

Emily

WHEN I ARRIVED at the church, late and sad, for Great-Aunt Mary's funeral I had been in tears for nearly a week. My face looked as congested and blotchy as that of my cousin Clemmie's father, Uncle Peter, and it must take at least half a bottle of whisky a day to maintain his corned-beef complexion. Our village church is tiny and it was already filled with neighbours and Kingsley relations from far and wide. As I made my way up the aisle I sensed a slight shifting and sighing amongst the congregation as my tragic appearance was noticed and a murmur of sympathy travelled up and down the pews as I took my seat next to my parents at the front.

My father turned to me briefly and squeezed my elbow. He looked tall and distinguished in his funeral overcoat, inherited from his father and now going a faint green on the shoulders. He could have been mistaken for any kind of professional man. Only his weatherbeaten face, the frayed cuffs of his shirt and his large, raw-looking hands gave him away as a dairy farmer. My mother leaned across him to pat my arm. Her expression was bright and social, which seemed jarringly inappropriate in the stony, dank gloom of the ancient church. She and my father sat a little way apart from each other, not even the sleeves of their coats touching, and I noticed that she had placed her handbag on the pew between them.

I had been hurrying not to be late and it was so cold that my quickened breath floated in a faint white mist, like an airy snail's trail, while behind me people turned up their collars and rubbed their frozen hands together. Then there came a mournful wheezing noise and up in the chancel a ghostly little white gargoyle face bobbed into view in the mirror above the organ. It seemed incredible that Miss Timmis was still vigorously alive while stout Great-Aunt Mary, her friend and companion, was dead. I watched her neat little feet in polished lace-up shoes dashing about the pedals like a pair of darting brown mice, and her arthritic, knobbly hands energetically pulling out the organ stops, and the music swelled into a dirge that seemed to have no beginning and no end but gurned tunelessly like a groaning, dying beast.

In the pew behind me I heard my cousins whispering and jostling. They were all there, all seven of them, squashed in together so that their shoulders

were forced up round their ears. They always did everything en masse so the idea that they might take two pews and spread out a little would not have occurred to them. As an only child it made me feel lonelier and sadder than ever that there was only my mother, father and me to occupy our own chilly stretch of polished wooden seat.

I turned to give them a sombre smile and my eyes passed over the boys, Stephen, Will, Jake, Hugh, Felix and Pete, the youngest, and rested on Clemmie, their sister and my dearest friend. Her face was pinched with cold under a coal-scuttle black hat and her pale blonde hair spread out on her shoulders like a mantle. She was sitting bang in the middle of her brothers, three on each side, looking like a medieval princess surrounded by her knights. Instead of returning my smile, she gave me a beady, assessing look, one golden eyebrow raised.

There was a muffled disturbance at the back of the church and Great-Aunt Mary's coffin came slowly round the corner, tipped forward at a slight angle and carried by six straining bearers. I recognised one of them as Neil, my father's relief milker, and even he, a sturdy lad with broad shoulders and square purple hands, was staggering. It was just as well that Great-Aunt Mary had left instructions for a wicker coffin or I don't think she would have made it up the aisle.

She had forbidden any flowers and so here she was, in an unadorned basket-woven box, and it was shocking to think of her lying there, cold and dead, only an arm's length away from where I stood. I imagined her wrapped in tissue paper, her hands crossed on her great monobosom, and then, for no reason at all, I thought of Ted and I began to cry again.

Ted. Small, stocky, brown-haired, handsome enough to make my heart stop whenever I saw him; vain, mean and unfaithful. I had loved him since our schooldays and we had lived together, tempestuously, for four years since university. Over the last miserable six months I had known in my heart that there was something wrong, but wanted to believe him when he said that it was my fault, that I was insane, jealous, possessive and suspicious. Then the hard evidence fell into my lap via his mobile phone and a pornographic text message to him from a close girlfriend of mine. A friend who had given me advice about Ted in the past. A girl with whom I had giggled and gossiped and confided awful and shaming truths. So it was a double treachery that tore my heart apart. How could they have done this to me? Lied and lied and covered their tracks and told me that I was mad? When I confronted him, Ted looked first shocked, then cornered and then angry. He said he loved me but when I pressed him he

admitted that he had been sleeping with Tatty on and off for two years. Two years! After that I threw him out, had a sleepless night and telephoned him the next day to beg him to come back. I had no shame. I also telephoned her, the über-bitch, but she switched off her mobile when she heard my voice.

Ted did come back but things could never be the same again, and after a few days of tears and rows (my tears, his provoked rows) he took a bundle of clothes under one arm, his toothbrush out of the bathroom, kick-started his motorbike and wheeled away.

I was bereft without him. Our flat was full of his things, his clothes, his CDs, his books. He was everywhere but he was gone. After a few days I borrowed a van and packed up my own stuff and moved out. A kind colleague at the primary school where I teach lent me her spare bedroom in which to weep and pass my sleepless nights and it was from there that I had travelled down to Dorset this morning for Great-Aunt Mary's funeral.

A funeral was right for the mood I was in. I wanted everything to be cold and grey and miserable, and I wished that it was me in the wicker coffin and Ted weeping in the front pew. It would have served him right if I had died of a broken heart.

So it was not for Great-Aunt Mary that I wept. She was my father's eldest aunt, and not even a proper blood relation. She had been married to Great-Uncle Timothy, Dad's father's younger brother, who had been dead so long that there was a thick crust of moss on his grave in the frozen churchyard outside. Ours is a large and untidy family, and in this part of Dorset there are a lot of us Kingsleys scattered about, most of whom now crowded the church. Some of them, a batch of second cousins once or twice removed, I hardly know. Great-Aunt Mary had been closer than that. For the last quarter of a century she had lived almost next door to where I grew up and where my parents still live – a farm in a small village tucked beneath a bare Dorset hill. Quite what Great-Uncle Timothy did for a living I'm not sure – something to do with the wine trade in London – and then he and Great-Aunt Mary, childless and in late middle age, retired to a small house in the village. According to Dad, Uncle Tim opened the front door on his first morning in Over Crompton, looked up at the lowering hill, said, 'Nothing but bloody sheep!' and promptly dropped down dead, leaving his widow complaining that it was she who was buried as a result. In the country, she meant.

Why she stayed and did not run back to London is lost in history. She continued to complain and to see herself as an exotic outsider, and a memory of my childhood is of dark green Harrods vans lost in the lanes round the village

with a delivery of some unheard-of luxury for Great-Aunt Mary on board. 'Small reminders of civilisation' was how she referred to the boxes of Elvas plums, the lapsang souchon tea, the tins of foie gras and crystallised ginger in Chinese jars. If Clemmie and I met a lost delivery van when we were out riding our ponies, we made a game of giving the driver the wrong directions so he ended up in a muddy farmyard or on wandering lanes which petered out at a silage clamp or a lonely corrugated barn on the top of a faraway hill.

What probably kept her was a certain fondness for other members of her late husband's family and the fact that she was an only child and had none of her own. Uncle Peter, her godson, persuaded her to join a racing syndicate which ran a promising horse he had bred at home on the farm and she went point-to-pointing every spring. Then, after our darling Gran died, she struck up an unlikely friendship with my grandfather, George, until his death two years ago. She invited him to lunch two or three times a week and they watched the afternoon's racing on the television and grumbled about the government and old age and everything else in cheerful alliance.

Great-Aunt Mary's cooking was almost the most important thing about her. She was a wonderful, wonderful cook in a slapdash, noisy, clattering, careless way. Children did not much interest her and she made it clear that she found us boring company, but spasmodically she enjoyed feeding us – educating our palates, she called it. Once when she caught Clemmie and me gorging on white-bread sandwiches filled with pink and white marshmallows – our idea of heaven at that time – she threw up her hands in horror and took us home to sit at her kitchen table while she cooked us beignets; tiny airy golden balls, puffed crisp in deep fat and dusted with icing sugar. After that we were summoned once or twice every holiday to be fed. Her roast chicken, fragrant with garlic and herbs, was so unlike the stringy, wet, flavourless bird my mother slapped on the table that it was hard to believe they were ever related. Her chocolate cake was rich and dense with a slick of glossy dark icing studded with tiny crystallised violets. Her roast beef was crisp and brown on the outside and soft and pink within – a revelation to me, accustomed to the overcooked fibrous slabs served up at home, on which one chewed and chewed to no effect.

Regrettably for us children, as Great-Aunt Mary got older and stouter there was less and less room for her to move round her cottage kitchen and she became disinclined to cook, and then Miss Timmis appeared on the scene as a companion and the cooking went out of the window completely. Harrods vans had long since ceased to call and Great-Aunt Mary took to shuffling about, one hand leaning on a walking stick, the other holding a cigarette, the butt stained

red by her violent lipstick kiss, and to eating shop cakes and ready-prepared meals, dished up by her nervous little friend.

Despite her spreading bulk her face was still strong and handsome in a fleshy, operatic style and her fine black eyes, overhung by jet-black arched brows, sparked with animation, but she was old and slow and bad tempered and I have to confess that recently I had no longer made the effort to call on her when I was home from London for a weekend. To be fair, she never indicated that she would welcome a visit and neither had I expected that she would die without a moment's warning.

Now she was gone and I already missed her because she was a character and part of my childhood and I hated things to change. My own life seemed so insecure and wavering that I took comfort in the belief that down in Dorset things went on the same for ever, and of course they didn't. To my profound dismay my parents' marriage had recently developed cracks.

Even as a child I had been aware that my father was what Gran called 'a ladies' man'. Clemmie and I used to think he was just being silly and embarrassing when we saw him with an arm round a woman at a party, or paying ridiculous compliments to some simpering girl hardly older than we were. As I got older, I discovered that his various local dalliances were well known and that my mother seemed to put up with it because although his affairs were intense and short-lived and made him whistle about the farm for a few weeks, they inevitably ran out of steam. He always came home with his tail between his legs, declaring his love for her and begging forgiveness. He reminded me of my childhood collie, Patch, who was also given to straying, staying out all night and appearing sheepish and hungry at the back door the next morning. Although his absences drove me wild with anxiety it didn't make me love him any the less, and I supposed my mother felt the same about Dad.

But now she had struck back and had had an affair of her own – a 'fling', she called it – with the Artificial Insemination man, a regular caller to the farm. At fifty-four! My father had the nerve to take it badly, and although they seemed to have patched things up to a certain extent, he was now threatening to sell the farm, which had been in the family for ever, and go off to live in Spain. He said that he was sick of cows and wanted to learn to play golf.

It was for all these reasons that I sobbed in tiny, freezing St Michael's, Over Crompton, but most of all I sobbed for myself because Ted had broken my heart.

After the service had come to an end and Great-Aunt Mary had been shouldered out of the church, we filed slowly from our pews and I fell in with

Clemmie, who clasped my elbow. Even through the thick wool of my coat I could feel her sharp little nails digging into me.

‘Bugger Ted!’ she whispered fiercely. ‘You’re better off without him. He was never the right man for you!’

‘He was an arrogant asshole,’ said Stephen from the other side.

‘A wanker,’ said Will from behind my shoulder. I sniffed and wiped my eyes with a wodge of wet tissue.

‘Would you like us to beat him up for you? Go to London and do him over?’ asked Pete and Felix eagerly.

‘It’s tempting,’ I said, ‘but he’s not worth the effort.’ I didn’t really believe this, of course. I would have done anything in the world to have him back and I lived in a state of nervous, gut-churning anticipation that at any moment he would call or text me and everything would be all right again.

‘That’s my girl!’ said Clemmie, her little diamond ear studs glinting in the wintry grey light that seeped through the clear glass windows of the church.

Outside, we milled about in the lane while Neil reversed the farm pick-up truck in the back of which Great-Aunt Mary was to travel to the crematorium, driven by my father and accompanied by Uncle Peter. I saw that someone had thought to brush out the back of the truck of the usual litter of straw and sheep nuts and had laid a tartan rug over the metal floor on which Great-Aunt Mary now rested, like a giant picnic, in her wicker coffin. This unorthodox ultimate journey had been arranged because she disliked unnecessary expense and had a deep suspicion of funeral directors, whom she considered thieves.

‘Why couldn’t she have gone to the kennels?’ asked Clemmie, stamping her frozen feet in her black high-heeled boots. ‘And been fed to the hounds like other fallen stock? She’d have kept them going for weeks.’

‘I hope there is someone to help unload at the other end,’ said Jake, turning up the collar of his long tweed coat, the elbows of which were holey and frayed. ‘Do crematoriums have fork-lifts?’

This irreverent attitude to death was not a reflection of a callous disregard for poor Great-Aunt Mary, but rather a family trait born of a loathing of sentimentality and an inability to talk openly of anything that remotely touched our hearts. My dear granny had shocked the ladies’ hairdresser in Market Newton where she went once a week to have her hair washed and set, by looking crossly at her watch as she waited to be collected by Grandpa and saying loudly, ‘Where *is* the daft old man? Dead, I expect!’ He countered this when he eventually hove into view by opening the door and addressing the salon at large in his booming Dorset countryman’s voice. ‘I’ve come to collect the corpse!’ It

was their way of dealing with old age and ill health. Granny was half blind and suffering from Parkinson's disease and Grandpa was devastated by the prospect of life without her.

Neil slammed up the back of the truck and Dad and Uncle Peter climbed into the cab and with a parting tootle on the horn set off down the village street. As we stood watching them go, kind-hearted Clemmie hooked her arm through that of little Miss Timmis, whose nose was very pink, through grief or cold I couldn't tell, and we trooped off towards the village hall where there was to be tea for the mourners. Since my mother had gone off the rails she refused to do anything helpful at home or we would have gone back to the farm and gathered round a cheery fire in the drawing room. As it was, it had been left to Dad and Uncle Peter to organise caterers to master the tea urn and set out the thick white crockery in the dusty hall. The mourners' feet clattered on the frozen lane and the sound echoed back from the pale winter hills on which nothing moved. The village seemed eerily empty and silent. Smoke from one or two cottage chimneys travelled white and straight into the pearly sky and some rooks batted about on the top branches of the bare elms behind the Old Vicarage; otherwise there was no sign of life, only a strong smell of livestock, warm and pungent, in the air.

The caterers' white van was pulled up outside the village hall, and inside, Mr Tooth the caretaker was lurking in the entrance, wearing his anorak and cycle clips and woollen hat, a worried expression on his face. He wanted to buttonhole someone about the water heater in the kitchen. He didn't want her left on or he'd blow a fuse, he said. It had happened before, after the playgroup jumble sale. I assured him we'd switch the boiler off when we had washed up the tea things, and invited him to stay, but he said, no disrespect but he had to get on, he'd got his fowl to feed, and he wobbled away into the grey afternoon on his bicycle, on the back of which were lashed three tall and knobby stalks of Brussels sprouts.

Inside the hall the long trestle tables were laid with white cloths and plates of sandwiches and cakes and at the far end there were glasses and bottles of whisky and sherry. The mourners seemed to cheer up when they were out of the cold and within sight of something to eat and drink, and in a matter of minutes the cousins had formed a loud, laughing group in the middle of the room. They made so much noise that everyone else had to drop their muted funeral tones in order to make themselves heard.

There was nothing the Kingsleys liked better than a funeral, except perhaps the entertainment of a good row, or someone else's farm sale. Kingsleys who had

hardly known Great-Aunt Mary, who could have passed her in the street without recognising her, had come from far and wide in order to run a critical eye over their relations, tease and provoke one another, stoke up on gossip and rekindle old feuds and alliances. Great-Aunt Mary could not have died at a better moment in terms of providing an opportunity to witness my parents' marital fall-out first hand.

I felt quite sorry for my mother, who was being determinedly bright and smiling. Her fuchsia lipstick had worn off except where it had crept into the lines about her mouth. She wore too much make-up these days, too much jewellery, and her clothes were too short and too tight. She thought it made her look youthful, whereas the effect was more sad and desperate. It looked as if, at any moment, she would be suggesting that we went out clubbing together. Now she passed round the plates of sausage rolls with a tinkly laugh here and a touch on an arm there, knowing all the time that great waves of family disapprobation were breaking all around her.

It was all very well for my father to stray and fall charmingly in and out of love with most of the pretty women in the neighbourhood; that was what was expected of a man of his type. It was quite another thing for a woman to flout the rules, especially my mother, who was marked down as being an outsider from the start. Poor Mum, the daughter of a Reading chemist, who met Dad at university where he was reading agriculture and she was studying political science. What had they ever had in common? She was never going to be a country girl. She arrived in Over Crompton as a socialist who disliked animals in general. Even worse, she was anti-hunting. Nothing was more condemning in the eyes of the Kingsleys, who were made up of Jorrocks-faced men who farmed up and down the county and hunted three days a week on stout cobs, and iron-arsed women who rode in point-to-points.

She was pretty though. I had studied the wedding photographs and there she was, a laughing girl with sooty eyes and dead-straight curtains of shiny black hair, wearing a pink mini-dress and a large flowery hat. I suppose she had tried to like the farm at first but by the time I was born she had given up the effort, and as soon as I went to school she got a job running the housing association in the nearest town and angrily championing lost and unpopular causes. 'Busybodying,' Grandpa called it. 'Should be at home cooking John a proper hot dinner,' sniffed Gran, and theirs was the mildest criticism.

Apart from our family, the other mourners were mostly ancient, the slightly less old and incapacitated ferrying the extremely old and doddery in cars which were parked erratically outside the church and would later prevent the

milk tanker from getting through the village to our farm. Funerals were one of the few outings left to them in their old age. You could always expect a good gate when one or another of them fell off the perch. I noticed that hardly any mention was made of Great-Aunt Mary. They were more interested in what was in the sandwiches and in getting their whisky glasses topped up. Beady-eyed, hung about with handbags and sticks and walking frames and adjusting their hearing aids in and out of whiskery ears, they were as alert and lively as anyone else in the room.

‘Which one are you?’ they boomed at me and my cousins, and when we shouted back our names they generally went on to tell a tale about our fathers when they were boys, followed by wheezy laughter.

‘You can see that this is the generation that won the war,’ said Clemmie to me, as she made a sortie towards the drinks end of the table on the arm of an ancient retired colonel who was clearing the way by using his stick like a metal detector in front of him.

I spotted little Miss Timmis twittering to the vicar and went to speak to her. My approach gave him the opportunity to duck away with a caring expression on his face and a little trill of his fingers in my direction.

‘Miss Timmis,’ I said, taking her arm. ‘How are you? I mean, *really*?’

‘Oh, my dear!’ she said, blinking up at me through her smeary glasses, her little pouchy, powdery cheeks trembling. ‘It was such a shock! So sudden! But you know, just the other day Mary said she thought it was time she died. She believed that God had forgotten about her.’

This was an arresting idea. I thought of the avenging God of the Jews, the forgiving God of the New Testament and Great-Aunt Mary’s version; absent-minded and disorganised. I imagined Him slapping the side of His head and saying, ‘Mary Kingsley! Completely slipped my mind! She’ll be expecting me!’

‘She’d asked for a poached egg for breakfast and I took it in to her on a tray, cooked just as she liked it, and she said she wanted the salt. It was so silly of me, I always forgot the salt, but when I went back with it only a few minutes later, she was sitting motionless in her chair and there was something about her which gave me a fright. “Mary?” I said, giving her arm a little shake, and then I realised that she had gone. Just like that, with the poached egg still warm on the toast.’

‘What a waste,’ I said, before I could stop myself.

‘Oh, no, Emily, because naughty Pugsy jumped up and ate it when I was waiting for your father. He licked the plate quite clean.’ Pugsy, a pop-eyed, wheezing fawn barrel on antique bow legs, is one of Great-Aunt Mary’s two

rather repulsive dogs. ‘Your father came at once and was so kind. He realised what a shock it was to me! I’ve been with Mary for eight years, you see, and known her since she was a girl in London before the war. Oh, my dear, I shall miss her. She was such a *character*. Such a strong person, even towards the end, when she found life difficult.’

‘What will you do now, Miss T? Will you want to stay in the cottage on your own?’

Miss Timmis’s little furry face brightened. ‘Oh no, dear. I’m going into a home. Mary had it all arranged for me, if she went first. I have had a room booked for some time. As soon as your father has the opportunity to help me sort out the cottage of Mary’s things, I shall move.’

‘But will you like that?’ I asked anxiously, thinking of a dreary place smelling of pee and cabbage, inhabited by dotty old women shuffling about in nylon nighties.

‘Oh yes, my dear!’ sighed Miss Timmis. ‘I have visited The Willows several times and know I shall be happy.’ She lowered her voice. ‘They have a very nice type of person living there. Old Lady Forbes is a resident, you know! I shall enjoy the company.’ I looked at her eager little face and saw that genteel snobbery could be a comfort to the end.

‘What will happen to the dogs?’ I asked, thinking of naughty Pugsy, who rogered anything that moved, and his sister Millie, stout and snuffly with only one oily blue eye.

‘Your father says they can go to the farm. He said that your mother, you know . . .’

I did, only too well. Poor Mum, I thought. Why couldn’t Dad give them to one of his girlfriends to look after?

‘Now, how about you, Emily?’ went on Miss Timmis in a brighter tone, twinkling up at me. ‘Are you engaged yet? To be married to that nice boy? The one with the motor bicycle?’

‘No, I’m not!’ I said, trying hard not to look as if I cared. ‘In fact, I have broken up with him. Just recently. I’m a single girl again.’

‘Oh well,’ said Miss Timmis. ‘You are so young. There is plenty of time to settle down and I am sure there is a *queue* of young men at your door!’

Oh Miss Timmis, wrong on both counts. Not so bloody young. I shall be a dreary twenty-six next year. And no queue either.

My mother whisked past at that moment with a tray of sausage rolls and caught my arm with her free hand. ‘Sorry to interrupt, Miss Timmis,’ she said. ‘I need just a word with Emily.’

‘Of course! Of course! I don’t want to . . .’ Miss Timmis twittered and patted at the scone crumbs caught at the corner of her mouth, but my mother took no notice.

‘What’s the matter?’ she said, drawing me to one side. ‘You look awful. Are you ill?’

‘No. I’ve just had a bit of a bad time,’ I began. ‘Mum, I’ve broken up with Ted,’ but she wasn’t listening.

‘Has Dad said anything to you?’

‘What do you mean? *Said* anything. Of course he has.’

She sighed impatiently. ‘About *us*, I mean. About him and me and so on?’

‘Mum! What is there to say? Everybody seems to know anyway.’

‘I just want to know what he’s *saying*. Especially to you. I want you to hear my side of the story.’

I winced. ‘Mum! Please! It’s up to you and him to sort it out. I don’t want to take sides. I don’t feel it’s anything to do with me.’

‘I’ve done nothing that I’m ashamed of,’ she said fiercely, jamming a whole sausage roll into the mouth of a passing child. ‘Nothing! When I think what I’ve put up with over the years . . .’

‘Mum!’ I said desperately. ‘I don’t want to know!’ I dreaded hearing that she had only stayed with my father because of me, but even left unsaid, the implication hung heavily between us.

‘But you should know,’ she said, ‘because if you had any idea . . .’

‘Please, Mum!’ I said, but was unwise enough to add, ‘If you’re so unhappy, why don’t you leave him?’

She stopped and stared at me. ‘Leave him?’ she demanded. ‘How do you imagine I could do that? We have been married for more than thirty years. Do you think I could just chuck all that away? I am fifty-four years old, Emily. I can’t start all over again. I don’t want a lonely old age, thank you very much.’

‘Well . . .’ I said helplessly. ‘What do you want? What about the Artificial Insemination man?’

‘Don’t speak of him!’ she spat. ‘He’s gone. Took bloody fright and asked to move areas. He’s serving Yorkshire now.’

Her anger and hostility made my eyes water. She bared her teeth in a ferocious smile as she surveyed the roomful of gathered Kingsleys. ‘Look at them!’ she snarled. ‘Like vultures round a corpse!’

I glanced about us. Her analogy wasn’t wholly accurate, because Kingsley men were mostly squat and square, red-faced Dorset countrymen, although the women did tend to be sparse and lean and beady-eyed.

‘Did you love him then, Mum?’ I asked awkwardly. ‘The AI man?’

‘Of course I didn’t. Don’t be ridiculous, Emily.’ She turned her fierce gaze on me. ‘But he provided a diversion. Took my mind off your father and the bloody farm. And,’ her voice softened and took on a wistful tone, ‘it was so good to be *noticed*. Appreciated, for once.’

‘Dad appreciates you in his own way. He’d be lost without you.’ I really meant it. My father relied on my mother for everything but romance.

‘Hmm!’ she said. ‘I’m sick to death of being told that. Of always being here ready to forgive him and take him back. I tell you, Emily, if I do stay, things are going to change.’

I stared at her angry face. She looked too old to be experiencing this sort of stuff, so like what I was going through, but nearly thirty years down the line.

‘Do you still love Dad?’ I asked.

My mother paused. She ran a hand through her hair, recently coloured an unflattering auburn, and her mouth sagged at the corners with emotion.

‘Of course I bloody do, Emily. Why else would I still be here?’ She looked around angrily. ‘Anyway, it would be what this lot would like. To see me off. But I won’t do it. Not to please them, anyway.’ She took a glass of whisky off a passing tray and downed it in one. I didn’t remember her drinking whisky before.

‘What did you say about Ted?’ she asked. ‘Did you say you had split up?’

‘Yes,’ I said and felt my lip tremble and my eyes fill with tears.

She put her arm round me. ‘Don’t let them see you!’ she hissed. She looked over my shoulder and I heard her murmur, ‘So fond of Aunt Mary.’

I scrubbed at my face. ‘I don’t mind who knows! Clemmie and the boys know already.’

‘Maybe they do, but the others don’t need to. All their ugly daughters are smugly engaged or married with their photographs in *Pigkeepers Monthly*, I expect, with rings through their noses. I don’t want them to see you unhappy.’

‘Oh, Mum!’ I didn’t care. I was long past bothering about my pride.

‘What went wrong?’ she asked, softening for a moment. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

‘I found out that he had been sleeping with Tatty.’ Even now the words hurt me.

‘Bastard!’ she spat. How angry she was about everything. ‘God! Men are all the same! How long had that been going on for?’

I found that I didn’t want to talk to her about it. I shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’ve moved out of the flat. I’ve been staying with a teacher from school.’

‘Forget him!’ she said. ‘I always thought he was untrustworthy. Sexy and good-looking and all that, but thoroughly untrustworthy.’

‘Please, Mum!’ I did not need reminding of what I had lost. ‘Poor Great-Aunt Mary!’ I said, to change the subject. ‘I can’t believe that she has gone.’

My mother looked thoughtful. ‘She snuffed it at the right moment, in a way. Your father and I hadn’t spoken for two weeks but you can’t deal with a death in the family in grunts. Now at least we are talking again. I shall miss the old bat. She was always good for a laugh, and of course, she loathed all this lot.’ My mother gestured with her hand at the surrounding Kingsleys. ‘Look at them! They are getting worked up about the will now. There have been endless telephone calls trying to find out how much she left and to whom!’ My mother snorted with laughter. ‘They are in for a shock!’

‘Why?’

‘She didn’t leave much. She has provided for Miss Timmis to go to a very expensive home and that’s about as far as it goes. Oh yes, apart from something weird about you and Clemmie.’

‘What do you mean? Weird?’

‘I can’t remember exactly. Nothing to get excited about. You’re not an heiress or anything. It was something to do with her ashes. Old Godders will tell you.’

Mr Godfrey was the family solicitor. I had seen him in church, small, round and jolly, twinkling and bobbing, even at a funeral, jammed into his fawn overcoat like a plump little sausage in its skin. I wrinkled my nose. I did not like the sound of Great-Aunt Mary’s ashes becoming my responsibility. I had heard tales of the scattering of ashes at sea or on Exmoor or at the open ditch at Wincanton racecourse. I imagined Clemmie and me detailed to do the same with Great-Aunt Mary in Harrods food hall. God forbid.

‘Right!’ said my mother grimly. ‘Back into battle!’ and with a horrid smile fixed on her face she continued on her way with her plate of sausage rolls.

She was brave, I thought. I had to give her that. Braver than I was, groping in my bag to check my mobile phone to see if I had a text message or had missed a call. I still couldn’t make myself believe that Ted had gone, and most of the time I felt that I would give anything to get him back. I admired my mother’s anger, but given her current mood I didn’t rate the chances of Pugsy and Millie if my father was unwise enough to expect her to take them on.

I looked about me and nodded and smiled to neighbours and relations but it was Clemmie for whom I searched. I spotted her in the corner with her rheumy-eyed old colonel and worked my way across to relieve her. The colonel’s

lower lip trembled, wet and pink, and he had Clemmie pressed up against the table and was leaning over her as if she was a plate of mouth-watering cakes.

‘Excuse me, Colonel!’ I said, edging in. ‘I don’t want to interrupt but I need to talk to Clemmie rather urgently.’

The colonel made a harrumphing noise in his throat. ‘My dear Emily. Enchanted, my dear.’ His horny old hand moved over my bottom as if it was the price to be paid for releasing Clemmie, who ducked out from the corner.

‘Thanks, darlin’!’ she said, and gave the colonel a fat wink. She took my arm. ‘Poor old Aunt Mary. I can’t really believe it, can you? I feel so mean that it is weeks and weeks since I last saw her. It was the summer, wasn’t it? At Dad’s birthday party. She was scoffing strawberries and cream and wearing an enormous straw hat and a vast dress that looked as if it had been made out of the sitting-room curtains, do you remember? Larger than life she was then, and now she’s gone.’

‘Have you heard about her will?’ I asked.

‘No? What about it?’ Clemmie’s beautiful oval face looked at me from under the brim of her black hat. She pursed her lovely wide mouth, carefully glossed with a pale lipstick.

‘There’s something about us in it. You and me, Clem. My mother says so.’

‘What about us? Has she left us everything? We always were her favourites.’

‘No, nothing like that. It’s something about her ashes.’

‘Yuck. No thanks,’ said Clemmie. ‘You can have all of her in a pot on your mantelpiece. I don’t want my share.’

‘No. I don’t think it’s like that. Mr Godfrey knows. He’s over there. Let’s ask him.’

Mr Godfrey was having a hard time keeping the Kingsleys at bay. He was surrounded by them, all wanting to know details of the will, and batting them away with little flurries of good humour. ‘No, no,’ he was saying to Frank Kingsley, a cousin of Dad’s who farmed the other side of the hill. ‘I can’t say anything else at the moment, but I can assure you that there is nothing of interest to your branch of the family. She made a few small bequests, but her estate was not large.’

I touched his arm. ‘Mr Godfrey! It’s us, Clemmie and Emily!’

‘Ah, girls!’ he twinkled. ‘I wanted to see you. I think we need to arrange a meeting.’

Cousin Frank bristled and glared. I could see he thought that something was going on, that wool was being pulled over his bushy badger eyebrows.

‘When do you have to be back in London?’ Mr Godfrey asked us.

Clemmie shrugged. The modern art gallery in which she had sat behind a desk filing her nails and bored witless had closed a month ago. Now she was waitressing and doing bar work in the run-up to Christmas. ‘Doesn’t matter too much to me,’ she said. ‘But why do we have to meet at all?’

Mr Godfrey drew us to one side. ‘In her will, your Great-Aunt Mary made a rather unusual request regarding the disposal of her ashes,’ he said in a confidential tone. ‘She has left a sum of money to cover the expense incurred and she has nominated you, her two great-nieces, as executors. She never spoke to you about this?’

Clemmie and I looked at one another blankly. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Not to me she didn’t. Clemmie?’

‘No!’ said Clemmie emphatically. ‘Never.’

‘I can’t take time off,’ I said. I was working as a supply teacher at an east London primary school where every man counted. It had been hard enough to arrange for my class to be covered while I attended the funeral. ‘Couldn’t we get this over with now? It can’t be that complicated.’

Mr Godfrey hesitated. ‘I do have the relevant papers in the car,’ he said. ‘Perhaps we could adjourn there for a short meeting? It shouldn’t take long.’

We followed Mr Godfrey outside and buttoning up our coats walked back down the village street to where his smart solicitor’s car was parked near the church. He took the keys out of his pocket and the car doors winked and unlocked themselves obediently.

‘Hop in,’ he said, fishing his briefcase off the seat. Clemmie climbed into the back, her coat falling open to reveal her slender legs in black fishnet tights. I slid into the passenger seat and we both sat and waited while Mr Godfrey flicked through papers which he rested against the steering wheel. ‘Ah!’ he said. ‘Here we are,’ and he began to read: ‘I appoint my two great-nieces, Emily and Clementine Kingsley, to be executors of this part of my will. I request that my ashes be transported to Mali, formerly French Sudan, in western Africa. My final resting place is to be,’ he hesitated over the pronunciation, ‘Timadjlalen in the Sahara Desert, and the last part of my nieces’ journey will have to be completed by camel. Sufficient funds from my estate have been set aside to cover the travel expenses and any loss of income that my nieces may incur. I realise that they may be a little surprised and dismayed at this request and perhaps unwilling to comply with my wishes. However, they must trust me when I say that this journey will be the most important of their lives. The man they must seek to facilitate

their travel is well known in the Kidal area. His name is Salika ag Baye.’

Clemmie and I sat in stunned silence for a moment, while Mr Godfrey cleared his throat and shuffled his papers.

‘Well!’ said Clemmie eventually, from the back seat. ‘Why on earth does she want to be scattered there? I’ve never even heard of Mali.’

‘I must admit I was equally surprised,’ said Mr Godfrey. ‘I had no idea that your great-aunt had any connection with Africa. I had a quick look on the internet. Mali is rather a large and empty west African country, the northern part all desert. I could find no trace at all of the particular place mentioned.’

‘I have never heard of anything so mad!’ I said crossly. ‘It’s ridiculous. How can we be expected to comply with such a stupid whim? She must have lost her marbles.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Mr Godfrey, shaking his head and searching through a document-holder. ‘The will was a model – beautifully drawn up. She had thought of everything. Here!’ He produced what he was looking for and waved an envelope at us. ‘She even bought your air tickets. Open-ended and valid for a year.’

He held out the envelope, at which I glared, unwilling to take it from his hand. I didn’t want anything to do with it. Clemmie reached across my shoulder and snatched it and ripped it open.

‘Air France. Two tickets. Paris to Bamako,’ she said. ‘Wow!’

Her excited tone irritated me. ‘For God’s sake, Clem. Don’t start thinking I’m up for this. It’s all very well for you—’

‘Oh shut up, Emily!’ she interrupted. ‘Don’t be so pathetic. This is an adventure. It’s exactly what we both need. I’m sick to death of my boring life and it will get you away from London and help you forget horrible Ted.’

‘If it is of any interest,’ said Mr Godfrey, patting my hand and smiling at me cheerfully, ‘I discovered that there is one place in Mali that you’ve probably heard of.’ He paused and his eyes twinkled. ‘Timbuktu,’ he announced with a flourish.

‘Oh!’ cried Clemmie. ‘I’ve *always* wanted to go there.’