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Written by Cathy Kelly

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The House on Willow Street



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What She Wants
Just Between Us
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Always and Forever
Past Secrets
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Once in a Lifetime
Homecoming

Christmas Magic (short stories)

CATHY KELLY

*The House on
Willow Street*



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*To my darling husband, John, and our wonderful
sons, Dylan and Murray. And the Puplets of
Loveliness, Dinky, Licky, Scamp, who were
there for all of it.*

Prologue

Danae Rahill had long since learned that a postmistress's job in a small town had a lot more to it than the ability to speedily process pensions or organize money transfers.

She'd run Avalon Post Office for fifteen years and she saw everything. It was impossible not to. Without wishing to, the extremely private Danae found herself the holder of many of the town's secrets.

She saw money sent to the Misses McGinty's brother in London, who'd gone there fifty years ago to make his fortune and was now living in a hostel.

'The building work has dried up, you know,' said one of the little Miss McGintys, her tiny papery hands finishing writing the address she knew by heart.

Danae was aware the hostel was one where Irish men went when the drinking got out of control and they needed a bed to sleep in.

'It must be terrible for such a good man not to have a job any more,' she said kindly.

Danae saw widower Mr Dineen post endless parcels and letters to his children around the world, but never heard of him getting on a plane to visit any of them.

She saw registered letters to solicitors, tear-stained funeral

cards, wedding invitations and, on two occasions, sad, hastily written notes informing guests that the wedding was cancelled. She saw savings accounts fall to nothing with job losses and saw lonely people for whom collecting their pension was a rare chance to speak to another human being.

People felt safe confiding in Danae because it was well known that she would never discuss their personal details with anyone else. And she wasn't married. There was no Mr Rahill to tell stories to at night in the cottage at the top of Willow Street. Danae was never seen in coffee shops gossiping with a gaggle of friends. She was, everyone in Avalon agreed, discreet.

She might gently enquire as to whether some plan or ambition had worked out or not, but equally she could tell without asking when the person wanted that last conversation forgotten entirely.

Danae was kindness personified.

And yet a few of the more perceptive residents of Avalon felt that there was some mystery surrounding their postmistress because, while she knew so much of the details of their lives, they knew almost nothing about *her*, even though she'd lived in their town for some eighteen years.

'She's always so interested and yet . . . ' Mrs Ryan, in charge of the church cleaning schedule and an avid reader of Scandinavian crime novels, tried to find the right words for it, ' . . . she's still a bit . . . distant.'

'That's it exactly,' agreed Mrs Moloney, who loved a good gossip but could never glean so much as a scrap of information from Danae. The postmistress was so tight-lipped that the KGB couldn't have got any secrets out of her.

For a start, there was her name: Danae. Completely strange. Not a proper saint's name or anything.

Dan-ay, she said it.

'Greek or some such,' sniffed Mrs Ryan, who was an Agnes and proud of it.

‘I don’t even know when her husband died,’ said Mrs Moloney.

‘If there ever *was* a husband,’ said Mrs Lombardy.

Mrs Lombardy was widowed and not a day passed without her talking about her beloved Roberto, who grew nicer and kinder the longer he was dead. In her opinion, it was a widow’s job to keep the memory of her husband alive. Once, she’d idly enquired after Danae’s husband, because she was a Mrs after all, even if she did live alone in that small cottage at the far end of Willow Street with nothing but a dog and a few mad chickens for company.

‘He is no longer with us,’ Danae had said, and Mrs Lombardy had seen the shutters coming down on Danae’s face.

‘Ah sure, he might have run off with someone else,’ Mrs Ryan said. ‘The poor pet.’

Of course, she looked different too.

The three women felt that the long, tortoiseshell hair ought to be neatly tied up, or that the postmistress should maintain a more dignified exterior, instead of wearing long, trailing clothes that looked second-hand. And as for the jewellery, *well*.

‘I always say that you can’t go wrong with a nice string of pearls,’ said Mrs Byrne, in charge of the church flowers. Many years of repeating this mantra had ensured that her husband, known all over town as *Poor Bernard*, had given her pearls as an anniversary gift.

‘As for those mad big necklaces, giant lumps of things on bits of leather, amber and whatnot . . .’ said Mrs Lombardy. ‘What’s wrong with a nice crucifix, that’s what I want to know?’

Danae was being discussed over Friday-morning coffee in the Avalon Hotel and Spa, and the hotel owner, one Belle Kennedy, who was very light on her feet for such a large and imposing lady, was listening intently to the conversation.

Belle had ears like a bat.

‘Comes in handy when you have a lot of staff,’ she told Danae later that day, having dashed into the post office to

pick up a couple of books of stamps because the hotel franking machine had gone on the blink yet again and *someone* hadn't got it fixed as they'd promised.

'I swear on my life, I'm going to kill that girl in the back office,' Belle said grimly. 'She hasn't done a tap of work since she got engaged. Not getting the franking machine sorted is the tip of the iceberg. She reads bridal magazines under her desk when she thinks no one's around. As if it really matters what colour the blinking roses on the tables at the reception are.'

Like Danae, Belle was in her early fifties. She had been married twice and was long beyond girlish delight over bridal arrangements. It was a wonder the hotel did such good business in wedding receptions, because Belle viewed all matrimony as a risky venture destined for failure. The only issue, Belle said, was *when* it would fail.

'The Witches of Eastwick were talking about you in the hotel coffee shop this morning,' she told her friend. 'They reckon you're hiding more than pre-paid envelopes behind that glass barrier.'

'Nobody's interested in me,' said Danae cheerily. 'You've a great imagination, Belle. It's probably you they were talking about, Madam Entrepreneur.'

Danae's day was busy, it being a normal September morning in Avalon's post office.

Raphael, who ran the Avalon Deli, told Danae he was worried about his wife, Marie-France, because she had an awful cough and refused to go to the doctor.

"'I do not need a doctor, I am not sick,'" she keeps saying,' he reported tiredly.

Danae carefully weighed the package going to the Pontis' only son, who was living in Paris.

If she was the sort of person who gave advice, she might suggest that Raphael mention his mother's cough to their son. Marie-France would abseil down the side of the house on a

spider's thread if her son asked her to. A few words in that direction would do more good than constantly telling Marie-France to go to the doctor – something that might be construed as nagging instead of love and worry.

But Danae didn't give advice, didn't push her nose in where it didn't belong.

Father Liam came in and told her the parish was going broke because people weren't attending Mass and putting their few coins in the basket any more.

'They're deserting the church when they need us now more than ever,' he said, wild-eyed.

Danae sensed that Father Liam was tired of work, tired of everyone expecting him to understand their woes when he had woes of his own. In a normal job, Father Liam would be long retired so he could take his blood pressure daily and keep away from stress.

Worse, said Father Liam, the new curate, Father Olumbuko, who was strong and full of beans, wasn't even Irish.

'He's from Nigeria!' shrieked Father Liam, as if this explained everything. 'He doesn't know how we do things round here.'

Danae reckoned it would do Avalon no harm to learn how things were done in Nigeria but kept this thought to herself.

Danae nipped into the back to put the kettle on and, from there, heard the buzzer that signalled a person opening the post office door.

'No rush, Danae,' said a clear, friendly voice.

It was Tess Power. Tess ran the local antique shop, Something Old, a tempting establishment that Danae had trained herself not to enter lest she was overwhelmed with the desire to buy something ludicrous that she hadn't known she wanted until she saw it in Tess's beautiful shop. For it *was* beautiful: like a miniature version of an exquisite mansion, with brocade chairs, rosewood dressing tables, silver knick-knacks and antique velvet cloaks artfully used to display jewellery.

People were known to have gone into Something Old to buy a small birthday gift and come out hours later, having just *had* to have a diamanté brooch in the shape of a flamingo, a set of bone-handled teaspoons and a creaky chair for beside the telephone.

‘Tess Power could sell ice to the Eskimos,’ was Belle’s estimation of her.

It was from Belle that Danae had discovered that Tess was one of the Powers who’d once owned Avalon House, the huge and now deserted mansion overlooking the town that had been founded by their ancestors, the de Paors, back in feudal times.

The family had run out of money a long time ago, and the house had been sold shortly before Tess’s father died. There was a sister, too.

‘Wild,’ was Belle’s one-word summation of Suki Power.

Suki had run off and married into a famous American political dynasty, the Richardsons.

‘Quite like the Kennedys,’ said Belle, ‘but better-looking.’

After spending three years smiling like the ideal politician’s wife, Suki had divorced her husband and gone on to write a bestseller about feminism.

To Danae, student of humankind, she sounded interesting, perhaps even as interesting as Tess, who was quietly beautiful and seemed to hide her beauty for some unfathomable reason.

‘Hello, Tess, how are you?’ asked Danae, emerging from the back room with her tea.

‘Fine, thank you.’ said Tess. She was standing by the noticeboard, clad in an elderly grey wool sweater and old but pressed jeans. Danae had only ever seen her wear variations on this theme.

Tess had to be early forties, given that she had a teenage son, but she somehow looked younger, despite not wearing even a hint of make-up on her lovely, fine-boned face. Her fair hair was cut short and curled haphazardly, as if the most maintenance it ever got was a hand run through it in

exasperation in the morning. Despite all that, hers was a face observant people looked at twice, admiring the fine planes of her cheekbones and the elegant swan-like neck highlighted by the short hair clustered around her skull.

‘I wanted to ask if I could stick a notice about my shop on your board, that’s all.’

‘Of course,’ said Danae with a smile.

Normally, she liked to check notices to ensure there was nothing that might shock the more delicate members of the community, but she was pretty sure that anything Tess would stick on the board would be exemplary. The vetting system had been in place since some joker had stuck up a card looking for ladies to join Avalon’s first burlesque dance club:

Experienced bosom-tassel twirlers required!

Most of the ladies of Avalon had all roared with laughter, although poor Father Liam allegedly needed a squirt of his inhaler when he heard.

‘How’s business?’ Danae asked.

Tess grimaced. ‘Not good. That’s why I’ve typed up the notices. I’m sticking them all over the place and heading into Arklow later to put some up there too. It’s to remind people that the antique shop is here, to encourage them to bring things in or else to come in and shop. The summer season used to be enough to keep me going, but not any more.’ She looked Danae in the eye.

Danae kept a professional smile on her face. Although she didn’t know her well, she sensed that Tess was not the sort of person who’d want sympathy or false assurances that everything would turn out fine in the end, or that the antique shop would stay open when other businesses were going under because of the recession.

Instead, she said: ‘Chin up, that’s all we can do.’

‘That’s my motto exactly,’ Tess said, breaking into a smile.

Her large grey eyes sparkled, the full lips curved up and, for a moment, Danae was reminded of a famous oil portrait of an aristocratic eighteenth-century beauty, with fair curls like Tess's clustered round a lovely, lively face. Someone who looked like Tess Power ought to have plenty of men interested in her, yet the most recent local gossip had it that her husband had left her and their two children.

Still, appearances could be deceptive. Danae Rahill knew that better than most.

When she'd shut the post office for the day, Danae headed home. She loved her adopted town. It was very different from the city where she'd grown up. After her father died, she and her mother had lived in a cramped three-room flat on the fourth floor of an old tenement building. They'd shared the bathroom with everyone else on that floor. Poverty had been the uniting factor in the tenements. People put washing and bags of coal on their balconies instead of window boxes.

Everyone should have been close, but they weren't – not to Danae's family, at least. Danae's mother created a barrier between them and their neighbours.

'We're better than the likes of them,' Sybil would say every day, after some fresh embarrassment, such as having to queue for the toilet because the Mister Rourke from number seven had a gypsy stomach thanks to a feed of pints on payday. 'Tell them nothing, Danae. We don't want other people knowing our business.'

As she grew older, Danae found other reasons to keep her own counsel.

When she'd first moved to Avalon, Danae had spent every spare moment exploring the pretty town, tracing its history in the varying architectural styles. Originally it had been a village consisting of a few grace-and-favour cottages for workers from the De Paor estate. These tiny brick homes arranged in undulating lines on the hillside were currently

much in vogue with city dwellers who wanted a seaside hideaway. There were few other buildings that dated back to that period, one exception being the Avalon Hotel and Spa, which Belle ran. The rest of the town was a hotchpotch of American-style wooden houses built by a 1930s developer near the seafront, with a couple of modern housing estates and pretty, small-windowed Irish cottages scattered here and there.

Danae's cottage was on the sparsely populated southern side of Avalon, right at the top end of Willow Street, a long, steep road that wound up the hill. The only neighbouring buildings were the ruins of a medieval abbey, which sat to her right, and Avalon House, which loomed behind her. Huge granite gateposts with battered iron gates marked the entrance to the once tree-lined avenue. Many of the trees were gone now, damaged like the great house itself, which had sat empty these last ten years.

Below Willow Street lay the sweep of Avalon Bay with its horseshoe-shaped sandy beach, which had been drawing seaside-loving holidaymakers to the area for many years.

Avalon was a resort town with a population of about five thousand at most during the winter, swelling to at least three times that figure in summer. Two caravan parks on the dunes were home to many of the visitors; those with money went to The Dunes, a beautifully kept site where a hundred, mainly privately-owned mobile homes, sat in splendour amid pretty little gardens. Further up the beach lay Cabana-Land, host to as many caravans as the owner could squeeze in and scene of much partying, despite signs warning 'no barbecues on the beach'.

The steep hillside where Danae lived was a very different landscape to the rest of the town. Here, wild rhododendrons grew in drifts and the Avalon woods began, a vast hardwood forest planted many centuries before by Tess Power's ancestors. Danae's cottage was surrounded by a lush garden hidden from the sea winds by a crescent of trees, among them ash and elders, with one oak she was sure wouldn't last the winter.

She liked to rest her fingers on the cracked bark, feeling the lifeblood of this ancient giant throb into her.

Ferns that wouldn't grow anywhere else in Avalon thrived in the sylvan sanctuary of her garden, while the winter roses bloomed with glorious blossoms. Her daffodils and crocuses came up weeks before anyone else's, and the tiny sea orchids that only grew on the spiky grass on the sea dunes ran riot, forming wild clumps everywhere in the shelter of Danae's domain.

When she got out of the car and opened the gate to the garden, Lady, a dog with the silvery grey fur and luminous pale blue eyes of a timber wolf, ran towards her, followed by the hens, clucking loudly as if to tell her their news. Danae hugged Lady first, then patted the hens' sleek feathers, careful to pet all eight or else there would be jealousy.

Cora, the latest battery hen she'd rescued, was wildly jealous of the others. Having received two weeks' daily nurturing from Danae, Cora had clearly decided that Danae was her saviour and favourite person ever. She was still quite bald from her two years as a battery hen, but her personality shone through her strange haircut.

The funniest of the hens was Mara. Named after Danae's niece, Mara was a sheeny Rhode Island Red who had been rescued by the local ISPCA. She was a flibbertigibbet of a creature, all fluffy bloomers and ruffled wing feathers at the slightest noise. Occasionally she would opt to remain in the henhouse at feeding time, waiting to be coaxed out like a reluctant diva, while in high winds she would climb atop the henhouse and stand there clucking like a female Heathcliff, impervious to the weather.

'She's completely mad,' Mara pointed out when her chicken namesake introduced herself by landing on top of Mara's lime-green Fiat Uno and sitting there in delighted splendour like the Queen of the Nile, wings stretched out. 'Is that why she's called after me?'

'No!' Danae laughed. 'She's beautiful and she nestled against

me instantly the first time I met her. That's what did it for me. Plus,' Danae went on, 'she's a redhead and her flame shines brightly.'

Mara, who was eccentrically unique and had fiercely red hair that rippled around her face like glossy lava, grinned.

'As excuses go, that's perfect,' she'd said.

Mara hadn't been to visit for far too long, Danae realized as she petted the hens. There had been talk in her brother's family of an engagement between Mara and a man at work, which was anticipated 'any day now', according to Morris, Danae's younger brother.

The wind had begun to howl through the forest and there were swollen, dark clouds overhead. There would be no stars visible tonight. Danae loved staring up at the night sky, seeing the Great and Little Bears, the rippling Orion's Belt and, her favourite, Cassiopeia. The spikily drawn big W was the first constellation she'd ever identified all those years ago, when she used to sit on the fire escape in the hostel and stare out, unseeing, at the darkness above.

One night, someone had handed her a tissue to dry her eyes and had started gently pointing out the stars until Danae's tears had stopped falling and she found herself looking *at* something instead of staring at nothingness, seeing only her own pain. That night had been a watershed for Danae. It had been the first time she'd emerged from the pain to look at the world and to hear another human being taking the time to be kind to her. That night had marked the first time in years she'd allowed anybody to comfort her.

Years later, the stars still had the power to touch her deeply. It was impossible to look up at the heavens without feeling that you were a mere fragment of the great universe, and that one day, the problems that beset you would mean nothing. Few tears could survive that realization.

She spent the evening inside by the fire, with some knitting on her lap and Lady asleep at her feet. Outside, the wind howled

ferociously and rain beat down on the roof with a fierce tattoo. At five minutes to midnight, Danae opened the back door and stared out at the storm that was battering the trees in her garden. From indoors, the howling wind and torrential rain had sounded as if they were going to lift every slate from the roof and hurl the very house itself into the sea. But once she'd stepped outside, into the eye of the storm, the torrent felt instantly calmer. It was only when she was standing on the wet grass, feeling the whip of the wind on her cheeks that she felt safe.

A storm this elemental demanded respect. A respect that could only be shown by standing in the midst of it, not covering beneath man-made roof or hiding behind stone walls.

The noise was different outside the house: rain landed more softly on grass and danced lightly on bronzed leaves. Without windows to wail against, the wind lashed the circle of ancient trees in Danae's garden. But the trees fought back, unbending. Their leaves whipped, their branches flexed, but the trunks stood immovable.

Danae walked stiffly across the small lawn to the largest, oldest tree, her beloved oak with its barrel trunk. Under the shelter of the giant oak, Danae leaned back and felt Lady's cold nose reach questing into her hand.

Lady wasn't afraid of storms. Her gleaming eyes shone up at her mistress with utter devotion.

Danae wasn't afraid of storms, either. It was the same with the dark. People who'd never felt the pure darkness of life itself were scared when night fell. People who understood the darkness knew that lack of light wasn't the problem.

Lightning rent the sky and even Lady quivered at the sight.

Something was happening, Danae decided. That was what such wild September storms signified: newcomers and a change. A change for Avalon.

Danae was no longer scared of change. Life was all change. Endlessly, unrelentingly. And all she wanted was peace, but it never came.

Autumn

Chapter One

Early mornings in Avalon were among Tess Power's favourite times of the day. On a weekend, nine-year-old Kitty would sleepily climb into her bed and snuggle up to her mother. And sometimes – only sometimes, because he often forgot – Zach would bring her a cup of tea in bed. This would never happen on a weekday like today, when Zach remained buried under his duvet until she hauled him out to go to school.

'Teenagers need extra sleep, Ma,' he'd plead. 'It's official: I read it on the Internet. Ten minutes more . . .'

Anything to do with her two beloved children made her happy – unless it was detention for Zach or an argument with Kitty over eating any foodstuff which could be classed as a vegetable: 'I hate broccoli and tomatoes and all greens, so there!'

That aside, Zach and Kitty's existence made Tess giddy with happiness. But there was something special about weekday mornings like this one, when she would slip out while the children were still sleeping and take Silkie, the family's fawn-coloured whippet, for a walk in the woods beside the home where she'd grown up.

Up here with the wind whistling around them it felt as if

Tess and Silkie were the only creatures in the world. As they approached the abbey ruins, Silkie suddenly turned and ran with easy greyhound grace over fallen leaves and twigs in the direction of the great house. Tess hesitated a moment before following. Even though she came up here almost every day for a bit of early morning meditation while gazing out to sea, she rarely went too close to Avalon House.

It was nearly two decades since she had left her old home, had watched it sold to strangers, knowing how desolate her father would have been if he'd lived to see it. And despite that lapse of time the pain had not lost its edge, so she tended to steer clear of the house, rarely venturing into the grounds, let alone inside.

Silkie, thrilled with this rare adventure, had found a path through the undergrowth. Tess didn't know what was drawing her towards Avalon House, but she followed, picking her way gently through the brambles and briars that had taken over the beautiful gardens her father had worked so hard to maintain. He had loved that garden, and it was strange that neither Tess nor Suki, her older sister, had shown even the slightest interest in gardening. Back then, they'd looked on gardening as a grown-up's pastime. Now, Tess found that the smell of freshly dug earth took her back to the lovingly tended gardens of the house at the end of Willow Street and awakened an overwhelming sense of loss.

Stop being so melodramatic, she told herself briskly, lots of people have to move from the house they were born in!

Yes, that was the attitude. Show some Power backbone.

She marched on, determined to have a good walk. She was perfectly able to approach the house and look at it and check how far into disrepair it was falling. The American telecoms millionaire who'd bought it ten years ago had lost all his money and now there was no chance that he and his wife would come here to restore the house to its former glory.

Avalon House was not the most beautiful piece of

architecture, but it was certainly majestic, and its hotchpotch of styles reflected the fluctuating fortunes of the de Paors. There was a Victorian great hall, a Norman tower that nobody was ever allowed in because it was a danger zone, and a crumbling Georgian wing. The entire place was shabby and decaying when Tess and Suki were children. They'd lived in the most modern part of the house, which dated back just over a century; despite the vast space, the only inhabitable parts of the old building were the kitchen, the library with its panelling and huge fireplace, and the back stairs that led to the bedrooms.

The De Paor fortune had long since vanished, leaving no cash for fires or modern heating. As a child, Tess had been conditioned to turn the lights off and to put as many blankets as she could on the bed to keep out the icy breeze that wound up from the coast to the house on the hill. Kids from the village school used to tease her about her big home, but once they'd actually *been* there, they were less likely to do so.

However, none of her schoolfriends had Greek goddesses, albeit crumbling and dressed with lichen, in their gardens. Nor did they have an eighteenth-century family silver teapot (one of the last items to be sold) or huge oil paintings of dusty, aristocratic ancestors staring down at them from the gallery. Her father had held on to the paintings till the end, convinced they were worth something.

Now Tess knew better. None of the portraits had been by important painters, and no one had been interested in paying a vast sum for someone else's ancestors.

Yet the house and the name *had* meant something in Avalon, and people had instinctively placed Tess in the category of elite. It didn't matter that her clothes were threadbare or that she had jam sandwiches for lunch, she was a De Paor, although the name had been anglicized to Power many years before. She lived in a big house. Her father wore elegant, if somewhat tatty, riding clothes to the village shop and spoke in clipped British tones.

Only one person in her younger life had ever seemed impervious to the patina of glamour about her name and her home: Cashel Reilly.

Tess didn't do regrets. Didn't believe in them. What was the point? The past was full of hard lessons to be learned stoically, not memories to be sobbed over. But it was a different story with Cashel Reilly.

How ironic to be dwelling on memories of Cashel and heartbreak when she'd come here this morning to have a serious think about Kevin, herself and the separation.

Nine months earlier, when the cracks in their marriage became too wide to pretend they weren't there, she and Kevin had both agreed that counselling should help. One of her husband's better qualities was the way he was open to ideas other men wouldn't dream of countenancing. There had never been any danger of him dismissing her suggestion that they see a marriage counsellor.

'We love each other,' Kevin said the day she'd suggested it, 'but . . .'

That 'but' contained so much.

But we never spend any time with each other any more. *But* we never make love. *But* we lead separate lives and are happy to do so.

The counsellor had been wonderful. Kind and compassionate and not hell-bent on keeping them together no matter what. As the weeks went by – weeks of date nights and long conversations without argumentative statements starting '*You always . . . !*' – Tess began to face the truth she'd wanted not to see.

Their marriage was over. Living with Kevin was like living with a brother, and had felt so for years.

There was no fierce passion. If she was entirely honest, there never had been. Kevin was the man she'd fallen for on the rebound. She'd been twenty-three then, still a romantic, vulnerable. Now, at the age of forty-one, she no longer

dreamed of a knight on a white horse racing to save her. Nobody saved you, Tess had discovered; you had to do that yourself. Yet some part of her longed for the sort of love that had been missing from her relationship with Kevin right from the start. You couldn't rekindle a love that had never existed. It was a sobering thought. Reaching that decision meant breaking up their family, hurting Kitty and Zach.

All the while, Tess felt guilty because she wondered whether she had done the wrong thing by marrying him in the first place. But their marriage had given her Zach; now a tall and strong seventeen-year-old, with a mop of dark hair like his father. And Kitty, nine years old, was the spitting image of her aunt Suki at the same age, with that widow's peak and the pale blonde Power hair streaming down her back in a silky curtain. These days, Suki's lustrous mane owed more to the hairdresser's bottle with its many shades in the platinum spectrum. Tess's own hair resembled their mother's, a muted strawberry blonde that gave her pale lashes which she couldn't be bothered to dye, despite Suki's urging.

Kitty, Suki and Tess shared the delicate Power bone structure, the heart-shaped face that ended in a dainty pointed chin and the large grey eyes.

Many times over the years, Kevin had told her she was beautiful, as if he couldn't believe his luck in finding this aristocratic flower with her tiny frame, hand-span waist and long legs. She couldn't quite believe him, though. She'd only believed one man who'd told her she was beautiful.

With six months of counselling behind them, Tess and Kevin had agreed on a trial separation, in case they were wrong, in case being apart would make them realize what they had after all.

'This isn't for ever,' Kevin told Zach, who'd sat mutinously, head bent down and dark curls covering his eyes.

'Bullshit,' Zach muttered, loud enough for both adults to hear. 'I think it's stupid.' He'd sounded more like his little

sister than a seventeen-year-old. ‘You want a divorce and you’re trying to pretend to us that you don’t.’

‘I’ll only be down the road in Granny’s house, in the flat at the back. She hasn’t rented it out for the summer yet, so it’s mine. Ours,’ Kevin corrected himself. ‘You’ll see as much of me as you see of me here.’

Kitty had gone and curled up on Kevin’s lap so she resembled a small creature, nuzzling against him.

Tess had been on the verge of insisting that they forget it, abandon the whole painful business of separation, when Kitty had fixed her with a firm gaze and said: ‘Can we get a kitten, then?’

In the three months since Kevin had moved out, Tess had found that single motherhood was more difficult than she’d expected. Kevin had always been fairly hopeless when it came to housework, but now that he was gone, she’d realized how much another adult added to the family, even if the other adult appeared to do little apart from arriving home expecting dinner and tousling Kitty’s hair affectionately as she got her mother to sign her homework notebook. He used to put out the bins, deal with anything electrical and was the one who went round the house at night, locking doors and checking that the windows were shut. Now that she had full responsibility for these tasks herself, Tess realized the value of Kevin being there, always kind, always good-humoured, another person with whom to sit in front of the television at night. Someone in the bed beside her. Someone to talk to about her day.

In the first week of his being gone, she’d felt the relief at their having finally acted on the fact that they’d never really been right for each other and the children had been the glue holding them together. Only separation would tell them the truth.

And then the questions had come: had she been stupid? Perhaps they should have continued with marriage

counselling, not decided so quickly that separation was a good plan.

Was it such a good plan, she wondered. Had been wondering for some time.

Silkie came and lay down on her feet, a signal that she was getting bored.

‘Time to go, pet,’ Tess said, with a quick glance at her watch. ‘Nearly a quarter past seven, let’s go home and haul them out of bed.’

Tess had brought Zach and Kitty up here a few times; not on her walks with Silkie, though. Instead, they’d gone through the huge, rusty iron front gates, which local kids had long ago wrenched open, and up the beautiful avenue lined with trees. She’d wanted her children to see their birthright.

‘This is where your aunt Suki and I used to live with your darling granddad.’

Granddad was a bit of an unknown to both her children as he’d died before they were born. The only grandparent they knew was Helen, Kevin’s mother. Granny Helen liked to play Monopoly, got very upset when she lost, and could be counted upon to give fabulous presents at Christmas.

Zach had been twelve the first time Tess took him to Avalon House. He’d looked at it in awe, pleading to go inside and see the rooms.

‘It’s huge!’ he’d said, eyes wide with amazement. ‘Nothing like our house, Ma.’

‘I know,’ said Tess cheerfully. It was hard trying to be cheerful as it hit her that, after generations of owning, Avalon House was no longer theirs. It wasn’t the size, the fact that it dwarfed their own tiny house ten times over, that made her mourn the loss. It was the sense that this had been home. This was where she’d been so happy as a child until . . . until it had all gone wrong.