

VINTAGE REID BANKS

Two is Lonely

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Jane's son David is eight years old and Jane is filled with doubts as he grows up without a father. Toby, her first love, has gone to Israel after the collapse of his marriage to Melissa. Then there is Andy, close at hand, a complex personality with his own problem son. In the background is Terry, David's father, an amorphous shadow hanging over them.

This intense, compassionate novel completes the the trilogy which began with *The L-Shaped Room*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynne Reid Banks was born in London in 1929 and was evacuated to the Canadian prairies during the war. On her return to England she studied at RADA and was an actress in the early 1950s; later she became one of the first two women reporters on British television. Her first book, *The L-Shaped Room*, was published in 1960 and was an instant and lasting best-seller. Lynne Reid Banks is also a best-selling author of books for children and young adults. Her classic children's novel, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, has sold over ten million copies worldwide. She lives in London.

ALSO BY LYNNE REID BANKS

The L-Shaped Room
The Backward Shadow
Fair Exchange
Dark Quartet

TWO IS LONELY

Lynne Reid Banks

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

ANDY

Chapter 1

IT HAD been an awful night and I came to in the morning, with the deepest physical reluctance, to find the alarm clock hatefully clamouring and my head and mouth and limbs giving me unmistakable messages of woe and protest as if I'd been on the worst sort of binge.

I hit the button on the clock so hard I knocked the thing off the bedside table, and heard the noisy ticking stop with the ringing as it hit the floor. I cursed hard, hating the world and everybody in it, and rolled over on my face. My eyes were sealed shut with tiredness; the morning sunlight streaming in over the downs was an affront. My mouth felt dry and my fingers swollen. The idea of getting up to face life and housecleaning and shop-keeping and being a mother, after being a mother the whole damned night when I should have been asleep, just seemed too bloody, bloody much.

It had been most nights now for weeks. Get David to bed at nine, and myself—exhausted from the day and from the night before and the days and nights before that—at ten thirty; two hours' sleep, and then—the urgent, frightened, imperious cry: 'Mummy! Mummy!' If I didn't respond, he would come into my room and into my bed. Once I had been so tired I hadn't woken up sufficiently to take him back, coax him, sit with him, and do all the right and proper book-things; he had slept curled up next to me the whole night, and in my sleep I had wrapped my arms around him and held him close to me, a warm, alive, male presence against my breasts and stomach and thighs, moving a little sometimes in sleeping contentment, and I, befuddled, dreamt he was Toby and woke up in the morning with a sense of horror and shame, as if I'd debauched him . . . This feeling rebounded in anger against him and there was an awful scene, far more shameful to me and

harmful to him than the physical companionship of the night . . . But I was tired. The tiredness was to blame. How can you go on, night after night, being patient, being kind, playing games he wants to play which are not really games but frightening manifestations of some deep inner disorder that you are afraid to let yourself guess at—wondering when, if ever, it is going to pass, what you can do about it, how to find out what is really the matter when he won't tell you . . . Does he know? Do you really want to know? Because whose fault can it be but yours, who else can you blame—except the child himself, and you do blame him sometimes when the strain becomes too much—'David, you're just putting it on, all this! I'm not coming in to you any more, you can yell as much as you like, you're a big boy and this is all nonsense—' And stopping at the look of mulish bewilderment on the small, loved face.

But even these basic considerations fade as the weeks go on; all you ask yourself then is, how can I go on, how can I stop myself hating the child for keeping me awake? Even the whys no longer seem to matter, only the how-longs have weight, because it's like torture, it's a constant rubbing friction on a relationship. The exhaustion, the bewilderment, the shame, made me short-tempered even during the day; my work suffered, my friends suffered, my child suffered. I suffered.

I'd taken him, first to a doctor, who after examining not David but me, prescribed a mild sleeping draught for him which I was afraid of but which in desperation I finally tried—unsuccessfully; then to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist did examine him. She took several sessions over it. Then she examined me.

'Has he ever asked about his father?'

'At one time he used to ask a great deal, but that was—oh, three years ago. Now, he never mentions him.'

'Doesn't he notice that he's different from other children in this respect?'

'His closest friend—my partner's daughter—is also fatherless. That helps him not to feel too isolated.'

'In what way is she fatherless?'

'He died.'

'Does David know that his father is still living?'

'Yes.'

'And you say he never mentions him?'

'Never.'

'But you realise he must think about him.'

'I've had no indications of it. Why should he hide his thoughts from me about that? He's quite frank about everything else.'

'Miss Graham, no doubt he gathered from your reaction when he was talking about it and asking questions that the subject made you uncomfortable.'

'But it doesn't.'

She said nothing to that. Whenever she said nothing, I came to take it as a sign that she thought I was fooling myself—or trying to fool her. At first it used to annoy me, but later, when I went over our conversations, I realised that she was very often right—certainly in this instance.

'Does he tell you why he is afraid to sleep at night?'

'He's never told me he's afraid to sleep. He just says he doesn't want to sleep, or he can't.'

'That's a child's way of saying he's afraid.'

'But why has this come about only recently? Until he was six, he slept perfectly well.'

'Until a child is six, he hardly realises he's different from other children. Even the Thalidomide children were mentally and spiritually quite happy and satisfied until around that age.'

This violent comparison shocked me, as it was meant to.

'David's a normal child.'

'During the day, he is. But night time for a child is rather like strong drinks for an adult. It brings truths to the surface which are otherwise kept hidden.'

‘But hundreds of children—thousands—’

‘Manage with only one parent? Oh yes. And some manage very well. And others don’t.’

‘Then you’re convinced that this—wakefulness of David’s is the result of his coming to realise that other children have fathers and that he hasn’t?’

She looked at me for a moment. She was a very unusual-looking woman, with a face like a caricature of a cat—high quizzical eyebrows, small snub nose, wide mouth like a cupid’s bow enormously attenuated at the ends, and short black hair clubbed into a youthful fringe. But she was over fifty, and the effect of the girlish hairdo was a little bizarre. However, she had the ‘right’ type of personality for a psychologist. She wasn’t a Freudian. I’d made sure of that first. All they do (Jo had told me, having been to one in her youth) is to sit and listen. I wanted practical advice. But getting it in this way was sometimes a bit more than I could readily take. It wasn’t so much what she said as the things she left me to figure out by myself from her silences, her mildly-raised eyebrows, her sudden, wry pursing of the lips, when the long corners would draw in suddenly and she would put the forefingers of both hands up to the place where her eyebrows joined. She seemed to be trying to conceal from me some impulse to frown in dismay or disapproval—no, disapproval is the wrong word; *pity* for what she saw me revealing, and which she could interpret. This sudden movement of the hands and mouth always put me on the alert to what I had just said.

‘Have you never thought of marrying?’

I laughed a bit. ‘I hear there are unmarried women who don’t think of marrying,’ I said, ‘but I’ve never known any personally.’

‘And in seven years, you’ve never met anyone . . .?’

It was I who was silent now. In seven years I had met several men. But the simple fact was that they were all—including Pietro with whom my relationship was strangely

simple, and now Andy, with whom it was strangely complex—overshadowed by the two who pre-dated the birth of David: Terry, his father, and Toby.

Terry, looked back upon, seemed like a shadow, some *deus ex machina* who had set upon me like a legendary shower of rain and impregnated me on the solitary occasion of our mismating. He was no more solid in my memory than that, and I thought about him as little as possible, which was very little indeed. My only thoughts connected with him were watermarked with fear, fear that he would one day get so fed up with his barren second marriage that he would really set about finding us and would batten onto us—or even only onto David—laying claim to him in some way and upsetting us both beyond calculation.

Since the telephone conversation I had had with him several years before, I had had no contact with him, and yet from time to time, sinisterly as it seemed to me for I was anxious only to avoid all thought of him, he was brought to my attention. One day when I was leafing through a film magazine in the local launderette I had been thrown into confusion by suddenly coming upon a photo of Terry, a Terry somehow indefinably altered, not merely by years. I had sat there gazing at it numbly. ‘Terence Boyden, ex-rep actor who for the past seven years has neglected show business for the world of publishing, returns with a new smile (a *new* smile?) and, so he tells us, a film contract only waiting for his signature . . .’ I peered closer. Yes, it was new. The crooked front teeth were gone, replaced by artificial-looking straight ones . . . and some trick of the photographer’s light had invested his head with a sort of halo. He no longer looked quite male, or even quite human . . . I shivered and threw the thing down, grimacing, so that the woman at the next washing-machine opened her mouth to ask what was the matter . . .

And Toby?

I had told the psychiatrist the basic facts about Terry, but I had not mentioned Toby. Not mentioning Toby had become a deeply-ingrained habit with me over the past five years. Since Dottie's departure for America, which more or less coincided with Toby's marriage, I had shut him up inside me where he occasionally fought to get out like an imprisoned genie. But he was safer in than out. I did not talk about him, even to Jo, my friend and partner. It had been bad enough, Dottie knowing. Now there was no-one left in my life who knew, except John, and John, with his mysterious dark-continent insight, also seldom mentioned him.

I sighed heavily. 'Yes, I've met men . . . quite a few. Never the right one, somehow.'

'Right for whom?' the psychiatrist asked.

'For me, of course . . .'

Her fingers flew up and made a steeple under the sudden ridges between her eyebrows.

'No, really!' I protested. 'A woman must choose a husband for herself, surely?'

She didn't answer.

At the end of the counselling, she said: 'David needs a father. He needs one very badly.'

I asked the question I feared to ask. 'Will—will this terrible night-waking go on, then, until—I get married?'

'Oh no! It can't. You might never marry. He can't keep it up indefinitely—physically, he must be getting tired, as you are. Besides, it's a phase. But it's a phase which, because of its very painfulness, is useful. You see you couldn't just ignore it, as you may have done other signs and symptoms in the past. The point is that while it lasts, you must try to come to terms with his lack. And do something about it. Because one morning you'll wake up after sleeping all through the night, and you may think to yourself, "Thank God, it's over, he's cured", only of course he won't be cured at all, it will just have gone to another place where it may

not be so obvious but may be eating holes in him just the same. And later on he may eat even bigger holes in you than he is at the moment. Because everything that's wrong in his life has to be your fault.'

'You mean, it must seem so to him?'

She drew in the corners of her mouth, then spread them again quickly in a smile.

'He's a very bright child, you know,' she said as she shook my hand.

'I know. It's something to be very grateful for.'

But she didn't answer that, either, directly; she only said, 'Well that depends how you look at it.' Only then did it seem to me that she had said, 'He's a very bright child, you know' as if she'd been saying, 'Look out.'

And now here I was, still lying half-comatose at 8 a.m. swallowing down gall and wormwood with my weariness, dreading the moment when I would hear him pattering along the wooden corridor in his bare feet, the moment when he would leap on top of me expecting his morning romp or at the very least a cuddle and a cheerful face. I had a million things to do, and not the slightest will or energy to do any of them.

And I'd broken the god-damned alarm clock. I groaned aloud and turned my head sullenly towards the window. Without raising myself, since the bed was right against it, I could look out into the spring countryside.

I was so tired that the tiredness opened up a gaping chasm into the depths of my mind, where unnameable fears lay blackly, slimily writhing. I didn't look, of course, but I knew they were visible—I could feel them moving there in my brain, going look-at-us, look-at-us. Suddenly I jerked upright and forced my attention onto the beauty outside the window. Green, with a backdrop of soft purplish hills, hedges that the farmers hadn't yet cut down to make room for another yard of crops. No motorway, no blocks of flats or factories or building developments of any kind; not even

an airport whose flight path led over my cottage. Not so much as a pylon. So much to love, so much to be grateful for . . . I felt the tears coming, tears not of gratitude but of loneliness and terror. It was day, and now David would be himself, he would go riding his pony with Amanda and laugh and be naughty and hug me or fight with me; he would eat with good appetite and I would look at his sturdy eight-year-old figure and be comforted; I would congratulate myself, I might even get smug again and think 'Alone I did it!'—exult in him as my sole accomplishment. And then night would fall.

What if I'd been fooling myself all the time, all through the years of effort? And if I'd harmed David, if my life with David had been based on a mistake—if *that* achievement was nullified by an inner canker, what of my personal victory? Oh, but I already knew the hollowness of that. Not all the time; sometimes I could kid myself about that too, and think I was happy and fulfilled. But not when I was tired, or depressed, and not in the cold darkness of the night when David was forcing me to be awake and aware of, instead of hiding in the merciful oblivion which had protected me before. To wake alone at night to a recurrent challenge—ineluctable physical and emotional demands—how it brought it home, the solitariness of a task meant to be shared!

And now I heard him coming. It had been a worse-than-usual night to which he had paid minimal tribute by sleeping in—not the four hours I would have slept if left to myself, but twenty minutes longer than usual. Now, with a child's quick-recovery potential which even a healthy 36-year-old woman can only gape at with bitter envy, he was fully awake and ready for his day, untrammelled and (apparently) untroubled. His feet came thud, thudding up the carpetless stairs, and I heard the whirr of the spinning-wheel on the landing as he spun it. His morning ritual. ('Has he any obsessive habits?' 'Yes, he spins the spinning-

wheel every time he passes, and won't throw out his gum till he's chewed it at least a hundred times.') And now, his head round the door.

And instantly, if temporarily, all the black anxiety and guilt and anger and even the weariness fell away, because of the dearness of him, the perfection. Small, dark, neat head; horizontal eyebrows cornering downwards at the outer ends, huge brown eyes, a smile of devastating potential . . . No, not quite perfect, for there were the two crooked teeth exactly where Terry's had been. Lovely well-developed little body. Athletic, by God . . . There at last was something to thank Terry for. My own school memories are still blotted by run-off races where I couldn't even beat the slowest, fattest child in the class to get into the relay team. . . . I could never quite believe in David's ability to climb trees and run and ride—and jump, which he now did straight onto my stomach with both feet.

'OW! God! Get off!'

He fell down on top of me and we wrestled briefly.

'Can we go over to Amm's today, Mummy?'

'You can, on your bike, if you keep to the side of the lane and are very careful.'

'Aren't you coming?'

I hesitated. I could easily tell him it was my day at the shop; he never kept track. Then when he'd gone out for the day, I could catch up on some sleep. But the lie wouldn't come out this time, though minor lies were not always beyond me.

'I'm pretty bushed, David—after last night.'

I hadn't meant to reproach him. If there was one thing that woman had taught me, it was that he couldn't help it. In any case, it was useless. His reaction was always the same when I brought up the nights during the days. He frowned slightly, moved away from me a little, and changed the subject.

'Amm and I could go out on our ponies, and leave you a map with a cross where you had to meet us with the picnic. Oh, Mummy, do let's!'

He lay on me, belly to belly with the bedclothes between us, his face poised eagerly a few inches from mine. I felt his slight but formidable weight on me and I trembled suddenly.

'You cold, Mummy?'

'No . . . Get off, darling, will you? I must get up now.'

'And will you come today?'

'Okay then.'

'YIKE!'

'Only darling, I must, *must* have a nap this afternoon. Will you promise to play quietly?'

'Promise. Or I'll stay over at Amm's if you like.'

'Well, we'll see. Now go and get dressed, and don't forget your teeth.'

'Why don't you wear pyjamas in bed, Mummy?'

'Because I prefer a nightie.'

'Amm wears a nightie but she says it gets up under her chin and leaves her bottom bare.'

'Oh do dry up about bottoms, David! You're obsessed.'

'What's obsessed?'

'When you think about a thing far more than it needs to be thought about.'

David dawdled on the bed and watched me getting dressed.

'Why do you do everything behind your dressing-gown, Mummy? Amm says Auntie Jo goes around the house with nothing on in the mornings.'

'Do you want me to go around with nothing on?'

He considered. 'No, but not to hide, either.'

'I'm not exactly hiding. I'm just being modest.'

'What's modest?'

'Keeping covered what ought to be kept covered.'

'That's hiding.'

‘Oh dear—perhaps it is. Well, that’s how I am. If you want a bare Mummy rushing around the place, you’d better move in with Auntie Jo.’

David rolled over on his back with a snort of laughter.

‘Bet she wouldn’t rush around bare if I was there!’

‘No, I bet not too. Why’s that, do you suppose?’

‘Because I’m a boy, I should think.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But Amm and I see each other’s bo—I mean, bare.’

‘David, honestly, you know there’s a difference between a little girl and a woman.’

‘Yes. Bosoms.’

This word had its inevitable effect of reducing him to such a helpless condition that he fell off the bed.

‘Oh come off it, for goodness sake! Go and dress yourself.’

Eventually I had to hike him to his feet and propel him through the door, hiccupping, and he tottered off to his own room crying ‘Bottoms!—and Bosoms! Alive, alive-o!’ I went downstairs and got the breakfast ready. While the eggs were poaching I went out into the hall and phoned Jo.

‘Hi—’

‘Hi, Jane, don’t stop me duck, I’m on the verge of being late.’

‘Never mind, Georgie’s always there to open up.’

‘The employer should be there first, you know that. Besides, we’ve got that consignment from Brum to unpack.’

‘I did it before I left last night.’

‘Oh really? You *are* good, thanks. Listen, what about the kids today? Any plans?’

I told her David’s.

‘Can you face it?’ she asked. ‘What of the night?’

‘Unspeakable—don’t even ask.’

‘Poor, poor you.’

‘My eyes aren’t properly open yet. Never mind. A breath of fresh air’ll do me good, and after lunch I thought I might

leave David at your place and get some kip—would that be all right?’

A slight pause. Jo was never happy about the kids being left alone. ‘Why don’t you sneak up and kip on my bed? Then you’d be around if they needed you.’

‘That’s a thought. Right, I’ll do that then.’

‘What about supper? Shall I bring home fish and chips?’

‘Yes—I can’t face cooking.’

‘Don’t blame you. You must be buggered.’

‘That’s an understatement.’

‘I’ll be back by 5.30. If you’re asleep I won’t wake you. I’ll feed the kids and, if you like—’ I knew what she was going to say and I knew why she’d stopped herself. In the good old days, David often used to sleep at Jo’s house with Amm. But you can’t do that, even to your best friend, especially when she’s the kind of sleeper that even the alarm-clock doesn’t always wake. ‘Well,’ she broke off, ‘maybe not. Though we might give it a try one night; you never know; maybe he wouldn’t wake up if he knew you weren’t going to be able to come.’

‘You don’t know how he is at night. I’d be afraid to risk it. He might go into hysterics or something . . .’

‘It’s hard to imagine . . .’

For Jo, perhaps; but she’d only ever seen David’s daytime self.

While David ate breakfast, I prepared the picnic to his instructions and incidentally swallowed three cups of very strong black coffee. After that I went upstairs, undressed again and had a cool bath. Then I made the beds and tidied up and washed the breakfast things, and by that time I felt a great deal better and David was literally dancing with impatience.

‘Mummy, come *on!* It’s nearly ten o’clock. It won’t be worth going—’

‘Take it easy. I asked Auntie Jo to tell Amm to catch the ponies and saddle up—they’ll be ready to start when we get

there.'

'If we ever do.'

Just as we were leaving the cottage, the phone rang. David nearly burst into tears.

'Oh, leave it, Mummy! Please leave it!'

But it's against my nature to leave a phone to ring.

'You open the gate and unlock the garage door. I won't be a moment.'

'Good morning,' said a voice I knew.

'Andy. Hallo.'

Anything? Something, undoubtedly. A feeling as if the skin of my face were being lifted. A slight breathlessness. I was given to these acute moments of self-analysis. I wanted to retain my objectivity, and this seemed one way.

'I'm phoning in the hope of persuading you to spend the day with me.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I can't.'

'It's not your shop-day. I've been counting.'

'When it's not my shop-day, it's my children's day.'

'Are you taking them out?'

'They're going riding and I'm meeting them with a picnic.'

'Sounds fun. Couldn't I come? I'll bring my own grub.'

I hesitated. 'But I don't know where we'll be meeting. They set the place always.'

'Well today you set it, and make it somewhere near the site.'

'Well—all right. Let's say one o'clock.'

'Good. I'll expect you.'

He hung up without goodbyes as he always did. His curtness was not a lack of manners; it was more as if he rationed himself for words, as if he were determined not to allow himself to waste any. His movements, too, were almost nervily direct and contained. Sometimes when we were together I longed to stroke him, soothe him somehow, make him relax with me . . . I thought if he relaxed

physically, if he were not always so *stiff*, so spare and squared-off and unsprawling, I might get that mouth of his open and some words out of it which would let me know what the hell was going on in his head. His speech was quite stark in its lack of frills; like his blueprints—like his buildings, as a matter of fact—his sentences came out in clean pre-fabricated neatly-finished shapes—geometrical. He never stumbled or withdrew anything or repeated himself. It put me off him, and yet, perversely, attracted me. There was more there; I knew it. Shut away, but there. That hidden human being I could sense, huddled inside those hard straight lines of certainty, order and purpose made me wonder bemusedly from time to time whether it was possible that I could love him.

Often I was quite sure I couldn't. How can one love a man who never reaches out to you, never offers you any part of himself or, for that matter, invites you to give any of yourself to him? Anyway, he was often pompous. Once he'd said, while we were having what ought to have been a cosy drink together in the Swan, 'Geometry is founded in natural laws, and so are we. We unearthed the laws of form and numbers, dug them out of the world like ore. They're impregnated with us, and we're impregnated with them.' I choked on my beer. Who the hell, I wanted to say, can find a warm, on-coming answer to a remark like that? And the insane thing was that even while this mini-lecture was in progress, I got a strong intuitive feeling that he was trying to *woo* me. His hand, a traitor to its orders I felt sure, suddenly shot out at the end of his speech and enclosed mine, a hand as warm and male and desirous as his words were remote and didactic and impersonal.

This was, and had been during the whole two months I had known him, the pattern. During his dry, often witty but never forthcoming comments over a dinner-table, his eyes, his hands, his whole inner self would be *yearning* towards me in a way that had me utterly confused. Every instinct I

had told me that he loved me and wanted me, and often it was hard to tell whether what I felt for him was an answering, concealed desire, or merely a burning curiosity bordering on exasperation.

Physically he had attracted me from the first time I saw him, leaning against a gate with his large black Rover parked in the lane right in my way. When I honked, he'd turned in my direction with an expression of thinly-veiled annoyance as if I'd interrupted a mood of cogitation.

'Could you please let me get by?' I asked politely, leaning out of my own car window.

'Oh,' he said, straightening reluctantly from his gate, 'sorry.'

As he took the few steps to the Rover, I saw he was tall, square, solid—the antithesis of Toby; middle-aged, middle-class, well-dressed, square-featured, brown-haired, clean-shaven. I liked his looks; I liked his *bulk*. I've always seemed to fall in love with thin (Terry) or small (Toby) men; and a man like that who looked like a bulwark could not but appeal, other things being equal.

He drove ahead of me to a lay-by, where he drew in, and then leant across to roll down his offside window and ask, 'Are you local?'

I pulled up level with him. 'Yes. I live in a cottage over there. Why?'

'Only that we'll be neighbours.'

'Oh really? Where are you going to live, then?'

'Back there, where you first saw me.'

'But there isn't a house anywhere near there.'

'I know. I'm going to build one.'

Oh, God. Bulldozers, builders, noise, despoilation. I suppose it showed in my face (every bloody thing does, apparently) because he grinned a bit ruefully and said, 'Sorry. But it won't last long, the upheaval I mean, and after that I'll let nature take over again. It'll all look very green

and unscarred by the time I've settled in—I'll bury the house in trees—you'll hardly know I'm there.'

Our eyes met for about two seconds and something in me registered: *possible*. Later I asked Jo about him. She knew at once who he was.

'His name's Felix Andrews. He's an architect, quite successful I believe. Moving out of the Smoke and going to build his own country house. He's bought quite a large acreage from George Downing, over the other side of the wood.'

'Yes, I know, that lovely open bit where the children can ride. Has he got planning permission?' I asked unkindly.

'Must have, surely. What's he like?'

This question meant, Is he a possibility for either of us? And I answered it: 'Nice, early forties, but of course he must be married.'

However, Jo knew all about that too, trust her. 'No, he's not, not any more. He must have been, at one time, because he's got a grown-up son—'

'Doesn't necessarily figure, as we know—'

'Come on, we're not all like you.' I may say that after seven years of the closest ties, she only just knew me well enough to get away with that kind of remark, even though I'd asked for it. 'He's probably a widower. Anyway, according to the grapevine he's building this house for himself and his-son-at-weekends, sort of thing. It won't be very big. Meanwhile he'll be down in the district a lot, supervising the building. He's staying at the Swan.'

'With the Davies?'

'Yes. It was Alf who told me all about him.'

Alf Davies, who, with his buxom wife Dora, ran the Swan Inn, had once been my employer. They had a daughter about the same age as David called Eleanor, known to Jo and I as Little Nell because she was so precisely the opposite of that pathetic waif—a fat little blonde replica of her mother, rosy-cheeked, good-natured, lolly-sucking,

over-dressed and spoilt rotten as the only offspring of besotted parents (well, Dora wasn't all that besotted, and frequently redressed the balance with a good clout on her ample bottom when Alf wasn't looking). Naturally she was the butt of contempt of all her school-fellows, including my son, whom I could reduce to howls of outrage by reminding him that he had often, as a baby, shared a bed with her. I had a number of photos, taken by Alf with a flash, to prove it.

Alf, having despaired of the large family he had hoped to raise, had turned the slack of his overflowing energy to being the village gossip and matchmaker. Dora, uncooperative in the matter of child-bearing, was more keen on Alf's substitute enthusiasm, and, to hear them tell it, they had already 'brought together' several couples towards whose children they adopted a possessive attachment even when they were not invited to be god-parents. They both took a special interest in me, of course, and I couldn't help wondering whether all this information, filtered through Jo in Alf's typically elephantine idea of discretion, might not be directly aimed at promoting a match between me and this stranger.

'I couldn't marry a Felix, could you?' I asked unguardedly, following in a completely unserious way this train of thought.

Jo looked at me sharply. 'Hey! Was he as attractive as that?'

'Oh, don't talk cock.' (Dottie's style, not mine; I was startled to hear myself say it, especially to Jo. I only use male swear-words under high pressure. I hadn't realised, till I said that, that I felt under pressure then.)

I had next encountered Felix Andrews in the saloon bar of the Swan when Jo and I went in there some days later to pick up our kids, who were in the Davies' living-room behind the pub attending Eleanor's eighth birthday party. This occasion held sufficient hedonistic promise to

overcome their everyday distaste for the hostess. I had thought this highly hypocritical and had tried to dissuade David from going, but he just looked at me as if I'd gone daft.

'But Mummy, it's her *birthday!* I mean, it's a *party*, with games, and presents, and special food, and a *conjuror*.'

'Well, I hope you'll take her something very nice, to make up for all your beastliness to her.'

'Oh yes . . . Mummy, will you . . .?'

'No, I won't! Out with the old money-box, my lad, a personal sacrifice is called for.'

Now I listened through the pub noises for the lighter, shriller sounds of happy children at play, but hearing high-pitched shrieks instead I raised my eyebrows questioningly at Alf, who looked harassed.

'Just a little *contra tomps*, I expect. With twenty-two of them in there, you can't expect much peace and quiet.' He listened a moment, then his face changed. 'My Gawd, it's Nelly! What are they doing to her?' And he dashed through the dividing door, leaving the bar unattended.

Several customers came in just then, and for old-time's sake I ducked under the bar and began to serve them. Jo said, 'Oh, come on, ducky, you don't have to do that, he'll be right back,' in a slightly put-out tone, but I was enjoying myself and the jokes of two old-timers who knew me from my first year in the village when I'd acted bar-maid for Alf out of necessity. Now, when I had lived down my dubious fame as an unmarried mother and become a respectable shop-proprietor and—so to speak—village matron, it was amusing, and fun, to find I could still pull pints neatly and hadn't forgotten my skills.

Suddenly I caught sight of Felix Andrews. I became self-conscious, and stupidly, snobbishly, wished myself on my own side of the bar. However, I had to brazen it out now, so I went up to him.

'What would you like?'

He was staring at me. 'Hallo Do you work here?'

I was relieved to get the chance to explain at once, and I did. He smiled. Did I detect relief there, too? We're all snobs at heart, we English, all of us. And yet the feminine machinery went into automatic motion, because I immediately registered his relief as a compliment. Why else should he care if I was a bar-maid? What sort of list would I be struck off, if I were? He held my eyes, once again, a fraction too long for perfect casualness. I turned away quickly to serve someone else, and left it to Alf to find out what Felix Andrews wanted to drink.

The party, Alf informed us (all smiles now, having discovered that his Nelly had worsted her persecutor with a fat-handed blow to the ear) was going like a bomb, but was at the present-giving last stage. Our young would soon be available for us to take home. Meantime we might as well have a noggin—I think he was about to say 'on the house' but then he caught the eye of the architect and, divining his intention by instinct, bit back the words and waited. Sure enough, he came across to us. Seen like that in isolation, crossing a room towards us, he was easy to appraise as a good-looking, confident man. Jo straightened herself and I sensed her favourable reaction, even before she knew who he was.

'My name's Felix Andrews,' he said. 'May I buy you both a drink?'

Jo accepted for both of us. Odd, how often I felt the age-difference between us, not in any loss of sympathy or understanding, but in a sharp and fleeting feeling every now and then that we were basically of different generations. She had passed some subtle, fortyish borne into what I can only term middle-age, however lightly it sat upon her, while I was still—well, not exactly young, but *not* yet middle-aged. I wondered if it had anything to do with the change of life, which Jo was now passing through. It was something I viewed with horror and dread, though

paradoxically I didn't (yet) fear growing old. It wasn't so much a matter of losing my youthful looks, smooth skin, and so on. I just hated the idea that I wouldn't be able to have any more children. The opposite was true of Jo. She reckoned she'd been lucky to fit in even one child, marrying as late as she had, and Amanda seemed to satisfy such maternal instincts as she had quite amply. But she had been a beauty; she had had quite a few lovers and many admirers. I couldn't escape the conclusion sometimes, listening to her talk about her days in the theatre, that it was the admiration more than the love which had been important to her, and that was no doubt why she had never married until at 37 she suddenly woke up and realised that what mattered now was to secure herself against the time when she would not be a beautiful but not very talented actress any longer. Happily she got love, and admiration too, from Ted, and the baby was more like a gift to him than a satisfaction of any basic need of her own nature.

Now that her looks had begun to fade—her hair no longer bright blonde of its own volition, her delicately-boned face beginning to look a tiny bit simian with wrinkles under her ever-more-careful make-up—she couldn't help mourning the beauty she was losing. I who had no beauty to lose, only youngness, sympathised deeply, though for the first time I could see that the lack of beauty could be an advantage.

We sat down together at a table with our drinks, and began to exchange polite pleasantries. Jo asked all the questions to which she already knew the answers. Felix Andrews didn't hide the fact that his work was the most important thing in his life; I liked him for that, though I kept wondering where his son came in—he didn't mention him. He did, however, say that his wife had died four years before.

Quite soon Alf beckoned us. The party was over. We said goodbye to Felix Andrews, shaking hands with him. I felt the unmistakable current of his maleness running into my

hand, and I smelt his male smell. Later, Jo was to say, 'I should say only about two per cent female hormones in that one.' Jo has a basic animal quality which reacts instinctively to the male and female animal in people she meets. I thought, (though I did not say so because I knew Jo was watching me and suddenly about this I didn't want to be watched too closely) 'Yes, there's a very male animal there which is looking for a mate.' I was a little frightened by the purely physical *frisson* this thought gave me.

'We'll be hearing from him, I expect,' I said casually.

'You will, you mean,' she promptly replied. She fixed her sharp bright blue eyes on me. 'Interested?'

'Don't know yet,' I answered as shortly as friendship allowed . . .

Chapter 2

‘M^{UMMY!}

I started guiltily, wondering how long I’d been standing there, my hand on the phone, brooding. I was always brooding these days. David kept having occasion to say sharply, ‘Your eyes have gone dead again.’ It hurt me to realise how much more often my withdrawn thoughts were with Toby than with Andy . . . Today, for instance, I had been awake (more or less) and functioning for two hours and until I heard his voice and got my face-lift I had not thought about Andy actively. This did not conform to previous love-patterns. As I walked out to the car I did a quick memory-recce—had I thought either of Toby? No. Somehow that made it all right. Toby and Andy were forever paired in my mind, like racing figures, or like weights on either arm of a scale; I watched them always and minutely to see who was getting ahead, cursed my folly, and continued to do it.

The post van came bumping up the lane, and the postman handed me my letters through the window. ‘Sorry I’m late, mum,’ he said. (He knew I was not entitled to more than a ‘miss’, but he had long ago granted me the ‘madam’ as a courtesy.) ‘Mr. Broughton’s boy left the gate open and his cows were all over the place. Had to back up and tell him, and then we had to chase ’em back. Took best part of half an hour. I wouldn’t like to be that lad when his dad catches hold of him.’

And our anachronism gave me a cheery wave and went bumping away out of sight round the hedgerow. I watched him go. Soon he would go for good. His route along this country lane had already received its doom in the form of the accursed word ‘uneconomic’.

It was a bare ten minutes by car to Jo’s house. It was much larger than the cottage and elegance itself by