain in the house next door twitched as she shuffled from foot to foot, but still there was no answer.

She bit her lip, unsure of what to do. If she were to go home without delivering the parcel, in the mood Paul was in there would be hell to pay. But what alternative was there? She decided to wait awhile. Her husband had been adamant that whoever she was delivering to would be expecting her, so perhaps they had just been delayed? She leaned against the cold wall and tucking her hands deep in her coat pockets, she shivered and waited.

Almost two hours later she again climbed the stairs to the flat, her heart pounding. Her errand had been unsuccessful and she dreaded what Paul's reaction would be.

Her hand trembled as she put the key in the lock. Taking a deep breath she threw the door open. The whole place looked as if a hurricane had hit it. Overturned, smashed furniture littered the floor – all the cheap ornaments she had bought to try and make the place look more homely were in pieces; even the curtains had been ripped down from the windows.

But worse still, where was Davey? There was no sign of him – and where was Paul? She began to cry, 'Davey!

Oh, dear God – where are you?'

A strangled sob came from behind the overturned sofa, making her almost fly across the room. Relief flooded through her as she saw Davey cowering in a corner on the floor.

'Oh Davey. Thank God. Are you all right?' She sank down beside him and gathered him into her arms, as he stared up at her from tear-drenched eyes. Deeply distressed, he merely nodded.

'Where's your dad?'

Clinging to her tightly, he falteringly told her, 'I don't know. A . . . After you'd gone he watched from the window an' then he seemed to get scared. He said some men were comin' an' then he just grabbed his coat an' legged it. Next thing the men came in. I told them he wasn't here, but they wouldn't believe me an' they started to smash everythin' up.'

'Did they hurt you, love?' When he shook his head, she sighed with relief. As she rocked him back and forth she asked gently, 'Did the men say what they wanted, Davey?'

He frowned as he forced himself to think back to the terrifying experience. His head slowly bobbed up and down. 'Y . . . yes. They kept sayin' somethin' about a parcel.'

Louise's heart did a somersault in her chest. The package tucked deep in her pocket suddenly seemed to be burning her. She took it out and flung it into the farthest corner, frowning in confusion as a fine powder exploded from it as it hit the wall.

'What are we goin' to do, Mam? The bad men won't come back, will they?'

Davey's voice sliced through her thoughts, and as they sat crouched together amongst the tangled mess she knew that once again she would have to drag her son from yet another home.

The soothing rhythm of the train slowed, and Louise started awake; she peered blearily from the carriage window. For a moment she was disorientated and fearful, but then as she realised where she was she relaxed back against the seat. Ahead she could see the lights of Trent Valley railway station glimmering faintly through the snow. She nudged her son in the ribs. 'Come on, Davey,' she whispered. 'Wake up, we're almost there.'

The child, who was leaning heavily against her, stirred, and pulling himself into a sitting position he yawned, 'How much longer, Mam?'

She smiled at him sadly as she ruffled his unruly mop of dark hair. 'Two minutes, love. Now come on – get your coat on. It will be cold when we get off the train.'

'Will we catch a bus to Gran's?' His voice was hopeful as he knuckled the sleep from his eyes.

Desperately trying to keep her voice light she answered him, 'No, love. There'll be no buses running this late. But never mind, it's not that far. We'll be there before you know it.' She refrained from telling him that even if there had been any buses she had used the last of their money on the train tickets.

He yawned again and obediently shrugged his thin

arms into the sleeves of his coat. Leaning towards the window he peered out into the darkness. 'It's snowin' again, Mam.'

She nodded, 'I know, it's been snowing for most of the way, but you wouldn't know that, Sleepyhead, would you? You've been fast asleep.' She smiled at him before standing to lift their suitcase down from the luggage rack, and only then did the smile slip from her face as a bitter frown creased her forehead. Nearly eleven years of marriage, and all she had to show for it was a battered suitcase, the few belongings it contained and the clothes that she and Davey stood up in. She suddenly saw the case in her mind's eye the way it had looked on the day Paul had bought it for her, all shiny and new like the future she had thought then was before her. The memory was so clear that she could almost smell the new leather. It had been the week before their wedding and he had presented it to her with pride.

'*There yer go then, sweetheart. Somethin' for yer to put all yer stuff in. In a few days' time we'll be married an' then it'll be a new beginnin' fer both of us.' She had slipped into his arms feeling confident that she was the luckiest woman alive. His eyes as he looked down at her were full of love, and the future stretched before them bright as a new day.*

As the train ground to a halt she swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and forced her attention back to Davey.

'Right then, young man, follow me.' As she opened the carriage door an icy blast of air met them. Ignoring it she deposited their case on the platform and turned to help

Davey down the steps. He shuddered and looked up at her miserably. They were the only two passengers to alight from the train and the platform was dark and deserted save for the lamps that shone from the waiting-room windows, casting an eerie grey light onto the platform. This only served to highlight the deep shadows that lurked in the corners and Louise saw Davey glance nervously around. Lifting the case she took his hand and started to march him along, glancing over her own shoulder to assure herself that they weren't being followed.

A solitary guard appeared, huddled deep into his overcoat, and watched them step away from the train before blowing his whistle. Instantly an enormous cloud of black smoke emitted from the engine as it slowly chugged back to life and began to pull away, leaving in its wake a strong smell of grease and engine oil that made Davey wrinkle his nose.

Their footsteps echoed hollowly as they moved along the platform, but only when they had reached the exit did she pause. Looking beyond the black icicles that hung from the sooty station roof she saw at a glance that the streets of Nuneaton town centre were almost as deserted as the station. The street-lamps seemed to be struggling to cast their glow beyond the falling snow, making the streets appear dark and dismal, like her mood.

On her right, the Railway Tavern windows were just visible and beyond that, in Bond Gate, a few solitary taxis waited hopefully for clients. She could see the roofs of the bus shelters in Harefield Road, dark and deserted

like the streets, just as she had told Davey they would be.

Concerned, Louise glanced at her small son just in time to see him knuckle the sleep and the snow from his eyes in a single movement. He was shivering and pale, desperately tired, and a wave of guilt washed through her. She had dragged him from his home and hurried him away into the bitter night yet again. But then, she guessed, he must be getting used to it by now. And God only knew how long it would be before he could put this night's experience behind him.

Sighing, she began to walk, almost dragging Davey along behind her. The thick snow slowed their steps. They had to lift their feet high to tramp through it and soon their toes were sodden and cold. They trudged on, their heads bent, and it was not until they had crossed the Leicester Road Bridge and turned into Weddington Lane that Davey spoke again.

'Will Gran still be up, Mam?' he asked breathlessly.

Louise was quick to reassure him. 'She'll be up, love, never you fear, and I don't mind betting as she'll have a nice mug of hot chocolate in front of you before you can blink. That will be nice, won't it?'

He didn't answer for a minute but when he did he asked, 'Will we be spending Christmas at Gran's? Or will we be going home to me dad?'

'We'll be spending it at Gran's, Davey,' she replied quietly. For a while they laboured on in silence. Now and again Davey paused to clutch at his side and complain that he had a stitch, but there was no time to stop and rest; she simply hauled him on as she cast frequent

glances over her shoulder. Many of the houses they passed had the curtains tightly drawn against the bitterly cold night, but a few had brightly decorated Christmas trees in the windows. Louise saw Davey glance at them enviously, although he made no comment.

The few people that they did pass stared at them curiously, wondering what a young woman and a child could be doing wandering about so late at night all alone. But no one spoke to them – they were too intent on getting back to their firesides.

It was almost half an hour later before they left the houses of Weddington behind and headed towards the small village of Caldecote on the outskirts of the town. The roads were unlit here and Davey clung tighter to her hand. She could feel his footsteps slowing and now his breath was coming in painful little gasps that hung suspended on the icy air.

'Not much further now,' she said encouragingly. Sure enough, not long afterwards she pointed to a small wood ahead of them that bordered the road. 'Look, Davey. You can just see the rooftop of Tanglewood through the trees. Ten more minutes and we'll be there.'

The sight seemed to spur him on and he renewed his efforts. Louise felt as if her arm was about to drop off, as the suitcase she was carrying grew heavier by the minute. Her only consolation was that she was so cold she was numb to the pain caused by the hard leather handle digging into her hand.

They turned off the road and began to walk along the tree-lined drive that led to Caldecote Hall. Tanglewood

was set in the edge of the grounds, but ahead of them they could see the lights of the Hall shining through the snow. For some years the Hall had been used as a school for children from overseas. Whenever they visited, Davey loved to watch them, fascinated by the different colours of their skins, although he was too shy to speak.

Tonight, there was no one to speak to even if he had wanted to. The road was deserted, and he was glad when they turned into yet another lane, for this was the one that would lead them to Tanglewood, the last lap of their journey.

The barren boughs overhead dipped as the wind whistled through them, and every now and again Davey jumped as they deposited the snow that had collected on their branches unceremoniously onto his and his mother's heads. The snow was deeper here but now that the rooftop of the house was in sight they struggled on, the distance of the drive only emphasising how isolated they were, and causing Louise to feel even more vulnerable.

A huge goose suddenly reared up out of nowhere, frantically flapping its wings at them and hissing.

A soothing word from Louise calmed it. 'Now then, Jessica, it's only me. Get back into your hut, you daft thing, before you catch your death of cold.'

At the sound of the familiar voice the goose waddled away and disappeared into the darkness, and minutes later the house loomed up out of the blizzard. Tanglewood had once been a gentleman's residence, bought long ago by Louise's great-great-grandfather. It had been a grand house in its day, but now was only a shadow of

its former self, thanks to her great-grandfather who had squandered the family's wealth. Legend had it, that by the time he had done with gambling, all that remained was the house and grounds, which amounted to one acre, and so it had been passed down through the generations.

But even in its sadly dilapidated state, with its ivy-clad walls and its many chimneys stretching up into the sky, Tanglewood still boasted a type of majestic beauty that thrilled Louise and gave her a sense of homecoming every time she returned.

The rough drive stopped in front of three curved stone steps that led to two enormous oak doors. On the right of the doors were two tall sash-cord windows that looked into what had once been a very impressive drawing room and a splendid dining room. On the other side of the doors were two more windows, one fronting the study and the other a library. Above them on the first floor were five more windows, one for each bedroom at the front of the house. Tanglewood boasted nine bedrooms in all, but only three of them were ever used now. They were all in darkness, staring out into the snowy night like great empty eyes, but as Louise knew the rooms were rarely used, this didn't trouble her.

Switching the suitcase to her other hand, she skirted the house and approached by the back way, and as they passed what had used to be the stable block but now served as a kennels for the many stray dogs that her mother housed in her small sanctuary, the animals began to yap and Davey started in shock. Louise yanked him on and as they rounded the corner was relieved to see a light

shining from the kitchen window. Stamping the snow from her feet she pushed the kitchen door open and ushered Davey before her into the wonderful warmth of the room.

Dolly Day, who was sitting in a comfortable old armchair at the side of the fire, glanced up from the newspaper she was reading. Her face registered no surprise; it might have been a normal occurrence, her daughter and grandson arriving late at night. Instead she simply rose stiffly and hurried over to lift the arm off the Lonnie Donegan forty-five that was playing on the record-player before turning to greet them.

'I were just readin' about Harold Macmillan's plans fer next year,' she remarked casually. 'He's tellin' us that we've never had it so good but I'll reserve me judgement. Promisin' the earth, he is. Still – that's the Tories for you.' Her eyes rested on Davey and filled with concern. 'What a night to choose to be out an' about. You look frozen to death. Come on, the pair o' you. Get them wet coats off an' get over by the fire while I make you a nice warm drink.'

Louise was aware of her mother glancing at her bruised eye as she passed her, but Dolly made no comment; she simply filled the kettle at the sink, setting the old pipes clanking, and placed it to boil on the old-fashioned black-leaded range that stood against one wall of the enormous kitchen. The range was a relic of Tanglewood's former glory and was Dolly's pride and joy. Louise had often suggested that it was time her mother saved up for a more modern cooker, but Dolly

always insisted that the range still worked as well as it had on the day it had been installed, and wouldn't hear of replacing it.

Louise sank gratefully into the chair at the side of the fire and allowed her mother to fuss over her. Her eyes moved around the familiar room. The kitchen was the heart of the house, and always had been for as long as she could remember. It was a massive kitchen by modern-day standards, running almost the entire length of the back of the house. The ceilings were high, as they were in all of the rooms, and still boasted the ornate plaster cornices and ceiling roses that had been installed when it was built. Admittedly there were areas that were badly in need of repair, but even so they still managed to look impressive. On the floor were the original quarry tiles, which Dolly polished weekly with Cardinal Red polish, dotted here and there with bright scatter rugs, and on the far wall was a deep stone sink with the original wooden draining board still attached to it. Above this was a window that overlooked Dolly's animal refuge. Some of the furniture arranged around the walls were pieces that had been brought or made when the house had first been built. Louise guessed that they must have some antique value now, although she knew that Dolly would never dream of parting with any of them even if she was starving, for she loved each piece as much as she loved the house itself. The dressers and cupboards had been polished with beeswax so many times that you could see your face in the smooth wooden surfaces.

Dolly's mother had been born and bred there, and so

had Dolly, followed by her own two children. It was Dolly's dearest wish that one day Louise would live there with her family too, although right at that moment it was the furthest thing from the young woman's mind. As things stood at present she wasn't even sure that she had a family any more – apart from Davey, of course. But she was too tired to think of that tonight. Instead she gave herself up to the pure pleasure of being fussed over for a time.

An hour or so later, Louise finally tucked Davey into the warm bed that his grandmother always kept ready for him. He had a full stomach and a hot-water bottle tucked at his feet, and as he nestled down into the blankets he sighed contentedly.

'Sleep tight, sweetheart,' she whispered, but her words fell on deaf ears. Davey was fast asleep before she had even reached the bedroom door.

Once out on the long landing she took a deep breath and sagged wearily against the wall; she suddenly found herself remembering another night long ago when she and Paul had brought Davey home to Tanglewood to spend his first Christmas with Dolly. Davey had been such a lovely baby and life was good and full of promise, for back then Paul had still been loving and optimistic about their future for most of the time. In her mind's eye she saw him leaning across the bed and tucking their son securely in so that he wouldn't roll out . . .

He grinned up at her as he kissed the little boy goodnight. 'Do you reckon he's old enough to enjoy the toys we've bought him?' he whispered.

She laughed softly. 'I doubt it,' she said. 'But you will.'

He nodded, his eyes full of wonder as he stared down at their sleeping child. 'He's going to have everything I never did,' he promised, and she believed him because she loved him.

'Louise!' Dolly's voice echoing up the stairs pulled her thoughts sharply back to the present and, drawing herself up to her full height, the young woman tried to compose herself before making her way back down to the kitchen to face her mother and the interrogation she knew would come.

Stick-thin, with steel-grey hair and a determined nature, Dolly Day was a small woman in stature – but what she lacked in size she more than made up for in heart. Over the years she had been forced to stand by and watch her only living child, Louise, suffer at the hands of a brutal husband, but never once in all that time had she ever criticised her for putting up with it or encouraged her daughter away from him. Instead she was simply there whenever Louise needed somewhere to go to lick her wounds, and tonight, she determined, would be no different.

When Louise re-entered the kitchen, Dolly motioned her to a chair and pushed another hot drink into her hands. 'So, his lordship is up to his tricks again, is he?' She frowned as she stared at Louise's black eye, and her daughter nodded wearily.

'How long are you plannin' to stay this time then?' Dolly asked. To her surprise, when Louise looked up at her, her eyes were dry. Usually, by now the girl would be in floods of tears, but tonight there were none, just an

emptiness about her that was somehow worse.

'I don't know, but probably until after Christmas at least. That is, if you'll have us. I won't be going back in a hurry this time.'

'Huh! If I had a pound note for every time as I'd heard you say that, love, I'd be a rich woman by now.'

Louise lowered her head; she hated herself for not being stronger – for being unable to say, 'This time I'm never going back' – but her feelings were in so much turmoil, she knew that now was not the time to make so final a decision. She longed to pour her heart out to her mother, but how could she? She was struggling herself, to comprehend the latest dreadful thing that Paul had done, and was sure that if Dolly were ever to find out how terrible things really were, she would never have him under her roof again.

Paul was mixing with men who were a law unto themselves, bad men who cared for nothing and nobody. Look at what they had done to her home! She and Davey seemed to mean nothing to Paul any more. Perhaps it was something to do with the cheap perfume she smelled on his clothes from time to time, and the parcels . . .? She shuddered just thinking of them, afraid to admit what she thought they might contain! And how could she ever forgive Paul for leaving their little boy all alone to face men who obviously had no morals whatsoever? So she lied, telling her mother only what she wanted her to know. 'I mean it this time, Mam. You see – I've nowhere to go back to at present even if I wanted to.'

Dolly raised her eyebrows. 'What do you mean, love?'

'I mean just what I say. I've had to do a moonlight flit. Paul got behind with the rent again and the rentman turned up today threatening to chuck us out on our ear. I didn't want Davey to see that so I just upped and left.'

Dolly was not surprised. 'Huh! Never understood why you'd choose to live in one o' them damn highrise blocks anyway. No garden for a child to play in, an' with the riff-raff that live there, no one would ever believe they'd not long been built. Dirty, smelly places – an' just where is Paul now then?'

Louise shrugged and when she replied her voice was choked with emotion. 'I've no idea. He's got himself into some sort of trouble again and I haven't seen hide nor hair of him for three days.' The lies slid easily from her lips as she avoided Dolly's eyes.

'Well, that means nothin'. He'll go to ground for a time an' then he'll come lookin' for you, same as he always does.'

Dolly was shocked yet again to see the determined glint in Louise's eyes when she replied. 'He can look all he wants, Mam, but I mean it this time. I'm not going back – not yet at least. It wouldn't be fair on Davey. He's seeing too much and it's making him nervy. But if it's a burden for you having us both here, then I'll look around and find us somewhere else to live. I might never go back to Paul, not how I'm feeling at the minute. Davey saw him give me this.' She stabbed her finger at her black eye and for the first time in her life Dolly heard bitterness in her voice.

'Kids shouldn't see things like this. He's even raised his

hand to Davey lately, and that's what's worrying me.'

Dolly chewed on her lip and hesitantly reached across to squeeze Louise's hand. The girl's slim shoulders were stooped, and one eye was black and purple with bruises, yet with the firelight playing on her chestnut hair, turning it to a burnished gold, she still managed to look beautiful.

'Take as long as you need to decide, love. I'm glad you an' Davey are away from the city, even if it's only for a time. You know what I think about them places. Dens o' vice if you ask me, what wi' all them Beatniks an' Teddy boys an' drugs flyin' around. I might live in a backwater but I read in the papers what goes on. Still, this ain't no time for me to go climbin' on me soapbox. You know there's always a home for you both here. This place is getting too big for me to manage on me own anyway, an' the money me aunt left me is runnin' low, I don't mind admittin'. I'm strugglin' along on your dad's pension an' handouts for the animals at present. I've had to shut some more o' the rooms off. But don't you get worryin' about him turnin' up. If you really mean what you say, then God help him, as far as I'm concerned. He'll go back down the drive quicker than he come up it, I can promise you that, an' he'll go wi' me boot up his arse an' all. You've no need to go back until you're good an' ready, an' if you decide you don't want to – well, that's just fine be me.'

'Aren't you going to say ''I told you so'' then?' Louise asked.

Her mother merely shook her head. 'You've never heard me say it yet, an' I ain't about to start now. We all

make mistakes in life – that's how we learn. Besides, things are different now to what they were in my day. Back then the attitude was ''you makes your bed an' you lies on it'', but we're almost into 1960 now an' things change, times move on. As far as I'm concerned, no one should have to stay in a loveless marriage, if that's what you're sayin' it is. I'm just glad as you're seein' the light. I've no need to tell you as me an' your dad never wanted you to have him. He were too much of a Jack the lad. But then, I suppose that's what drew you to him. They say as opposites always attract. Just answer me one question though. Do you still love him?'

Louise looked across at her mother and suddenly the tears that she had held back for so long flooded from her lovely blue eyes and spilled down her swollen cheeks. 'I don't know, Mam. I don't know how I feel any more.'

Shock registered on Dolly's face. This was only one of many times she had given Louise and Davey sanctuary at Tanglewood, but never before had she heard Louise say that. She had formed the opinion long ago that Paul was a bad apple and as far as she was concerned, it only needed one like him in a barrel to taint the rest, so the sooner Louise got Davey away from him the better, though now, of course, was not the time to say it.

In a second, she had covered the distance between them and was rocking her daughter gently in her arms. 'That's it, love, you cry it all out. Things can only get better from now on. You're back where you belong, at home at Tanglewood for as long as you want to be here.'