Opening Extract from...

THE LOVE CHILD

Written by **Rachel Hore**

Published By **Simon & Schuster**

The Love Child

By the same author:

The Dream House
The Memory Garden
The Glass Painter's Daughter
A Place of Secrets
A Gathering Storm
The Silent Tide
A Week in Paris
The House on Bellevue Gardens
Last Letter Home

RACHEL HORE

The Love Child

SIMON & SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2019
A CBS COMPANY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-4711-5698-4
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4711-5699-1
eBook ISBN: 978-1-4711-5701-1

Typeset in the UK by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For Suzanne

WANTED

Respectable married couples wishing to adopt. We have healthy infants and children available from good backgrounds.

Full surrender. Complete discretion.

References essential.

Apply Box D.103.

The Times, 1917

One

London, December 1917

'This is the one.'

Edith's eyes widened in surprise at the firm tone of her husband's voice, the light of satisfaction in his eyes. Philip was a mild-tempered man and she rarely knew him to express such a strong opinion.

'This is the baby for us, Edie.'

'Edith,' she whispered, aware of Miss Chad hovering nearby.

She contemplated the fragile infant in his arms and bit her lip, uncertain. This girl was not the prettier of the two available. Edith had wanted to reach out and cuddle the other, a sturdy cherub of ten months with rosy cheeks and a fluff of fair hair. So much like Edith's youngest sister at the same age. The nurserymaid had set the child astride a toy horse and held her as it rocked. The darling's blue eyes had widened with alarm and she'd clutched at the young woman's sleeve.

This other baby was too young to sit up. 'Three months,' Miss Chad had said and bid another maid to lift her from her

crib to show the visitors. The sleepy infant had taken one look at the portly bespectacled man in the black frock coat and his thin, plain-faced wife and burst into angry cries.

'Poor mite,' Philip had murmured and stretched out his arms to take her. 'She's so light, Edie!' He cradled her awkwardly, muttering a tentative, 'There, there.' This must have been all the baby wanted because after a moment she stopped screaming and stared up at him with her troubled navy-blue gaze, tears shining on her long, dark lashes.

What sallow cheeks the child had, Edith thought, remembering the pink and white skin of the fair-haired girl. This baby's small pointed face and almond-shaped eyes put her in mind of a kitten. Cats brought Edith out in a rash.

'That's better.' Philip propped the infant up against his shoulder and stroked her whorl of dark hair. It was at that point that he had looked at his wife, beamed and said those devastating words: 'This is the one.'

Miss Chad clasped her hands under her chin, her eyes glinting in satisfaction over her spectacles. 'She's very *dainty*, isn't she?' The principal of the Adoption Society was a handsome woman in her forties with a generous, upholstered figure. She wore too many strands of beads for Edith to imagine her cuddling babies.

It was Miss Chad who had answered Philip's response to her advertisement in neat firm handwriting, but although she'd requested references, it was in a tone that could only have been described as ingratiating. A solicitor and his wife from a quiet seaside town. Conventional, comfortably off. How suitable! 'You sound just the kind of people we wish to adopt one of our little ones', she'd gushed, 'but letters of support from your vicar and a local mother of standing are a minimal requirement.' The references Philip supplied had duly been

checked and today the couple had come to the nursery in west London to choose a baby girl.

'What do we know about this one's parents?' Philip asked before Edith could draw breath to protest. 'I believe I told you that we wanted an orphan.'

'She isn't one, *exactly*.' Miss Chad did not meet his gaze. 'But she has been fully relinquished by the mother.'

Everyone wanted orphans, Edith supposed. If the parents were safely dead, they couldn't ask later to have the child back, could they? Miss Chad had already explained that adoption was not legally binding, such a nuisance, but that financial penalties in the Society's contract would put off any birth parent tempted to change their mind.

'We don't have any *orphaned* girls at present.' Miss Chad's cheery tone grated. 'But this baby is special. The mother's family are well-connected, gentlefolk. Most unusual for a girl of that upbringing to get herself into trouble, but this war has upset everything. We've had no problems with the child. Healthy, takes her milk well. *Spirited*, I'd say, you've seen that yourselves. But with the right training I believe you'd be very pleased.'

It was, Edith thought, as though they were acquiring a puppy, not a baby.

The infant stared with fascination at the white silk handkerchief in Philip's breast pocket. At his chuckle, her round-eyed gaze moved to his face and she batted his jaw with her starfish hand. To Edith's amazement, her usually solemn husband burst out laughing.

'Philip?' she said in desperation. 'I don't think I want—'

'Edie, she likes me,' he broke in, his eyes shining with happiness.

'Yes, I'm sure she does, but don't you think that sweet fair-haired girl . . .'

'An absolute enchantress, isn't she, Mrs Burns?' Miss Chad cooed. 'More placid than this little puss, but then *she's* adorable in her own way, too. It's your choice. We like our parents to feel satisfied. Both children are available immediately, though we do have a waiting list for baby girls . . .'

'We'd better decide right away,' Philip said, turning serious. 'Whichever you like, of course, Edie, dear.' He smiled down at the kitten-baby. 'But I prefer this little thing.'

Later, when Edith looked back, she wondered how she'd allowed it to happen, why she'd given in to her husband's whim and taken a baby she hadn't warmed to. It was partly the picture Miss Chad went on to elaborate of the mother's genteel background. Mostly, though, it was to do with Philip's strength of purpose. It had taken her by surprise.

Two

Hertfordshire, January 1918

'It's eight o'clock, Alice. Time you were up. We've things to do.'

Her stepmother's sharp voice cut into the young woman's dreams. For a moment she lay, heavy and confused, as a clatter of crockery and a smell of toast accompanied Gwen's busy footsteps into the room.

Gwen set the breakfast tray on the bedside table and went to throw open the curtains. Alice raised her head, blinking at the flood of sunlight, then rolled over with a groan and pulled a pillow over her head.

This served only to muffle Gwen's strident tones. 'You can't go on like this, Alice. I simply won't have it and nor will your father. You still have all your life before you.'

Alice pressed the pillow over her ears. She knew all too well her stepmother's opinion of her. Gwen was running through the phrases again. 'Selfish, I never knew such a girl. Your poor father. It's nearly broken him.' According to Gwen she was stubborn, ungrateful, unwomanly, and many other things besides. All this rained down on her grief. She hated Gwen,

would never forgive her, but part of her, just a small guilty part, had begun to recognize that her stepmother had saved her. From a life in the shadows, a life that would have ended before it had properly begun.

But the cost.

Once again, Alice tried to resist the image that popped into her head when she least expected it: the small kitten-like face, the bud-like mouth releasing her nipple, the whorl of dark hair, large eyes of unfathomable blue that fixed unblinkingly on hers. As though the baby were taking her in, impressing her mother's face on her mind. Alice remembered how she had stared back at her tiny daughter. 'Oh, look at you,' she'd crooned, and her lips had met the soft skin of that small forehead in a kiss. 'Look at you, my darling.' The baby's hair and eyes already reminded her of Jack. No, she wouldn't think of Jack, she simply wouldn't. And now she must learn day by day how to shut out that memory of her child. With hope and a prayer that she was alive and thriving somewhere in the world. *Without her mother.*

A sob rose in her throat. She threw the pillow aside and pushed herself up to see Gwen standing at the end of her bed, arms folded, her little finger tapping out her impatience. Alice stared back mutinously. Dislike flashed between them.

'Eat your breakfast and get dressed.' Her stepmother turned, crossed the floor and threw open the doors of the great walnut wardrobe. She rifled through the clothes that hung there before unwinding a smart travelling suit from its hanger. 'See if this still fits,' she said nastily, draping it over the bed. 'We're going to London. Louise Hartington's mother wishes to interview you. Read the letter. It arrived a moment ago.'

'What?' Alice noticed for the first time a thick cream envelope propped on the breakfast tray. She snatched it up,

scanned the page inside and tossed it on the floor, the words rebounding in her head. *'I'm sure dear Alice would make a most entertaining and sympathetic companion for my mother . . .'* A companion!

'How dare you keep interfering with my life,' she screeched. 'I won't go and wait on some querulous old woman.' A scene from her childhood flashed into her mind of a visit to a great-aunt, a robust widow who'd bullied her companion, a plain moth of a girl. She wouldn't put up with that sort of treatment, she simply wouldn't. She'd wanted to go back to nursing, maybe in London, but her parents wouldn't let her near wounded soldiers again. Not after what had happened.

'Nobody said anything about old Mrs Eldridge being querulous. Louise makes her sound charming.' Gwen rescued the letter and folded it back into its envelope. 'Of course, she doesn't suspect a thing, and you'd do as well to keep it quiet.'

'Why would I do otherwise?' Alice hissed. She'd had a child outside marriage. No respectable employer would take her if they knew. Her good breeding and her education would count for nothing. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter as I'm not doing it, so that's the end of that.' She crossed her arms and stuck out her lower lip, all too aware that she was acting like a child herself, but Gwen really was the limit.

'You need to grow up, missy.' Gwen's voice was sharper than ever. 'You have to do something. I simply won't have you maundering around the house making everyone's life a misery. Your father and I have had enough.'

'Then I'll go to London by myself, take a flat and apply for work of my choosing. Girls do it all the time now.'

'Not any girls in our circle. And you won't get any support from your father for *that* kind of life.'

'And what kind of life do you think that is?'

They glared at one another, both enraged.

'One where you think you're free to do exactly as you like. There's only one word for such a young woman and it's too impolite to pass my lips. You're going to Mrs Eldridge whether you like it or not. And if she gives you a good report then we'll see what's next. Now, eat up and get dressed, there's a good girl. I've told Spriggs to have the trap ready for ten. We're catching the train at half past.'

Gwen never flounced, but Alice sensed her irritation in the crisp way she shut the door behind her. And she was glad. She pulled the breakfast tray before her and began savagely to butter a slice of toast.

Gwen lingered outside Alice's bedroom, wondering whether her stepdaughter would do as she'd been told. It was a gamble, but she was convinced that toughness was the right approach. Alice hated her, but then she didn't think much of Alice. All through the difficult last year they'd struggled with one another for dominance. She believed strongly that she'd done right by George's daughter, and that working for Mrs Eldridge was a suitable next stage in her rehabilitation. It was hard sometimes to believe that Alice was nineteen, that she'd spent a year in France nursing the wounded in this dreadful war and then, for a brief while, become a mother, for it was as though the young woman had regressed into an angry, pouting adolescent. Her behaviour just now had been disgraceful.

Alice had resented her ever since Gwen had set foot in Wentwood House five Christmases ago, when George had introduced her to his children as his wife. The marriage had already taken place. Gwen had suggested to George that she meet Teddy and Alice beforehand, but George, who was such a sweet man, had wanted to surprise them. A Christmas

present of a new mother! What a wonderful idea, so touching and thoughtful of him. He was living in a bubble of happiness, dear George. Anyone could see that she, sensible Gwen Wright, had lifted him from the sadness he'd sunk into after the death of his wife Mary. Thrown from a horse two years earlier, poor woman, when Teddy was thirteen and Alice twelve.

As for Gwen, she'd been a missionary in East Africa until her mid-thirties, but had increasingly hated it and, after suffering an attack of typhoid, returned home. Looking after a widower and his motherless children seemed an appropriate new vocation. She had met George at the wedding of some mutual friends.

She knew she had made a difference. Dear George no longer spent every hour of the day at work, that was one good thing. She brought order to the chaotic household; that was another. Meals now came promptly, and the food was much better than when she'd first arrived. Making changes had not been easy. The parlour maid had been sent packing for failing to dust properly and Cook had resigned twice, both times having to be persuaded by George to stay.

The running of Wentwood House brought up to standard, Gwen turned her energies to George's poor bereaved children. Here she was brought up short. All sentimental hopes that she would fill the gaping hole left by Mary's demise were quickly dashed.

Fifteen-year-old Teddy was a tearaway, perennially close to expulsion from the minor public school where he boarded. At home in the holidays he would mix with the local lads, working alongside them in the fields for a few shillings or helping with the shoot. As long as he was out and about, at the centre of whatever was going on, he was content, but Gwen was horrified. Really, if war hadn't come, and had he not signed up

eagerly as soon as he was old enough, she didn't know what she'd have done with him. He'd grown up quickly, as they saw during his periods of leave, becoming a fine officer with a deep empathy for the men, some of whom had been his boyhood companions.

And finally, impossibly, there was Alice. George had, from somewhere – the sainted Mary, no doubt – gained the ludicrous idea that his daughter should be properly educated and had sent her to a girls' day school in a town a few miles away. It was one of those progressive places which believed in teaching girls beyond their needs and Alice had loved it. So far as Gwen was concerned it had taught her scandalously little to prepare her for a destiny as a wife and mother. Alice exhibited no interest in the running of Wentwood House. Instead, her head had been stuffed with useless knowledge of Latin, mathematics and science. Speaking French, granted, was elegant, and had no doubt proved useful with her nursing, but then the distressing thing happened that no one who knew of it must speak about, and here Alice was back home, refusing to do anything except mope around and feel sorry for herself. *You'd think she'd show some remorse.* Gwen had, after all, saved her from absolute ruin!

Yes, working for Mrs Eldridge would be a safe thing to do for a while, to get Alice back on her feet. She'd have to be clever, though, if she were to catch a husband. There was a dreadful shortage of young men; such a tragedy. But maybe there was something suitably useful Alice could do in life. It had to be admitted that she was a pretty girl, with that mass of honey-gold hair, creamy skin and wide green eyes. So tall and graceful, too, though a little on the thin side. Perhaps she still had a good chance.

From inside the bedroom came the sounds of footsteps, the

opening and closing of drawers, a murmured curse. Satisfied that Alice was getting up, Gwen turned and crossed the landing to her own room to make preparations for the journey.

Three months later, Alice was walking home through St James's Park beneath a lowering sky. It was her afternoon off and she'd spent it glumly wandering by the Thames, as she'd done more happily with Jack during their short, sweet time together. The park was emptying of people, it being late with rain threatening, and she hurried on, head down, hardly noticing her surroundings.

'Alice, Alice Copeman, by all that's holy.'

Alice stopped short at the familiar voice. A petite young woman in a cape had drawn up beside her. Sparkling blue eyes and ginger hair coiled over her ears under a nurse's cap.

'Jane!' she gasped and her heart leaped to see her old friend, but she hesitated before meeting her embrace and it was enough to make Jane Forder study her face, forehead creased in concern.

'How are you?' she asked tentatively.

'Very well. Do you work nearby?' Alice rushed on, anxious to deflect Jane's attention. 'I thought you were still in France.'

'No, I had to come back six months ago. Daddy had a funny turn. He's all right now, well, more or less, but Mummy wanted me close. I'm at the Westminster. It's not too bad. Certainly after what we had out there.'

Alice closed her eyes briefly against the images that flooded in, the tents crammed with beds and straw pallets, the bodies laid outside in the mud, the terrible stench, the boom of the big guns and the whistle of shells. When she opened them, it was odd to see fallen blossom on lush grass, a pair of eager sparrows pecking up crumbs. She felt herself sway.

Jane's warm hand gripped her arm. 'Are you all right?' Her friend drew her to a nearby bench. Alice sank down on it gratefully, but avoided Jane's concerned gaze. 'Alice, what happened? You left without saying goodbye. Didn't answer any of my letters.'

A cold drop of rain dashed against Alice's cheek.

'I'm sorry, Jane, I did mean to write but I wasn't . . . myself.'

'After what happened I'm not surprised.'

'What do you mean?' Alice felt panic. Had her friend guessed her condition?

'The news about Jack. I don't blame you for being miserable. If that happened to darling Bobby, I don't know where I'd be.'

Alice nodded, then smiled briefly. She remembered meeting Jane's childhood sweetheart when he sneaked a visit to the camp once; his wry smile and quick gesturing hands as he told grim, mocking tales about army life. 'How is Bobby?'

'He's got leave,' Jane said brightly. 'I'm meeting him off the train tonight. In fact, Alice,' she rushed on, her cheeks flushing, 'I should have written. We're getting married on Tuesday. It's only a small affair. The church where I was christened. Perhaps you'd come? I know Mummy and Daddy would be pleased to meet you.'

A tide of desolation threatened, but Alice held it back and hugged her friend warmly, genuinely pleased for her. 'That is wonderful, darling, and no more than you deserve. Bobby's a lucky man. But I'm sorry, I can't come. I'll be working.' In truth, if she begged, Mrs Eldridge would probably give her the time off, but she couldn't bear to go and witness her friend's happiness. It would be too painful. Tears at a wedding were all right for sentimental old ladies, but not the raw grief of the young.

'You're a VAD still, are you?' Jane asked.

Alice shook her head. 'I know this may sound odd, but I'm a companion in Mayfair. Rather a sweet old thing, but awfully strict and old-fashioned. There's an unbreakable routine. If I'm a minute late to luncheon I'm in trouble.' In response to Jane's disbelieving expression, she hurried to explain. 'It's Gwen, my stepmother, who fixed it. It's to build me up. I've been . . . unwell, you see. Quite low.'

'I'm so sorry to hear that, Alice. A companion does sound a bit dreary, though. What about your plans? You can't have forgotten what that doctor told you—'

'All that's on the back burner for the moment.'

'Not for ever, I hope. You loved nursing.'

Another drop of rain splashed on Alice's face and another. She pulled up the collar of her coat and frowned. 'I should have brought my brolly.'

They walked briskly over to a pretty wrought-iron bandstand under which they sheltered, swapping news about people they knew. Alice had little to contribute to the conversation though; she'd deliberately not kept in touch with anyone. Since she'd left France she'd tried not to think about her life at the camp hospital near Camiers. But talking to Jane now about the nurses and doctors they'd known, the soldiers they'd cared for who'd risked their lives in this senseless war and suffered grievous wounds to body, mind and soul, she remembered that sense of purpose. How useful she had felt then, how fascinating she'd found the delicate workings of the human body, how satisfying it had been to cheat Death of a faltering spirit through careful nursing. Strength and longing pulsed through her again, so that by the time the rain eased and the women parted with vague promises to stay in touch, Alice felt more alive and filled with energy than she had for many months.

*

Alice was right about Mrs Eldridge who, for all her strictness, had a soft heart. Sometimes she studied her young companion with intelligent watery brown eyes and probed her gently about her ambitions. Alice avoided giving straight answers to her questions because she wasn't ready. It wasn't nosiness on Mrs Eldridge's part, Alice recognized, but genuine concern. 'I can't think why you're wasting your youth on an old thing like me. You'll be off and away soon, I know you will,' she said once, though Alice gallantly protested.

She'd have to do something else soon, because she was honestly bored to death. She hardly saw her father or stepmother, though she looked forward to the weekly letter from her father, which she read avidly. He wrote mostly about life at Wentwood, which made her long for home. The farmworkers had asked for a wage increase, because they had to work harder as there were fewer of them. He was considering their request. A mangy stray cat had hidden itself under a sagging sofa and terrified Gwen by yowling when she sat down. He missed his 'little Alice', but hoped 'she'd stick to her guns for the time being, eh?' There was no offer of money, which was a nuisance because the pittance Mrs Eldridge paid her on top of board and lodging was quickly spent. For the moment, anyway, she was indeed stuck.

Meeting Jane, however, started her thinking. *'You loved nursing.'* Her words were like a worm, wriggling about inside her mind. The doctor in France whom Jane had referred to, a young sandy-haired Scot, was one of the few of his generally high and mighty colleagues who spoke to the humble VADs. He had told her about his sister, Elsie, who, aware of the wartime shortage of doctors, applied to the Women's Medical School in Edinburgh. To his joy they'd taken her. He sounded

immensely proud of her and Alice admired him for that. Then, to her surprise, he'd gone on to say, 'You should try too, with your schooling. You'd be good at it, I can tell. You're calm like Elsie and you make good decisions under pressure.'

She pondered her future as she searched for lost spectacles, supplied answers to crossword clues and played bridge with Mrs Eldridge's elderly friends. Maybe after the wretched war was over, when her brother Teddy was safely back at Wentwood and everyone less harrassed, she'd approach Daddy again about university. She'd talked about reading science at Cambridge once, a long time ago, but Gwen had been against it and because of the war she'd gone to be a VAD instead. Then Jack's death and the baby had happened and she'd lost sight of all plans. She was still trying so hard not to think about it, to stuff it away in some attic in her mind so it wouldn't have the power to hurt her anymore.

Living in Mrs Eldridge's elegant Mayfair house helped because it had no associations with her past. It was like turning to a clean page. She could start again.

There were still times, though, when Alice was alone, that her thoughts would take charge and dart where they wished and, before she knew it, the image of that small, kittenish face with its appealing eyes would appear and she'd feel a tenderness in her breasts. It would then take a while to wrestle the memory into submission. This had to be done. If she gave way to tears anymore, she believed she'd go mad.

She remembered what her stepmother said when she'd started at Mrs Eldridge's. 'You must forget the child. You must use all your strength to put away what happened and get on with your life. Tell no one, ever. Pretend it didn't occur. It's the only way.'

Alice had recoiled from Gwen's harshness then, but now, as

she grew stronger, she came to see that this advice would help her survive. Her months at Mrs Eldridge's were many things: tiresome, frustrating, frequently lonely, but it had helped to think of them as a convalescence.

Then came a night when a strange thing occurred. Alice woke in the darkness with the strong sense that someone had called her name. She pushed back the covers and slipped out onto the landing to listen, but the house was quiet. When she opened her eyes next it was morning and she realized she'd come to a decision. She would forge her own career, her own path in life: she would find a way to train as a doctor.

In the end, her nascent plans did not have to wait long. There came an April afternoon when she returned from changing the old lady's library books to find her employer asleep in her favourite armchair, a sleep so deep that the maid could not rouse her for tea. The doctor was summoned urgently, but to no avail. Mrs Eldridge died the following day.

Though Alice was sad, she felt released. After the funeral, she packed up her few possessions, certain that she stood on the threshold of something new and exciting.

She would speak to her father and stepmother and she would persuade them. She was determined. At the age of twenty, love and motherhood were behind her. There was something else important she had vowed to do with her life.

Three

Suffolk, July 1918

Edith sat up, hiccupped, then reached for the glass of ginger cordial on the bedside table. She'd retired for an afternoon nap, but found it impossible to sleep. Her head ached and although the door was shut, she could still hear ten-month-old Irene's piercing wails and the nurse's soothing country voice all the way down in the kitchen. She replaced the glass, took up a damp flannel and sank back on the pillows with a sigh. As she dabbed her throbbing temples Edith reflected on the unfairness of life.

A month's approval. It wasn't enough time to gauge whether a baby was right for you. Not much longer than for a dress bought from a mail-order catalogue.

She and Philip had been married nearly five years before they'd decided to adopt. They had hoped and prayed for a baby of their own, but time had crept by and nothing had happened. Even the most insensitive of their acquaintances had stopped asking when they were going to 'do their duty' and start a family. Embarrassed, probably. Or, more likely, absorbed in their own sufferings during this dreadful war.

Soon after their second anniversary, Edith consulted Dr Stevens. A married man with children of his own, she knew he meant to be kind, but it had been a humiliating experience. 'Let's have a look at the works, shall we?' he'd said, handing her up onto the bed in his surgery. She flinched from his cold hands while he shone a light into her most intimate parts and poked about with a speculum as though she were indeed something mechanical. 'Everything's in good order, Mrs Burns,' he said with a twinkle. After that, if she saw his avuncular figure in the street she would nod and hurry on, unable to meet his eye.

It had taken months to persuade Philip to seek medical advice, but when eventually he did, the tests offered the same conclusion. There was no obvious medical reason why Edith might not conceive. All this should have been comforting, but instead she had become consumed by bitter frustration. It must be her fault somehow. Maybe she wasn't *relaxed* enough, but then she found Philip reserved in that area of their lives as in much else, and their lovemaking was usually a hurried affair, not displeasurable, but a relief to them both when it was over. He would roll off her with a 'That's it then, I s'pose,' and sink into a deep sleep, leaving her to lie on her back, quivering in the darkness, hoping that this time a baby would start.

When they'd first announced their engagement, Edith's friends and family had viewed Philip as quite a catch. 'Maybe not as handsome as my Bill,' her forthright sister Muriel had said, 'but he's a good sort and you won't want for anything.'

Edith had been thankful to escape for ever her widowed father and the farm cottage, the tears and roughness of her upbringing. She had worked hard at school, determined to better herself, and she had managed it. At seventeen, she won a college bursary to study shorthand and typing. With

certificates and a glowing reference, she'd secured a job with the land agent's office in the coastal town of Farthingsea, and for four years she'd been ever so happy, earning her own money, though less pleased to be living with Muriel. Her middle sister had married a signalman on the railway, and given birth to three boys in quick succession, which meant that Edith had to share a bedroom with Bill's niece, the put-upon unofficial nursemaid, and the two older boys. The girl snored because of adenoids.

During the course of her day Edith sometimes nipped up the High Street with paperwork for Ratchett & Ratchett, Solicitors. Although it was one of the typists she dealt with there, she sometimes saw the junior solicitor, Philip Burns, a quiet, well-spoken man who always wore a formal tailcoat. His plain face was pleasant and he always greeted her politely. It wasn't hard to guess that he was unmarried.

The cracked mirror over the bedroom washstand reminded Edith that she was no beauty either, with her small, beady eyes and thin lips. But she made sure that her suits were clean and fitted well so they showed off her trim figure, which she felt was her best feature. Neatness was her watchword. She spent ages in the mornings coaxing her pale flyaway hair into a smooth coil on her narrow head, and used powder to take the shine off her long nose. There were other ways she made the best of herself, too. She switched allegiance from the Nonconformist chapel to the Anglican parish church, and it was there that she and Philip had their first proper conversation one evening after a concert in which he had sung a short solo. She plucked up the courage to approach him and praised his fine tenor voice. Blushing, he asked where he'd seen her before and she pinked up in turn because he'd forgotten.

Philip lived with his mother, a stout widow who wore black

bombazine and a disapproving expression. A few weeks after the concert she died in hospital after a fall. Edith took care to write Philip a letter of condolence in which she alluded to the loss of her own mother ten years before. It touched a chord with him, he wrote back. One Sunday after evensong he confided that he had recruited a housekeeper whom he was finding not much of a cook. He told Edith he could not dispense with the woman's services, as she was recently widowed and easily distressed. Instead he'd decided to eat a good luncheon out when he could, then she'd only have to prepare a cold supper. Shyly, he asked Edith if she would care to join him one day.

As they ate together for the first time, at The Nelson, which did a very good set meal, she studied him carefully. He wasn't much to look at. His round face was jowly and he was slow and careful in his movements, but she liked his gentle chuckle when she recounted stories of her employer, who had a habit of sneaking out to the pub to place ill-judged bets on the horses.

It wasn't a passionate courtship, but Edith was content. She liked his three-storey brick villa in Jubilee Road, with its view of the sea between rooftops, and thought she would choose a live-in maid – she would have no qualms in sacking the housekeeper. As for Philip, he said he had often thought that he should marry. It would make his clients feel settled about him. And so it was arranged between them.

When war broke upon the world that sun-baked August day in 1914, Philip was too old to volunteer. When conscription was brought in and the upper age limit raised, he was excused because of weak lungs, extreme short sight and flat feet. At first Edith was secretly ashamed, but no one else appeared troubled by it and no coward's white feather was handed to him in the street. He was the sort who looked

older than his years, at thirty-seven undoubtedly middle-aged, his thick-lensed spectacles a result of years reading small print, his round-shouldered stoop from hunching over dusty tomes.

They were lucky, Edith realized, as she scanned the casualty lists in *The Times* or passed a bath chair in the street bearing a once sturdy young man whose legs had been replaced by a blanket. There was still plenty of work for Philip. People always needed lawyers and so their standard of living continued as before. She was barren, yes, barren (she would whisper the awful word to her reflection in the bathroom mirror) but she kept her sadness to herself. Others' grief for lost husbands, sons and brothers was more important than her disappointment.

'At least you've never had a child to lose,' the next-door neighbour told her curtly, after a telegram arrived regretting the death of her youngest. Edith had called to express sympathy, but her words had somehow come out wrongly and the bereaved mother had snapped at her. She'd made her escape and swallowed a nip of cooking sherry to calm her nerves.

Five years and no child. Edith first mentioned adoption to Philip after she read about Belgian refugee orphans in *The Times*. The couple had just decided they weren't sure about a *foreign* baby when she had spotted Miss Chad's appeal in the classifieds.

Downstairs, little Irene continued to wail. Whether it was teething or tummy ache, Edith had no notion. What was the matter with the child? She had been a difficult baby from the start, always wanting to be held, when Mr Truby King was quite clear in his popular childcare manual that this was entirely wrong for Baby's development. Only Philip appeared

able to quieten her, but he was at work all day so Edith had had to cope alone.

They'd prepared a story when they'd brought her home to Farthingsea, that Irene was the child of one of Philip's West Country cousins, killed along with his wife in a motor accident, a dreadful tragedy, and of course Philip had offered to step in and take the child. The neighbours accepted this fiction. Whether they questioned it was another matter. The important thing was that a respectable front had been put up.

More difficult to overcome was Edith's failure to accept that this strange little girl was actually hers now. Irene's face had filled out and she no longer put Edith in mind of a stray kitten, but her thick dark hair and deepset blue eyes were alien to Edith, like a changeling's. Edith's memory would often wind back to a vision of the placid, golden-haired tot at Miss Chad's nursery. That child would have looked much more a part of the family.

By winning Philip's heart, Irene had stolen all Edith's hopes. To be fair, Edith had wrestled against her resentment of the baby. She knew it wasn't right to blame Irene, but it was difficult to love a child who was inconsolable. In addition, she was jealous of her husband's close bond with Irene. Edith couldn't help how she felt, could she?

Then a miraculous thing had happened. Edith sighed and stroked her still-flat belly. She was happy, oh yes, delighted, but no one had warned her how ill the condition would make her feel. She'd not been able to manage Irene properly because of the nausea, so Philip had hired a nursemaid. For Edith was finally expecting a baby of her own.

Why this had come about after years of fruitless wanting was not easily explained. Dr Stevens said smugly that he'd always told her that it was only a matter of time. Muriel was

sure that it was down to having a baby in the house, it 'made things flow'. Philip thought she'd been too busy with Irene to worry about herself, so that something inside had settled. Time, flowing, settling, whichever it was Edith didn't know. The important thing was that she was having a child who would be hers indisputably, blood of her blood, bone of her bone. It was a part of her now, growing inside, though she hadn't felt it move yet. Everything would be perfect.

Or would be, if it weren't for little Irene.