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Love in Lindfield

Written by David Smith

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LOVE IN
LINDFIELD

DAVID SMITH



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In memory of Charles Eamer Kempe and his many admirers

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She approached their meeting point in the old churchyard in moonlight. It was late, there wasn't another soul around. The hooting owl made her nervous. Why had he suggested meeting here of all places? She checked her watch. The time was right but her suitor was late. Jumping at shadows she took shelter in the porch and then heard a noise inside, like a small bell, calling her. Gingerly she turned the old iron latch and pushed the heavy door ajar. There were tea candles lit along the floor in a little path. She followed them, calling out his name but getting no response. 'It's dark, this is scary,' she whispered. But there was still no response. She stopped at the end of the candles in a little space at the back of the church and waited for what seemed to her to be an age. Suddenly two hands descended from behind her, covering her eyes. She jumped and then felt a tall shape against her back. 'God, you scared me,' she said relaxing a bit at his familiar form. 'This place is creepy enough!' 'Heaven or hell?' asked the voice, deep but strangely unfeeling. 'What?' she asked. 'Soar or burn?' it asked again. 'Soar I guess?' she replied, expecting him at any moment to lift her in his arms and kiss her. But instead she felt a dark felt mask being lowered and tied over her head and those two muscular arms gripping her tightly. Then her hands were bound. She felt hot breath on her neck. She could hardly breathe. She knew he had exotic tastes but this...? Her hair was pulled aside and she felt a kiss, deep and passionate. She felt a tingle of excitement in her body, but still she was scared. 'Come on, this ain't a joke no more,' she said. 'What are you doing, let me go?' But there was no answer, instead she was pushed roughly forward and her foot jarred against the first tread of a staircase. 'Heh,' she said, you hurt me.' 'Up,' said the voice. Doubtfully she began to climb. Where was he taking her? They climbed the circular staircase to a

little platform. Then she remembered, the bell tower, she knew that, she'd been there once before. She felt a larger rope being attached to her bound hands. 'What are you doing?' she asked. 'You said heaven?' said the voice. 'But I didn't mean...' 'Then soar!' came the reply before she could finish and let off her first muffled scream; because she was already flying through the air...

PROLOGUE

A good friend of mine, who for the moment must remain nameless, was recently helping out with the clearance of Old Place in Lindfield, West Sussex, when she came across a set of very interesting documents relating to the history of the parish. They included the introduction to unpublished material collated by the designer John William Lisle about one of Lindfield's most famous residents: the stained glass master Charles Eamer Kempe. That discovery provided her with the germ of an idea. She has been working hard to pull the material into a new book on Kempe's life. This tome will accompany the forthcoming BBC production of Henry James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, presently being filmed at Old Place. From the first drafts I've seen, I'm sure it will be a fine volume, one that I personally hope will increase the awareness of that underappreciated master's work. My friend has asked me to acknowledge her great debt to John Lisle's late daughter Margaret, whose earlier book *Master of Glass* has provided her with many of the details of Charles Kempe's life story.

The little tale that follows, therefore, may prove something of a curate's egg; in the majority, it's pure fiction, but there are some genuine facts inexpertly woven within. Oh, I should probably thank Henry James for 'allowing' me to expropriate the plot of his novel – one that has provided both the catalyst for my meetings with the main protagonists (whose real names, of course, I have kept carefully hidden) and the secrets of a few of love's 'spoils' hidden within!

The Author,
Lindfield, West Sussex

Charles Eamer Kempe was born three score and ten years ago on June 29th, 1837 at Ovingdean House in Sussex. He was always a most gifted, kind and enthusiastic man; a friend and mentor to me and many others. He believed strongly that man's highest endeavour should be to praise and glorify God. True to that vision, he used his wonderful talent solely to that very end. During his lifetime he became a master of stained glass design and manufacture and probably the pre-eminent church decorator of the last forty years. History, I'm sure, will judge him kindly.

The studios where we worked together in London and Sussex have produced almost four thousand windows over the years as well as a myriad of designs for altars, church furnishings and memorials. Sadly, he passed away on April 29th last at Nottingham Place, London. His funeral was held at Ovingdean shortly afterwards and was attended by hundreds of mourners. Now that he has departed from us, we realise through his loss of course that he's left behind not only a flourishing business, but also a great legacy of work. But none of that can take away the great hole he has also left in our lives. Unfortunately he has no direct heir; for as is well known, he never chose to marry. All the same, I as chief designer and draughtsman, Alfred Tombleson the manager of his glass works, and Walter Tower, his cousin and now Managing Director of the firm, are all dedicated to keeping his great work and reputation going for as long as we can.

Mr Kempe was born and brought up at Ovingdean, a peaceful hamlet just east of Brighton. It nestles in the cossetting folds of the Downs; between the High Weald and the chalky-rind of The Channel. He was the youngest of five boys and had two beloved elder sisters, Louisa and Augusta. There's no doubting that he was the darling of an affectionate and cultivated family. Unfortunately he outlived all his siblings.

The Kemp family's prosperity was derived from the wool-trade, and more latterly coal. With the growing demand for that

black gold, the Kemps became wealthy landowners and extremely well-connected in Sussex society. Mr Kempe's father Nathaniel, a Justice of the Peace, was a successful man but childless from his first marriage. Following the untimely death of his first wife Martha, he remarried in 1823, still desirous of a family.

His second wife and Mr Kempe's mother, Augusta Caroline Eamer, was the daughter of the illustrious Sir John Eamer, former Lord Mayor of London. She was only twenty-eight when she married Nathaniel, nearly forty years her senior; she was forty-two when Mr Kempe was born, her seventh child. It appears she conveyed on him all that motherly love can bestow; he was her little lamb and his early years were full of blissful and happy memories.

Nathaniel Kemp died in 1843, aged eighty-four. But by then the family's rural idyll was already under threat. To the east, the genteel resorts of Eastbourne and Hastings were expanding rapidly; to the west, Brighton was on the verge of becoming the London-on-Sea we know today. Around the same time, Nathaniel's nephew Thomas Read Kemp died a broken man in Paris. He'd lost everything in the speculative development of the impressive crescents and squares of Kemp Town on Brighton's eastern side; earlier he'd sold his Brighton farmhouse to the Prince of Wales – a parcel of land that became the site of the famous Brighton Pavilion.

Charles Kempe was still only six years old when those two tragic events occurred. But still he often recalled to me memories of his father, a kindly man who'd 'stroked his hair and walked about in church'. He had a clear recollection of the grandeur of the funeral that so exactly presaged his own in the same church sixty-three years later.

As I said, Mr Kempe never married; but it's a commonplace that every man has at least one great mortal love in his life. I believe he also had such a love, but I will keep my counsel as to who I think that person was. He revealed hints of that knowledge only to a very few.

On the other hand, the substantial images of his greatest and immortal love are there for everybody to see in the legacy of his windows: his lifelong dedication to the love of Christ. But even then, if you look more closely at that great body of work, there are fragments of deeper passions revealed within; some that I believe reflect his own earthly longings: his 'Imago Amoris'. Maybe you too will detect in one of those images clues to that mortal love.

In any case, he had many male and female admirers alike who loved him dearly. This little collection of letters and recollections is our devotion to that love and our combined memories of him; contributed and compiled by those he knew best over his glorious seventy years.

*John William Lisle,
June 1907*

CHAPTER ONE

THE VILLAGE BELLES

*Here is the golden close of love,
All my wooing is done.*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Marriage Morning*

The Tyger Inn, Lindfield, Sussex, March 21st, 2015

It was a fine day for a wedding. All Saints Church was decorated beautifully for the occasion and the whole congregation, it seemed, had been involved in the extensive preparations. It was truly a village celebration. The recently arrived young curate was to marry the lovely Maggie Swift, a popular and charming local girl, who helped out part-time in the village school, sang in the choir and occasionally even rang the church bells. It had been a whirlwind romance over a period of less than eight months, but everybody agreed they were made for each other. The ancient church was full to overflowing that morning and the service was carried off by the Rector pretty well perfectly. It was one of those village occasions that everybody wanted to be a part of, one which would be talked about for years to come, the conclusion of a shy but public romance that had kept everyone on tenterhooks in anticipation of a happy announcement. The bride looked absolutely stunning in tulle and antique lace as

the bells rang out and she emerged with her joyful groom into the spring glory of the dappled churchyard. If she still had doubts about whether she was yet ready for marriage, they were nowhere to be seen.

After the main ceremony and photographs were over and the congregation had dispersed, a smaller group of invited guests gathered in The Tyger Inn next door for the wedding breakfast. Maggie's elder sister Ellie was the chief bridesmaid. She was busily occupied, efficiently and purposefully putting the last touches to the arrangements, the girls' dear mother being unfortunately no longer alive. Joe Swift, their father, although usually reluctant to socialise, had made a great effort to look the part in his borrowed morning suit and tails and after downing a glass of local cider for courage, was entertaining their guests merrily.

The Tyger was the oldest pub in the village, run by a tall, blonde and interestingly festooned woman called Monica Malling, the daughter of an old Lindfield family, but from a slightly superior and more moneyed social circle than the poorer Swifts. Even in a small community like Lindfield, subtle gradations of belonging and acceptance exist, however long you've lived in the village and however wealthy you are; it's something that is hard to put your finger on. The Swifts were still regarded as relative newcomers in that respect, even though Joe had first moved there forty years ago and the girls were universally admired and viewed as delightful. The Mallings, on the other hand, had been there for ever and were everywhere. They were not landed aristocracy but they certainly had money, even though no one was quite sure where it had come from, some said illicit brewing, others land speculation. The truth was probably mercantile and much less exciting and they had certainly

achieved a position of respectability in local society despite their dubious forebears.

But Monica Malling was different somehow; she didn't quite fit and was something of a reversion to that past, the black sheep of the family. She'd started amiably enough; she'd attended the same junior school as the Swift sisters, and then gone on to attend a local private school for a few years. But although she enjoyed all the advantages of wealth, she'd gradually rebelled. Her behaviour had become increasingly erratic and eventually she was expelled over some misdemeanour with one of the teaching staff. Ironically, she'd ended up back in the same class as the Swifts at the local comprehensive. However, although the Swift girls had resumed their acquaintance with Monica, it was never as close as their childhood friendship and they hadn't really mixed. In fact it was worse than that. There was no doubt she bore them a grudge and by then she had acquired some very exotic and unsavoury friends. Then there was some unfortunate rivalry over boys. The Swifts began to avoid her and then lost touch completely when the girls left school. Without the grades for university, Monica had taken a catering course at the local college and to everybody's surprise had knuckled down and had progressed well in that career. She was eventually appointed as manager of the Tyger; and later, with a little monetary help from her family, she'd bought the property and was now owner in her own right. Despite her continued strange tastes and odd sense of dress, she was acknowledged to be making a pretty good go of it and the restaurant was usually booked up well in advance.

Her present partner, Ryan Ross, who'd also attended the same junior school but had gone on to an even more prestigious local private school, was assisting her serving

the guests at the wedding breakfast and very smart he looked, too, in his white tux. He was commonly viewed as the handsomest and most desirable bachelor in the village, and had left many a heart fluttering over the years. He certainly wasn't shy when it came to women; by reputation he had little sense of commitment and even less sense of propriety. Nobody could quite work out exactly what he saw in the vampish Monica, but she certainly seemed to have established some deep hold over him recently.

Ryan's wealthy grandmother was there too, but as a guest of honour: Mrs Serena Ross, the owner of Old Place, the large house behind the church. Serena did not usually attend such humdrum village functions but had been persuaded to do so this time, as she'd known Joe Swift from way back, when he worked there as a gardener. Some said they'd once had an affair before he married the girl's mother, but there was no evidence of that. It was probably all just village gossip.

In any case, she was in her usual feisty mood that morning and had left no one in any doubt about her distaste for the changes Monica had made to the pub, replacing many of its historical details and artefacts with a 'great deal of modern tat'. She was obviously not keen at all on her grandson's present choice of partner. But even so, she was doing her best not to spoil things for the bride and groom and had given them a beautiful and tasteful antique tea service as a wedding present. Still she was a calculating soul. The second reason why she'd accepted the invitation was that she thought the wedding would be a good place to look out for a more suitable future partner for her grandson than Monica. She was therefore searching eagerly around the room, weighing up each young woman in turn with the well-practised eyes of an aficionado of feminine nubile charms.

Indeed, it was not long before Serena's observant eyes

alighted on Ellie. In her view, she was definitely the ‘most likely’, a seemingly delightful girl who had no visible airs or pretensions and was now efficiently in charge of the arrangements for the luncheon. Serena had noticed how she’d earlier looked almost embarrassed to catch the bridal bouquet. Although she considered that Ellie did not present herself particularly well – slim, pale, her strawberry blonde hair not quite correctly styled, her flurried bundle of petticoats rather quirky for a bridesmaid – she did see in her someone with potential, someone who understood fine things; more importantly, someone who might be shaped. She admired the way she was dealing with the guests and trying to make them feel welcome, even if she was clearly unpolished and unpractised in such arts. Most importantly she’d noticed the stares of rival hostility Ellie had received every so often from Monica.

After the speeches were over and impatient to progress her plan, Mrs Ross beckoned Ellie over with a discreet hand signal and whispered to her behind the protection of her menu card.

‘Are you safe, can I utter it?’ she asked. Ellie looked at her perplexed.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Isn’t it too dreadful?’

‘You don’t like the food?’

‘No, no dear. The décor; it’s horrible, horrible. What a dreadful mess she’s made of this place.’

Ellie laughed, at least relieved that her complaint was nothing to do with the wedding feast, which she thought was actually going down rather well.

‘Well, yes, I suppose it’s an acquired taste!’

‘And my grandson wants to marry that girl, too. It’s such a shame, terrible really.’

Ellie was surprised but intrigued by her words. She'd found it hard to avoid noticing Ryan, because, of course, they had a distant romantic history stretching right back to schooldays. But she hadn't seen him for some years, as, unlike her sister, she was now living away from Lindfield in Ovingdean with her father. Ryan had certainly grown up, and moved on from the cocky tousled youth she remembered into a very handsome young man, although she hesitated to concede he'd matured. Along with half the rest of the village, she'd had a bit of a crush on him when she was younger. Okay, so he was never the brightest lad, but he was cheekily good-looking, pleasantly artless and usually quite well behaved with her when they met at dances and such (unlike the adventurous rumours spread about him by some of the other girls).

She knew Monica too, of course, and was also somewhat surprised to see how grown up and businesslike she looked, and even more surprised that she and Ryan were now a couple. She remembered Monica's distinctly chequered past. They used to call her 'psycho' at school – she was into every extreme lifestyle and fad that came along, eventually fashioning herself as a grungy Amy Winehouse-type. But there was no doubt they were now a couple. Earlier, there'd been an awkward moment when Ellie had walked in on them snogging ravenously in the kitchens. Well, awkward for her. Ryan seemed embarrassed, too, but Monica didn't seem to mind the discovery of their intimacy at all; in fact, it'd appeared to Ellie that she'd played it up for her benefit. In any case, that was their concern; she had a wedding to organise. And she was distinctly off men at that moment anyway...

Later, as they were getting ready for the bride and groom to leave for their honeymoon, she overheard Mrs Ross ask

Monica if she'd 'take a breath of air in my garden with me' as it was 'quite stuffy' in the 'winter garden'. She assumed that was a little dig at the overheated glass conservatory Monica had installed during the autumn. Ellie watched them carefully as they left. Strangely, Mrs Ross suddenly seemed quite affable towards Monica, in contrast to the views she'd expressed privately in their earlier conversation. It was as if she was ritually respecting someone who had rival influence over her precious grandson. But Ellie could tell her true intention was false. She also noticed with a kind of snobbish amusement that Monica walked with difficulty in her Jimmy Choos through the turf, so that when one heel got caught and she had to pull it out, she dropped her Gucci bag in the process. *Sophistication never was her thing*, Ellie thought, somewhat cattily even for her.

Needing some air herself, she followed the two women at a distance up towards the church and soon realised that Ryan was walking alongside her, quite a way behind the others. Although it was a bright day, there was still a chill in the air and she wrapped her pashmina closely around her shoulders. For a moment they matched strides but did not speak and she smiled inwardly to herself; it was amusing for Ellie to wonder, given Ryan's reputation and their prior history, whether this encounter had been pre-planned on his part. She was intrigued by that possibility, even though he represented by reputation such a lot she hated about men, but still he was certainly good-looking... It was he who broke the silence, asking quite politely how she was getting on and where she was living.

She answered vaguely and quite cautiously, not wishing to seem in any way too keen but feeling a little flutter of excitement in her stomach as she did so. She sneaked a glance at him and thought again how good he looked in

his tux; in fact, he was absolutely beautiful with his tanned golden face, curly hair and muscular frame, but still she was wary of his intentions. She asked him what he was doing. He said something about landscape gardening but was not particularly coherent or forthcoming. In fact, he seemed rather ashamed about that and nervous of her. During that short conversation she realised that despite all his fine education, he was probably still wonderfully dense. That confirmed her earlier suspicion that Ryan, at any rate, was certainly not the clever one of the couple, that honour clearly belonged to the still strange but now entrepreneurial Monica. It made her think that if she were ever to marry or anything, she'd also need to be the one to contribute the cleverness; things were certainly better that way round. They continued to walk in silence. She found herself flirting already in her facial expression and hand movements.

She certainly hadn't expected Ryan to pull her aside and kiss her behind the yew tree, but the champagne had left her light-headed and somewhat open to his approach. It was both thrilling and delicious. She found herself responding enthusiastically, regrettably disturbed at last by a call from one of the departing guests. And it was indeed from that flushed and huddled moment in the churchyard that Ellie subsequently became aware of a quickening of her previously subliminal marital ambitions.

Of course, neither had she expected to be the one to catch the bridal bouquet earlier, but having done so, she felt inside that maybe there was at last room in her life for a more substantial relationship. After all, her biological clock was ticking, as they say. But she wasn't going to be rushed, either. Any potential suitor would have to meet some pretty high standards. But she had to admit to herself that she had

rather enjoyed that late-afternoon smooch. And he was certainly viewed as a catch in the village.

As she returned to Brighton on the train through the rural fields that evening, she began to imagine for herself a future full of things she particularly loved. Some of which might even include a romance with Ryan Ross, despite the fact she knew they were in so many ways poles apart. Especially if his grandmother was soon going to fix it for Monica to be off the scene.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WEB SHE SEEKS TO WEAVE

'Now do you know how I feel?' Mrs Gereth asked when in the wondrous hall, three minutes after their arrival, her pretty associate dropped on a seat with a soft gasp and a roll of dilated eyes.

Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*

Two months later – Ovingdean Hall, near Brighton, Saturday, May 23rd, 2015

By May, Ellie had been working for over a month assisting Serena Ross on the inventory of Old Place. Her newly married sister Maggie was also helping her out in her spare time. The work was interesting and it had also given her the opportunity to reacquaint herself with village life and brought closer the prospect of a renewed relationship with Ryan.

When they were small girls, Ellie had always been the princess and Maggie the tomboy, but somewhere in their teens they'd kind of swapped roles. Ellie had gone on to become a political and idealistic animal, not always the most easy-going characteristics, while Maggie became much more homely, practical and good-natured, taking baby-care classes and then joining the Red Cross. So it was no real surprise that Maggie had married first. However, even so she knew Maggie still had some doubts about marriage, it

had all happened so quickly and Maggie had confided in her that she felt ill-prepared. Nonetheless, Ellie was in no doubt that there would be a baby along for the couple soon. Even after a couple of months, as far as she could tell they were still at it every minute they could find for themselves!

As she got older, Ellie's idealism had developed into strong and deeply held principles, whether it was CND, socialism or later the green agenda. Unlike Maggie, for most of her teens Ellie had avoided both sport and boys (apart from that brief dalliance with Ryan Ross) and worked diligently at her studies. She'd developed quite a creative side too: she was talented and had a natural ability. She'd been encouraged to draw and paint and then to act in various school plays; but she never got the pretty parts, always the smart villains. Her sweet younger sister mostly did the pretty parts.

After school, Ellie had started on a theatre course, but a riding accident had cut short that plan. Undaunted, after recovery, she'd found a less physically demanding course studying fine art at a college in South London. They said she showed great promise. After a while she'd started to specialise in jewellery design and engraving. In fact, she'd even been selected to help with restoration work for private clients and museums in London including pieces for the Wallace Collection. However, fate struck again. A one-night stand with a married lecturer, the unfortunate result of her inexperience with men and a spiked drink at a party, had brought a sudden end to that ambition. She got pregnant. Initially, the guy in question had taken no responsibility for the situation beyond fine words, fearing the break-up of his marriage. But under threat from her father, he'd eventually promised a financial arrangement if she kept things quiet. She'd returned to Sussex to have the child that was the unhappy product of that fling. Tragically, she lost the baby.

So the putative father had never even had to come good on his meanest promise.

After a brief period of understandable grieving, she'd sorted herself out with counselling and restarted her jewellery studies at a different college. About then, she'd also found a new passion for painting in acrylics. Again, she had natural flair. She began to sell her somewhat unique interpretations of local landscapes to a few galleries in Brighton. By chance, an article on one exhibit attracted the attention of a well-known local collector. After buying some of her work, he mentioned a position going as an artist-in-residence at the local arts centre. He was on the Board. She applied without much hope and was therefore surprised to be offered the job. It was only later she found out he'd put in 'a good word' for her that had swung it her way. That was her first official connection with the old boys' network. It filled her with distaste but also a guilty exhilaration.

Soon came the predictable expectation from him of a social meeting. She realised she was potentially heading for trouble again. After a bad experience with one married man, she knew she needed to be more careful the second time round. Her friends warned her that affairs with married men never went well. But she ignored them. After several further invitations, she felt herself slowly weakening, even falling, for him. She consented to drinks in a Brighton pub but it was businesslike and she thought nothing more of it at first. He was well known as a financial supporter of the greens as well as the arts. But although he was attractive, good company and clearly influential; Ellie was determined not to allow a second relationship to become physical. But soon, at the drunken suggestion of a friend, another scenario began to occur to her. The more she thought about it, the more daring she became.

She found herself beginning to weave an age-old trap. Why shouldn't she use her smarts to her own end this time, to ensnare her generous but likely amoral pursuer? Her agreements to see him steadily became more calculating, as his own intentions became more obvious. This eventually involved a hastily arranged hotel room where they'd finally done the deed. She'd cried after he left, staring out defiantly at the accusing sea, both thrilled and angry with herself. But she was more than ever determined. She'd realised he'd be a fantastically useful source of contacts in the arts world; he seemed to know just about everyone. Why shouldn't she use her own feminine attractions and his shimmering access for her own benefit, for once? But she did force herself to read several learned tones on third-world protest movements in penance that weekend.

However, it wasn't long before she found out she wasn't his only dalliance with a twenty-something ingénue that summer. She quickly noticed he had a roving eye, and, of course, the more spiteful of his friends told her stories of other girls and the presents he'd given them. He had previous. But she bumped into his attractive photographer wife at an exhibition in Ditchling. As it turned out, this lady was no stay-at-home frump; in fact she was more than gorgeous. What she saw in him therefore, Ellie initially had no idea.

They got chatting. Ellie was seduced by her flamboyant and unconventional personality. She was quietly shocked that this 'wife' seemed to know about and even condone his flirtatious behaviour, but at the same time, intrigued too. He was the one with the money and contacts. She clearly had the talent. From the subject of her photographs, her appetite appeared very broad too. She invited Ellie to her studio and it was soon apparent from her propositions that the

couple enjoyed what was known euphemistically as an open marriage. That meant she could see pretty well whoever she pleased. The studio was her hunting ground. It was all very Bloomsbury and flattering. But, by then Ellie had begun to understand her own power; she continued to play along with him (and her) for a while, getting into even more ludicrous liaisons in the process.

Through association with their contacts, however, she'd also begun to develop a new and lucrative side-line. She discovered she had a good nose for sniffing out the more talented up-and-coming artists. Soon she got one or two requests from his wealthier friends to select art work to adorn their sea-view penthouses at the posher end of Kemptown. Within a few months, that initially ad-hoc trade had developed into a business: she was soon buying, in a small way, for the contemporary collections of many wealthy local clients. She wasn't sure it quite fit in with her conscientious instincts or even socialist principles, but she was confident she could usefully distinguish between wealth and values. The government had taken so much out of arts funding through its austerity measures that someone had to replace it, and why not be part of that social contract? By the beginning of spring, she was able to count several 'retired' rock artists, a DJ, a film actress and even a well-known reality TV star amongst her clients. The next development, however, was a surprise even to her.

Ellie's second meeting with Serena Ross had taken place at Easter, shortly after the wedding. Of course after that brief snog in the churchyard, she'd daydreamed about the chances of a renewed relationship with Serena's grandson. But nothing much had happened and she was too busy to wait for his occasional hurried phone calls. She wasn't short

of social offers in Brighton, given her growing reputation. She'd even been invited to speak at a couple of conferences as well as supporting the local greens in their campaigning.

Serena Ross had been widowed for two years after twenty-six years of marriage. She'd always led a very independent and somewhat patrician life. However the empty and staid friendships of that old life were now boring her. She wanted to be free to travel, to meet new people. Serena had also come to realise that the time had come to downsize from her empty mansion. The big house on the hill was far more than she needed, however it would be a huge task to sort through its eclectic contents. By chance, Ellie was independently recommended to her by an old Brighton friend as someone who could help her sort through Old Place before its impending sale. Mrs Ross was intrigued: she remembered warmly the girl she'd met at the wedding and was therefore immediately aware of the double opportunity such a project might also present: for her to get her wayward grandson Ryan back on track.

When first approached by the intermediary, Ellie had felt unsure. Serena Ross clearly didn't fall into the typical profile of her clients, she was well above her normal social circle and she had a radical's antipathy to old money. However, a meeting had been arranged and Ellie had been suitably charmed and charming. When Serena told her she saw in her something of the determination and discrimination of herself as a younger woman, Ellie was hooked. On the spot, Serena had made her an offer she couldn't refuse financially. Ellie was both flattered by her words and also totally fascinated by the project. Of course, she already had an inkling she might be letting herself get drawn into a somewhat complex family situation too, but was sure she could handle that. One comment in particular had betrayed

what was surely in Serena's mind when she'd referred to Ryan:

'If only that dreadful woman was off the scene, I could get him married off to someone decent.'

Serena Ross's grandfather, a successful Oxford lawyer named John Wynter, had bought Old Place from Charles Eamer Kempe's cousin Walter Tower in the 1920s. Three generations of Wynters had grown up in the house and gradually added to its eclectic collection of furniture and furnishings. Serena was the only child of that third generation and had known the house since she was a little girl. After her parents were killed in a car accident, she'd been brought up by her grandfather at Old Place itself. In 1987, on her betrothal to the banker Augustus Ross, her grandfather had entrusted the house to her on his death as part of her marriage settlement, but only for as long as she continued to live there; after that it was to pass to her next lineal descendent. She'd lived there ever since.

Her two-year-deceased husband had been an amiable old-school type who'd made a fortune and accumulated quite a collection of modernist objets d'art in his own right. On their marriage, he'd blended these incongruously with the more traditional spoils the Wynter family had accumulated. Away from the main rooms, the house was therefore furnished in a haphazard jumble of styles, with attics stuffed with decades of unwanted overspill. It was the story of a life, in fact of two lives, in fact of a dynasty. One in which she had fully paid her part as collector-in-chief, arbiter of taste and centre of a wide and influential social circle.

But since her husband's death, Serena had begun to tire of all those false friends and hangers-on, and tried to integrate

herself more with village-life. Recently she'd reached the landmark age of sixty. Although she didn't necessarily feel this was old, she still felt the time had come to move on. There were places she wanted to see, things she wanted to do. After a brief negotiation, she'd agreed with her grandson Ryan to remove herself to a charming, but slightly squeezed, Queen Anne property called Poynting's at the other end of Lindfield High Street. Ryan was thrilled with her decision, and started to harbour plans to sell or develop parts of Old Place himself. Initially, therefore, he was happy to say that she could take whatever she needed with her. Given the contents of Augustus Ross's will, he was not expecting her to hang on to the whole property or its remaining contents after she'd vacated it.

Although she'd had no real formal education, Serena was a woman of catholic convictions and very particular tastes. She'd agonised for ages over which choice pieces from her lifetime collection she'd take with her to Poynting's: furniture, porcelain, clocks, fabrics, embroidery. However, she was even more daunted by the prospect of clearing Old Place of the rest of its contents. That held far too many difficult memories, which was precisely where Ellie would come in. Although an unusual request, Ellie was fascinated by the opportunity. Eventually she'd need to bring in a professional auctioneer, of course; however, Serena had promised her she could keep her first choice of whatever she wanted from the collection. That was the deciding factor (apart from maybe the opportunity to see Ryan away from the ever watchful eyes of Monica). There was a lot to do though, which is why she'd dragged Maggie in to help her with the inventory. Her sister was good at that stuff, computers and everything, and Ellie had seen that she needed something to keep her mind occupied outside school hours while her husband was busy around the parish.

At first, Ryan was quite taken with the idea of Ellie helping his grandmother out. 'It's awfully kind of you to help my gran with this. We really need to get the place cleared,' he'd told her.

But soon after, things had changed radically. Monica and her mother, Mrs Malling, had visited Old Place to view its fine furniture, cases of enamels and Venetian velvets. However, that visit had not gone at all well: to Ryan's consternation, they were both highly disparaging about Serena's lifetime work. Mrs Malling in particular had described 'the spoils' as being 'most striking but rather old-fashioned and probably reproduction'. Ryan had watched with horror the telling and very visible effect of that shocking remark on his grandmother's face.

Of course, Serena had remained calm at the time, but that'd been the decisive point when she'd made up her mind to take ALL the best pieces with her to Poynting's, rather than risk leaving any to 'those philistines'. So when Monica and her mother had subsequently visited Serena in her new house and realised exactly what had happened, there'd been an almighty row.

Newly arrived from Brighton that afternoon, Ellie had been cleaning some valuable porcelain in an upstairs room, while calmly evaluating yet again the merits of a potential liaison with Ryan. A noise outside had caught her attention and she'd watched with dismay as Ryan and Monica, her mother and Mrs Ross started debating angrily on the terrace. She distinctly heard Ryan at one point tell Serena that he intended to marry Monica come what may and that he required all the 'things' to be returned to Old Place immediately.

After half an hour, when the noise had died down and she'd thought it was safe, she ventured downstairs

to speak to Mrs Ross and soon realised that she'd come down prematurely. She was at once confronted by Serena's embarrassing departing words to Monica in front of the other guests.

'We still haven't had the talk we should have had, have we Monica?' she said to Monica dismissively, and then turned very deliberately to the already red-faced Ellie as she addressed the room.

'...but here's Ellie – yes, with you, I believe I might at least rest in my grave!'

Ellie flushed and stared angrily at Mrs Ross. As soon as the guests had left, she turned to her and said, 'How could you?' Mrs Ross just smiled at her and shrugged as if to say: 'Try harder dear'.

Ellie took her leave and rushed back as quickly as she could to Old Place, where Maggie was fortunately there to give her comfort and calm her down. She recounted bitterly the events at Poynting's, but soon they were both giggling about it all.

'God I hate the Ross's. Why did I ever agree to get mixed up with all this?'

'Calm down Ell, you're nearly done now, another week and it will be ready for the auctioneers.'

'Another week, I'm not sure if I can bear the stress!'

'Yes you can. Have you decided yet?'

'I don't know, I quite like some of the enamel miniatures, but then there's that pretty picture of Valetta, too.'

'No, not the artwork, you dope, I meant Ryan. Any joy?' her sister teased.

'God knows. You can guess exactly what he wants out of a 'relationship' but Monica's still got him well under her thumb as far as I can see,' Ellie replied sulking. She was

acutely conscious that in accepting Mrs Ross's offer, she was walking a fine line between her aesthetic ideals, ethical scruples and her own unsatisfied desires. She could see that Maggie knew so too.

'Well that's a good thing if you ask me. He's not good news.'

'You're probably right, but have you seen his eyes and those muscles? Land sakes what I'd like to do with that body if I got the chance.' They both laughed.

'Anyway sis, changing the subject, do you have any plans for tonight?'

'Just some concert that Sal wants me to go to at the Festival.'

'Anyone I've heard of?'

'I doubt it. She told me, but I haven't a clue who the band is!'

'Well, you never know, you just might meet Prince Charming. It'll take your mind off 'Flash', at least!'

'No 'Flash' is just honest lust,' Ellie laughed. 'Anyway, are there any Prince Charmings left in Brighton? I doubt it somehow. I'm sure I'd rather be having a nice night in like you cuddled up on the sofa with your brand new hubbie,' she continued, and winked at her sister, who reddened.

'Hey, I forgot to mention, you know that little sandalwood box you found yesterday without a key?'

'Yes?'

'Well I managed to get it open with a clothes pin and pliers.'

'You devil, you. What did you find?'

'Some lovely handwritten letters.'

'What, to Mr Kempe?'

'No, they seem to be a collection made by a guy called John Lisle, Kempe's chief designer. Tributes he collected

after Kempe's death for some sort of memorial that never got published.' She showed her the first letter from John Lisle.

'Wow, that's wonderful. Let's see the rest?'

'This one, for instance appears to be from a childhood friend: a Mr Jack Beard, a gentleman farmer in Ovingdean. A lot of it's in dialect.'

'Beard – yes they were landowners in the area until quite recently.' She read the first couple of paragraphs. 'Oh Maggie, isn't this amazing stuff! You're a real star!'

Dear Mr Lisle,

Thank you for your letter. It was very good to make your acquaintance at the funeral. With regards to your request, I am not generally a writing man but the following is a memory I still treasure of Charlie Kemp from our childhood. I am sorry about the indelicacy of the subject matter, but I always found it a most amusing story and Charlie and I have chuckled about it on many occasions since. I have told it as faithfully as I might do in my own words in the circumstances.

It was a spring day and as I remember, we'd been wading in the pool fed by the gubbery little spring that runs along Hog field. I was carrying a homemade net and rod, our jars were already full o' nymphs and beetles and all sorts, including a crested newt, the poor thing thrashing about dimly in the cloudy water.

'Cum 'ere Charlie, luk at dis,' I said. 'Wot's dat, Jack?' Charlie replied. He must have only been about five or six in those days. His brownish hair was smeared with sweat and chalk slurry from the bank; his clothes a real mess too, as were mine. We crouched down on our bellies and stared into the little pool left by a field post discarded into

the water. A pair of dragonflies was scurrying amongst the reeds.

'Mousearnickles,' I replied. I was a year or so older than him. My Pa was the local farmer in Ovingdean back then.

'No not dem, dat in de water,' he said. He pointed to where three small dark greeny-brown shapes were darting from shadow to shadow, flitting from weed to weed. Every so often, their bony backs glinting in the sun as they scurried through open water into the greeny mass, our eyes drawn by their colouring and scuttling.

'Sticklebacks,' I replied. We tried to fish 'em out, but there were too much algae to use the nets proper. So instead I clasped my hands together to form a sort of cup. I scooped at one of 'em shapes in the water as it passed, then pulled my fists up into the sunlight to see what I'd bagged. I remember shrieking with the pain.

'Ow, jigger,' I said. 'It's git spines sharp us nails, deys dug rite into ma finger, mortal surelye.'

Charlie stared at the creature next to the little blob of pink-red blood that was oozing from my finger. The fish was a squirming silver-grey shape, twisting in the creases of my hands. It had bright kingfisher-blue eyes and delicate pale-scarlet gills.

'Quick de abbler jar,' I shrieked, and we popped the little minnow safely in the largest jar to join the gasping newt. We watched in awe as the creatures danced round and round, the one dabbing the glass with its snout the other gulping for air in the thick stug-stained water.

'Ah dat's a monstus gud un,' I said. 'Wot a haul we got now!'

Charlie took the jar back from me and held it up to the light to see the little gobby eyes of the fish. They were

beautiful and clear as if stained with colour. There were faint striped markings along its back and three raised spines. 'It's mighty purdy,' he said.

'Tis indeed, yung 'un. Cum on Charlie, let's see wot else der is,' I said, wiping the blood off my finger with my sleeve. We crept further along the bank till we found a second, stagnant pool. That one was teeming with life, full of little black wiggling creatures, some swimming free, some still attached to their egg sacs.

'Wot's dat?' asked Charlie. I guessed he'd never seen that particular miracle of nature before.

'Frogspawn,' I said, 'un dem's taddies, liddle frogs.' I scooped up a handful of the jelly and plonked it dripping into the second jar. 'Ya can kep um till dem's grown tails un legs 'n all, an' den watch 'em goo off in de grass. Dursn't tell ya ma though, I knows ur don't like sich things in ur house.'

'Taddies,' said Charlie. 'Dat's a queer name.'

'Ya cud be a taddie yaself, chuckle-head, with dat gurt big 'ed an globby har,' I laughed. Cum on Charlie, we best be gittin ya home and cleaned up.'

Charlie nodded back. He loved being out in the fields with me. We climbed up out of the ditch onto the droving path that led along the lane called Greenways back through Grange Farm. That's where I lived with my ma and pa. Further down the lane was the big house where Charlie lived with his family. It was getting late and the shadows showed how long we'd been out in the fields. We both knew he'd probably be in for a beating from his pa if it was dark by the time he got back. In the distance we could already hear the fox-hounds in my pa's kennels howling for their evening feed. We began to jog along the road, past the Old Smithy, but as we passed the pile of old logs by its side wall, Charlie started.

'Summut moved, Jack!' he shouted. We went closer to the logs to see what it was. Indeed as I inspected the pile it seemed as if the whole pile of wood was moving.

'Rats,' I said, dropping the stick I'd started poking the pile with. 'Ugh, I hate dem fiends. Quick, run strate past 'em Charlie.'

But before we'd gone a couple more steps, two of the beasties were already amongst our feet. In fright, Charlie shrieked and dropped the jar. It smashed on the ground and the chalky-grey liquid flowed out leaving the poor animals squirming together in the dusty pool of water. I knelt down and tried to scoop them up into the second jar with the frogspawn. But in Charlie's fright, he'd already started running towards the stables that were next to the Smithy's yard. Laughing, I called after him to stop.

'Cum back, ya chavée, stop being afeared an' maak'n sich a fuss, dey won't hurt ya.' But I figure Charlie wasn't so sure and just kept running.

He told me later that once inside the stables he began to feel safer at first. He could smell the warm hay and straw and horse dung. But there were two working punches inside, a load of old machinery and the dog cart that my pa used to get up to town. The two huge beasts were stomping noisily in their stalls. Charlie could see their great red-stained eyes staring back at him in the gloom and could hear their haunches pushing against the stall doors. He was afeared again. He hadn't been in the stables before without me or one of the farm hands. He scrambled away from the horses across to where the fresh straw was kept and then up the steps into the hay loft.

Once upstairs, he found that something else was moving. His heart was beating fast and he wished dearly that I'd come. *Maybe there were rats up there too,* he thought. Below him

the two great shires had settled down a little and the place was quieter. He thought about going back down, but he could hear a new noise, a rustling. He lifted his head up further into the loft so that he could see what it was. 'Oh Lord,' he thought, 'I hope it ain't more rats.'

The last rays of the evening sun were streaming by then through a broken slat, the blinding beams dancing around the hay dust. He could see a shape moving and then heard a low-groaning noise; up and down, up and down, casting humped yella shadows on the wooden planks of the loft. As his eyes adjusted he saw the shape had drifts of golden straw-like hair attached to it, like a glowing scarecrow. He heard panting and groaning. He was really scared but curious all the same. He bit his lip and moved closer. Outside, I was still calling for him to come out but he ignored me.

The movement in the hay stopped and there was a low moan as if someone had been hit in the belly. The upper shape rose and he saw a face and glinting blue eyes and the white cotton of a girl's blouse open to her waist, two sweet round love-apples hanging freely from within. He said as they weren't like his ma's, but smooth and soft and rose-tinted, heaving up and down with the girl's panting breaths. He heard two voices.

'Sam, sshh, what was that?'

'I think ya knows dat goistering well anuf, yun missie!'

'No you thick oaf, there was a shout, quick there must be someone outside.'

The girl's voice was fine but anxious. She clasped her dress to her upper body and pulled her petticoat and skirt back down from where they'd been hitched up around her hips. Charlie knew that voice of course. He'd known it all his life. It was the sweetest voice on all the face of the earth. It was a voice that had sung him to sleep so often in his nursery...

'Lulu,' he whispered. Cos it was his sister, see.

As I said Mr Lisle, I must apologise for the indelicate subject, but we did laugh again and again over that incident. I dare say some wouldn't ever recover from the shock of that, with girls and all I mean. But I reckon as it did him no harm when it came to meet 'em later. He was never that afeared of 'em after that, he joked.

Jack Beard,
Gentleman farmer,
Grange Farm, Ovingdean