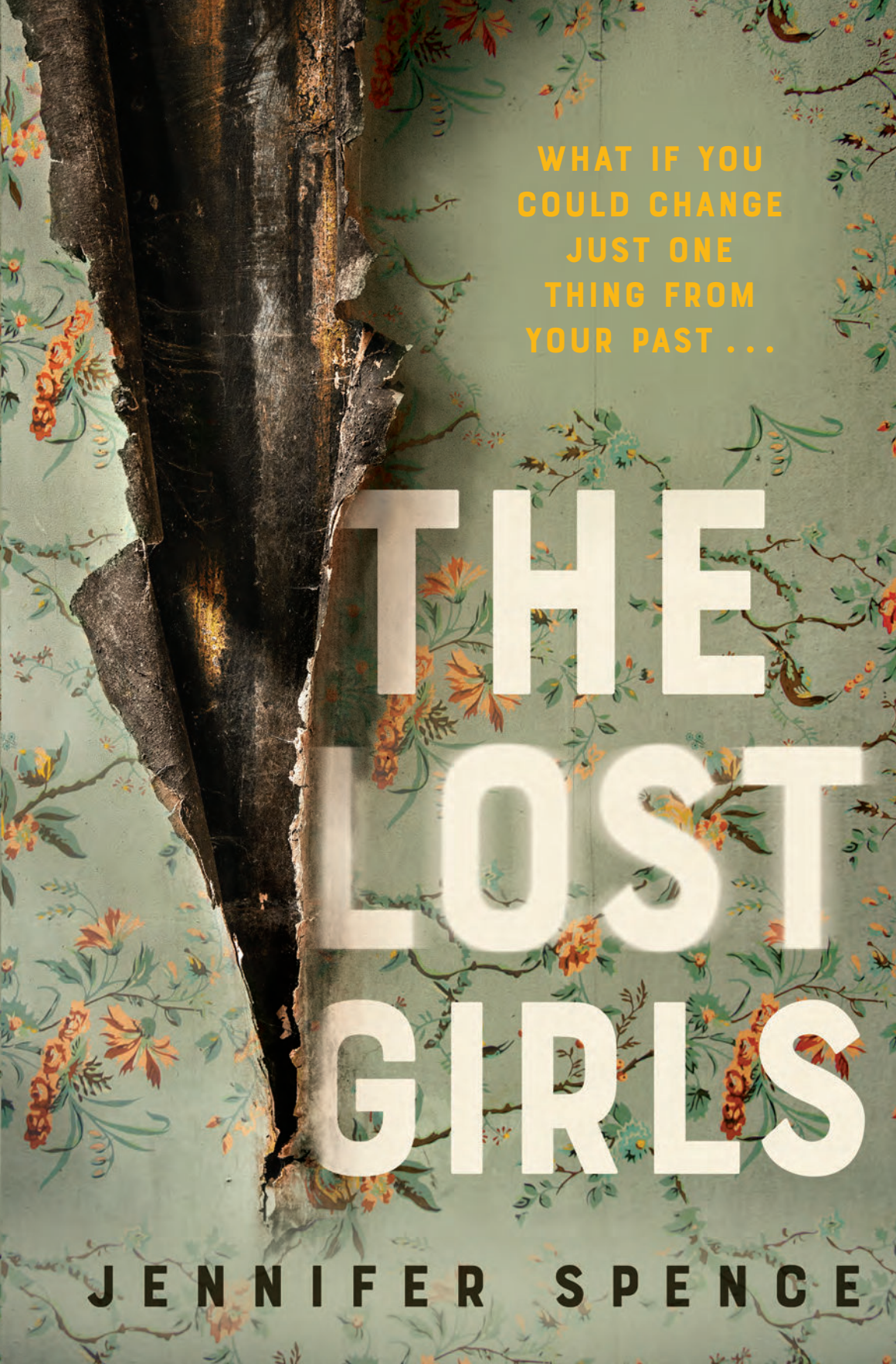
WHAT IF YOU COULD CHANGE JUST ONE THING FROM YOUR PAST . . .
THE LOST GIRLS
JENNIFER SPENCE

# THE LOST GIRLS

JENNIFER SPENCE

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# 1

Whatever can have happened to the jacarandas?

This morning the street was awash with electric blue, fallen blossoms slippery underfoot after a welcome shower in the night, the air balmy and fragrant with promise. A woman sitting in front of me on the bus to the city had blue flowers scattered on her bowed head, sparkling with dewdrops.

Now all at once it's turned cold and the blossoms have gone, the branches stripped bare. Maybe there was an early summer storm while I was in the cinema, weeping through the new *Dunkirk* film. I found myself shivering in my light clothes at the bus stop and was disconcerted to see that everyone else was well equipped with coats and umbrellas. But I got a seat on the bus and it was warmer there as I half-dozed through the short journey home.

I sense without looking up the moment when the bus leaves the main road and starts winding into the narrow streets of our waterfront suburb. Richard and I have lived here for forty years – without children, with children and then once again without children. It's home to me now, the streets familiar and secure. This is our *shtetl*.

But the morning's jacaranda blossoms have inexplicably vanished.

Still a little sleepy, I walk the length of our street to where the grey bulk of the former engineering works looms over the water, its stark exterior giving no hint of the comfort inside. Most days I walk up the stairs to our beautiful apartment on the third level, but today I'm planning to take the lift, my body aching with weariness. I'm fighting it, but the ageing process is winning, and my idea of voluptuous pleasure is to get into bed with a book.

But there are still no electric blue flowers, not even on the ground, and there's something odd about the big double doors at the entrance. Why haven't I noticed this before? The paint is a faded green, not the glossy deep red it's always been. I can't imagine why anyone would want to do that, and why weren't the residents consulted?

More seriously, the keypad is missing. The only way into the building is to type in our code and wait for the door to swing open. Why would they move the keypad? I search around in vain. And why are the concrete steps cracked and stained?

With a growing sense of dread, I step back and look up at the building. Several of the windows are broken or boarded up. The open space around the entrance, where it's set back from the street, has lost all its lush green plants, and is now a discoloured expanse of concrete with weeds growing in the cracks.

I peep along the narrow side alley, to where I should be able to glimpse the smart town houses the developers built at the back, facing the water view. All I can see is some ramshackle old tin sheds.

It's possible that I got off at the wrong stop and came down the wrong street. But I know all the streets, all the buildings, and this one is not familiar; except that it is.

When I push at the doors they don't move. I reach up and hammer with my fist. The heavy doors muffle the sound, but a middle-aged man walking past with a scrawny little dog on a lead looks around and grins.

"You won't rouse anyone in there, love," he calls cheerfully.

I try to frame a question, but he's gone. The light is fading and I'm cold. All I want is to go home.

Home. Our beautiful quiet apartment with a view over the water, even a prized glimpse of the Harbour Bridge. Home, where it is always warm on these chilly winter days as the sun streams over the balcony onto the well-worn rug in the living room. Richard will be watching the ferries and fidgeting in his armchair opposite mine, waiting for me to get home so he can take the white wine out of the

fridge and pass me my glass, anxious to tell me about his day.

We moved into the apartment as soon as the conversion was finished, bringing only what we needed. We shed our old lives with the old furniture, and the project steadied us and gave us a future.

Things have felt strange today ever since I fell into a reverie at the bus stop and looked up dreamily, my attention attracted by a noisy bunch of schoolgirls who were jostling their way to the front of the line. I recognised one of them, or thought I did: a solemn little thing in her too-long checked dress and private school hat, and I started racking my brain for her name. Vanessa? Veronica? She was quite friendly with Claire in the early years and I used to chat with her mother in the playground while they ran around shrieking. Samantha, that was it. I gave her a tentative smile, but she turned away, expressionless.

Then I realised how silly I was being. I'd spent too long browsing pointlessly through the city shops, then losing myself in the film, and my brain was fogged with tiredness. Any friend of Claire's would be in her early thirties by now, not a flower-faced schoolgirl.

When I got onto the bus the card reader was nowhere to be found. People were pushing past me and taking up the last of the seats. In desperation I thrust some coins at the driver and to my surprise he accepted them and even gave me an old-fashioned paper ticket.

On the journey, I didn't pay much attention to the world around me. When I glanced out the window to see how far we'd come the surroundings were familiar, but at the same time disorientating. I usually press the button to stop the bus just after I see the brightly-lit clothes shop on the corner, but for some reason this time I didn't spot it. But it was certainly the right bus. I remember passing the supermarket on the right, and feeling glad I didn't have to get off to buy food. Julian called me this morning to say that he and Françoise won't be coming to dinner after all. I would have loved to see them and their enchanting little girls, but I'll welcome a quiet night, and to be honest Richard gets a bit grumpy when the twins come on week-nights, tired from a full day at preschool and inclined to be naughty.

Richard. Whatever strange thing has happened to our building, I know he's at home waiting for me. He can come down and let me in. I pull out my phone to call him, but there's no signal.

A feeling of dread is growing inside me. I walk past our building to where the street finishes at a barricade with a view over the harbour lower down, and sit on the bench that's thoughtfully provided there, looking back up the street. Lights show in a few of the houses, but the windows of our building remain dark. There's something different about the street, but I can't put my finger on it. I have a feeling some of the houses are the wrong colour, and maybe some of the front gardens are not quite right – either too lush, or not lush enough.

This is what dementia would be like. Could it be that I'm much older than I think, and things have changed around me, but I'm fixated on the way they were in the past? In this unfathomable future our apartment building has inexplicably been abandoned.

If I'm demented, I wonder, would I think so rationally? I look at my hand to see if it's wizened and covered in brown spots, but it looks normal. If only I had a mirror. Oh, of course. I switch my phone to selfie mode and peer at myself on the screen. Wrinkles around my eyes and mouth show up in pitiless digital detail, and my hair is lightly streaked with grey, but I'm pretty sure this face is no older than the one that grimaced at me in the mirror this morning.

I'm still in my right mind. I know what day it is: Tuesday 7 November 2017. I switch my phone back to the home screen and glance at the readout, but oddly it reads *<date> 0:00 am*. Some sort of weird communication error, I suppose.

I just want to go home.

# 2

I walk up the street, looking for clues. Reflected lights shimmer on the wet road. The bins must have been put out last night, because half of them are still on the kerb, waiting for their owners to get home from work. They're not the standard red-topped wheelie bins, but an odd assortment of steel or coloured plastic garbage cans, all different sizes.

My apprehension grows and begins to take form.

The people on the bus were dressed normally, and some of their faces seemed familiar, but I couldn't have put names to them. They weren't all peering into mobile phones, I recall now. Some of them were reading books, even newspapers, and many of them had headphones.

I could go into the corner shop, and ask Karen or her husband if they know what's happened to our building. I'm pretty sure the shop was open when I went past. I turn at the top of the street and look along the road. Yes, all

the lights are on and there are the usual tubs of flowers and a stand with a few varieties of fruit out the front.

But that's wrong too. The corner shop closed down five years ago, collateral damage in the battle of the two local supermarkets; and yet there it is.

Before we moved into our empty-nest apartment, when the factory was still an abandoned jumble of old buildings, we lived around the corner in our large, run-down family house. Lately I hate going near it, because the new owners have renovated all the character out of it and razed our garden. What will I see, I wonder, if I walk past it now?

The thought takes hold, and I couldn't deflect my steps even if I wanted to. The old house. Am I going to see it renovated yet again, or am I going to see something else, something even more frightening?

I'm standing on the other side of the narrow street, looking at the row of terrace houses, wide and tall, isolated by narrow side gardens from the smaller single-storey houses. The terrace on the corner, our house, is ablaze with light. The curtains are open at the upstairs French windows, and I can see right through to the Van Gogh print hanging on the bedroom wall. Richard picked it up at the Rijksmuseum when he went to Amsterdam for that conference, and he always assured me that it was true to the original. By the time we threw it out the colours had faded to a uniform bluish-grey, but I knew that when he looked at it he still saw the real painting in all its vibrancy.

We threw it out, but there it is.

The frangipani in the front garden, bare and fleshy, is just tall enough to clear the iron fence. They take a long time to grow, but by the time we sold the house it was glorious, strewing its flowers extravagantly all over the footpath. Dripping ferns surround the frangipani and hang over the front path, which we rarely used. A side door gives direct access to the lane that leads back up to the main street. I stand at the corner, looking.

This doesn't make sense. This is not dementia. It's Pincher Martin reliving his whole life in the moment when he's drowning.

My whole life. This house was my whole life. Other periods might be hazy in my mind, but memories of the years we lived here come flooding back in vivid colour.

Someone is coming down the road, a stooping figure. It's old Mrs Grainger, the eyes and ears of the street, usually glimpsed peering out through the lace curtains of the house she was born in. She squints up at my face and passes by without recognition.

We went to her funeral. Her son told her life story, revealing a woman none of us had bothered to get to know. I remember wishing I had talked to her more.

Now there's another flurry of movement, a shaft of light darts across the lane as the side door opens, and suddenly she's there, turning to go up the hill, calling something over her shoulder.

"Milk too? Okay."

She. Me.

I have never seen myself like this. You strike a pose in the mirror. You compose your face into what you think is your best expression. You look into your own eyes.

But she is there in front of me, not looking this way. I tentatively raise one hand, but she doesn't raise hers. Me, but not me.

She's young, slim, still wearing her work clothes, a ridiculous tailored dress with padded shoulders. Her honey-coloured hair is tied back at the nape of her neck, puffy over her ears. I was right, that hairstyle didn't suit me, I saw the light and changed it just before Lauren and Phil's big party for their twentieth anniversary. I want to follow her. I'm watching a movie and she's about to walk out of the frame. Without premeditation I step into the lane and call her name. My name.

"Stella?"

She stops and turns, frowning a little. She sees her own face gazing at her, every contour familiar, the colour of the eyes, the slightly parted lips over the carefully straightened teeth. The two front teeth! Surely she will recognise me.

"Hello?" she says doubtfully.

What she sees is the papery skin, the slight stoop, the wrinkles and blemishes. She sees a crone with frizzy greying hair.

A slippery thought darts into my mind. Didn't a strange old woman come up to me one winter's evening and tell me some garbled tale . . . what was it now? Why haven't I remembered this before?

"Stella," I say. "You are Stella, aren't you?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

Let me in. I want to see everything, all the details of your life. Your home, your children, your husband, your cats.

A flash of inspiration.

"My name's Linda," I say. "Linda McCutcheon."

"Oh, my God," she says.

# 3

She brings me into the kitchen and it's almost unbearable. I want to stop and marvel over every object, and I hardly hear her nervous chatter.

"I don't believe it. Mum always said, but I never thought . . . My God, I can see that you're related to me. Look, I really have to get some bread for tomorrow's lunches before the shop closes. Please, sit down, don't go anywhere. I'll be back in a minute, then we can talk."

I sit on one of the hard kitchen chairs. When did we put cushions on those chairs? It wasn't long after we got them. The kitchen is cluttered as usual, schoolbags dumped on the timber bench, a chopping board hastily rinsed off, carrots and broccoli lying next to it. I'm startled all over again to see the cupboards. The colour looked nice in the sample piece and the name appealed to us – what was it? Something like *Ashen Rose* – but when the whole thing

was installed and we came home from work to admire it, all we saw was a sea of pink.

Julian wanders in, absorbed in his headphones and his mini-disc player, and starts when he sees me.

"Oh, hi," he says.

My heart swells with love. He's fifteen or sixteen, gangly, his hair still very blond and straggling down to his shoulders, his face freshly-minted. That diffident slouch, the smiling eyes. He's dressed as he always was in a loose flannelette shirt and jeans, and I long to touch him, to feel the reality of that bony body.

"Hi," I say. "I'm your mum's Aunt Linda."

"Yeah? I didn't know she had an Aunt Linda."

"Neither did she, really. We've never met."

"I'm Julian. Where is Mum?" He holds out his hand and I shake it. I can't be dreaming this.

"She's gone to the shop," I say. "She won't be long."

He rummages in the cupboard, grabs a handful of biscuits and leaves again, not before giving me a conspiratorial wink.

A minute later she comes in clutching a carton of milk and a packet of sliced bread.

"Well!" she says.

"I met your son," I say. "He's gorgeous."

"Oh, right. He wasn't getting himself a snack, was he?"

"Not that I noticed." My instinct is more to protect him than be truthful to her. I can't be truthful to her, in any case.

"Will you have dinner with us?" she asks.

"I'd like that."

"It's a bit of a madhouse at this time of day. I'll get Richard to look after you while I get on with the cooking."

"I could help you." I really could. I know where everything is kept, and once I see what she's making I'll know exactly what to do.

"Thanks anyway," she says with a tight smile. "It's better if I just do it. The kids might help a bit later." I know better than to insist. She wants me out of her hair.

"Kids? You've got more than one?" I am longing to see Claire. Her presence pervades the house, but I still can't believe I'm actually going to see her.

"Last time I looked." She goes to the door and calls, "Richard!"

"I'm in here!"

We follow his voice into the living room where he's kneeling at the fireplace, his back to us, crumpling newspaper.

"This is my Aunt Linda," she tells him.

"Linda?" He turns his face up at me, so young and open that I catch my breath. There are a few lines around his eyes, but his hair is still thick and dark brown, brushed straight back and kept quite long, and some strange shift in perception lets me see his face and the older Richard's face merged together. He's wearing the grey jumper I knitted him when Claire was a baby, the elbows finally starting to unravel.

"Linda? The one who . . ."

"That's right. She's going to have dinner with us. Do you want to look after her? I'll just be in the kitchen."

"Thanks . . . um . . ." I turn to her, but she's gone.

Richard is staring at me.

"Wow," he says. "I can see a bit of a resemblance to Anne, but . . . wow. I reckon I'm looking at Stella when she's older. Almost."

He jumps up and comes towards me.

"Sorry, Linda. Have a seat." He gestures towards the couch. "I'll just get this fire going."

"That's nice," I say as the flames start to crackle and the warm smell of burning eucalyptus fills the room. I sit down on the old couch which is not so old now, hardly sagging at all. There's a newspaper next to me and I turn it slightly so that I can see the date. It's Wednesday 20 August 1997.

I knew it, I'd already worked it out, but it's still a shock to see it there in black and white.

"The wood's not great," says Richard. "I asked for box, but they brought stringybark. It's going to smoke a bit."

"That's no good." This happens pretty much every winter, I recall.

"I get better firewood when we go down to Mount Wallace to see Anne," he says. "I hired a trailer last winter, should have done it again this year."

I can tell he's watching me to see how I react to Anne's name. The image of her fills my mind, and I'm afraid there will be tears if I say anything.

"You are that Linda, I suppose? Anne's sister."

I nod.

"Sorry I'm being nosy," he says, relentless. "I suppose you realise that none of them know what became of you?"

I must have told Richard about Linda the first time we went to Mount Wallace together, back when Dad was still alive. Among the family photos on the crystal cabinet in the unused front room there was a prominent photograph, the last one taken before she disappeared.

Linda is posing for the camera in a full-skirted light-coloured dress that shows off her trim figure, her blonde hair pinned back at the sides and cascading over her shoulders in careful waves, a big smile revealing a gap between her two front teeth. Her mouth is dark with lipstick, but her eyes are clear and innocent. Nice girls didn't wear eye makeup in those days, Mum told me.

There is another photograph of my mother, Anne, at about the same age or a bit younger, wearing a drab long-waisted dress with her hair, also blonde, in a short bob. She's hugging a very small Linda, aged about two, who is scowling at something off to one side. Apart from their colouring the sisters are not very much alike, and I've always been told I look more like Linda. I've certainly got that accursed gap between my teeth.

The other siblings, my three uncles Jack, Mark and Frank, were all closer in age to Mum. No-one knows

how or why Linda came along in 1933, eight years after Frank, and by all accounts she was always difficult. Mum recalled a baby who screamed day and night. The three brothers were moved from their big bedroom to an enclosed veranda on the far side of the house so they could get some sleep. As soon as she turned fourteen Mum was pressured into leaving school to help around the house, and she had to share the big room with the fretful baby.

"I used to put her in my bed with me," she told me. "No-one ever told me you shouldn't do that – no-one ever told me anything, now I come to think of it. I did wake up once to find she'd slipped right down under the covers, somewhere near my feet she was. She was sleeping so well I was tempted to leave her there."

"What about Grandma Dulcie?" I asked. "Why couldn't she look after the baby?"

"Good question. Your grandma took to spending most of the day in bed with all the blinds down. I imagine Linda came as an unpleasant shock, and she just didn't have the energy to do it all again; or maybe it was some sort of nervous breakdown, no-one ever talked about it."

When Linda was just three her father, my grandfather Herbert McCutcheon, died. He was only forty-seven. He had managed to avoid following his two brothers into early graves at Gallipoli and Villers-Bretonneux in the First World War, but he had left the best part of himself in the trenches.

Mum, the oldest child, managed to get a job in the local drapery store and her middle brother Mark was given permission to leave school just shy of his fourteenth birthday and start work at the sawmill. The eldest brother Jack had already run away from home. He was working as a roustabout somewhere in Queensland and learning to shear. The only one left at school was Frank, who was thought to be the brightest of the bunch, and Mum devoted herself to keeping him there.

Linda, given free run of the house while my grandmother wept in her bedroom, was smart and naughty. On more than one occasion the older siblings came home from work or school to find she had gone missing. They would spread out, shining torches into the growing darkness, calling and calling. Mum was the one who usually found her, under the house or up a tree.

Then the day came when no-one could find her. It was a hot, still Sunday morning in early January, 1950. She was sixteen, and the general assumption was that she had followed Jack's example and run away.

Richard used to speculate about where Linda might be and what she might have got up to. But when my mother was in the hospital, rapidly fading away, she started talking about her missing sister, and her yearning was palpable.

We threw ourselves into a determined effort to find Linda, advertising far and wide, and we even managed to

get some radio time on the ABC, but it came to nothing. Richard was convinced that Linda must have seen the ads and hardened her heart, and he lost his sneaking regard for her.

"She's dead," Mum told me in one of her more lucid moments. "Something happened to her back then, I don't know what. She wouldn't have done this to me, you know?"

"I'm sure you're right, Mum," I said, gently holding her poor wrinkled hand. Her skin was as thin as tissue, so fragile I hardly dared touch her, afraid that part of her would come away.

"If she was alive she would have contacted me, sooner or later," Mum went on. "She wouldn't have left me fretting."

We didn't talk about it again, and I didn't remind her that Linda had packed a small bag and taken it with her, or that no body had ever been found.

Now, as far as the younger I – she – is concerned, Linda is sitting in her living room as large as life. The question is, will the younger Stella believe it or will she send this imposter packing?

I'm not too worried, because of course I know how Stella's mind works. She will be sceptical, but curious, and she will give me the benefit of the doubt while she searches around for some proof.

"It's a long story," I tell Richard. "I wanted to get in touch with Anne, but I just kept putting it off. How is she?"

"Oh, she's in pretty good shape. We can't get her out of Mount Wallace, she's involved in everything down there."

"She's not still in our old house, is she?" It's a genuine question, because I'm not sure when it was that Anne finally moved into a flat closer to the centre of town. It was a long time after Dad died, but I don't remember the year.

"No, not for a long time," says Richard. "She and George, Stella's dad, did move in for a while to look after your mum. Stella was there until she left school. But when Dulcie went they had to sell up and share out the money. You do realise Dulcie's not around anymore?"

"Well, she'd be over a hundred if she was," I murmur. "That would be something."

Jasper materialises in the room, jumps up on the couch beside me and sits with his tail neatly coiled around him, washing his face. I assume he's just been fed.

"Beautiful cat," I say, stroking his head. "Burmese?"

"Yeah. Bit of a one-woman puss, that one. He's been known to turn on people."

With that, Jasper steps delicately into my lap and curls up, purring. Richard laughs.

"I've never seen him do that with anyone except Stella," he says.

"Oh, I think they recognise a cat-lover," I say, scratching Jasper's ears.

Richard puts one last piece of wood on the fire and looks up, a slightly worried look.

"I suppose a share of that house would have been yours," he says.

"Dinner's ready." The clear voice comes floating in from the kitchen. My voice.

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