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Forgive Me

Written by Lesley Pearse

Published by Michael Joseph

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Forgive Me

LESLEY PEARSE

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

Forgive Me

Chapter One

As Bette Midler's 'From a Distance', came on the radio, Eva turned up her car radio and sang along with it. It was cold and raining, but she was feeling happy because Olive, her boss had let everyone go early when the heating broke down. As Eva had arranged to go to a makeup party this evening with some of the girls from work, she would have more time to wash her hair and get ready.

She turned into the drive, but had to slam her brakes on because the wrought iron gates were unexpectedly shut. She stopped only a whisker from them. 'Damn,' she exclaimed. Not only had she nearly hit the gates, but now she would get soaked opening them up.

As she could see her mother's red Polo parked at the end of the drive by the house Eva felt irritated. Why had she closed the gates if she was in?

Despite her pique at having to get out in the rain and push open the heavy gates, Eva noticed that the borders of daffodils and other spring flowers around the huge expanse of front lawn looked bright and beautiful. However inconsistent her mother was in so many ways, she lavished care on the garden, in fact had it not been raining quite so hard she would be out there now.

Hopping quickly back into her car, Eva drove up the drive and parked just behind the Polo, then hurried through the arch which led to the old stable block. A few years ago her parents had converted the yard into a courtyard garden, and the stables to an indoor swimming pool. The courtyard was

a real sun trap, the surrounding walls kept off the wind, and at the start of March it had been so mild they had all sat out here for a couple of hours after Sunday lunch.

The back door was unlocked. Eva hung up her coat on a peg, then went into the kitchen, expecting to find her mother there, preparing the evening meal. But she wasn't there. In fact the kitchen was so polished and neat with a carefully arranged bowl of fruit and a vase of daffodils on the black marble work top, that it looked like it was about to star in a feature in Homes and Gardens.

This was rather unusual as her mother wasn't tidy by nature. When Dad was away on business for a few days she always let things slide. Sometimes Eva would get home in the evening to find the breakfast things still where they'd been that morning. But Dad was fussy, and liked everything to be immaculate; mostly when Eva got home first she'd find her mother frantically rushing around putting things straight, polishing and tidying before he got in.

Eva thought today's extreme tidiness must mean Dad as expected early or they were having visitors as there wasn't so much as a dirty cup, or glass anywhere.

'I'm home mum' Eva called out. 'Where are you?'

Getting no answering call, she glanced into the sitting room, and the conservatory beyond, also the study and the dining room. She wasn't there, and like the kitchen they were immaculate. It was also ominously quiet, usually the radio was on.

Puzzled, Eva stood at the bottom of the stairs for a moment. Her mother might be unpredictable, some days she made several different kinds of cakes and cooked meals to stow away in the freezer, and on others was barely motivated to use a tin opener. Yet one thing was constant, and that was that she always welcomed her family home.

Normally just the sound of Eva's or Dad's car on the drive

was enough for her to break off whatever she was doing to come and greet them.

Like many Georgian houses the hall was large and impressive with the oak staircase rising from the middle, then curving gracefully round to meet a gallery on the first floor. There was a sky light window above, and on a sunny day the staircase was flooded with natural light. Today the light was murky and the rain was drumming against the glass.

Eva went halfway up the stairs, and called out again. When there was still no reply she wondered if her mother had got one of her migraines and gone for a lie down, so she decided against calling again for fear of disturbing her.

All the five bedrooms and two bathrooms led off from the gallery. But as Eva reached the gallery and saw that her parent's bed room door was open, she doubted she was sleeping. She peeped in; there was a dress on the bed, which suggested she'd changed, perhaps to go out for a walk. Yet that seemed unlikely when it was pouring with rain.

Eva was puzzled as she looked in each of the bedrooms, remembering that the back door hadn't been locked. Mum wouldn't leave that open even to nip quickly to a neighbour's house.

A door with a plain wooden staircase behind it led to three tiny attic rooms. Once servant's quarters, now two were spare rooms, rarely used except at Christmas or other special occasions when someone came to stay, the third one used for storage. Although it was unlikely she was up there, Eva checked anyway. But she wasn't there.

For the past few weeks her mother had been somewhat withdrawn and distant. On several occasions Eva had found her just staring into space, in a world of her own. A couple of days ago Eva had talked about it to Ben, her younger brother. He'd been of the opinion it was her age, because

he'd heard all women got a bit odd in their forties. But now as Eva began to feel anxious, she wished she'd risked Dad scoffing at her and told him what she'd noticed.

Hoping that her parent's room might offer up a clue Eva went in there. The dress on the bed was the one she'd been wearing at breakfast. Dad had been sarcastic, asking if she was going to a tea dance because it was a vintage dress from the 1940's, emerald green wool crepe with a small corsage of lighter green velvet flowers on the bodice.

Although Flora was a stay-at-home wife and mother, she liked vintage clothes. She said they belonged to a gentler period when women looked like women. Her wardrobe was full of old velvet, chiffon and crepe. Dad was always sarcastic about the way she dressed. To him they were just second hand clothes and he thought the wife of head of sales for one of the largest paper product companies in Europe, should dress the part.

But although Dad got his way about almost everything, he had given in on this point because absolutely everyone else agreed Flora suited vintage clothes. Her red curly hair, curvy body and pale skin could be likened to many of film stars of the 1940's. Crepe dresses cut on the cross, beaded bolero's and peplum waisted jackets went with both her shape and her character. Maybe they weren't too practical, but then practicality wasn't exactly Flora Patterson's strong suit.

As Eva stood in her parent's bedroom, she remembered the terrific row her parents had when Dad arrived home from a business trip to find mum had completely re-decorated this room. Eva had never been quite sure whether she liked the shock of coming from the muted decor elsewhere into this red and gold, grandiose and decadent room. But she really admired her mother for not only decorating it herself, getting the curtains, carpet and French walnut furniture in while dad

was away, and sticking to her guns when he went mad about it. She had insisted that she was entitled to have one room in the house that was just for her.

Although it was unlikely mum had braved the rain to do something in the garden, or the garage, it would account for her changing her clothes, so Eva looked out the window.

People assumed by the grand gates, and the sweeping drive that the back garden must be huge. It had been, but the house was in such a bad state when her parents bought it that they sold all of the land at the back of the house to pay for the renovations. The development company who bought it built a small estate of executive houses there.

There was just a narrow strip of patio at the back now and a eight foot wall to give them some privacy. But here in the front of the house it was still possible to imagine how The Beeches had looked when it was first built two hundred years ago because the trees and bushes surrounding the lawn shut out even a glimpse of neighbouring newer houses. Eva couldn't see the garage from the window as it was adjoined to the side of the house, but it was possible that if the door was shut and her mother was engrossed in something, she might not have heard Eva's car.

But as she turned from the window she noticed that the door of the en-suite bathroom was closed. Like the extremely tidy kitchen, that was uncharacteristic. Except for Tuesday's when Rose the cleaning lady came, there was often a trail of dropped clothes from the bed to the bath, doors and drawers left open.

'Mum, are you in there?' she called out.

There was no reply but she went over to it and banged loudly, just in case she had her Walkman on in the bath. She turned the handle and opened the door just wide enough to peep in.

To her relief she could see the top of her mother's head just above the end of the claw foot bath. 'Oh here you are! So sorrow to intrude. I was getting worried-'

She stopped short suddenly noticing the bath water was as red as her mother's hair.

'Mum!' she screamed as she rushed in. 'Mum! What's happened?'

But one look at the pallor of her mother's face and her wide open, yet vacant eyes was enough to know she was dead, and the craft knife dropped on the floor beside the bath covered in blood told her how it had happened.

Nothing in Eva's entire life had prepared her for such a shocking sight, and she screamed involuntarily, running out onto the landing in fright.

It took her a few moments to pull herself together enough to go back into the bedroom, pick up the phone and dial 999, but as soon as she'd stammered out to the operator what she'd just found and given the address, she went back onto the landing and slumped down onto the floor, too shocked and terrified by what she'd seen to go downstairs.

The waiting for someone to come seemed endless. The only sound was rain thudding down on the sky light and her heart beating too fast. She wrapped her arms around her knees and sobbed.

Nothing had happened that morning to make Eva suspect something was badly wrong. Breakfast had been utterly normal, and aside from dad's sarcasm in asking mum if she was going to a tea dance, nothing unusual had been said. Mum made a pot of tea as usual, and just sat there drinking hers as Sophie and Ben got themselves cereal. She'd said all the usual stuff; had Sophie had got her games things? Reminded Ben he must have a proper lunch at school not just a packet of

crisps. She'd kissed them all as they left the house, even asked dad to pick up his best suit from the dry cleaners. Did she know she was going to do this even then? And why did she tidy the whole house? Did she think her death would be less distressing for everyone if the house was looking perfect?

Even when Eva heard the siren in the distance, she felt unable to move. She didn't think she'd even be able to speak to the police or ambulance men.

Suddenly the silence was broken by tires on the gravel drive and loud male voices. Amongst them was her father's too, he must have arrived along with the emergency services. Knowing he would have Ben and Sophie with him, Eva felt she had to protect her brother and sister from what she'd seen and she hauled herself up.

But before she even got to the stairs she heard Dad speaking in the hall below. He must have opened the front door to let the police in that way.

'There must be some mistake,' he was saying with indignation. 'Are you sure it wasn't a hoax call. Yes that is our oldest daughter's car, but did the person who made the call say she was Eva Patterson?'

'Daddy!' Eva called out, clinging to the gallery rail. 'It was me. Don't let Sophie and Ben up here.'

All at once what seemed like a dozen people were all speaking at once. There were heavy footsteps and Sophie was yelling that she wanted to know what was going on.

Eva felt as if she was in the middle of a terrible nightmare. But she knew she wasn't going to wake up and find it wasn't real. She really had seen the bathwater bright red with blood. She really had lifted mum's arm and seen the slash across her wrist, and she hadn't imagined the bloodstained knife lying on the floor.

As the ambulance men came up the stairs she turned to

point to the bedroom. But the dark red carpet in there looked to her like a pool of blood and her stomach heaved. She could hear Sophie screaming downstairs, and Ben's voice too, shrill with anxiety, then Dad's voice above theirs, telling them to be quiet as they were making the situation even worse. She felt herself growing dizzy, and she must've fainted, because the next thing she knew she was on the floor and a policewoman was kneeling beside her.

'There now,' she said soothingly. 'You've had a terrible shock, but come downstairs with me and I'll make you a cup of tea.'

WPC Sandra Markham was thirty eight, and had been in the police force in Cheltenham for twelve years. She knew she had a reputation at being good at weighing up the dynamics in domestic's, which one of a warring couple was the vicious one, the liar, or the bully. Her opinion was valued because she was very observant, could read body language well, and she also had a knack of getting people to talk.

She had been called upon to be present when it was necessary to break news of a death or serious accident, hundreds of times, and each time the reaction was different. Some people couldn't take it in, some guessed what was coming as soon as they saw a police uniform. Some remained dry eyed and silent, others screamed and wailed, and there were many other variations between the two extremes. But in every other case where children had lost a mother or father, she had never known the remaining parent, however shocked and grief stricken they were, not to rally enough to try and comfort them.

In the three hours Markham had been at the Patterson's home, she hadn't once seen Andrew Patterson attempt to comfort Eva.

He had arrived at The Beeches with his two younger children at the same time as the police. He'd gone up the stairs right behind the two male officers and Markham had followed him. He didn't even glance at his older daughter crumpled up on the landing as he rushed into the bedroom.

That of course was understandable given the circumstances. Yet when he came out of the bedroom just a few minutes later when Markham was trying to get Eva onto her feet to take her downstairs, she cried out to him, and he ignored her.

Once Markham had got Eva down to the kitchen she questioned her, trying to ascertain the girl's exact movements from when she returned home from work, until the point she found her mother.

Finding your mother dead in a bath of blood had to be one of the most terrible things for anyone to experience, especially someone so young. Yet Patterson didn't once come over to Eva, put his arm around her, or show any concern for her.

Sometimes in cases like this people appeared vacant, too shocked to really take in what was happening around him. But Patterson was listening hard, and when Eva said how the kitchen had looked like a show house, he interrupted. He curtly asked why Eva found that strange, implying that she was lying.

The house was immaculate, and it looked to Markham as though it was always kept that way. But she didn't think Eva would make any reference to it, unless this wasn't always the case. Was Patterson trying to conceal his wife's failings? Could this be a source of conflict which had pushed Flora Patterson to take her own life?

There was no doubt that Andrew Patterson was a very attractive, and clearly very successful man. Six foot two, athletic build, dark hair with just a sprinkling of grey at the temples,

good teeth and very dark eyes. His shock and horror at his wife's death seemed heartfelt, yet his lack of compassion towards his oldest daughter was suspicious.

There was only a year between Ben and Sophie, the two younger children, and they could easily have passed for twins they were so alike, both tall, slender, with their father's glossy dark hair and eyes. As Markham hadn't seen the mother, she assumed Eva must take after her because she was much shorter, with blue eyes and light brown hair.

Because Patterson interrupted her questioning several times, and also because Sophie kept rushing in and out of the room wailing and screeching, Markham took Eva into the sitting room to get the whole story.

Distraught as she was, it was obvious Eva was a caring, level headed girl. She managed to tell her story clearly and showed a protective anxiety for her younger siblings that was very laudable. While she wasn't strikingly beautiful like her younger sister, she had a sweet face, and there was something about her that made Markham want to take her in her arms and cuddle her.

Part of it was because she looked a bit prim and old fashioned. Her hair was tied back at the nape of her neck, her navy blue suit, white shirt and plain court shoes were far to frumpy for a girl of almost twenty one. Yet despite that Markham felt she was more worldly than her appearance would suggest.

Usually when Markham interviewed young girls after something horrific, they were unable to get beyond their own feelings. Eva related her irritation at the gates being closed, and her bewilderment that the back door was unlocked and no sign of her mother, just as any other girl would. She broke down several times too, becoming so upset when she described the moment when she found her mother,

that Markham felt she might have to halt the interview. But Eva visibly made the effort to pull herself together, and her real concern was what drove her mother to do it, not for herself. She was also desperate to go to comfort Sophie who was by then hysterical.

'Would you say your parent's marriage was a happy one?' Markham asked gently. The house was beautiful and luxurious and it was hard to imagine any woman not being happy there. But she knew from experience that appearances could be deceptive.

Eva nodded tearfully. 'I think so. But they were very different kinds of people. Dad's very ordered and calm, he liked everything just so. Mum could be quite chaotic and disorganised.'

'Was there anything, even something quite small that you noticed different about her recently? Did she seem worried? Nervy, had she been ill?'

'Not really. She had seemed sort of distant for awhile, but then she often had periods like that.'

It was at that point Markham looked round and saw Patterson hovering by the doorway, listening. His expression wasn't one of anxiety for Eva, it was more like he was checking on what she was saying. She not only wondered why that was important to him, but also why her colleagues hadn't made sure he stayed in the kitchen with the other two children.

There were no grounds to find Flora's death suspicious. The way she was lying, the absence of any signs of a struggle and the knife dropped over the edge of the bath made it clear it was suicide. The fact she was wearing cream silk underwear and the stark note left in the bedroom, saying only 'Forgive Me', suggested she had planned it in advance.

Yet there had to be a reason why a woman who appeared to have everything, a beautiful home, three children and no

financial worries, would chose to end her life. Debt, disgrace, terminal illness, an unbearable marriage or an illicit love affair were all possibilities, and perhaps this would come to light later. Yet Markham felt certain Andrew Patterson already knew the reason, or at least could guess at it but he wasn't the kind to reveal anything which might reflect badly on him.

As for Eva, her total bewilderment proved she knew nothing. Markham could only hope the post mortem or the inquest might throw up some answers for all three children. To be left wondering why would be tortuous.

Much later that evening, after Flora's body had been taken away to the mortuary, and the police had left, Eva sat at the kitchen table nursing a cup of tea that had long since grown cold. She felt completely numb.

Ben was next to her, still wearing his navy blue school blazer, in much the same state, not speaking, his eyes red rimmed and swollen, and now and again he reached out silently for her hand. Dad was across the table from them, grimly drinking whiskey and only uttering a few questioning words now and then which he didn't appear to need answers for.

Sophie was the only one who hadn't kept still, she had paced around the kitchen, one minute sobbing loudly, the next angrily demanding to know why their mother had done this, and when she got no real answer she would then flounce out of the room, pick up the telephone to cry to one of her friends.

Eva looked at the clock at one point and felt surprised it was only eleven thirty; it seemed to her that she'd been sitting here for a whole night. She wanted to go to her room, not to sleep because she doubted she'd be able to, but just to escape the atmosphere of brooding intensity that was pressing down on her.

All the images of what had taken place earlier seemed

confused now, and out of sequence. There had been so many policemen coming and going, so much noise and confusion. She recollected someone, she presumed it was a doctor, saying that Flora had been dead for around two hours when Eva found her. She wondered why she remembered that when everything else seemed a jumble.

Dad had cried earlier. She went to him to try and comfort him, but he pushed her away, almost as if he held her responsible. Another horrible moment was when the men carried mum's body down the stairs on a stretcher. Sophie shrieked like a mad thing saying they couldn't take her away and when Eva had tried to calm her down and explain the police had to take her, Sophie accused her of not caring.

WPC Markham had been very kind to her. She'd said people often said and did hurtful things at such times and she mustn't take it to heart. Eva found it odd that much of the detail of what had happened earlier was fading, the only part that was still crystal clear in her mind was her mother's white face above the bloody bath water. That image played and replayed in her head over and over again.

Was it true that the police had found a note which just said 'Forgive me'.

How could Mum say goodbye, kiss Dad and each of them that morning, then clean and tidy the house, yet go on to do that in the afternoon?

Why? What could have been so terrible in her life that she couldn't bear it a minute longer?

Earlier she had heard dad talking to one of the policemen. 'I gave Flora everything she wanted,' he said. 'This house, holidays, she could buy what she liked and go where she liked. She loved her children, how could she do this to us?'

'There isn't always an explanation for why people do this,' the policeman had replied.

But an explanation was needed, they were all distraught. If it was because mum was terminally ill, if she'd gone mad, or she had huge debts she'd been hiding, that at least would make some kind of sense of it.

Eva had never felt as helpless as she did now. As the oldest she had always been the one who acted as peacemaker in squabbles between Sophie and Ben, if they were in trouble with mum or dad she took their part. She wanted to try and comfort them both now, and to reassure them they would get through this, but she couldn't, she didn't have the words, or the will. Dad, Ben and Sophie, they all seemed like strangers, not her family.

She had never known Dad be anything other than self assured, calm and in charge in any situation. Her friends always said he looked like Pierce Brosnan, and was tasty for a middle-aged man, but to Eva he was just her dad, officious and controlling, lacking a sense of humour, but always reliable. He had never been demonstrative, nor was he the kind you could have a heart to heart talk with, mum had often accused him to being emotionless.

Yet now, watching him nursing yet another large glass of whiskey, a five o'clock shadow on his cheeks, muttering 'Forgive Me', over and over again, he bore no resemblance to the man who had always been as steady and controlled as a rock.

Sophie and Ben both took after him, Ben's hair was as Dad's had been, thick, dark and wavy, flopping over his eyes. At eighteen he was as skinny as a runner bean, and even though everyone told him he would fill out before long, he despaired of ever having the kind of muscular body some of his friends had.

Sophie was seventeen, and very pretty. Five foot nine, with fabulous shapely legs, glossy dark hair and a perfect size ten

figure. Recently she'd decided she was going to become an actress. In moments of irritation Eva had retorted that she was already a drama queen.

She certainly had been a drama queen tonight. Screaming, wailing, flouncing around saying she felt like killing herself, even when the police were still here. And she kept going over and over what had happened, almost as if she was in a feeding frenzy on the drama of it. She'd even gone into the sitting room and telephoned some of her school friends to tell them all about it.

Eva felt Dad should've asserted himself then and told her she had no right to divulge such a personal thing, because by tomorrow it would be all over Cheltenham. But he didn't seem to even notice what Sophie was doing. Yet what upset Eva most, was that her sister was only reacting to how this tragedy would affect her. 'What will people think of me?' she said, just before spreading the story further.

'How could mum be so selfish when I needed her to find out about drama colleges?' she said later, seemingly totally unaware that how self centred a remark that was.

Eva loved Sophie, but she had always been a spoiled brat. Whatever she wanted, she got. At seven she wanted ballet lessons, and she'd only been going six months, when she threw a tantrum because she wasn't picked to be in a show. Dad tried to reason with her and said she just wasn't good enough yet, and that by next year she would be, but she wouldn't see reason and refused to go to dancing any more.

Next she wanted a pony, and she went on and on about it till she got Pepper. Within two months she was refusing to even feed her, let alone ride her. She said Pepper smelled.

Eva had wanted a pony too, and she asked if she could look after Pepper. She'd never had riding lessons like Sophie because the lesson time on Saturdays coincided with activity's

Ben and Sophie went to, but she felt she could learn quite easily.

'I'm not throwing more good money after bad,' Dad said in that voice he had when his mind was made up. 'I'm selling Pepper and that's the end of it.'

Eva could see mum thought this was unfair. 'Give Eva a chance, she's far more responsible than Sophie,' she argued. 'Besides all three of them need to learn that caring for an animal should be taken very seriously.'

Dad had just cast a scathing glance at Flora, as if he held her accountable for Sophie losing interest in the pony. 'I've made my decision, Pepper is going and we'll have no more talk about it.'

To this day Eva could still remember the triumphant smirk on Sophie's face. She didn't want Pepper herself, but she didn't want her older sister to have him either.

Eva wasn't one for resurrecting past hurts, but earlier when Sophie had claimed that it was Eva's fault their mother had killed herself, she'd nearly slapped her.

'How can it be my fault?' she asked. 'I'm the only one who ever helped her around the house. I never demanded anything of her.'

'You did, you've kept on about having a twenty first birthday party.' Sophie retorted.

Eva's birthday was 21st April, a little less than a month away, and she could hardly believe her sister would claim such a thing as she'd barely mentioned it at all. She looked to Ben and her father for support. But they just sat there and said nothing.

'It was Dad who suggested I had one,' Eva pointed out. 'If you remember I said I didn't want a party.'

'You pressured mum to get a marquee put up in the garden.'

Eva had been incredulous at that. 'That was mum's suggestion. Tell her dad!'

He didn't answer, just gulped down the rest of his drink and filled the glass again.

It was Ben who put an end to the argument. He banged his fist on the table and said it wasn't decent to argue at such a time.

He was right of course, and as much as Eva wanted to point out that it was Sophie who hassled their mother every single day about something, she knew this wasn't the time for it and had lapsed into silence.

As the chiming clock in the sitting room struck twelve, Eva felt someone had to make a move. 'We can't make sense of anything sitting here,' she said getting up and looking to Ben and Sophie. 'Perhaps you two should try and get some rest too?'

'I'm not leaving dad,' Sophie said, sticking out her lip. 'He needs me.'

Eva shrugged; their dad was in a world of his own, and she doubted he needed Sophie's prattling and hysteria. 'If any of you need me, you know where I am.'

Up in her bedroom, Eva lay down on her bed and sobbed. She desperately needed someone to put their arms around her and tell her the misery she was feeling would go away in time. While she knew it was awful for everyone, she'd had the worst shock in finding mum, and she'd been the one who had been questioned the most, so surely dad could've put his own feelings to one side for a moment and thought of her? He'd cuddled Sophie and Ben, and even reminded them they still had him, but he'd ignored her.

She really didn't want to dwell on it now, but the truth was she was always the one who was ignored by dad. Right back when she was only seven or eight, she had felt he cared only about Ben and Sophie and she was virtually invisible. Even

Granny and Grandpa, his parents had been the same. They talked to her, bought her presents, yet the two little ones got the lion's share of their attention.

Mostly she thought it was because she wasn't pretty like Sophie, or clever like Ben. Sophie demanded a centre stage position and always got it; Ben charmed people and made them laugh.

Maybe that was why she became rebellious at fourteen. She truanted from school, hung around with rough kids from the council estate, and allowed herself to be led into trouble, and to dress like a Goth. While she knew she was alienating herself from her parents, at least outside the home she felt she was somebody, she was even admired by her new friends because she didn't act like 'posh' girls they knew.

Unfortunately when she left school her appearance made things very difficult for her. The only work she could get was in fast food outlets, and that incensed her parents even more.

A horrible incident when she was nearly eighteen had finally brought her to her senses. Yet even though she had admitted to her mother then that she was ashamed of how she had been, dad never praised her for changing her ways. Even when she got her present, good job in the mail order company, dropped the Goth look, let the black and purple dye in her hair grow out and wore suits and smart dresses, he still acted as though she was an embarrassment.

Recently she'd been promoted to head of customer services, with a big pay rise, but Dad hadn't once asked what the job entailed, or about the people she worked with.

As for the 21st birthday party, she had never wanted one. The people she would've liked to celebrate with were the ones she worked with, and they would be uncomfortable at the kind of posh show-off do mum and dad wanted.

What would happen to the family now? She couldn't

imagine how they could hold together without mum. She might have been erratic, disorganised and given to being distant sometimes, but she had been the hub of all their lives.

Was she severely depressed and none of them had ever realised?

Eva didn't know very much about depression, but she had read in a magazine that artistic and sensitive people tended to be more prone to it. Flora was artistic, she'd been at art school when she was young, and Eva remembered her drawing pictures for all three of them when they were small, making lovely Christmas decorations and cards, and she was always called upon to design posters for school events. Even her vintage clothes were part of that. Could she have become depressed because she had no outlet for that side of her?

It occurred to Eva then that she really didn't know anything much about her mother. She rarely spoke about her youth, what ambitions she'd had, who her friends were, or even how she felt about anything. Eva knew plenty of trivial stuff, that she'd rather have a bar of Cadbury's chocolate than a posh box of chocolates, or that green was her favourite colour and peonies her favourite flower, but not serious stuff like what made her really angry, or what her worst fear was.

But then now she came to think about it, they'd never really talked, not the way Eva talked to other women at work. They told Eva stories about when they were young, about their families and sometimes they spoke about the mistakes they'd made along the way. Each little confidence brought them closer as friends, but mum never opened up about anything. It was like she held up an invisible shield to stop anyone getting close.

It was clear enough that something or someone had caused her to be so unhappy that she was pushed over the edge. But such things didn't erupt out of nowhere in one day. So why didn't she tell anyone what was wrong?