



A Family Feud Saga

*Winners
and Losers*

LINDA SOLE

"A truly engrossing, fast-paced drama" *Booklist on The Lie*

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WINNERS AND LOSERS

Linda Sole



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‘Where are you going?’ Sarah turned as she heard her mother’s voice. ‘If you’re meeting friends at that youth club again, just be careful – and don’t talk to strangers on your way home, especially men in cars or vans.’

‘Mum!’ Sarah’s laugh was a mixture of affection and frustration. ‘Anyone would think I was fourteen. I’m nearly nineteen. You don’t have to treat me like a child.’

‘You think you’re grown up and in some ways you are,’ Mrs Jenkins said. ‘But you are still very young, Sarah. You don’t know what some men are like – and you read about dreadful things these days . . .’

Sarah kissed her mother’s cheek. ‘Don’t worry. I’m always careful. I shan’t be late so don’t watch the clock.’

She went out of the front door, closing it carefully behind her. Her mother and father were stricter than her friends’ parents were, but they spoiled her, buying her pretty clothes and anything else she wanted. The only problem was that they treated her as a little girl – her mother in particular – and she wasn’t a child any more. Several of the girls she’d gone to school with were already married and had started families of their own; others had gone to university or had moved away to find better jobs than were available in their small market town – or city, as it ought to be called.

Sarah had once asked why Ely was called a city, when it was really only a small town. Her father, who was a member of the council, told her it was because they had a wonderful cathedral and that she should be proud to live in such a quiet, respectable place.

Sometimes she thought she would like to go far away. She liked shopping in Cambridge when she could, because there were a lot more shops and it seemed more alive than her hometown, but she could only manage to get there now and then, especially now that she had left school and found herself a job. She was lucky to have been taken on by a smart dress shop, which had recently opened in the High Street. Her wages were not generous, but she earned more than some of her friends did.

She walked past St Mary’s church and the Cathedral green, where the old cannon stood guard as it had for years, heading for Cambridge Road. As she approached the youth club, she saw some of her friends gathered outside and waved to them, her spirits lifting. There was always something to do at the club, because she liked playing darts or table tennis, and even though she couldn’t play she enjoyed watching the young men playing snooker. Sometimes one of the members would bring a new record and they would dance.

‘Janice . . . Phyllis,’ she called to her friends. ‘I was afraid you might not be here.’

‘We were thinking of going to the jive club,’ Phyllis told her. ‘I went last week and it was good fun, Sarah. You should join.’

‘I should like to,’ Sarah replied. ‘I’ll see what Mum says and let you know.’

‘Surely you don’t have to ask?’ Janice stared at her as if she were mad. ‘I stopped asking my mother years ago.’

‘Mum likes to know where I am,’ Sarah said. ‘Oh, don’t let’s talk about it. I know what you think, but Mum is so good to me. I don’t like to upset her.’

Sarah saw the look that passed between her friends. She knew what they thought of the way she always tried to respect her parents’ wishes.

‘How do you like working in Woolworth’s, Phyllis?’ she asked to change the subject.

‘I’d rather work where you do,’ Phyllis said. ‘You lucky thing. How did you manage to get a job like that?’

Sarah laughed. She had been lucky to get the job. She suspected the fact that she was Ron Jenkins’ daughter might have had something to do with it, but she wasn’t going to confess that to her friend. Her employer’s husband was a Mason and Sarah’s father had met him at the lodge meeting. He’d told Sarah there was a job going. She knew she wasn’t the only one who applied, but she was the one chosen.

‘I suppose I was just lucky,’ she said. ‘Have you been to see *Gone with the Wind* yet? I went on Monday with Mum and Dad.’

‘I saw it ages ago, the first time it came here,’ Janice said.

‘Oh yes, so did I,’ Sarah agreed. ‘But I loved it so much I wanted to see it again – I could watch it over and over. Rhett Butler is gorgeous, isn’t he?’

‘You mean Clark Gable,’ Janice said and grinned. ‘I go to every film he stars in . . .’

The girls smiled at each other as they discussed their favourite film stars and the new clothes, make-up and records they had bought. When they entered the large set of rather dingy rooms that were used for the youth club, a round robin game of table tennis was going on, and a group of young men were playing darts. One of them called out to the girls and they drifted towards them, smiling and nudging each other as they accepted the invitation to play. The smell of cigarette smoke was strong, mixing with the pungent odour of hair cream and the strong, cheap perfume some of the girls wore.

Sarah took the set of darts and smiled at the young man. She knew him as Phil Burton. His father was a local shopkeeper and very respectable, but Phil was known to be a flirt and he was all hands. Sarah thought that if she took him home her mother would think him very suitable, but then she had no idea that he had already tried to get Sarah to go with him in his car up to the deserted aerodrome. Sarah was well aware what would happen if she did, and so far she’d said no and meant it. She was aware that some of the men thought she was stuck up or frigid, but she didn’t particularly want to end up having to get married in a hurry the way some of her friends had.

She liked Phil, as she liked some of the other men, but she hadn’t yet seen anyone who made her heart beat faster.

Connor Searles sat in his car eating fish and chips and watching the girl walking towards him in the driving mirror. There was something different about her; she dressed more stylishly than most other girls did in the small market town of Ely, and she held her head high. He had seen her about the town a few times but he didn’t know her name. He wound down his window as she drew level and grinned when she turned to look.

‘Hello, darling,’ he said confidently. ‘Where are you off to this evening?’

She gave him a slaying look and walked on without speaking. Connor let out a piercing whistle but she didn’t glance back.

‘You don’t want to bother with her,’ his mate Tiddy Jones said from the passenger seat. ‘Stuck-up bitch! I asked her for a dance down the church hall last Saturday and she told me to get lost.’

‘Why would she bother with you?’ Connor asked and laughed as Tiddy aimed a blow at his head. ‘She’d have to be mad to go out with a loser like you!’

‘Now who’s talking?’ Tiddy scowled. ‘Face it, mate, we’ve neither of us got a chance with the likes of her – our wages wouldn’t pay for the clothes she was wearing, let alone buy her the kind of house she would expect.’

‘Speak for yourself. I’ve got prospects,’ Connor said, though he was lying. He worked on his brother’s farm for little more than his keep – a comedown from the days when his father, Robert Searles, had been one of the richest farmers in the district.

‘Oh yeah? Tell me about it,’ Tiddy drawled. ‘You’re like me, mate, stuck in a dead-end job. Worse off, if you ask me. At least my father owns his smallholding – your brother has sons of his own. When he dies you’ll get nothing.’

‘Wouldn’t want it,’ Connor told him. ‘I’m only hanging around until Dan gets on his feet and then I’m off.’

‘Where to?’ Tiddy asked and laughed, as Connor couldn’t answer. ‘Forget it, mate. You’ll never make the break.’

‘What is her name?’

Tiddy stared at him, then made a mocking face. ‘Sarah Jenkins. Much good it will do you. Her father owns a part share in a local building firm. They’ve got money. She went to a boarding school and thinks she is worth ten of the likes of us.’

‘I haven’t found a girl yet who said no when I asked,’ Connor said. ‘She’ll fall like all the rest when I’m ready.’

‘Yeah and pigs might fly,’ Tiddy retorted. ‘Let’s go to the jive club. Jean Bates goes there and fancy her . . .’

Connor obligingly started the engine. He was lucky to have the small Austin and knew that Tiddy hung around with him mainly because of it. Dan had bought the car cheap and done it up for him, giving it to him for his last birthday. He might not earn enough to court a girl like Sarah Jenkins, but he certainly wasn’t interested in a slut like Jean Bates. Tiddy could have her and welcome.

Sometimes Connor wondered why he hung out with Tiddy, who wasn’t really a friend – not like Peter Robinson. Peter was Alice’s brother and they had been friends all their lives, but Peter had got tired of working on the land. He’d surprised everyone by joining the navy when he was twenty.

‘Why don’t you come too?’ Peter had asked. ‘It will be more fun than hanging around here all our lives.’

Connor had made the excuse that he couldn’t leave his brother in the lurch, which was true but only a part of the truth. Dan had come home from the war a hero, but there had been too many problems waiting for him, not least the fact that their elder brother Henry had let things go and the farm was facing bankruptcy. Despite that, he had taken his youngest brother to live with him and his wife, and Connor felt he owed him something for that at least. Sometimes he felt trapped working on the land with no prospects for the future, because things had moved on in the few years since the war ended. Gradually the country was becoming more prosperous, putting the years of hardship behind them. Connor knew he wanted more out of his life, but as yet he didn’t know what he wanted to do.

Tiddy was right about the girl, though. There was no way he could afford to give her the things she expected from life.

Sarah let herself into the house and went straight up to her room. She looked at herself in the mirror brushing her thick hair. It had been cut to collar length recently and she’d had an ends perm to put a little bounce into it. She supposed the colour of her hair was quite pretty, because it had sort of reddish lights in it and a slight natural wave. Her mother had said she didn’t need a perm at all, but Sarah liked the extra bounce.

She’d had fun at the youth club, but she’d left earlier than she needed to because she had got bored with the darts and her friends had gone off to the pub for a drink. Sarah had been asked along but she

refused; her mother didn't like her to go into pubs. She didn't like Sarah to smoke either, but she had that evening.

Undressing, Sarah thought about the man in the car. She hadn't answered when he spoke to her because her mother had told her she shouldn't – but she had noticed that he was rather good-looking. He had very dark, almost black hair that looked a bit wavy. She hadn't been able to see the colour of his eyes in that quick glance, but she thought they might have been grey.

Sarah sighed as she slipped into bed and switched off the lamp. Phil had tried to grope her when she went outside to the toilets at the club, but she had managed to avoid him.

'Mummy's girl,' he had called after her.

The jeer stung a little, because she knew that one of her friends must have been talking about her behind her back. She was pretty sure that neither Janice nor Phyllis was a virgin. They didn't say so openly, but she had heard some whispering going on at the youth club and she wondered if they knew what the men said behind their backs.

Sarah didn't want them to talk about her like that; she would rather they laughed and called her mummy's girl – although she wasn't, not really. She did lots of things her mother wouldn't approve of, but some of the advice she was given made sense to Sarah.

She saw her friends wheeling prams and looking washed out, as if they were tired and fed up with struggling to make ends meet. They hadn't had much chance to have fun. Sarah wished she could find someone she really liked enough to do it with – she wouldn't mind getting married then – but so far she hadn't met the right one.

As she fell asleep she was still thinking about the man in the car. He had such bold eyes and his grin had nearly made her smile despite her determination to ignore him.

'Connor,' Alice Searles said as her brother-in-law came down to the large farmhouse kitchen the next morning, yawning. 'There's a letter for you – and a card from Peter. I had one too. He says he is in Gibraltar and he will have leave in a couple of months. He is going to visit when he gets back.'

'Great,' Connor said and smiled at her. He had always liked his brother's wife. She was a little plumper than she had been when she first went out with Dan, but still attractive. 'I was thinking about Peter last night . . .'

'Do you miss him? I do,' Alice sighed. 'I'm glad he joined the merchant navy, though, because he has been a good life for him. I think he hoped you would join too.'

'He asked me to,' Connor admitted. The kitchen was warm and smelled of dogs, babies, herbs and frying bacon. It was a familiar smell and comfortable, but sometimes he would rather have been alone away from all the hustle and bustle in the mornings as the children scrambled for their breakfast before leaving to walk the three miles to school. 'I thought about it, but I don't think the navy is for me. Besides, I couldn't just walk out on Dan – he needed me.'

'Yes. He still does . . .'

Alice looked thoughtful. 'You shouldn't let that stop you, though, Connor – is there's something you would rather do with your life?'

'I wouldn't if I knew what would suit me,' Connor said truthfully. 'I sometimes think I ought to do something but I don't know what I want . . .'

He grinned at her. 'Do you want me out of your hair, Alice?'

He had lived with them since his brother came back at the end of the war. It hadn't occurred to him that Alice might enjoy having her home to herself.

'No, of course not, daft,' Alice said and smiled. 'I just think you don't have much fun tied to the land. Don't let the years slip by and then regret it, Con.'

‘I’ve got a holiday coming up, remember. I’m off to stay with Emily in a couple of days.’

‘Yes, that will be nice for you. Emily has such a lovely home and she always makes us all feel welcome.’

‘That house is lovely, but she has a hell of a time to keep it going.’

‘Yes, I know. Everyone thinks she is rich, but in a way she is no better off than we are . . .’

‘That bacon smells good.’ Connor grinned. ‘Any chance of a bit of fried bread to go with it?’

‘Lady Vane,’ Emily’s housekeeper called as she entered the study where Emily was working at the beautiful Georgian partners’ desk. ‘You asked me to remind you that your brother is coming to stay tomorrow. I think you wanted to clear any appointments for the next few days?’

‘Yes, Sheila, thank you.’ Emily smiled at her. ‘I did remember. The vicar had arranged a meeting of the Church Friends Association for tomorrow afternoon, but I told him I would not be able to attend so he has moved it to the sixteenth of next month.’

‘I’ve given Connor his usual room and Cook is preparing a list of menus for you to approve.’

‘Connor isn’t that fussy about what he eats.’ Emily’s expression was amused, because there wasn’t a female member of her staff at Vanbrough who didn’t have a soft spot for her youngest brother. ‘Do you know, it’s six months since he visited, because Dan can’t spare him for more than a few days now and then.’

‘Will Mr Daniel and Mrs Alice Searles be coming for Christmas this year?’

‘Oh, I’m not sure. Christmas is months away yet. Dan is always so busy on the farm. I’ve asked him and his family, and Frances too, but I doubt if my sister will come. She is wrapped up in that hot life of hers in Cornwall.’

‘Well, I suppose it takes up a lot of her time.’

‘I am sure it does.’

Emily sighed as her housekeeper left the room. Frances expected her to visit her at the hotel because she didn’t – or wouldn’t – understand how much work was involved in running an estate like Vanbrough. She seemed to imagine that all Emily did was sit around and be waited on – or pretended to! Frances had no idea of the work that went into keeping up the traditions here.

Getting up from her desk, Emily walked to the window and glanced out at the beautiful view of smooth lawns and ancient trees. There was a mist drifting through the park, giving everything a slightly murky feel, but it would clear by mid morning. She loved this place, loved it as much as her father-in-law had, and was as much a prisoner of duty as Vane had been for the whole of his life. Sometimes she felt trapped by her surroundings.

When Simon had brought her here as a young bride for the first time she’d been overwhelmed by the magnificence of the house and grounds. She’d been nervous of Vane and his wife, Amelia, but she had learned to love this place – and to love Vane.

Her marriage had been such a tragic mistake. Simon had never loved her. He hadn’t been capable of loving any woman – his tastes lay elsewhere – and he’d married her to please his father and to gain an heir. Vane had loved her, though, loved her with a passion he had controlled, keeping it secret until he was on his deathbed. After Simon’s death, Vane had found ways to keep Emily here, setting up a convalescent home for badly injured men towards the end of the war and putting her in charge. He had left Vanbrough to Emily’s son Robert, along with part of the money. Vane had wanted Emily to run the estate, because he knew she loved it. Amelia had been very angry, because she knew that Robert wasn’t really Simon’s son.

After the funeral she’d gone off in a rage, vowing to contest the will and tell Vane’s cousin the

truth about Robert's birth – but she had never carried out her threats. Seven years had passed since Vane's death but Emily had heard nothing from her. She thought that Amelia must have decided that the estate was more trouble than it was worth, and perhaps she was right. It was certainly hard work, and finding the money to keep going was more difficult than when Vane was alive.

He had left Emily ten thousand pounds for herself. Robert had four times that amount but it was tied up in a trust. The income came to Emily until her son was old enough to look after his own affairs and the money was used to pay the running cost of the house, which were ridiculously high. She was as careful as she could be while maintaining the standards Vane would expect, but money was tight.

'What do I do next?' Emily looked up at Vane's portrait. 'I can't put up the rents for the tenants and I can't stretch the income from Robert's trust. We need at least another thousand a year if I'm to keep supporting all those charities.'

Vane's image stared down at her unmoved. Once upon a time he had seemed to answer her when she talked to him, but that had stopped happening a long time ago.

'I made a promise and I've kept it – but I'm not sure I can continue for much longer, Vane.'

Vane made no reply. Why should he? He had carried the burden during his life and the problem was hers now. She had accepted the burden and grown into her position. A beautiful, poised, elegant woman, she was admired by many but remained slightly apart, giving everything she had except herself. Emily had a deep well of love within her, but she had learned that it was unwise to love because it ended only in pain.

She frowned as she thought about her problem. There was really no one she could go to for help. Her sister Frances was rich, of course. She'd inherited a lot of property after her husband died – or had blackmailed her father-in-law for it, if you told the truth. Sam Danby had made her suffer for that, but in the end Frances had come out of it a wealthy woman. Money that had come from a dubious source but enough so that Frances would never have to think twice about paying a bill.

Most people thought Emily was rich, because she lived in a house that everybody admired and many envied. She was always being asked to sit on this or that committee and to contribute to a new charity. Vane had been a charitable man, but he had divided his money in half when he died and that meant Emily's income was far less than her father-in-law had enjoyed.

'Damn you, Vane!' Emily said. 'I should sell everything and go off and live in Spain!'

It was an empty threat. She would struggle to keep going for as long as she could, but she might be forced to sell one of the farms. Before she did that she would need to take advice – perhaps from Vane's cousin, Alan Leicester. They had met at the funeral but not since, although Alan had phoned her a couple of times and sent cards at Christmas.

Emily felt the niggles of guilt at the back of her mind. Alan should be Lord Vane. The estate hadn't been entailed and Vane was entitled to leave it where he chose, but the title should by rights belong to his cousin. Robert had been Vane's beloved grandson as far as the world was concerned – but it was a lie. A lie he had accepted and compounded by leaving his estate to Emily's son.

Shaking her head, Emily thrust the doubts to the back of her mind. She still missed Vane like hell but she was perfectly capable of managing. She would find the money she needed, though something would have to go – either some land or one of the pictures. In the meantime she would forget her problems and enjoy Connor's visit. She didn't see nearly enough of her family.

'Have you got everything you want?' Alice asked as Connor came downstairs carrying his battered old suitcase. 'Clean shirts, pants, socks?'

'Don't fuss, Alice,' he said but he was grinning. At twenty-four, Connor was a tall, strong, good

looking man with dark hair and bold eyes. Everyone said he was much like Daniel had been as a young man, but at his age Dan had already seen the horrors of war.

‘Emily won’t think much of me if I let you visit her without the things you need.’

‘Emily wouldn’t blame you. She knows what I’m like.’

‘Are you ready?’ Daniel asked as he came into the kitchen. He was wearing stained cords and shirt in a green and brown check that had seen better days, his cap pulled over his eyes. ‘I’ll run you to the station, Connor. You don’t want to leave your car standing there while you’re away.’

‘Thanks,’ Connor said. He kissed his sister-in-law’s cheek. She smelled of babies and cooking. There had been a time when she always carried the scent of flowers. He noticed how tired she looked and said impulsively, ‘Don’t work too hard, Alice. You should make Dan take you for a holiday.’

‘What did you want to say that for?’ Daniel asked as they went out to the yard. A couple of mongrel dogs were sniffing round but ran to him, barking eagerly as he opened the van door. He shooed them away. ‘You know I can’t afford to take time off, let alone pay for a holiday.’

‘I’ll look after things here when I get back,’ Connor offered. ‘I can ask Jack Mullins to give me a hand with the cows and there’s not much else needs doing until we lift the potatoes. Why don’t you take Alice to visit Frances? She is always asking for one of us to go down. It wouldn’t cost more than a tank of petrol and a few flowers for Frances.’

‘Alice wouldn’t go if I suggested it. It would mean taking the children and that’s too much bother.’

‘She looks tired. The children wear her out.’

‘You don’t need to tell me how to look after my own wife!’ Daniel glared at him. ‘Four kids are a lot. I’ve told her she needs help in the house but she won’t listen.’

‘You should put your foot down – and you need a holiday too. It’s not my business but what happened to your ideas for a garage of your own?’

‘Bankruptcy and lack of time,’ Daniel growled. ‘When we lost everything after the war I had no choice but to put those fields into Alice’s name. I’ve struggled to clear my debts. Clay owed me money. I got some of it but he never finished paying me back and I’ve given up bothering.’

‘Clay!’ Connor’s mouth twisted with disgust at the mention of their elder brother. He had been the only one to survive the bankruptcy with any amount of money, though both Frances and Emily had come into money. ‘He couldn’t lie straight in bed! The bastard cheated us all when Dad died! You and Henry let him get away with murder.’

‘I was away fighting a war,’ Daniel reminded him. ‘Henry had no head for figures. He did his best but the worry killed him, poor devil. You don’t remember but we had to pay Margaret out of Dad’s estate and there were other things . . .’

‘I remember Clay raped Margaret – his stepmother! You paid her to keep quiet. You should have let him go to prison!’

‘Maybe. Forget it,’ Daniel muttered. ‘I haven’t forgotten the garage. One day I’ll get there.’

‘Yeah . . .’ Connor took out a packet of cigarettes and offered them to his brother. Daniel shook his head but Connor lit up. ‘One day I’ll be rich and famous. Pigs might fly!’

Daniel laughed. ‘You’ll have to marry into money, Con. There are plenty of girls after you. Janice Baker’s father is loaded. He owns the carrot factory over at Manea. Marry her and you’ll be in clover when he goes.’

‘Only trouble is that she looks like a horse,’ Connor replied. ‘Thanks, but I’ll keep looking for now.’

‘It’s money or looks,’ Daniel said. ‘You rarely get both in this life. It’s not fair that you ended up with nothing from Father’s estate. I meant you to have the fields on Stretton Road, but it didn’t work.’

out the way it should. When I can afford the garage you can take over the land.'

'I'm not sure I want it,' Connor said. 'There must be something more out of life than slogging your guts out to scrape a living, Dan.'

'I wish I knew how to get it.'

'Yeah, me too.' Connor grinned at him. 'I'll ask our rich sister for money for the garage.'

'You say one word to Emily and I'll have your guts for garters!'

'I meant Frances. Emily lives in that damned barn of a house but she hasn't got a penny to spare.'

'I know. Emily would have lent me the money for the garage if she had it. She asked me once when she had some money going spare but I turned her down. I've sometimes regretted it,' Daniel said. 'But you won't get a penny out of Frances. She blames me because the land was lost. I wouldn't ask her for anything if I were you – that money has blood on it if you ask me.'

'Money is money,' Connor said. 'But I wouldn't really ask either of them. It was a joke . . . you should know better.'

'Yeah, right,' Daniel said as he brought the van to a halt. 'Have a good time, then – and give Emily my love.'

'Yes, of course. You should think about what I said, Dan – about a holiday for Alice. Mary might have the kids for a week or so . . .'

'Mary has enough to do,' Daniel said. 'Frances asked her to help run the hotel but she wouldn't leave Stretton. Most of her kids are grown up now, but she stills works part-time in the packing factory.'

'Mary has had a rough time. She came out of things badly when Henry died, but you don't hear her complain. I still think she would have the kids if you asked – or Emily might.'

'I'll think about it,' Daniel said. 'Go on or you will miss your train.'

'Right – see you in a week or so, then.'

Connor left his brother and went into the station.

Daniel sat where he was in the van, staring into space. He had tried hard to put all thought of the garage out of his mind, because it was a dream he had given up after the bankruptcy. He was struggling to clear his name because the shame of bankruptcy was something that didn't sit well with him. Damn Clay for forcing them to take decisions that had led to the crushing debts that had caused the bank to foreclose on them. It wouldn't have happened if Daniel had been home to help Henry run things, but he'd been stuck in a German prisoner of war camp and his eldest brother had struggled alone until his heart gave out.

If Marcus Danby had been alive, Daniel might have asked his brother-in-law for a loan to get back on his feet, because Marcus had been approachable, but there was no one else. He couldn't go cap in hand to Frances – though she had more money than she knew what to do with – and Emily was struggling. If he were Emily, he would sell that damned great mausoleum of a place, bank the money and enjoy life, but she loved the estate and refused to move out.

Shaking his head, Daniel started the van again and headed for Ely. It was market day and he liked to visit the cattle market and then have a drink in the pub afterwards. It was his one chance to get away from the farm and Alice.

Connor had annoyed him by saying he ought to take Alice for a holiday. He was well aware that his wife was looking tired and washed out. She never seemed to have time for anything but the kids these days, and sometimes Daniel wished that he hadn't married so young. He hadn't meant to get married at all until his business was up and running. If he had stuck to his word, he would have had the garage

by now, but they had four children and it took every penny he could earn from his smallholding to feed and clothe them all.

Alice had been lovely when they were courting. Daniel hadn't been able to resist making love to her, and when she'd fallen for a baby there had been no hesitation. He had married her straight away and he didn't really regret it. He loved Alice but sometimes he wished that they were back at the start of their marriage. His children were precious, of course, but it would have been better if they had come later, once he'd got a bit of money in the bank.

Daniel drove round past the Lamb Hotel and into Market Street, heading for the parking lot behind the cattle market. He could smell the pungent smell of animal excrement as he got out of his van, leaving it unlocked as he strode towards the pens. The nervous bleating and bellowing of the animals added to the general noise. The auction was already taking place, though they hadn't got to the livestock yet. They were still selling bits and pieces of machinery, tools and other items that were often put into the sale. Sometimes you could find a box of china that someone had discarded. Alice had collected blue and white and he bought the odd piece for her if he saw it going cheap.

'Not a bad day for it,' a voice remarked and he turned to see Bill Henderson, a neighbouring farmer who had a lot more acres than Daniel had these days. 'I've got my eyes on a couple of Herefords – need to build up my milking herd a bit.'

'I'd like a couple of Jerseys if I could afford it,' Daniel said. 'But I saw a few good Herefords in the pens.'

'Your father had Jerseys once, didn't he?'

'Yes, before the war,' Daniel agreed. 'Henry sold them. He preferred Herefords.'

He nodded to the man and walked on. There was nothing he wanted in the sale and he fancied a drink before he went home. He might take a look in the shop that sold television sets; he couldn't afford a new one, but now and then they had one going cheap. Alice and the children had watched the coronation of the young Queen Elizabeth at Alice's parents' house and he knew she would like a set of her own, though he wasn't sure what the reception would be like in the Fen. He ought to get her something, though the TV was probably more than he could afford; it would need setting up and an aerial. No, forget it, he'd find something cheaper.

Connor's words kept echoing in his head. Maybe he *should* find the money to take Alice away for a few days. Mary might have the kids over a long weekend . . .

Absorbed in his thoughts, Daniel didn't see the woman watching him as he strolled under the arch into the pub yard. Even if he had, he probably wouldn't have recognised her. Daniel had long forgotten the woman he'd known so briefly in Liverpool during the war.

Maura watched as the man walked into the public house. She was certain it was Daniel Searles and for a moment her heart stood still. She'd come to Cambridgeshire in the hope of seeing him, even though she'd wondered if he had moved on. She hadn't even known if he'd survived the war. Seeing him so unexpectedly in Ely had driven her breath away. She wasn't ready to confront him just yet. She needed to think about what she was going to say.

Would he even believe what she had to tell him? She'd visited Stretton once during the war when she discovered she was pregnant, hoping to find him and explain, but she'd met his young brother Connor instead and he'd made it plain that Daniel wasn't around. Maura hadn't bothered too much then, because she'd had a job and prospects. Things were different now. Recovering from the break-up of her marriage and with only a few pounds in her purse, she needed a helping hand.

The Searles had land and money. Daniel owed her something. It was time he started to help keep

his son. She'd managed alone since her husband walked out, but she was down on her luck and she needed money.

It was more than likely that Daniel would disown his son, though if he looked at him, he would see that she wasn't lying. David looked just like his father. If he'd been with her now, Maura might have followed Daniel into the pub, but that could be a mistake. She needed to plan this carefully. Find out how the land lay before she approached him.

Maura knew that the one night they had shared during an air raid in Liverpool had meant nothing to Daniel. She had been on the brink of suicide, so desperate that she had begged him to make love to her when they ended up sharing a bed, because she was too drunk to look after herself.

But Daniel could have refused her! Maura hardened her heart. She was sick of working for pittance wages and going without. She wanted her own hairdressing business, and Daniel Searles could buy it for her. He had plenty of money and if she got it right, he would be glad to pay her to keep his secret.

She imagined he had married the girl he'd been engaged to when he spent that night with her. Maura wasn't above blackmail if need be, but perhaps he would simply give her the money. She would take the bus to Stretton another day and ask some questions. Once she knew a bit more about his life she would approach him.

Smiling, Maura walked in the opposite direction. It looked as if things were turning her way. She hadn't even been sure Daniel Searles had survived the war, but now she knew that he was alive and still living in the area she could make plans for the future.

Alice spent the day washing, cooking and looking after her two youngest children. When Daniel came in she was so tired that her head had started to ache. These days she never seemed to have a minute for herself and she was conscious of the fact that she had vomit all over her blouse. She'd meant to change and smarten herself up before Daniel came home but little Sally was teething and she hadn't stopped crying all afternoon.

'What's for dinner, love?' Daniel asked. 'Something smells good.'

'I've got a steak and kidney pie in the oven,' Alice said. 'Sally has been crying all day. I haven't had a minute to sit down!'

'You work too hard. You should have someone in to help you for a few hours a day, Alice. You look tired . . .'

'That's right, rub it in,' Alice snapped. 'I know I look a mess but I haven't had time to change anyway, I don't have anything worth wearing.'

'You should say if you want a new dress . . .'

 Daniel frowned as he walked towards her. He reached out for her but the stink of the baby's vomit made him change his mind and move back. 'I know things are tight, but you have the egg money.'

'That goes on the children,' Alice said. Tears started to her eyes but she dashed them away angrily. 'I don't have help because we can't afford it, Daniel. You know we can't.'

'We can afford a few bob,' Daniel said. 'I've almost finished doing up that roadster I bought cheap. When I sell it I'll give you half the money. You can get your hair done and buy some new clothes – and I'll find someone to come in for a few hours a week.'

'You don't have to do all this just because Connor told you to take me on holiday.' Alice looked at him angrily.

'You know that isn't the reason,' Daniel said and took her into his arms despite the acrid smell that hung about her. 'I love you, Alice. I may not always remember to tell you, and I know things haven't been easy since I came back, but I'm doing my best and I've nearly cleared my debts. Once I'm out

that, things will get better.'

'I'm not complaining,' Alice said. 'I know you do your best. I'm not bothered about the new clothes, but perhaps we should have someone in to help a couple of mornings a week. If I had help with the washing and ironing, it would make things easier.'

'It's hard work for you with that old mangle and the copper,' Daniel said. 'One day I'll buy you a washing machine!'

Alice shook her head. 'Ma has always managed with the copper and a mangle,' she said. 'I think I'm not completely over Sally's birth yet; it pulled me down and I get so tired.'

'Of course you do, love,' Daniel said. 'Go up and change before Danny gets home from school. I'll put the kettle on and make us a cup of tea.'

'Thank you.' Alice hesitated as she prepared to leave the room. 'Did you buy anything in the market?'

'Just a few plants for your garden. I thought about getting you some flowers but decided you would rather have the plants. I'll put them in for you after tea if you like?'

'And I was moaning at you,' Alice said, looking rueful. 'I'm sorry, Daniel. It was thoughtful of you to buy me plants. I would much rather have them than cut flowers.'

'I thought you would.' He ran his fingers through his thick hair. 'I do love you, even if I don't always show it.'

'You work too hard yourself. You will have all the milking to do yourself now that Connor has gone away.'

'I might get someone in to give me a hand,' Daniel said. 'How would you feel about a couple of days at the sea somewhere – just you and me? After Connor gets back, of course.'

'I couldn't leave the children,' Alice said. 'Perhaps when Sally is a bit older, it would be nice. We haven't had much time just on our own, have we?'

'It was the bloody war,' Daniel said. 'Everything changed because of the war. Go on up and get changed, love. I'll make the tea and we'll have a cuppa before the lad gets home . . .'

Connor saw the car waiting for him when he left the station. Emily opened the door and got out waving to him, her face wreathed in smiles. She came to greet him, throwing her arms about him as he set his case down.

'Connor! I'm so glad to see you!'

'It's great to be here.' Connor gave her an affectionate hug. She was dressed in something light and summery and she smelled of an expensive perfume. 'How are you, Emily?'

'The same as always,' Emily replied. 'I seldom have time to think about how I am – but that's a good thing, isn't it? How are Dan, Alice and the children?'

'Dan is just the same. Alice looks tired. I think she needs a break from the children, but Dan says he can't afford to take her on holiday.'

'He knows they are welcome to come here – and they can bring the youngest children. Mary would look after the older two so they could stay in school.'

'Danny is shooting up,' Connor told her with a grin. 'Very grown-up. I think he will be taller than Dan when he's a man.'

'It's several months since I've seen them all,' Emily said. 'It isn't easy for me to get away, but I really should pop down. Perhaps I can persuade them to get away for a few days.'

'Just don't tell Dan I said anything. You know how proud and stubborn he is – like a prickly hedgehog when it comes to borrowing money. I think he has almost given up on that garage he wanted'

so badly.'

'I would have lent him the money when Vane was alive. I had money to spare in those days, but I'm afraid I don't have much now – though I could afford to give Alice some money for a little holiday.'

'She is as bad as Dan,' Connor said as Emily drove away from the station. 'I sometimes wonder which of them is the worst.' He looked at his sister. 'Anyway, how are things for you? I suppose you still put every penny you get into that house of yours?'

'It isn't really my house, it's Robert's. I am the custodian and he will take over from me when he's older. He may decide to sell. I can't pretend it isn't a liability – but Vane asked me to carry on for as long as I could.' A little sigh escaped her. 'Take no notice. You know I love the place.'

'Vane should have left you more money. He split his property up and then expected you to carry on as before. How did he think you would manage?'

'Vane was too ill to think clearly. Besides, he had Amelia and his daughter to think of. He couldn't give us everything. I feel guilty enough as it is.'

'I don't see why you should. If Simon had lived, it would all have come to him – and he would have had the burden of running the estate instead of you.'

'I think Simon would have sold,' Emily said, an odd look in her eyes. 'He intended to live in America, you know. I made Vane a promise and I'm doing my best to keep it – though I may have to raise funds by selling something. I hate to part with land and I can't take anything important from the house, but I've found some pictures that Vane had stored away because they needed restoration. I've sent them for valuation and I may sell them if they're worth anything.'

'You need a steady source of income. Something ongoing that would bring in the money regularly.'

'Tell me about it.' Emily laughed as he made a wry face. 'I can manage to keep my head above water as far as the house is concerned, but Vane supported a lot of charities and I may have to cut down on them a bit, though I don't want to . . .'

'What about the convalescent home? You told me that closed last year. Have you done anything with the dower house yet?'

'I considered letting to a tenant, but it is in a bit of a mess. It might cost too much.'

'Well, I'm a dab hand with a hammer and I can decorate. I did the parlour and stairs for Alice last spring. I'll take a look while I'm here – see if I can help get it into shape for you.'

'You're here for a holiday, not to work!'

'It won't hurt me to do a few hours in the mornings. I shall know what you need to get done and I might have an idea of what it ought to cost. Besides, I'll enjoy it.'

'Thanks, Connor.' Emily smiled at him. 'It is really nice having you here, love.'

'I like coming. I know how much you love this place and it is pretty special – even though it must be such a lot of work for you.'

Emily shook her head and he grinned. Emily had always been a fighter. He didn't mind doing a bit of decorating for her, but he wished he could think of something that would make a real difference.

Connor walked down to the dower house that evening after dinner. It was a warm, soft night and the scents of lavender and jasmine were in the air. He could understand why anyone would find the surroundings intoxicating; beautiful specimen trees made the park a peaceful and inspiring place to walk. It was, of course, an outdated way to live. Vane had clung to the old ways while he was alive, but two wars had changed England beyond recognition, and estates like Vanbrough were more of

liability than a privilege these days. You needed outside money, because the rents from farmland and cottages were not enough to support a lifestyle that belonged to the eighteenth century.

Emily had given him the key to the much smaller – though still substantial – property that had traditionally been used for the dowagers in past years. By rights, Amelia should have lived here, but she had gone off somewhere after Vane died, because it had still been a convalescent home then. Emily had kept it going until the last residents had been moved on, and since then it had stood empty. Gathering cobwebs and spiders, no doubt – and probably damp.

Connor went inside. Immediately he caught the sour smell left behind. It had been home to badly wounded soldiers for several years and there was plenty of evidence left behind. He turned up his nose as he visited the toilets and bathrooms, of which there were five in all – too many if it was to become a private house again. He thought that two of them could go, and the partitions that had been erected to make them could be torn down. The bedrooms that had not been partitioned were a good size and most were in reasonable condition. Some of the furniture was still here, but most of it looked fit only for the bonfire. Downstairs the back parlours had been used as bedrooms and there were toilets and other facilities that needed to come out.

Connor made a mental note of the jobs that needed doing. If he had a couple of months to spare, he could have done most of it himself, just calling in electricians and plumbers as necessary. Unfortunately, he had just one week. In that time he could only scrape the surface of what needed doing. However, he might be able to make a clearance, which would make it easier for Emily to have the professionals in to give her estimates.

Once the place was in reasonable condition she could rent it out and that should help her a little. He knew it would cost her several hundred pounds to put the house right. She might not have the money to do it, of course. If she couldn't afford the outlay, Connor would come back again and do what he could. He was torn between wanting to help his sister and Dan, but Emily was managing and in his heart he knew Dan couldn't do everything alone.

Sighing, he closed up and walked to the local pub he favoured. He had made one or two good friends over the years and he might get one of them to give him a hand.

Sarah tried on the dress she liked. Her boss had gone out and she'd locked the door because it was her lunch hour. She didn't often bother to go to a café in the middle of the day. Her mother packed her a sandwich and she was able to make a cup of tea in the back room.

Twirling in front of the mirror, Sarah admired the dress from all angles. It had a full skirt and stiff petticoats underneath, which made it stand out. The bodice was tightly fitted, and the neckline was a deep scoop, but at the back it had a big stand-up white collar and it was tied with an orange bow at the front. The main colour was black with little floral motifs of orange and green all over it. It really suited her, made her feel special, but it was expensive.

She looked at the price ticket as she took it off. Seven pounds and ten shillings – more than twice what she earned in a week – but she would get a discount and she loved it. She had wanted it the moment it came out of the large brown box with all the other new stock. Sarah knew she had to have it. She would ask if she could put down a deposit and pay the rest over the next few weeks.

She smiled as she hung it up in the back room. She was being extravagant, but it was her birthday soon and if her father knew she wanted the dress, he might just buy it for her.

He was away on one of his frequent business trips at the moment. Sarah wondered why he had to go so often – sometimes it was every weekend. However, her mother didn't seem to mind too much. She had been talking about taking a few days in Clacton – just Sarah and her mother. Mr Jenkins was too busy. He was always too busy to go on holidays. Sarah couldn't remember when he had last taken them away. She couldn't have been more than nine or ten. She supposed it was because he had to travel so much himself.

She went into the back room to eat her sandwich and drink her tea. She was allowed to have the radio on during her lunch break, and she liked to listen to music. She liked the new stuff they called Rock 'n' Roll, though it was really just rhythm and blues with a different beat. She would ask her father about the dress when he came home. He was usually in a good mood when he got back from one of his trips.

Maura got off the bus from Ely and stood outside the shop in Stretton High Street, wondering what to do next. She knew where the Searles family had lived before the war, but she'd already discovered that the house had been sold. Where would Daniel live now? She could ask around but she didn't want to be people looking at her and starting to gossip, so she would have to be careful. His name wasn't in the telephone directory but that didn't mean anything: a lot of people didn't have telephones.

Seeing an old man walking towards her, she hesitated and then approached him. Her mind worked swiftly as she tried to remember what Dan had told her about the girl he was courting. She needed to get the name right . . . Alice . . . yes, her name was Alice.

'Excuse me, sir,' she said in the soft Irish accent that most men seemed to find fascinating. 'I wonder if you could tell me where Alice Searles lives, please?'

'I could,' he said, gaze narrowing. 'Why would you be wanting to see her, miss?'

'It is Mrs Jacobs. I used to know Alice and Dan – but I moved away when I married and we lost touch.'

'You're not a Stretton person.'

‘We lived in Ely,’ she smiled as she lied. ‘I knew she had married but I don’t know where she lives.’

‘I’m not sure I should tell you,’ the man said. ‘Dan drinks in the King’s Arms sometimes. You might find him there, though he only drinks on a Friday night.’

‘Oh . . . thanks . . .’ *for nothing*, she added under her breath. It was Sunday and her day off from work so Dan wasn’t likely to be at the pub this afternoon. It wouldn’t be easy for her to come over on a Friday night. She worked hard and she had her son to take care of when she got home.

She frowned as the man walked off. Suspicious old devil! She should have known what village folk were like. Dan’s brother had been the same when she’d visited during the war, almost warning her off. The man had been the only person in an otherwise empty street. Where was everybody? It was a lovely day – why wasn’t anyone out enjoying the sunshine?

She had an hour or so to kill until she could catch a bus back to Ely. While she was here she might as well take a walk along the street. The Searles’ old house was opposite the church. If she walked that way, she might see someone in the garden or the churchyard . . . Perhaps a child might not be as suspicious as the old man.

As she walked along the street, she heard the sounds of music and laughter. Then she saw the notice advertising the village fête. Maura smiled. So that was where everyone had gone. She followed the sounds of voices and laughter, her spirits rising as she discovered that what looked like the whole village had turned out. Most people had obviously come on foot, though there were a few cars and vans parked in the field.

She looked about her at the various stalls. There were all kinds of games and competitions, from throwing balls at coconuts and counting how many beans in a jar to shooting arrows at a target. Hearing a roar of approval, Maura wandered towards where a tug-of-war was taking place. She saw a notice that said the Stretton team was taking on all comers. Her eyes went over the men lining up to take part and saw the very man she was looking for.

Dan had his shirt sleeves rolled up, his head bare. He looked every bit as attractive as he had during the war, and so like her son that her heart turned over. She loved her son, even though it had been a struggle to bring him up alone. Maura smiled inwardly as she watched the tug-of-war begin. She was impossible to approach Dan for the moment, but her son was being looked after for the afternoon and she had plenty of time.

Alice stood with some of the other women, watching as the tug-of-war began. She was proud of Dan when he took his place in the line-up, because he looked strong and she knew the other members valued him. It wasn’t often that he got a chance to take time off for something like this, because he worked so hard for his family. Alice knew that he wasn’t happy struggling to wrest a living from his fields. He wanted more – he wanted that garage he’d set his heart on before the war – but money was tight and he had to content himself with doing up a few cars when he got the chance. The extra money came in handy, and things were better at the moment because he’d got a hundred pounds for the last car he sold. True to his word, he had given Alice half of the money, which she suspected was the whole of his profit.

Alice knew he meant her to spend some of it on herself, but as yet she hadn’t felt able to buy anything. She really did need a new dress, but her mother had promised to buy some material from the market when she visited Ely next. Alice could make a couple of dresses for herself and also for her daughters, Sally and Jean, at half the cost of ready-made. She wasn’t bad at sewing and she could borrow her mother’s sewing machine. Her hair needed cutting too. Alice was lucky enough to have

natural wave and she managed it at home most of the time, but it was looking dull and she was wondering if she should have a rinse or something. She wasn't sure where to go. She had asked Mary about the local hairdresser, but Mary said she always went to Ely.

'There's a place in the High Street,' Mary said. 'I had a permanent wave there last month. I hate the way they string you up on those things, but my hair is so straight. You're lucky – all you need is a good cut. There's a man there who cuts really well.'

'A man?' Alice looked uncertain. 'I'm not sure I should like a man doing my hair, Mary.'

'He is really nice,' Mary told her. 'If you want to make an appointment, I'll ring up for you – and I'll have the children while you go.'

'Thanks, that's good of you,' Alice said. 'I'll think about it and let you know.'

'Your hair could do with a beer rinse to get rid of the grease and put some life into it,' Mary said. 'If you don't want to go to a hairdresser, I could get you a special rinse.'

Alice had agreed to try it. Mary was meeting her here this afternoon and had promised to bring the sachet with her. Seeing her sister-in-law, she waved and walked over to meet her, pushing Sally in her pram. Danny had the younger two with him. Her eldest son had taken the others on the swings. He had two shillings and sixpence in his pocket to treat himself and his siblings, and he wouldn't be back until it had all gone.

Turning away from the tug-of-war, Alice met her sister-in-law who was standing by the toffee and apple stall.

'I want to get a few of these before I go home,' Mary said. 'Jimmy is here with his friends, but he loves these – and so does Vera. The older ones don't bother these days. They all used to come to the feast but they grew out of it after they left school.'

'Danny is looking after my two. I might buy some toffee apples later, but I don't want them just yet. I could do with a cup of tea – how about you?'

'Just the ticket,' Mary said. 'You look nice today, Alice.'

'I thought I would make an effort, but this dress is a bit tight on me now. I've got bigger up to since I had the children. I'm going to make a new dress when Mum gets the material next week.'

'Why don't you buy one? I saw some lovely ones on the market this week. You should have a trip into Ely, get your hair done at the same time.'

'The shop in Stretton High Street has some pretty ones, too,' Alice said. 'I look every time I come up the village, but they are expensive – twenty-five shillings is the cheapest. I could get two and one each for Sally and Jean with that sort of money if I make them myself.'

'I saw a lovely one for ten bob on the market,' Mary told her. 'It would really suit you, Alice.'

'It will probably be gone,' Alice said. 'It sounds cheap, though. I should like a dress that was really made for me, though I've made my own since I got married.'

'You're good at it,' Mary said. 'But you've got enough to do – and the dresses I saw on the market are lovely. There were several at that price when I looked.'

'Well, I might . . .' Alice turned her head as there was a burst of cheering. 'It sounds as if the first tug has been won. Oh, look, it was our men who came out on top!'

'They will be at it for ages. Men! They are more like small boys if you ask me,' Mary said scornfully. 'Come and look at the flower-arranging tent and then we'll have that cuppa . . .'

Dan laughed and joined in the general celebrations as the Stretton men won the second bout. They were the champions again this year, and it was a satisfying feeling.

'Coming for a beer?' Jack Gregson asked. 'I think we deserve it after that, don't you?'

‘Yes, I think we do.’ Dan looked round for Alice. He was a bit disappointed to see that she hadn’t waited for the end of the competition. Most of the wives, sisters and mothers had been cheering them on all the way through, but it seemed Alice had got bored and gone off somewhere. ‘I’ll see you in a minute, Jack.’

Dan had seen his three youngest children. They were eating candyfloss and looked as if they were having a good time. He felt in his pocket and found a half-crown. He knew that Alice had already given them money, but the feast only came once a year and he had the rest of the money from that cash. He needed to keep most of it so that he could buy another car to do up, but he could afford a few bob.

He walked up to Danny and ruffled his mop of dark, curly hair. ‘Having a good time, son?’

‘It’s great, Dad. I’ve spent all the money Mum gave us.’

Dan produced the coin from his pocket and smiled as the boy’s eyes lit up. ‘Here you go, the Don’t tell your mum I gave it to you or she will have my guts for garters.’

Danny grinned and grabbed the coin. He called to his sister and brother and they all ran off, back to the swings or the coconut shy. Daniel stood for a moment in the sunshine, thinking how good life was. Maybe he didn’t always have enough money to go round, but he was blessed with a loving family and that was what really counted.

‘Hello, Daniel. Long time no see . . .’

Dan turned in surprise as he heard the soft Irish lilt of the woman’s voice behind him. It took him a while to make the connection in his mind, but it was a memory he had deliberately buried. He didn’t like to remember that he had been unfaithful to Alice that night during the air raid in Liverpool. He hadn’t meant it to happen and now, as he looked at Maura, he wished it hadn’t. She was an attractive girl, but there was something in her eyes that made him run cold.

‘Maura . . .’ He tried but couldn’t recall her second name. ‘Sorry, I’m not sure . . .’

‘Maura Jacobs. I got married.’

‘I didn’t know. But wait, I remember . . . you had been drinking because you couldn’t bear what had happened to your fiancé.’

‘I married someone else,’ Maura said, her mouth hard. ‘I didn’t have much choice after that night – the night we spent together, Dan. You do remember what happened, don’t you?’

Dan looked at her warily. A little pulse was flicking at his temple and he was afraid he knew what was coming next. ‘It was down to you,’ he reminded her. ‘I told you I wasn’t free . . .’

‘I’m not asking you to marry me,’ Maura said. ‘I have a son – *you* have a son, David; your eldest son. It was all right while I had a husband, but he ran out on me last year. I have to work long hours and it isn’t fair on David . . .’

‘Are you saying he’s mine?’ Dan looked at her hard, praying that she was lying. ‘Why should I believe you? Our Danny is my eldest son.’

‘Alice’s eldest,’ Maura said. ‘My son has a prior claim on you.’

‘Why should I believe you? If you did have a child, why have I never heard about it before now?’

‘I came here during the war to bring your handkerchief back. Your young brother told me you had gone away. I gave it to him instead.’

‘Connor never told me.’ Dan’s gaze narrowed. ‘What do you want, Maura? If you are going to make trouble . . .’

‘I want money – two thousand pounds should do it,’ Maura said, giving him a hard look. ‘If you pay up, that is the last you will hear of me. If not, I might have to tell your wife. Or even your son. Do you think he would like to know he has an older brother?’

‘Damn you! Breathe one word of this to either of them and I’ll—’

‘Break my neck.’ She threw him a look of scorn. ‘Do you imagine you would get away with it? Dozen people have already noticed us, Dan. Just think of what you could lose.’

Dan scowled at her. ‘Where the hell do you imagine I can get two thousand pounds from – and where the hell should I?’

‘You’re the son of a rich farmer. It should be easy for you. Besides, isn’t your sister a lady or something?’

‘Emily couldn’t afford to lend me that sort of money, and I can barely keep my family these days. It is impossible!’

‘Well, it’s your choice,’ Maura told him. ‘Either you pay up or your wife will receive a letter in the post.’

‘You’re a cold bitch! I didn’t want you. I just tried to help you out.’

‘That’s not quite as I remember it,’ Maura said. ‘I should say you were pretty desperate at the time. Maybe Alice wouldn’t sleep with you . . .’

‘Shut your filthy mouth or I’ll shut it for you!’

‘Threats don’t scare me,’ Maura said. ‘If you lay one finger on me, I’ll make certain the whole world knows what you are, Daniel Searles. I’m not greedy. I’ll take fifteen hundred pounds but I want it soon.’

‘I can’t raise that sort of money.’

‘A thousand pounds is my last offer. Either I get the money within a month or . . .’ Maura smiled. ‘You know what to expect.’

‘Where will I find you?’

‘I shall be in touch,’ she said. ‘Enjoy the fête, Dan. I’ll see you around.’

Daniel watched her walk away. She was a cheating, lying bitch, just like Margaret had been. He had paid his father’s second wife to stop her telling the police what Clay had done to her and it had cost him his dreams. He had almost finished paying his debts off so that he could clear his name from bankruptcy and now he was going to have to borrow money again.

Daniel frowned as he saw Alice and Mary walking towards him. He prayed that his wife hadn’t seen him talking to Maura. She would certainly be curious if she had and he hated lying to her. He loved Alice and he’d always felt guilty about that night, but he had never entertained the possibility that he might have another child.

Damn Maura! She was lying – she had to be. Even as he denied it, he was remembering that night and realizing that she could easily be telling the truth. Alice had fallen for their first child on the wedding night. Why shouldn’t Maura have conceived that night? He just wished it were a lie.

‘You won, then.’ Alice smiled at him. ‘Why aren’t you celebrating in the beer tent with the others?’

‘I was looking for you. Do you want a drink or have you had enough?’

‘I’m ready to go home when the kids are. Is something the matter, Dan? You look bothered and angry.’

‘No, I’m not angry,’ he lied as he ran his fingers through his hair. He didn’t want to have to borrow money to give Maura. If there was any money to spare, it should be for Alice and his children.

His children . . . Daniel felt the sickness in his throat. If Maura wasn’t lying, he had another son. One he had never even seen.

‘Daddy, you’re home!’ Sarah ran to her father and put her arms about him, hugging him. ‘I miss you when you’re away.’

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