

## Sinister Affairs

### Chapter 1: Another Woman's Shoes, November 1953

The old liner pitched and rolled in the heavy ocean swell. Emma stood alone on the deck, her hands gripping the rail as the floor beneath her rose and fell. Above, she caught fleeting glimpses of stars as clouds laden with rain laboured across the night sky. Shafts of moonlight broke through and lit the deck as if it was a stage and she was the audience. Then, as the mist cleared from the front of the ship, she saw Evie, her long auburn hair gusting about her head in the wind. She was looking towards Emma - searching but not seeing.

Rain began to beat down and wind howled around the rigging. Emma called out.

"Tell me this is right, Evie. It's what you wanted isn't it?"

But Evie continued to stare into the distance, unaware of Emma. The swell in front of the ship rose high above its bows, arching and screaming in fury. Emma shouted again, her voice rising above the anger of the storm.

"Tell me it's alright, Evie. Tell me it's alright."

The crest of the wave broke and came crashing down over the bow, drenching Emma and washing Evie from sight. The liner plunged into the cauldron of water and the lights went out.

### February 1965

Emma awoke to the first rays of morning light edging their way into the bedroom. It was the same nightmare she often had - a distorted memory of her voyage back from America.

A movement in the bed caused her to look down at Peter. He was asleep - mercifully peaceful. So often his nights were filled with terror as memories of his wartime incarceration returned to haunt him with images that caused him to wake up screaming.

Her mind drifted back to that voyage from the United States to England. She had been alone on deck, clutching the letter that Evie had sent her weeks before - Evie, her childhood friend, dying from aggressive cancer. This would be her last letter. But it was the final line that had made up her mind.

*"... if fate does ever bring you back to these shores, please do visit Peter and Michael ... You are a strong person, Emma .... If you could share a little of that strength it would bring me great comfort."*

The light was growing stronger and Emma realised there was no chance of going back to sleep. She slipped quietly out of bed and made her way onto the landing. The door to the twins' room was open. She peered in at Robert and Julia. Robert lay at an angle across the bed, his tousled blond hair lying in abstract confusion across his face. Julia was more neatly covered with just her head peeping out from beneath the covers. 'Mango Monkey', with his knowing grin, lay passively alongside her. Emma made a mental note that at nine years old, it really was time for the twins to have separate rooms.

She looked across to Michael's room. The door was firmly shut. She wouldn't go in. She and Michael were close but there was an 'understanding'. He was Peter and Evie's son and she knew that some areas of their previous life were closed to her. That had been clear from the time she knocked on the door of Hope Cottage on that wet and stormy night twelve years previously.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she pulled the curtains to reveal a milky white morning. In the distance she heard the 'clink' of the milkman doing his rounds and caught sight of the paper boy dashing up and down gravelled drives as he sought to finish his paper round and get back home before it was time to go to school.

Emma filled a kettle with water and placed it on the gas hob. She lit a cigarette. It was a habit leftover from the war years when she and Evie had dated American airmen at the local base. Cigarettes and silk stockings had been the airman's currency, buying their way into a girl's bed. Both she and Evie had succumbed to the realities of the time as brief romances were followed by the aching silence which came after a raid from which many airmen failed to return. Young men in their twenties - dead. Small mementos sealed into envelopes and pushed to the back of drawers.

She drew heavily on the cigarette, allowing the nicotine to fill her lungs. Now they were being told that smoking killed you. But it was too late.

Outside, there was more activity as early risers made their way to work. She felt a surge of comfort as she regarded the neat detached houses in the crescent, resplendent with small front gardens and neat lawns. Their own house filled her with pleasure. Four bedrooms, two reception rooms and a kitchen that was big enough for them to eat in - a large reception hall with a lofty ceiling contained a stained glass window that seemed to add a timeless quality to their home. And just in view on the drive was a brand new car - Peter's pride and joy - a gleaming maroon Austin Cambridge.

Then, as so often happened, her present was invaded by a memory from the past - a past which haunted her.

She was sitting in the shack which she and Samuel shared with his brother and sister in a small black township in Mississippi. Rain was pattering on the tin roof and she was beginning to worry that Samuel was late back. But he was always late back. She didn't really know what he did. He told her that it was none of her business. He was a trader and that's all she needed to know. Recently, things had not been going well. Money was short. It was not the life he had promised her when they met back in England during the war. She hadn't understood then what racial discrimination meant. He was the first black man she had met. She was overcome by his size and his beauty. He sang to her, Negro spirituals he called them, in a soft low voice. He told her that when he went back to America, it would be different for black men like him. Because of the war and fighting alongside white people, they would be respected and get good jobs. Her journey out to the US in January 1946 with thousands of other 'GI brides' was full of hope and expectation. They relished the idea of new lives, far away from the poverty and grime of England.

Shouts from outside draw her attention. The 'yelp' of a police siren. The door bursts open and a rough voice calls out.

"You Samuel Allen's woman? Speak up. You his woman or not?"

“I’m his wife.”

“I don’t know nothin’ about a wife but if you’s his woman you’d better prepare yourself for a shock. He’s been shot. Some sort of gang fight. Found him dumped in a field ‘bout five mile away.”

Samuel died in her arms two hours later in the austere surroundings of the free hospital. He never regained consciousness.

Noises from upstairs indicated the twins were up. Laughing and shouting followed by a scream meant things were normal.

“Start getting dressed, you two.” Emma shouted out. “I’ll be up in a minute. I want you ready for school by eight.”

Muffled protests indicated that the message had been understood.

There was nothing left to keep Emma in America after Samuel’s death. She found herself despised by the white community and cast out of the black townships. It took her almost a year to earn the money for the voyage home, working as a barmaid and on occasions being forced to provide sexual favours for the leaders of the community - white men who were stalwarts of the church and upholders of ‘American values’. It was two weeks before she was due to set sail that she finally received Alice’s letter. It had taken three months to reach her.

The twins exploded into the kitchen in various states of undress. Julia was wearing her school uniform but had neglected to put on any socks. Robert’s tie looked more like a hangman’s noose than the elegant badge of learning that it was meant to be.

“Sit down, you two - your toast is just coming. Robert, can you pour some juice please?”

“How are we getting to school today?” asked Julia through a mouth crammed with toast,

“Can Daddy take us?” demanded Robert.

“I think Daddy’s going into the office today so he can take you - yes.”

“Hooray!”

The door to the kitchen opened and Peter appeared. The slightness of his build worried Emma. She had tried to get him to put on weight but her attempts at providing high calorie meals had little effect. His face was gaunt and his hair was beginning to recede but the wide grin that he always reserved for Emma compensated for any other imperfections. They kissed briefly.

“I’ve just told the kids that you can take them to school today. Is that right?”

“If they’re ready in ten minutes. I’ve got a meeting this morning so I can’t hang around.”

“Off you go then,” ordered Emma, clapping her hands together. “Do your teeth and be ready by the front door in ten minutes.”

The twins vacated the kitchen like an imploding vortex. Emma and Peter were left with a few moments precious peace.

“Who’s your meeting with?”

“Someone from the planning department at Eastlea Council. They’re talking about pulling down those Nissen huts they put up during the war. There’s still hundreds of them dotted round the East End on bombsites and waste land. The idea is to build new council homes.”

“Are we in with a chance?”

“Possibly. But it all seems to be about who you know these days. That’s not really my style. What are your plans?”

“I’m taking Michael to the hospital this morning for a routine check.”

She saw a frown pass across Peter’s face and his brow furrow.

“Any more news on the operation?”

“That’s what I’m hoping to find out today.”

The clamour of feet racing down the stairs brought an end to the brief conversation. Peter took a slice of toast with him and within minutes Emma heard the sound of the Austin starting. She waved from the window as the car disappeared around the crescent. She poured more tea from the pot and lit a second cigarette, luxuriating in the security and safety that the home provided. It could so easily have been different.

The liner docked at Tilbury in the afternoon on a wet and cold day in November 1953. Emma caught a train to Norwich and then changed onto the local branch for Frampton. It was dark when she arrived at the deserted station. Pulling her clothes tightly around her and clutching onto her small case, she started walking towards Hope Cottage. The streets were familiar yet there were few faces she recognised in the damp twilight.

Soon she was in Duck Lane, avoiding the potholes and stumbling over loose cobbles as she made her way towards the house.

Then it was in front of her. Hope Cottage. The house that Jed had built for Alice. The house within which a terrible betrayal had taken place. The same house that linked Emma inextricably to the fortunes of the family who lived here.

There was a light on in the downstairs front room. She could hear band music from the radio playing quietly in the background. Clutching Evie’s letter, she braced herself for what she was about to do.

She had no prepared words - no explanation. She was at the front door. Rain had drenched her clothes. She lifted the knocker and let it fall.

The radio inside was turned down. A brief movement of the curtain. The latch being lifted. The door opening to reveal Peter - not as she’d known him before the war, no longer the

baby-faced RAF pilot with the funny moustache and the boyish grin. Now a man who wore pain on his face and who scrutinised her through eyes that had witnessed cruelty that was beyond comprehension.

“I’m Emma. You don’t remember me do you?”

His eyes remained fixed on her face. A muscle twitched in his temple.

“I know who you are. You’d better come in.”

As she walked through the door, she was embraced by a rush of warm air.

“Michael, this is Emma. She was your mother’s special friend. She’s come to visit us.”

Sitting on the floor by a roaring coal fire was a frail looking boy with legs that seemed to face in wrong directions. He was surrounded by construction toys and was in the middle of building a crane. Peter lifted him carefully from the floor and placed him in a chair.

“Michael is five. He loves building things.”

A shout from upstairs shook Emma out of her introspection.

“Em - I need you,” bellowed an adolescent voice, half male and half soprano.

“Coming now.”

Emma stubbed out her cigarette and quickly made her way to the landing. Michael had dressed and was on his crutches by his bedroom door. Numerous operations on his deformed legs now enabled him to walk with assistance but more operations were to follow, the most serious on his fragile hip joints.

“Do you want me to walk in front and you place your hands on my shoulders?”

“OK. Go slowly though.”

It was thought that Michael’s deformity was caused because Evie and Peter were first cousins. They hadn’t known this when they met. When they learned the truth the family was very nearly destroyed.

“What time is the appointment, Em?”

“Eleven o’clock. I’ve got a taxi coming at 9.30. It’ll take us all the way to Great Ormond Street.”

“Is this the one then?”

“What do you mean?”

“When I get to find out if they’ll do the hips. They’ve always said that’s the big one. The one that’ll get me walking.”

“You shouldn’t raise your hopes, Michael. You know the treatment is still very new. You’ve done so well walking with the aid of crutches. The time will come but don’t rush things.”

“I hardly think sixteen years of being a cripple is rushing it.”

That first night she had changed into dry clothes and simply sat with Peter and Michael. Few words were exchanged. She just observed - saw how Peter worked with Michael to build his crane, guiding, not telling - discussing not instructing. At nine o'clock, Peter carried Michael up to his room and put him to bed. Later, he made sandwiches which he and Emma ate by the fire. For a long time he didn't talk. Emma felt no need to force the conversation. It was as if a hand was resting on her shoulder, reassuring and supporting her.

“I was expecting you,” he said eventually.

She stopped eating and looked at him, waiting for him to say more.

“Nothing specific, you understand, just things that Evie hinted at towards the end.”

“She wrote to me just weeks before she died.”

“What did she say?”

“Why don't you read the letter?”

She handed Peter the crumpled paper and watched as he scrutinised the writing, his face betraying signs of emotion as he began to understand the wishes of his dying wife. Minutes passed as he stared silently into the dying embers of the fire.

“She felt very angry about the way that you and Flora were treated. She never forgave Jack. When she learnt that you and she were half-sisters, I think she felt responsible. Maybe this was her way of saying ‘sorry’.”

“I think it's more than that, Peter. I think this is Evie's way of passing on her love to you and Michael.”

The taxi was making its way slowly through the East End of London. The very name ‘East End’ was synonymous with deprivation and crime. The district had grown up in the early eighteenth century outside the walls of the City of London. It attracted many of the dirtier trades such as tanning and charcoal burning with the prevailing westerlies carrying fumes away from more affluent areas of London. In the early nineteenth century, a vast network of docks was built on the banks of the River Thames to accommodate Britain's thriving trade with its colonies. But the waterfront was now showing signs of decay. Large container ships berthed at a new deep water terminal near the mouth of the river. Fewer and fewer ships were making their way to these smaller docks that had given rise to a community of working people whose lives centred around the importing and exporting of goods to and from Britain's declining colonies. Small groups of men hung around on street corners, smoking or drinking from bottles. There was still evidence of bomb damage all around. The East End of London had been heavily blitzed in 1942 and large tracts of land laid waste. Most of these had now been cleared and were awaiting redevelopment. That's why Peter had taken the decision to move the business from Frampton to Romford - to be close to the people whose lives would be affected by change and to be close to those who held the power to award contracts.

Michael was absorbed with the changing landscape as the taxi made its way to Great Ormond Street Hospital and Emma found herself surrendering to the memories that lay like floating corpses just below the surface of the present.

The letter from Jed had arrived in the spring of 1946, not long after Emma had joined Samuel in Mississippi. She couldn't understand why Evie's father would be writing to her. Since Evie's mother had died of cancer, Jed had brought her up with their long term lodger, Jack. It was a strange arrangement, two men living together and bringing up a young girl. There were whispers and rumours but nothing was said openly.

She waited till she was alone in the room they had rented in a black suburb of the city and then tore open the envelope. The handwriting was small and badly formed.

*Dear Emma,*

*I am writing to you because something has happened to our family which also affects you. I am sorry to break it to you like this but these are the facts.*

*I am not Evie's real father - Jack is. Many years ago when Jack first came to lodge with Alice and me in Hope Cottage, him and Alice got together and Alice became pregnant. I didn't want to lose my Alice so I agreed to him staying on as lodger and all of us saying that I was the father. And that's how we did it all of these years. Of course, when Alice died, Jack and me had to bring up Evie together. I won't pretend that was easy but we've managed it and though I won't claim we're friends, let's just say we've learnt to live together.*

*All would have been alright had it not been for Jack's nephew turning up at Hope Cottage in 1939. I think you met Peter. He was an airman based down the road just outside Norwich. Evie and he took a bit of a shine to each other but then he was posted out to Singapore in 1941 and shot down. We was told to assume he was dead. Then in 1946 when they were liberating prisoners in the Far East, they found Peter. He'd been captured and badly treated. When he got back he was a different man - broken I'd say. But Evie stuck with him and gradually he recovered. Next thing they announce they're going to be wed. Well, here's the problem. Jack is Evie's real father so that makes Peter her cousin and it's not thought good that first cousins should marry. So I insisted they be told the truth. Jack didn't like the idea at all and we fell out real bad, but I stuck to my guns. Didn't want them to start off their marriage with the same lie we'd been telling all them years.*

*So why am I telling you this? How does all this affect you? Well, before Jack took up with Alice he did a really bad thing. He forced himself on your mother, Flora, and got her pregnant. Circumstances were that I might have been able to stop it but I didn't and I'll live with that regret all my life. So Emma, you're Jack's daughter too. I'm sorry to break it to you like this but I didn't want a half-truth told. I felt it was time you knew the whole truth. Evie and you were like sisters to each other so it's only right that you know that you actually are half-sisters.*

The taxi pulled up outside the imperious Victorian edifice that is Great Ormond Street - England's premier children's hospital. Emma and Michael made their way into the reception and sat in the lofty waiting area until they were called. Professor Barry was a

lean, bespectacled man in his fifties and head of orthopaedics. He had been in charge of Michael's case ever since Peter and Evie brought him to the hospital soon after his birth in 1948. Michael had been born with in-turning feet and dislocated hips. Many in the medical profession had consigned him to a life in a wheel chair but Professor Barry was a renegade. He believed that surgery could cure Michael's condition though the road would be long and difficult. Aged 12, Michael was able to stand for the first time and walk with the aid of crutches. More operations had corrected the alignment of his feet but the big operation that would enable him to walk unaided was to secure Michael's hip joints. Professor Barry had made it clear that this would only be performed when Michael's legs were sufficiently strong as the new operation would place great strain on the realigned legs. Today they would find out whether the operation could go ahead.

Emma left Michael with Professor Barry and his team to carry out more exhaustive tests. She could sense the fear and vulnerability in Michael as he prepared for the verdict. So much of his life had been spent in hospitals, isolated from other children. Physically, he was wasted as his body had failed to develop normally. Intellectually, he was way ahead of his years as the time he spent alone was filled with reading extensively.

Emma walked out into the spring sunshine and made her way to a small café she'd frequented on previous visits. She found a table in the window and idly watched passersby. The new fashions of the time were on show with girls in mini -skirts revealing extensive areas of exposed thigh and young men wearing Afghan style jackets with hair that stretched over their ears and collars. The Beatles current hit, 'She Loves You', played in the background. The headlines of a paper that had been discarded on the table next to hers spoke of a sex scandal involving a senior minister in the Government. There was an unmistakable air of optimism about. The austerity and dullness of the post war years were being cast off like a worn out coat. Underneath lay something more exciting and less predictable.

It was so very different to her own recollections of childhood and adolescence. Her early memories were of dark basement rooms with high windows that let in only meagre shafts of light. Elsewhere in the house lived witches with pinched, wrinkled faces who would come and frighten them. Sometimes, one of the witches would take her mother away and when she returned she would be crying silently. She would hold Emma tightly in her arms and they would stay like that for hours.

Later she learned that Flora had been sent from the asylum where Emma was born to work for an elderly couple who lived in nearby Norwich. These deeply religious people reminded Flora daily of the sins she had committed by having a baby outside of marriage and any hint of rebellion on Flora's part was met with the threat of return to the asylum. Emma came to realise that her mother's 'disappearances' were to satisfy the sexual needs of the old man.

It was Jed who had rescued Emma and her mother from their incarceration and provided Flora with a job in his rapidly expanding construction company. He became a regular visitor to their small cottage but Flora resolutely refused to discuss with Emma the exact nature of their relationship. In their adolescence, Evie and Emma became firm friends but always there was that unspoken awareness that it was an unequal relationship - Evie led and Emma followed. Increasingly, Emma had come to recognise that her flight to America as a GI bride was as much to do with her need to break this unequal bond with Evie than it was about her love for Samuel.

Emma was ushered by the nurse back into the consulting room. She could see immediately that all was not well. Michael's eyes were red and he avoided her look.

"Sit down, please," requested Professor Barry as he paced by the open windows which overlooked a forlorn flower bed. "Michael is coming on well from his last operation. The bones have set well and everything is aligned. That's good."

"So can he have the next operation - the big one?" enquired Emma.

"Well, that's the point. I don't want to rush things. It would be a tragedy now to undo all the good work by hurrying things. I think we need to wait a little while longer before we operate on the hips."

"How long?"

"A year - possibly eighteen months."

She heard Michael let out a muffled gasp.

"But surely ..."

"Michael is sixteen now. I'll do my best to ensure that he'll be walking unaided by the time he's eighteen."

The journey back home through the East End of London was tense. Emma tried to comfort Michael but she knew that he needed his father. When Peter returned from work the two of them would retire to Michael's room and spend hours together. Emma never knew what went on - she was excluded from this most private of conversations.

Outside, the weather had turned overcast. Between the drab carcasses of old warehouses she caught glimpses of empty dock basins towered over by the steely grey arms of cranes whose jibs were locked in rigor mortis above the redundant berths. For the first time, she noticed how run down some of the buildings had become, how derelict were the rows of tenement housing and how sad the faces of women who toiled around their homes.

Her flight from America had been the opportunity for a new beginning. She had stepped into the shoes of another woman and inherited both her husband and her son. But that woman turned out to be her half-sister, Evie, the girl she had grown up with and envied for all the advantages that she possessed but which were denied to her. It was sometimes difficult to be sure who she was. Was she really Evie in some reincarnated form? Or was she truly herself, an independent, free thinking woman who had cast herself knowingly into this role because it was her right to do so? She had watched her mother, for so long a victim, as she lived in the shadows of this family. Was this all about retribution? Is this what she wanted?

She remembered the first time that she and Peter had made love. Instead of going to her normal room, he simply took her by the hand and led her into his bedroom. It was full of memories of Evie - lacy curtains, blue taffeta cushions, a worn looking rag doll and a pink bed cover. He pulled Emma into his arms and kissed her mouth. Then slowly he kissed her neck, breasts and stomach as he undressed her. There were no words. It felt like a well-rehearsed routine which Emma went along with because she knew it was to become her routine too. When she was undressed and laying on the bed, Peter took off his own shirt.

Emma couldn't help an involuntary gasp as she saw the weals and deep scars which lacerated his back. Peter said nothing. He just let her look. Then he lay down beside her. Their love making was physical and selfish - satisfying a need for them both. She noticed that his eyes were closed. Was he seeing Evie? Was he making love to Evie or to her?

## Chapter 2: Back from the Dead, February 1965

Peter eased the car effortlessly through the streets of Romford. It gave him great pleasure to drive a well-engineered vehicle. The walnut veneer dash board reflected an aura of confidence and the unmistakable smell of leather confirmed the newness of his prized possession.

He stopped at the school gates and the twins tumbled out.

"Bye, Daddy."

"Bye - see you later."

The doors clicked shut and Peter headed out onto the main road into London. Droplets of rain chased chaotically across the windscreen and the hypnotic tone of the wipers drew Peter back into a past from which he fought every minute to escape.

Evie's death had been unexpected and he was left devastated. He focused all his resources into caring for Michael whose disability meant that life for him would always be a struggle. When Evie was alive, they had kept their spirits high by refusing to give in. There were frequent outings and holidays. Michael's disabilities would not be allowed to crush them. But after Evie died, Peter lost the energy to fight and he and Michael turned inwards, away from the pain and cruelty of the outside world. It was to this fortress that Emma had arrived eleven years previously when Peter was at his lowest.

Peter still remembered opening the door to reveal an apparition - a rain-soaked young woman carrying a small case. Her legs were caked in mud and her hat lay sodden on her head. At first, in the gloom, he thought she was Evie - her face had a similar structure and she was the same height. But he knew that was madness. Evie was dead.

"I'm Emma. You don't remember me, do you?" he heard her asking. He felt the muscles in his face twitch involuntarily. A surge of panic welled up inside him. He recalled Evie's whispered words, spoken only hours before she died.

*"If Emma ever returns, make her welcome. In her you will find so much of me."*

"I know who you are."

"Can I come in and talk?"

He took the wet coat from her in the small lobby and hung it on a peg. Neither spoke. Then a child's voice called out from the room beyond.

"Have they gone Daddy? I need you here."

They smiled at each other nervously and he led her into the room.

"Michael, this is Emma. She was your mother's special friend. She's come to visit us."

“Michael looked up briefly and smiled, before turning his attention once more to the half-built crane on the carpet.”

“You’ll have to excuse me for ten minutes. I promised Michael I’d finish building this. Then he’s off to bed.”

Peter helped Michael to lift the crane’s jib into place and secure it with nuts and bolts. He was aware of Emma watching them both. But it wasn’t intrusive. Her presence felt completely natural.

“Look, Daddy, it works,” shouted Michael as he began to wind the crane’s hook up the jib. “Let’s try lifting some things.”

“No, Michael. Time for bed now. You can play with it again in the morning.”

He lifted Michael into his arms and carried him up to his bedroom, troubled by how easily he had invited this woman into their home.

“I usually just have sandwiches. Is that OK for you?” he enquired as he returned to the living room.

“That’s fine. Do you want a hand?”

“No, you stay there. I’ll bring them in.”

Perhaps he would let her stay the night and then ask her to leave in the morning. He would drive her to the station and put her on a train. He felt his head beginning to hurt.

“It’s just cheese and ham.”

“That’s much better than I’m used to.”

Peter sat and looked into the fire. He found words difficult. He hated small talk. He half expected her to begin chatting - but she didn’t. She remained silent, eating and observing.

“I was half expecting you,” he said at last.

She didn’t reply. He was forced to continue.

“Nothing specific you understand - just things that Evie hinted at towards the end.”

“She wrote to me, you know, just weeks before she died.”

“What did she say?”

“Why don’t you read the letter?”

She pulled a crumpled piece of paper from her bag.

“I’m sorry it’s a bit ragged. I’ve read it over many times.”

He unfolded the paper and immediately recognised Evie’s neat small handwriting. His heart raced.

“*My dearest Emma,*

*I hope things are going better for you. You sounded so sad in your last letter but that was a long while ago so hopefully your life has improved.*

*I have some tragic news. I have been diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer - just like my mother. I have been told that I have only a few months, maybe even weeks to live. We are all devastated and are trying to come to terms with the news."*

Peter checked the date on the letter. It was August 5th. Evie died three weeks later on August 26th.

*"I have come to terms with my death. I have faced death before and I will be able to cope. It is Peter and Michael I fear for. Peter is not strong after his terrible experiences in the war and Michael, as you know, suffers from a disability. So I have a great favour to ask you, Emma, as my special friend and my half-sister. If fate does ever bring you back to these shores, please visit Peter and Michael to make sure they are well. You are a strong person and I believe you have a bright future. If you could share a little of that strength with them, it would bring me great comfort."*

Peter felt his eyes misting with tears. He turned away to avoid embarrassing Emma. He felt a hand rest on his. He wiped the tears away and turned back.

"Evie didn't know that Samuel had been killed when she wrote that. The letter took two months to reach me. When I received it I sent a telegraph to my mother. She replied, telling me that Evie was already dead."

"What do you want from us, Emma?" asked Peter in a whisper. "We manage."

"Read on - over the page, Peter. I think you should see what Evie says there."

*"When we both discovered some years ago that we shared the same father, a lot of things became clearer to me. As teenagers, we were always close. Although we were raised differently, I always felt a bond with you. That bond was even stronger during the wars years when we both dated American servicemen and cried together when they failed to return from a mission. Together we complemented each other, opposite halves making a whole.*

*I have a feeling that you will return here one day. I believe that your life is still bound up with my family and their fortunes .If you do return, please keep my memory alive with Peter and Michael -there is nobody else to whom I would rather entrust that memory."*

Peter clutched the crumpled letter in his hands and breathed heavily to maintain control. Emma watched him but remained silent, her hand still resting reassuringly on his arm. He peered into the glowing embers in the fire grate seeing only the pain and suffering which had become so familiar. He knew that Emma had suffered too. Her mother, had been consigned to an institution after Jack had made her pregnant and Emma grew up not knowing that her father lived nearby.

"She felt angry about the way that you and Flora were treated," continued Peter. "She never forgave Jack. When she learnt that you were half-sisters, I think she felt her family bore some responsibility. Maybe this is her way of saying sorry."

"I think it's more than that, Peter. I think it's Evie's way of passing on her love to you and Michael."

Peter turned and looked at Emma. The idea that Evie's love would live on through Emma struck him as bizarre. At first he felt anger. Evie's love was special and private - something that only they would ever know. But then as he studied Emma's concerned face, he began to wonder if love could be passed on. Could one person's love for another be ignited again through a third person? He pushed the idea from his head.

"We've got a spare room. I'll fix you some sheets. Let's talk again in the morning. This is all very complicated."

But the next morning they didn't talk. Michael's carer rang to say she'd be late so Emma offered to look after Michael whilst Peter went to work. She cooked Michael's breakfast and listened attentively to his stream of chatter. When Peter returned, he was pleased to see that Michael was animated and happy. Later, they sat together around the kitchen table talking easily about their day.

The following days were similar. A routine began to develop. The threat of a 'big' conversation seemed to recede. After Michael was in bed, they would listen to the radio together, often to a comedy - the Goons or Hancock's Half Hour. Emma heard Peter laugh for the first time. After the radio was turned off, they would talk for a while. Slowly, their stories emerged and they shared their grief and disappointments with each other and in so doing the pain seemed to lessen.

One night together, they had both been reduced to tears. They hung on to each other for comfort. Suddenly, Peter found himself kissing Emma, pulling her tightly to his body.

When, after two weeks, Peter led her to his bedroom, it was because any remaining doubt had been cast aside and their bodies yearned to share the passion that had built up between them.

As he kissed and undressed her, it could so easily have been Evie that he held in his arms and he felt confused that he should be thinking about her as he was about to make love to Emma.

He had no words to describe the savage tapestry of wounds that lacerated his back - vestiges of his incarceration in a Malayan jungle prison camp. So he simply removed his shirt and turned his back to Emma, bowing his head in humility.

He heard her gasp but say nothing so he took off the rest of his clothes and lay down beside her. Their love making was urgent and selfish as both rediscovered the delight of total immersion in the act of giving and receiving love. Afterwards, as he and Emma lay together and held each other tight, it would have been so easy to believe that it was Evie who was encased in his arms. And yet he knew in his heart that Evie now was free to leave - her final act of love having been bestowed.

Peter arrived at the council offices and was shown into a waiting room. There were posters papering the walls proudly proclaiming the benefits of living in new high rise tower blocks that were beginning to rise from the ashes of the bombed East End of London. Peter wasn't sure about these places. Since moving to Romford he'd spent time getting to know the people who lived in the East End, trying to understand what life was like in their communities before the war. To many people the Victorian terraces were slums, but amongst the dock workers and their families they engendered a feeling of belonging

somewhere. Families lived together in the same street and children played outside in the same road. Life was conducted amidst public scrutiny but no one was alone. Peter feared that the soulless concrete towers would breed isolation.

A secretary collected Peter and led him along echoing corridors, her high heels beating out an impatient rhythm on the wood block flooring. Finally, they turned into a panelled room resplendent with portraits of past public servants cloaked in their robes of office.

“Take a seat,” she commanded in a shrill voice. “The Chief Planner will be with you in a few minutes.”

Peter sat at the embossed table which claimed the centre of the room. The faces on the wall looked down on him judgementally.

This was an important meeting. The Borough of Eastlea was where much of the post war reconstruction was taking place. If Carters Construction, as it was now called, was to get a part of this action, Peter had to make the right contacts now. The company had come a long way since its beginnings in 1921 when Jed inherited it from the previous owner.

Peter knew the story well. In 1921, Evie’s mother Alice had married Jed, believing that his small building business would offer an escape from the life of poverty she endured with a drunken and abusive father. Jed built Hope Cottage where he and Alice planned to live and raise their family but soon after they were married, a lodger came to stay. Jack was a self-made man but according to doctors he had only a few years to live as his lungs had been destroyed by mustard gas in the First World War. With his wealth and sophistication he seduced Alice and offered her a glimpse of the life she craved. Her marriage to Jed was thrown into turmoil when she discovered she was pregnant with Jack’s child. However, an agreement was reached between them to live together under the same roof with Jed taking on the role of father. To the outside world, they would be a normal family with a long term paying guest - not uncommon in those post war years when every penny counted. There were many who guessed the situation and couldn’t understand how a man could live in the same house with his wife’s lover. But Peter discovered years later that Jack had invested in Jed’s business to enable it to survive. So Jed was faced with an excruciating decision. If he turned Alice and Jack out - the business would fail. If he allowed them to stay, his future would be built on a terrible lie - that the baby was his.

The door of the room swung open to reveal a man in his mid-forties sporting a grey moustache and wearing a tweed jacket.

“Mr. Malikov. My apologies for keeping you. My name’s Donald Jenson. I’m the Chief Planner. I understand that you’ve contacted us a number of times about being included on our contractor list?”

“That’s right,” replied Peter. “It’s taken a while to get to see you.”

“I’m sorry about that. You see, we get a lot of people wanting to do work for us and we have to be very careful about who we chose. There are a lot of cowboy outfits around. Sit down and give me some background to your company.”

Peter explained how the company had its origins in the small market town of Frampton. He sketched a picture of Jed with his hand cart working in all weathers to keep roofs on old houses and leaking gutters repaired. Then came the break - the contract to convert a big barn in the centre of Frampton into a community theatre. From that point the

company expanded rapidly and, on Jed's death in 1961, Peter took over the management and moved the business close to the east of London so that they could benefit from the booming reconstruction work in the city.

"So you see," continued Peter, "we've made a real commitment to the East End of London. I've spent time in pubs and working men's clubs talking to these people about what they want. They want new homes but also they want their communities back. They want that sense of belonging to somewhere - a place where everybody supports everyone else."

The Chief Planner rubbed his chin and looked uncomfortable.

"If you mean you want to recreate those desolate rat-infested ghettos that existed before the war ... "

"Not at all," interrupted Peter. "But I think people want real homes, with back yards and neighbours they can talk to over the fence - not these concrete towers that are beginning to spring up."

He gestured to the posters on the wall behind depicting rows of concrete buildings connected by raised walkways set in a futuristic cityscape.

"I'm afraid you're a bit out of touch with current thinking, Mr. Malikov," replied the Chief Planner. You see, it's down to economics. We can pack many more people in if we build high. The population is expanding fast. We've got immigrants starting to arrive from the colonies. Where do they all go? With so much destruction during the war, this is our chance to do something different - something exciting. We'll build tall. Install fast elevators. Build gardens in the sky. Return the ground to meadow and bring the country back into our cities."

Peter felt a great sadness. He'd met these visionaries before - individuals who had big ideas but who never bothered to talk to the people who had to live with the consequences of their ideas. Already the earliest tower blocks were beginning show signs of physical and social decay. Groups of young people with nowhere else to go would gather around the entrances - their very presence intimidating some of the older residents. Lifts were breaking down and taking days to repair, leaving some old people stranded in their flats without food. Before the war, neighbours cared for each other but in the new tower blocks there were many who didn't even know who lived next door.

"... but here is a project which might suit you," he heard the Chief Planner say. Peter quickly paid attention.

"It's just an idea at the moment. Some conservationists," he said with implied contempt, "want us to convert old warehouses into apartments. The idea is to have a mix of expensive apartments and council housing. I can't see it working myself. Who'd want to spend a lot of money buying a new flat and find themselves living next to a dock worker?"

Peter felt his hair bristling as anger rose up inside him.

"Or I shouldn't think the dock worker would want to find himself living next to some rich bloke," added the planner quickly, sensing Peter's disdain. "It's not too different to the job you did on that barn at Frampton. Bigger scale, of course, but I'm happy to put your name forward if you would like to be considered."

Peter left the meeting with mixed feelings. Here was an opportunity to get involved in a big project. He liked the idea of mixed housing - people of different means and abilities living and working together. And he liked the idea of bringing new life back to old buildings - warehouses that had served the capital for decades, now restored for a new purpose.

He felt his spirits lift as he left the crowded suburbs of London and entered green countryside where cattle timelessly munched the wet spring grass. Yet even here there were signs of change - new roads being cut, trees being felled and building plots marked out. London was bursting its seams and was destined to greedily consume anything that stood in its way.

It was unusual for Peter to be home before the twins were in bed. His arrival was greeted by excited chatter about the day and quarrels about homework as lesson books competed with food on the kitchen table. Peter looked around for Michael but he wasn't there. He caught Emma's eye and immediately understood. Promising to be back soon, he climbed the stairs to Michael's room and knocked on the door. There was no answer so he gently turned the door handle and went in.

The room was in darkness, despite it being bright outside. He saw Michael's crutches lying on the floor and an overturned water glass nearby. Michael was on the bed, his back turned away from his father and his body curled into a foetal ball. Peter sat down on the bed beside him but didn't speak. In the years that he and Michael had been alone, silence had been a frequent companion, a space within which thoughts could take shape before being articulated.

"Another year to eighteen months," said Michael at last in answer to the unspoken question.

"Why?"

"My legs aren't ready yet. He doesn't want to take any chances."

"I'm sorry."

"Another year, Dad. That's what he said. Maybe a year and a half."

"That's not long when you've got the rest of your life."

"I want to walk, run, jump, compete. I want you to be proud of me."

"I am proud of you."

"I'm a cripple."

"You're an intelligent young man with great courage. More courage than anyone I've ever known."

"You had courage - in that prisoner of war camp."

"That was survival, Michael - not courage. I didn't have a choice. I just tried to stay alive."

"Why?"

“I knew that your mother was waiting for me.”

“Did you love her?”

“Very much.”

“Do you love Emma?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nor do I, Michael. Sometimes it doesn’t help to understand. Sometimes it’s best to accept things.”

“Why was I born with bent legs? Was it a punishment?”

The question sent a shiver down Peter’s spine as he thought about the fabric of lies which had been woven to prevent Evie from learning the identity of her real father. Jed’s refusal to allow them to marry until the truth was revealed had confronted them both with a huge moral dilemma but they had nevertheless decided to proceed and raise a family.

“No, Michael. It’s not a punishment. It just happened.”

Peter lay by Michael’s side and wrapped his arms around him. Words ceased to have meaning.

Later that evening, Peter and Emma ate in the kitchen with the children safely in bed.

“So, tell me about the meeting. Do we stand a chance?”

Peter told her about the passion for high rise blocks which was well outside the capability of Carters Construction. He told her about the planner’s dream of people living in towers in the sky, connected by rapid metros which would whisk people from outlying areas to vast central hubs full of shops, restaurants and theatres.

“But what about the high street?” enquired Emma. “What happens to all the local traders - the butcher, the greengrocer, the baker? Are they going to be in the sky too?”

“I don’t think they exist in the future. You’ll probably find all the things you need delivered straight to your door.”

“Don’t be so silly. How would we ever meet anyone?”

She stopped - suddenly aware that Peter was clutching at his chest.

“Peter - what’s up? What’s the matter?”

His face was turning white and he was struggling to breathe. Emma raced to his side and undid his collar.

“Peter, my love. What’s wrong? Tell me.”

Slowly Peter began to breathe again and the symptoms subsided. Emma threw an arm around his neck.

“What happened? Where does it hurt?”

“Just here - in my chest,” replied Peter rubbing the area gently. “Maybe it was just indigestion. I’ve had it before but not as badly. “

“You’ve got to let up, Peter. You know what Doctor Robinson said - your body has taken a beating. It’s not as strong as you think.”

“I’ll try. I’ll try to hand over some of my responsibilities.”

“You must involve Angus more. That’s why you hired him.”

Angus was the new office manager, appointed three months earlier to help Peter run the business. He was a burly red-headed Scot in his mid-thirties with considerable experience of the building sector. He seemed to have an inexhaustible list of contacts he could call upon for any eventuality. Emma was pleased that Peter had help but sensed an arrogance about the new man and a disdain for others which caused her concern.

“Angus is still learning the ropes,” replied Peter. “It’ll take time.”

That night in bed, Emma slept fitfully. When she awoke, it was still dark. The barely visible face of the bedside clock told her it was two in the morning.

Thoughts from the past fought for her attention.

After she had arrived at Hope Cottage in November 1953 she fell into a routine with Peter and Michael which felt strangely natural. Michael responded well to her presence and Peter became more involved in the business again. She and Peter moved into the same bedroom and their lovemaking became more fulfilling. But still the shadow of Evie lingered in Emma’s mind - was it Emma that Peter touched, kissed and loved or was it the memory of Evie?

A sigh followed by a muffled shout told Emma that Peter was in the grip of a nightmare. She had vowed never to quiz him about his time as a prisoner of war. She knew that he had suffered humiliation and shame. His body began to writhe and perspiration poured down his face.

*Rain dripping from the jungle palms. A naked man bound to a bamboo frame, his ribs protruding from his emaciated body. Guards in torn and stained uniforms screaming unintelligible commands. Contorted faces inches from his own. He can smell their breath. Feel their spit. See their hate. A leather horse whip thrust into his hand. The purpose is unmistakable. Beat him until the skin splays from his back. But he will die long before that. He is hanging onto life by a thread. The crack of a whip across his back. He stumbles. Explosions in his head. He seizes the neck of the nearest guard.*

His hands gripped Emma’s throat. She struggled to breathe but her wind pipe was blocked. Her eyes bulged. Peter was above her, his face locked in desperation. She tried to push him but his body pinned her to the bed. She tried to scream but only choked. She felt consciousness slipping away.

Then he stopped - frozen in the act of raising his hand above her. For a moment Emma thought she saw love in his eyes - regret, sorrow. But then it was gone - his body slumped onto hers - a final sigh as breath drained from his lungs.