

# Other Women

Kirsty Crawford

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

love**reading**.co.uk

If you love reading, you'll love the unique benefits of [lovereading.co.uk](http://lovereading.co.uk). You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author 'like-for-like' recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to [lovereading.co.uk](http://lovereading.co.uk) today!**



helping  
you choose  
your next  
book

---

## *Chapter One*

Her last day.

Bella woke feeling leaden. That was all wrong, for a start. She was supposed to be feeling like a prisoner on the brink of liberation, wasn't she? Instead it felt as though a heavy weight had been placed in her chest overnight. Beside her, the bed was empty; Iain was up already. Good God, what on earth was the time? She struggled over to look at the alarm clock: it was almost six a.m. She flopped back on to her pillow and growled with annoyance as the morning sounds of the house filtered through to her: the children running about and calling to each other, the plumbing system doling out the hot water for showers, the faint tinny voice of the radio in the kitchen. Above it all was a high, piercing, tuneless sound.

For Christ's sake! she thought. He's whistling. Who actually whistles when they're cheerful, apart from the Seven Dwarfs?

It was typical of Iain to be at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum to her. As she grew more depressed at what lay ahead, he became more elated, his good mood making him unbearably energetic and upbeat. Every little thing he did at the moment set her on edge and grated on her nerves.

The tower of boxes near the bed looked precarious, a manilla-coloured Cubist mountain, filled with clothes and books and hangers and shoes and all the thousands of things she didn't even know she'd managed to cram into one small bedroom. Around them, the room looked stripped and bare. She could tell just by looking at them that the drawers and the wardrobe were empty – they

seemed lighter somehow. In three hours, the movers would be here to hoist it all up, the boxes and the furniture, and take it down the stairs and out through the front door. And that would be that. They would scoop up their possessions and the Balfours would be gone from here for ever.

She ought to be used to it by now, this moving on and abandonment of places, but this time it was different. Before, she had always looked ahead to what awaited them. This time she was looking back at what she was leaving behind. She felt like a dog pulled reluctantly along on its leash by an over-enthusiastic owner – Iain had chivvied and bullied, persuaded and commanded until finally she'd agreed that they would leave, and now the time to go was here.

She closed her eyes and tried to drift off again, but it was no good. Sleep was not going to come back now. The next time she slept would be in the new house, in a strange room in a tiny Cotswold hamlet miles from anywhere – certainly miles from London, from her friends, and from everything that was comforting and familiar. Well – it was too late to change her mind now. Everything had been set in motion, and all she could do was try to stay in control as far as she could.

'Morning, love!' said Iain briskly, coming through the bedroom door. He was vibrant with energy. 'Chop-chop! We're all up and dressed. I'm just making some breakfast for the kids.'

'The movers aren't arriving till nine,' Bella said wearily. 'Why do we have to get up so early?'

'Well, we'll need to clear up and pack the last of the boxes, won't we? We ought to strip the bed. And I want us all ready to go the minute they arrive. You know what the traffic's like getting out of London on a Saturday, and with a great removal van, it'll be twice as bad. I'm aiming to be in Rawlston by lunchtime, if possible.'

Bella scowled but Iain refused to notice. 'Come on,' he said brightly. 'There're cheese toasties and tea all ready in the kitchen.' He turned and bustled off.

Why would he think that either of those things might tempt her down? she wondered. She was a coffee and muesli person and always had been. She'd started to notice that, lately, Iain appeared to be finding it harder and harder to distinguish her from the children. She admitted defeat and climbed reluctantly out of bed.

This move was just the kind of thing her husband thrived on: a monumental project, entailing lots of organization and getting everybody sorted out. Yet, despite all his enthusiasm, Bella couldn't help noticing that the actual work – packing the boxes, making the children sort out their things, cleaning the house for the next occupants – had been done by her. Still, perhaps that was for the best: they'd moved so often that Bella had her system down to a fine art. When Iain tried to be helpful he mucked everything up, muddling the boxes by putting bathroom stuff in the bedroom crate, glasses in with the toolbox and stopping to read the books as he packed them. Once she'd found him carefully wrapping the tins of food in newspaper – 'to stop them knocking each other,' he'd explained. If only he'd taken so much care of their wedding china, which had almost become extinct over the years and many encounters with removal men.

She found Katie and Christopher bouncy and excited in the kitchen, eating their breakfast, and Iain humming and cheerful. Her husband's good humour was sending her plummeting downwards in inverse proportion but, at least, she thought, he had stopped whistling – minor mercies and all that. By the time they'd all finished, tidied up and done the final packing it was still only seven-thirty and they had to sit about with nothing to do, the children haring about and jumping on boxes. Bella was cross and

sleepy. Iain was triumphant that they were so ahead of schedule.

Life had been a series of endings lately, thought Bella, as she locked the front door of their house for the final time after the removal men had taken out the last box. There had been leaving her job – admittedly, not exactly a wrench although she would miss some of the people she'd worked with over the past five years. They'd held one of those awful leaving parties for her, where everyone stood about and drank warm white wine and only talked to the people they usually talked to anyway. She'd got a card signed by everybody – *Keep in touch! It won't be the same without you! We'll miss you!* – and a little sheaf of Argos vouchers. The thought was kind, but she knew they wouldn't miss her. Why would they? In a month or two, someone might say, 'Has anyone heard from old Bella? What's she up to? Does anyone know how she's getting on in the country?' and after that she would be forgotten, just as she'd forgotten the people who'd worked with her for a while and then moved on.

'Excellent. We can buy a lawnmower with those,' Iain had said, when she'd shown him the Argos vouchers. 'We'll be needing one now.'

'Mmm, I suppose so. I just . . . I can't help thinking it would have been nice to get vouchers for Liberty, or Heal's, or Harrods. Somewhere like that. So I could get something a bit frivolous.'

'I expect you'd like to spend it all on kumquat bath oil or something equally ridiculous. This is much more practical. Useful.'

The removal truck, loaded with all their possessions, made its slow way down the street, heading for the road out of London. Iain and the children waited for her in the car, while Bella walked round to the estate agent to

deliver the house keys. It was a fine late May morning and Chiswick looked fresh and pretty. The streets seemed alive with young families out for a stroll, taking the children to the green to play or doing some Saturday shopping. She passed the knick-knack shops with the colourful toys and ornaments that drew the eye like candy, and the smart delicatessen with its array of cheeses and continental chocolate. Then there were the exclusive boutiques, four different types of supermarket, the branch of Snappy Snaps she used so often, the dry-cleaner's, the off licence. Here was everything she needed for a civilized life, and she was leaving it all for a hamlet miles from the nearest village. No dashing out for a bottle of new world Shiraz there. If she popped out, it could well be days before she returned.

She felt a stab of panic. Had she made the right decision? When the company had offered voluntary redundancies, she'd wondered idly if this was the get-out clause she'd been waiting for, after five years of working in computer training. Then, when she'd mentioned it to Iain, he'd pounced on it with excitement and begun to rhapsodize on it like a composer with a theme. What had been a way to change her job became an opportunity for them to pursue Iain's cherished dream to move to the country, her redundancy money providing the injection of cash they'd always needed to make it a reality, but never had.

At times, she'd had to admit, Iain's dream had seemed attractive: times when she was stuck in fuming traffic, or her train came to a frozen, unexplained halt in the fusty darkness of a tunnel somewhere below Gloucester Road; when she saw a gaggle of dangerous-looking youths loitering and menacing passers-by; when her car window was smashed again, leaving glittering chunks of glass everywhere. And that was before she thought about the children. Really, this move was for them: to give them

fresh air and freedom and a sense of what lay beyond concrete and Tarmac and straggly commons covered in dog mess; to move them away from London schools to somewhere they might be able to cling on to childhood a little longer. They were beginning to pester her and Iain for more and more expensive toys and gadgets because their friends had them. They were on a bit of a hiding to nothing with that one, especially where Iain was concerned. His favourite reason for saying no to something was because everyone else did it or had it or was going to get it. Katie, who was just ten, was hankering for a mobile phone for Christmas. She might as well forget that right now.

Bella handed in the keys at the agent's, trying to ignore the people scanning the photographs of properties for sale, and fighting her sense of gloom. She'd come to love their house, even if they'd never quite got it finished. Like most of their houses, it had been a wreck when they'd bought it and at first they'd gone at it with enthusiasm, but that had gradually waned and she'd got used to living with bare plaster and untreated floorboards. At least the new place didn't need much beyond some decorating.

The family were sitting obediently in the car waiting for her return. She climbed into the driver's seat.

'Right, then,' she said, trying to sound upbeat. 'Say goodbye to the house everyone!'

'Goodbye, house!' chorused the children.

'See you soon,' added Christopher, waving out of the window at their front door.

'No, you won't,' said Iain. 'We're not coming back, don't you remember?'

'Aren't we?' Christopher blinked his huge blue eyes in surprise, as though no one had mentioned such a thing to him.

Bella twisted round to look at him, smiling encouragingly. 'You know, Chrissie, you can't have forgotten –

it was only the other day. We went to see the new house in the country where we're going to live. And we went round your new school – don't you remember the lovely classroom and all the paintings and the special nature reserve they've got?'

'Course he does,' said Katie. 'You remember, stupid. Remember the stream?'

Christopher's face lit up. 'Y-y-y-yes!' he stuttered with excitement. 'And I can have a hamster, you said! A hamster called Stephen.'

'That's right, darling.' Bella started the engine. 'Now, the sooner we get going, the sooner Stephen will become a reality.'

They put some story-tapes on the radio to keep Katie and Christopher amused, and headed west. Before long, they were on the motorway.

That's that, then, thought Bella. The end of my life in London. It felt as though she was leaving behind everything that defined her, and sailing out into the unknown towards a whole new version of herself that she could discern only blurrily at the moment.

The thing she feared most was the loneliness. Her girlfriends had organized a large, chatty farewell lunch at the Clapham house of one of them; they had all enthused about the move, cooed over the photos of the new house and said how lucky she was, how much they envied her and how they would all be visiting. They'd given her a present of a pair of wildly flower-patterned gumboots and a rainbow umbrella – 'no danger of you disappearing into the rain and mud with those,' they'd told her. She'd been very touched and had hugged them all tightly when the time came to say goodbye. That had been bad enough but worse had been saying goodbye to Nicky, her closest friend. When they had met for a quiet farewell drink in Soho, Bella had embarrassed herself by crying.



‘Hey, hey, hey! What’s all this, honey? It’s not so bad,’ Nicky had said, clasping her hand. ‘You’re only going to Gloucestershire, you know, not the Orkney Isles.’

‘I know,’ said Bella, damply, sniffing into a tissue. ‘But we find it hard enough to meet up when I’m here in London. How are we going to manage it when I’m miles away?’

‘We just will. And now you’re a lady of leisure, you can come up and visit me. We can have lovely weekends together, doing all the things you promise yourself you’ll do when you actually live here and never get round to. And you’ll have that wonderful place to live in. Holly Lodge. The picture makes it look beautiful.’

‘It is,’ Bella admitted. She’d forgotten how pretty it was until she’d driven there the previous week to measure up and inspect the rooms. A red-brick Victorian house, it stood sturdily at the end of a long lane, just at the turn that led up to the big house shielded behind its high hedges of rhododendrons. The lane was pot-holed and dirty and she’d been cursing it when she’d pulled the car to a halt. Then she’d been startled, first by the extreme quiet – no traffic noise, no wailing sirens, just the distant buzz of some farm machinery – and then by the picturesque house, with its white sash windows and carved wooden porch, a spray of jasmine curling up over it. ‘But it’s not just a holiday home – I have to *live* there. And what am I going to do?’

‘Isn’t there a town nearby?’

‘Well, Oxford’s about thirty miles away.’

‘There you are, then. You can find something there, can’t you? It won’t be as bad as you’re expecting.’

Bella stared into her glass of wine. ‘It’s just . . . we’ll need money. I have to find a job. And I can’t help feeling weary at the thought of starting again. We keep moving, we never seem to settle. It’s as though we believe that life is going to be better somewhere else, if only we can get

there. We've been in London four years, and that's the longest we've spent anywhere.'

'Iain wants to better himself, doesn't he? I thought that was why you're always buying these old ruins and doing them up and selling them. I assumed there must be money in it.'

Bella smiled crookedly. 'You'd *think* so – it seems perfectly reasonable. But it never works quite like that. We always spend far too much on the houses because Iain insists on doing the work himself, rather than paying someone. It all goes wrong and we have to bring someone in to fix it. Iain gets the cheapest builder he can find, who naturally makes a mess of it, so we have to bring in someone else or just hope that whoever buys it won't notice, but they always do. Then we find out that we're just outside a catchment area, or on the wrong side of the street, or our area has just gone down in value . . . so you're looking at one of the few people not to make any money out of buying and selling property. We're just about breaking even. We could never have afforded the lodge if I hadn't had the redundancy money.'

'Oh, Iain . . .' Nicky laughed and shook her head. 'He's such a funny old thing.'

'Funny, unless you're married to him.'

'You picked him – you must have seen something in him.' Nicky refused to take Iain seriously, pretending that Bella had married him as some kind of joke in order to amuse her friends. 'Come on – you two seem happy together. I mean, he's a bit eccentric but you have a laugh together, don't you?' She frowned. 'Is everything all right with the two of you?'

'Oh yes, yes. We're fine, really. But sometimes I feel as though I just don't know him, even after all these years. In fact, it seems to be getting worse as he gets older, as though he's retiring inside himself and cutting off from the outside world. That's why I've got this theory that the

move is about getting away from everything that he doesn't like, so he can construct his own way of life in the solitude of the country.'

'Most moves are about getting to something better, aren't they? There's nothing unusual in that.'

Bella frowned. 'I suppose so – but it's different with Iain. It makes me think of someone retiring into a monastery.'

'Oh. Yes. I can see that's not too good.'

'But it's his dream. It's what he wants. I can't stand in his way because I owe it to him to give it a try.'

'You'll be fine,' Nicky said firmly. 'Just don't forget about what you want, okay? I don't like to think of you suffering in the middle of nowhere so that Iain can indulge his fantasy of country life. You can call me, or email any time. Okay?'

'Okay. Just promise you won't forget me.'

They arrived in Rawlston soon after lunch, having made good time down the motorway. The removal men had got there before them, making Bella suspect that the lumbering van had gone far too fast down the M40, and the lawn in front of the house was already crammed with furniture and boxes where they had unloaded the truck. Iain got out quickly to let them in. Katie and Christopher scrambled out in excitement to start exploring their new territory, while Bella sat for a few minutes longer in the car, watching. She ought to get out herself and make sure that Iain knew where things should go but she couldn't quite face it.

The children ran past the front door, a flash of bare legs and a slap of flip-flops up the path, and skirted round the side of the house towards the back garden. Bella took a deep breath and got out of the car. The air was warm and sweet with the smell of grass.

'Bella, I need you!' shouted Iain. 'I can't find my keys. Have you got your set?'

The men carried on stacking furniture on the lawn, oblivious to Iain's buzzing.

'Yes,' she said, 'and yours is in your jacket pocket.' She handed him hers anyway.

'Thanks. Right. Let's get sorted out.' He hurried to the front door and started fiddling with the keys. Bella watched him with a sort of irritable fondness. Iain was in his summer weekend uniform: tatty old shorts, ancient sandals and a sagging blue Aertex shirt. His hair, thinning on top, was still more brown than grey but it was growing wispy and fluffy, which Bella suspected had something to do with the long years of using the very cheapest shampoos. Iain would never buy anything but the super-market own-brand and he insisted on getting that in bulk, great tubs of over-scented pink gloop. Well, if it made him happy. Bella preferred her nice herbal stuff.

Iain opened the door. 'Let's do a quick tour of inspection.'

She followed him inside and up the stairs. They'd both come to see the house originally, before they'd put in their offer, but Iain had little recollection of it. He could vaguely recall the kitchen and the garden but hardly anything else. It was one of his peculiarities, his inability to remember things. He forgot people, places, names, even words.

He went into the first bedroom, the largest, with the fireplace, the bathroom next door and a view that showed green fields and dark copses for miles.

'Now, this is it!' he cried. 'Look at that! Fantastic.'

'I thought this might do for us,' Bella said casually, from the doorway. 'Imagine waking up to that every day. What do you think?'

'Oh, yes. We'll have this one.' Part of the trick with Iain was making him think everything was his own idea. He strode to the window and opened it. 'Kids! Come in and see the house. You need to choose your bedrooms.'

Bella tensed. 'I've chosen their rooms. Christopher is on this floor, Katie's upstairs in the attic. She'll like being a bit separate but Chrissie's too sensitive to be far away.'

'No harm in letting them decide,' Iain said. 'I don't think it makes much of a difference.'

'All right,' Bella said, realizing that she would have to steer the children into making the right choice. She was too tired and the day too fraught to start taking Iain on.

The movers left as the afternoon turned rich and golden. The beds were in the appropriate rooms, after furtive persuasion by Bella, and the furniture deposited haphazardly around the house. Bella wondered what the movers had made of the Balfours' mish-mash of things, most of it second-hand, picked up in junk shops and at sales; the old travel trunk that served as their coffee-table, the battered wardrobes, the cartons and cartons of books. How did all this define them, she wondered. It looked both familiar and strange in its new setting and for a moment, she had a sense of distance about who they were as a family. Delightfully shabby, perhaps? Messy? Unconcerned with expensive trinkets and family heirlooms? Or just too poor to afford anything decent?

She went into the kitchen at the back of the house. This was an extension to the original so it lacked the high ceilings and tall windows of the rest. It was long and low, with a dirty old Rayburn set into the far wall. God only knew how she was going to cook on that thing. The plain units were serviceable, the Formica bland and only a little chipped. Grey-tinged net curtains swung from a piece of elastic over the windows that gave on to the back garden. Those will have to go, thought Bella. Why are they there? It's not as if anyone can look in. There are no houses for miles.

She was absorbed in unpacking when she heard a strong rat-tat-tat on the knocker. She turned her head to

listen and it came again, so she went to the front door and opened it.

A tall man, smartly dressed, stood on the doorstep smiling. He was imposing with his height and air of confidence, a well-lived-in face, deep blue eyes and silver-and-black hair. Behind him in the lane Bella could see a sleek, expensive-looking sports car.

He said, 'Hello. You've just moved in, haven't you? I've come to say welcome.'

'Thank you, that's very kind of you,' said Bella, conscious of her chaotic moving-day hair and her torn old jeans. He was very good-looking – you'd have to be blind not to see that.

'My name's Ben Clarke. I'm from the house at the top.' He gestured up the lane to where the big house was just visible, its roof and chimneys emerging above the trees.

Bella was puzzled. 'Where Mrs Fielding lives?' She and Iain had met Jane Fielding when they'd come to view the lodge and knew she lived in Rawlston House.

'Yes. But we don't live with her. The house is divided and we're in one half. I live there with my wife Sam and my daughter.'

'Oh. I see. Well, it's very nice to meet you. I wasn't sure how many other people live around here.'

'There are the folks in the cottages –' Ben Clarke nodded over his shoulder towards the small houses on the other side of the lane – but most of them are well past retirement age, so I don't know how much of a social whirl you'll be enjoying with them. Do you have any kids?'

'Two. Katie and Christopher.'

'Good,' he said emphatically. 'We need some more children round here. How old are they?'

'Ten and seven.'

'A bit on the young side for Emma, she's nearly

eighteen. Never mind, you must all come up and have a drink soon. What do you think of the place so far?’

‘Lovely. Quiet. Compared to London, anyway.’

‘Which part of London are you from?’

‘Chiswick.’

‘Don’t know Chiswick.’ They stood and smiled politely for a moment longer. Ben said, ‘Well, I won’t keep you – I’m sure you’re busy. Just wanted to say welcome to Rawlston. Do come by any time and let us know if we can help.’ He turned to go, then swung back. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Balfour. Bella and Iain.’

‘Great – well, here’s my card. Call or email and make a time to visit. I mean it. ’Bye. Happy settling.’ He handed her the card, then walked off down the path. A moment later the car disappeared smoothly up the lane.

By nine o’clock the children were mute and drooping and went up to their bedrooms without protest. Bella felt the floating tiredness of a hard day’s work when she followed upstairs. Outside, darkness was falling, a thicker, deeper kind than city darkness, and the night was full of sound: the chirrups of night insects and the rustling of branches. In the city, she understood the perils of the night, the knifers, muggers, the speeding traffic. Here, inside their bedroom with the lamp lit and the curtains drawn, she felt as though something massive and unknown was moving outside as it willed. She reminded herself that those farm cottages were only over the road, their small windows glowing yellow, proof of other people about.

In bed, she said to Iain, ‘Did you know that the big house has got two families living in it?’

He looked up from his book. ‘I might have. Did Jane Fielding say something about it? I don’t remember.’

Why *does* he forget everything? she thought. It’s as though his mind is a sieve and he can’t hold anything in it.

‘A man called round while you were in the garden. Ben Clarke. He lives in the other half. He wants us to go up and visit.’

Iain brightened. This was part of his fantasy of what living in the country would be like, as they were clasped to the bosom of the new community. ‘That’s great. When?’

‘I’ve got to call him.’ She poked her foot out from under the duvet. The night was really too warm for such a thick cover but it was all they had.

‘You must. The sooner we get to know our neighbours, the better. What was he like?’

‘Nice enough. Distinguished. But not grand. I liked him.’

‘Good.’ Iain turned back to his book. ‘Then give him a call in the morning.’