

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



September Starlings

Ruth Hamilton

About the Book

Laura Starling, now wealthy and successful, has survived a bitter past. She fled from a tyrannical mother into the clutches of a sadistic man. She endured poverty, fear and pain. Then along came Ben Starling, older, wiser, who smoothed her path and gave her love and security.

But now Ben has become a stranger who has slipped beyond her reach. As her stability threatens to disintegrate once more, a thin, waif-like girl from Liverpool thrusts her way into Laura's life – a girl who is to prove a link with the past. But no one can help Laura make the decisions that will alter the course of her existence. As the September starlings gather, Laura realises she must take courage and forge her own future.

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About the Author

Also by Ruth Hamilton

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THE SEPTEMBER STARLINGS

Ruth Hamilton



CORGI BOOKS

For Margaret Vincent

Many thanks to:

Michael & David

Diane & Meg

Danielle & Kevin

Irene Cunningham, who made house-moving almost bearable

also

The Reverend Geoffrey Garner, Anglican Rector of St Mary's, Bow, in London, who certainly knows more about the Catholic saints than I do.

Author's Note

There are two real people in this book – Danielle McGregor and Kevin McCann. I ‘stood in’ for Laura Starling and asked the questions Laura might have asked. I thank Kevin for his poetry, especially for ‘The Trouble with Wings’, and Danielle for allowing me to read her work on Sachsenhausen. Without the support of people like these two, writing would not be such a joy.

Part One

Chapter One

The water dances, seems lighter than the soft breath of air that fans my cheek, brighter than the lofty dome of sky. I bite my lip, force back a tide of emotion too mixed to be identified. The fear has gone, has left me cold and bare. The fear has been my closest companion for many months and I cannot imagine how I shall live without its presence. Like an old toothache, it became my familiar, a nagging, complaining escort.

The village of Barr Bridge is smaller, shabbier than the image I brought with me this morning. When I was ten, the bridge across this stream was wider, stronger, a substantial part of my existence. Now, my eyes reach high above the pitted and corroded rails, while two adult strides can almost cover the meagre span. Middle age has come to me and I have carried it to a place that was always old. Yes, I have come here to remember, to collect my thoughts.

I fell in once. We were throwing things over the sides, through the bars and into the happy brook. It still giggles and gurgles, prances hysterically over time-slicked stones, celebrates its own prettiness as it splashes and splits into prisms of pure joy. For what reason? How brief its self-laudatory pleasure will be! There is water in my eyes, a wetness whose salt pricks like onion-tears. Do I feel pity for this tiny ribbon of stream, do I mourn already for the reach it will become as it makes its merry way to town?

Anne called to me. 'You'll fall in, Laura!'

'I don't care.' And I really didn't care. In the first decade of a child's life, safety does not sit high on the agenda. 'My paper boat will get through before yours does,' was my

rash response. I hung from the bridge in the manner of a trapeze clown who purposely courts disaster so that an audience might be amused. It was a long way down and I took an age to meet the water. The cold thrill of it snatched my breath away, but the spasm of terror that was almost pleasurable was wrenched from me and I felt no more. She dragged me out, heaved my waterlogged body up among the reeds. I was waking, becoming aware, yet she screamed wonderfully at the sight of my torn and bleeding forehead.

She loved me, loves me still, continues to worry about her wayward cousin. My hand raises itself until it finds the scar, a small and crescent-shaped blemish that hides coyly beneath the hairline. Anne, too, has a scar, larger than mine, a silver blemish on her lovely face. Her mark was made by a man whose name I seek to forget, though it is hard to erase from memory the creature who shaped my young adult life.

I am here for a reason, have followed my instincts to this bridge. Did I come just to remember a summer day in 1950? Do I want to hear my mother's voice again? 'You've ruined that frock,' she snapped. There were sutures in her daughter's face, yet she worried more about ripped stitches in two yards of gingham. And yes, the socks were new and spoilt.

A flash of silver catches my eye as a small fish is swept along towards its doom. The stream bustles on, displays that familiar, manic glee as it plumes over the sloping bed to dash thoughtlessly into the future. Just as I did. This carefree babble knows nothing of its fate, is blissfully unaware of its destination. If it knew what was in store, would it defy nature and gravity, would it stop and turn back? I didn't. I just kept going, was as stubborn and stupid as Barr Brook. Down there, in the town of Bolton, the stream's beauty will die, turning first to pewter, then to a stinking foam of bleach and effluent. Won't it? Does it

happen, is there a bleachworks, is cotton still spun here in 1992?

I had no more sense than this blind waterway. Although I could reason, could listen to advice, I bumbled and blundered along into my own premature decay. With this place, I have an affinity.

I turn and look at the village, just one street of cottages with an 'everything' shop at its centre and a pub at the base of the slope. Like the stream, Barr Bridge totters down the hill, each house leaning on its neighbour, the whole lot depending for support on the Black Horse. The Black Horse has not stood still, though. It has moved on, has become an eating place for Sunday families. There is tarmac at the back, a grey surface sectioned by thick white lines where cars can be stabled to recover after the climb from town. Rustic tables and benches front the pub, red and white umbrellas advertise vermouth, spread their gores above the seating area. Progress. They probably have prawn cocktails, chicken-in-a-basket, Black Forest gateau, foreign cheeses. There'll be quiz nights, folk music groups, theme parties.

I walk across the cobbles, stand on the narrow pavement. These flags have shrunk - I recall that they were huge and uneven. Steps punctuate the path, but they are no longer steep. I lived here through my teenage years, when I was fully grown, returned as a mother for temporary stays, yet I still see this village with the vision of a child. It is true, then, that we remember in patches, that our minds leap about and settle where they will. Although I reached my present height at the age of fourteen, I keep Barr Bridge firmly in the 'childhood' compartment of my memory.

The inner doors of the Black Horse have not been renewed. The brewery has kept the coloured glass, though one small section has been repaired, replaced by a pane of thick, plain frost. Twin brass handles do not shine, but they

are comfortingly familiar. I will hold this in my mind, because the rest of the place will be altered past recognition.

There is a deep-piled carpet of red and gold stretching its garish opulence right up to the bar. I smile. We used to run in here for dares, used to take pennies from evening domino players whose days were spent tilling the land and tending animals. They never told our mothers, never brought trouble on our heads. Anne and I were probably a part of their fun, something to take minds off a difficult calving or a broken fence.

The bar is the same, chunky, solid, hewn from a dark red wood that boasts a beeswax sheen. A small blackboard at one side announces PUB GRUB, and a glass case houses sandwiches, pork pies, pasties, a few ploughman's lunches. The tables are various, some square, some circular. A huge painting of a black horse occupies the upper half of a wall, the animal's stance reminiscent of an advertisement for one of the bigger banks.

The place is empty save for one very small old lady who crouches over a glass of flat amber fluid, possibly cider. The landlord emerges from a door marked PRIVATE. 'Can I help you?' he asks. He is young, agile, wears tracksuit bottoms and colourful training shoes. Once behind the bar, he is smart in the white polo-necked jersey, displays manicured nails and two gold rings. 'A tomato juice,' I answer finally. Who will come and eat all his food? The unmistakeable smell of Lancashire hotpot has followed him through from the PRIVATE rooms. 'And a cheese sandwich,' I add, worrying about his profits.

He serves me, is deft with the steel tongs as he removes my food from the case. 'One pound forty,' he states dispassionately. No need to concern myself about him, then. It's a small sandwich with a large mark-up, so he'll doubtless survive. 'Anything else?' His mouth tweaks, promises a smile, does not deliver.

‘No, thank you.’ I take plate, glass and change, decide on a whim to linger. Each New Year, I promise myself that there will be no more whims, yet I continue erratic, impulsive. ‘I used to live here.’ Why am I talking to this sullen young man? ‘My father was John McNally.’

At last, a stiff and rather professional smile. He reaches out a hand, waits until I have deposited my lunch on the counter. The grip is firm. My sapphire and diamond cluster has twisted, cuts into an inch of the adjacent finger. I struggle against the urge to flinch and draw away. ‘Charles Roe.’ His tone is clipped, especially when he spits out the ‘Charles’. I would wager a small fortune that few have dared to call this man Charlie. ‘Your father did Barr Bridge a lot of good, Mrs ... er ...’

‘Starling. Laura Starling.’ I win back my hand, feel the blood as it stings its way back into crushed digits. ‘I’ve just come to have a look at the old place.’

The arms fold themselves, while the dark head nods pensively. ‘This village would have died off but for McNally’s. Do you have anything to do with McNally’s these days?’

‘No. My mother is the major shareholder.’

He whistles. ‘She’ll be worth a bob or two, then.’

I am used to Lancashire bluntness, but this man is more calculating than the usual Bolton lad. ‘I wouldn’t know.’

He is staring at me, the cold marble gaze seeming to cut my soul. Barr Bridge remembers me, then, has engraved me into its folklore. I was the one who ran away, who turned her back on a comfortable life, disappointed her mother, broke her father’s heart ... ‘Where are you living these days?’

‘In Crosby.’

‘Liverpool?’

‘That’s right.’

He leans closer. ‘Your mam?’

‘She lives in Crosby too.’

Snow-white incisors bite the lower lip for a split second. 'Does she live with—'

'No. She has a retirement apartment.' He is annoying me. I should not have begun this conversation, am beginning to lose patience with myself. 'I'll sit down now.'

My table faces the rear of the building. The geriatric car I have named Elsie is cooling off just outside the back door - I can see her right-hand headlight fixed on me like another calculating stare. To the right of the main bar, a large extension of glass and wood crawls further down the hill. A NO SMOKING sign sits over the entrance to this pine-clad dining area. The cloths are white and crisp. Some quiet music escapes from the smokeless zone, creeps across the bar and into my ears. It is 'nothing' music, the sort that lulls its victims into a comatose state. With their senses dulled to the point of paralysis, the Black Horse customers no doubt pay inflated prices without too much thought.

Mr Henderson used to sit here, at a longer table. Five or six of his cronies would join him, each with a pint glass in one hand and some small change in the other. Brows would furrow beneath caps whose peaks were pulled low as shields for giveaway facial expressions. Poker-physogs, these old men used to have, though Anne and I called them domino-sulks. Sometimes, when the game was really vicious, my cousin Anne and I would stand unnoticed for minutes, our breath held tight in our young chests as we watched the silent fighting. A domino would tap sharply to announce a pass. Mr Henderson always cleared his throat before placing a tile on the ale-stained wood. Sometimes, the quiet was broken by an angry shout. "'Ow long 'as tha 'ad yon three, Bert Entwistle? 'As tha just picked it up? On'y yer passed afore till tha got a double. Nay, I'm not sayin' tha's cheatin'. 'Appen it were a mistake. Sit thee down, no need to jump off th' 'orse, its nobbut a game.'

I can hear them now. If I close my eyes and breathe in the smell of stale beer, I can be a child again. Halfway up the slope, Auntie Maisie will be baking bread. Boys from the little school will be chasing about, running after wooden hoops or chasing a rubber tyre. Inside the school, Miss Armitage is no doubt picking at her lunch, two fish-paste sandwiches with the crusts cut off, an apple, a piece of white, crumbly Lancashire cheese. She has a secret. Anne and I are sure that she has a secret.

Doors slam, bring me back to the here and now. The car-park is filling up and some men have entered by the back door. McNally's. That's how the landlord makes his profits, then. I have a sensitive nose and, even from this distance, I can pick up that slight liquorice scent. While Father's patent medicines were in various stages of development, the smell of liquorice often clung to coats and shirts, used to enter our house with him. Mother tried to wash it out of clothes, but it was a stubborn odour, a comforting one. This is my father's empire. He is now a pile of dust in the ground, yet he still lingers here, on the farm he bought for a pittance after the war. These men and women who stand at the bar with their Kalibers and lemonade spritzers are the children of John McNally. They are not of his loins, but they are born of his brain.

I must go outside. The landlord is leering in my direction, pointing me out with a brown, beringed finger. Old McNally's daughter has come home, perhaps she's wanting some power, a say in the running of the factory. Maybe she's regretting that hasty exit with ... what was his name, now? Did she marry him? Will you go and talk to her, Doreen, it'll come better from a woman. I imagine the gist of their talk, flee outside before I can be accosted by a Doreen out of quality control, a Rita from the packing department.

When I stand on the pavement again, the old woman who was drinking cider is waiting for me. In my hand, I

carry the remnants of a dry cheese sandwich. I break it, scatter it for the birds. She has fixed her gaze on me, is boring through me with her eyes.

‘I know you.’ The rusty tone is quiet, yet accusatory.

‘I lived here. A long time ago.’

She coughs and extends a yellow claw in my direction.

‘Laura. Is it Laura?’

‘Yes.’ I need to be alone, must find out why I have come here. It’s hard to work out the answers when the questions are still a mystery.

‘Laura.’ The two syllables drift out of her mouth, then the lips clamp themselves tightly while the ancient crone considers me. ‘Laura,’ she repeats at last. ‘McNally.’ She congratulates herself, straightens the drooping shoulders. ‘Anne Turnbull was your cousin. She went on to university and became a solicitor. I was so proud of her.’ A grin bares dentures that are as jaundiced as the fingernails. ‘What did you do with yourself?’

‘Nothing.’ Who the hell is she?

The mouth is sucked inward again, works in an infantile fashion that seems to be a part of growing senile. ‘You must have done something. We all do something, you know. I was your teacher and you loved my stories. I remember how your face would light up when I opened the book.’

Oh no, this woman is older than God! When I was ten, she must have been nearing thirty. She wore romantic blouses and a hopeful expression, always had a cameo pinned to the lace-trimmed neckline. Five blouses, she had – white, cream, blue, mauve and pale pink. If we were uncertain of the day, we needed only to look at Teacher’s blouse, because her life had a rhythm that defied interruption. To this very day, I remember that Monday meant blue. Her skirts were either navy or grey, always long. When the ‘New Look’ came in, Miss Armitage was suddenly fashionable with her just-above-the-ankle clothes. Anne and I would whisper behind our sum books. ‘Do you

think he died in the war?' And, 'Someone will come to marry her, because she is so beautiful.'

She is no longer lovely, looks older than her years, which probably number seventy, perhaps seventy-three. 'Miss Armitage.' I reach out and touch a frail shoulder. There is no substance here, no discernible bone in the flesh. If I press hard, she will crumble like an autumn leaf - no - more like a leaf from a withered and unread tome of ancient poetry in some dead, forgotten language. 'How are you?' I manage.

'I am very old and very tired, but I hang on just to make a thorough nuisance of myself.' The beady eyes are keen, do not match the rest of the picture. 'The pension pays my rent, buys me a glass of cider on a Friday.' The eyelids droop as she rakes my body with a stare that almost makes me shiver. 'Come into the house.' She turns, stumbles on, knows that a child from her class would never presume to disobey. I am fifty-two, yet I follow as meekly as a mindless sheep.

The cottage has a sitting room and a kitchen on the ground floor. Stairs rise out of a corner of the front room, but there is a bed here, in an alcove to the left of a tiled grate. She lowers her frailty into a padded rocker. 'Can't get upstairs any longer. They come once a week, carry me to the bathroom and give me a lick and a promise. Thank goodness the landlord didn't demolish the outside lavatory, or I would now be totally robbed of my dignity.'

There's another seat, a squarish armchair upholstered in a linen-effect cloth whose pattern consists of roses in improbable shades of pink and fuchsia. I sink into it, study the room. There are prints of flowers with plain wooden frames, some certificates, a sepia photograph of a child with its parents. On the beige mantelpiece, between two candlesticks of heavy brass, sits a young man in an RAF uniform. Above his head hangs a scroll whose mount is plainly home-made, just a sheet of glass and passepartout. I

know instantly that Miss Armitage has managed this herself, that few have been allowed to handle the item.

I check myself, curse my own rudeness, open my mouth to speak. But she is sleeping, has fallen into that deep slumber which is reserved only for the very young and for the ageing. Her jaw sags, while the ill-fitting upper denture rests on her tongue. In the hearth sits a rack containing three short-stemmed pipes, but there is no man here. And these are ladies' pipes – I saw them on sale in Devon many years ago. Miss Armitage has, it seems, discovered tobacco rather late in life. The stains on her teeth are caused by pipe-sucking, then. The pipe is her pacifier, her security blanket.

So, forty-odd years on, I have seen Miss Armitage's secret. The mantel is like an altar with the photograph as its centrepiece. Some tired violets sit to one side of the young airman, while a pale silk rose fills another small gap. Beribboned medals lie flat among the flowers, while twin steel cufflinks squat in a saucer, their oval surfaces displaying a worn crest. A matching tiepin skulks behind them and I cannot bear her pain, her loss. Was this her brother? No. A dead brother might be kept upstairs in a drawer, but only a lover would merit long years of naked devotion.

'He's dead now.' The false teeth click as she speaks. Does she know that she has been sleeping?

'I ... presumed that he was dead.'

She nods. 'Last year. After I lost him, I too became infirm. They talked about me, you know. After all, I brought him here in the sixties, didn't marry him. They realized eventually that I was fit to continue as a teacher in spite of my loose morals.' The irises glisten wetly. 'And they even helped, came into the house while I was in class, bathed him, took him for little walks. Bless them, bless them all.'

My memory stirs, tries to speak to me. Yes, there was talk, but I was too busy with my own problems, too caught

up in trying to keep one step in front of my biggest mistake. Auntie Maisie spoke about a man, and I didn't listen. But I must say something now. 'So ... he didn't die in the war?'

She shrugs and I hear a bone grating and creaking. The woman has wasted almost to nothing, so her skeleton must be wearing away too, leaving her bones brittle and fine. 'The war killed him. For over ten years, he stayed in a hospital for ex-servicemen. When the hospital was closed, the authorities wanted to move Richard to a psychiatric unit. His father was dead and his mother was ill, so I brought him to live with me. I could not have allowed him to go into an asylum.'

I swallow audibly. 'Was he difficult?'

'Not with me, not with the Barr Bridgers. He was at home, you see. I was the only person he remembered well. When I explained to him that I would need to continue working, he accepted the kind people who replaced me during school hours. At the end of a couple of years, we even managed to throw out the sedatives.' The small head lifts itself proudly, causing the bundled hair to loosen at the base of her skull. The bun wobbles, threatens to break free, settles like the ill-placed nest of some hasty bird.

Does she want me to ask? If I do ask, she might become upset. If I change the subject, then I might be accused of coldness. 'What happened to him, Miss Armitage? If it's too painful, don't talk about it.'

She sighs heavily, blinks a few times. 'Richard was a rear gunner. His plane went down and the rest of the crew died, they were all burnt to death. Over the years, in his darker moments, he could hear them screaming. The plane was low when he jumped - or so I was told by those whose fighters survived the mission. The Germans got him and his wounds were treated after a fashion.' She halts, fingers a crocheted armrest. 'A bump on the head, you see. Some of his brain died. He was judged to be so deranged that he was not imprisoned in the normal sense. The Nazis placed

him in a mental hospital in Poland. No-one spoke English and most of the patients were probably beyond communication in any language.' She leans back, closes her eyes.

'And he stayed there till the end of the war?' I ask.

'Longer than that, my dear. He seldom spoke, you see. In 1947, a Polish doctor recognized that Richard's few words were in English, so he was brought home and put into the veterans' hospital. Somehow, his story was pieced together and he was reunited with his mother. But she could not have managed him. When she told me the details, I went immediately to visit him. And he knew me, responded to me. Laura, I could not have allowed them to put him behind bars again. We were engaged to be married, but that was not to be.'

'No.'

The blue eyes are wide again. 'We had some happy years. Not as man and wife, you understand. It was like having a child of my own, someone who depended on me for almost everything. Then, when I retired, we were together all the time.'

'I'm so sorry, Miss Armitage.'

'Don't pity me. My life has not been wasted, Laura. I taught many children, gave them a good start. There would have been no other man for me. At least I got back what was left of him, was able to cater for his needs.'

This is all too much for me. I am so near to her – my recent experience mirrors hers too closely. After a few garbled words about being excused, I dash up the steep and narrow stairs, find myself in a bathroom whose area has been stolen from the rear bedroom. Everything is pink. Although the house is rented, she has probably renovated it herself, has chosen warm and hopeful colours. Clusters of carnations spill down the walls until they meet rose-hued tiles. The bath, the washbasin, the lavatory are all pink, but

the fitted carpet is a plain burgundy to match the towels. It is all so clean. They look after her, then.

With my face still damp after a cold wash, I stand on the landing, hear the clatter of teacups. His door is open. Blue and white striped pyjamas are folded on a candlewick bedspread. Brown slippers stand on a mat beside the bed. On a pine chest, shaving instruments are laid out next to a man's handleless hairbrush. I am reminded of a piece I read years ago, something like, 'I am not dead, I am just in the next room.'

The handle to the front bedroom creaks as I push the door wide. It's all peach and cream in here. Over the space where her bed used to stand, there is another photograph of Richard, but she is with him this time. They hold their hands towards the camera, fingers intertwined so that her tiny engagement ring will show. And I am crying now, weeping for the gentle soul who bathed my scraped knee, comforted me when Mother's cruelty showed on my face. Twice I had Liza McNally's fingermarks printed crimson on my cheeks. But Mother left my face alone after Miss Armitage's visit. From that day, I was seldom beaten, and when Mother did lash out, she made her mark where it would not show.

Richard. I touch his image, whisper his name. I did not know him, though I heard and ignored the gossip during my brief stays here. My own difficulties swamped me then, left little space for interest in the troubles of others. But I understand, oh God, I understand. Miss Armitage's Richard has gentle eyes and a firm chin, is justifiably proud of his wife-to-be.

She calls. 'Tea, Laura.'

I am summoned, so I descend.

She is enthroned again in her rocker, has pulled out the mismatched Doulton for me. 'You've been crying.'

'Yes.'

There are roses on the cup, bluebells on the saucer and I am shaking. Was I sent here so that I would know the question? Does she have an answer? I sip, can scarcely swallow.

‘He died in the back bedroom.’ The tone is down-to-earth, commonsensical. ‘I was with him. Would you like some cake?’

‘No. No, thank you.’

She drinks greedily, noisily. ‘What do you do for a living, Laura?’

‘I write.’

The grey head nods. ‘I should have known that. You are comfortable?’

No need for lies here. ‘I am wealthy, Miss Armitage.’

‘My name is Alice. I can see from your clothes and from your jewellery that you have done well.’

‘I married well.’

The miniature face is clouded by confusion as she remembers my flight from this village. ‘But that boy was ...’

‘I married well the second time. He was a jeweller.’

She regains her composure, is glad that I gave her the opportunity to resume the perfect manners. ‘Was? Is he dead, dear?’

I shake my head. ‘He’s ... he’s in a nursing home.’

‘Oh.’ There is so much wisdom in her face, and it has nothing to do with age. She was always wise, always sensible. ‘Richard raved so. I bought the television set for him, because it seemed to soothe him. The memories were so dreadful. I should have hated for him to die when he was hearing the pilots’ screams. It was important that he should go in peace, or I might have imagined him suffering that terrible nightmare for all eternity. Are you sure about the cake, Laura?’

I nod. She is telling me something and I am impatient to hear the end of her message.

'Then I shall eat it. The old are allowed to be gluttonous.' She bites, chews, gulps, swills down the residue with a draught of tea. 'He is older than you?'

'Yes.'

Her cup clatters in its ill-fitting saucer. She probably uses a mug when she has no visitors. '*Coronation Street* tonight,' she states. 'I do enjoy that programme. Richard liked it. He died on a Monday, just before *News at Ten*. Though it hasn't been the same since Hilda left. The Street, I mean. Don't worry, this isn't quite dementia. I've always been a scatterbrain.' She sniffs, nods her head repeatedly, reminds me of Katherine Hepburn in that *Golden Pond* film.

I know all about dementia ... 'And he was peaceful?'

'Oh, yes.' She is staring again, is pushing her knowledge into my head. Her next words come in a whisper. 'There is the Maker in all of us, a little piece of the Lord. He tells us what is best, Laura. God guides our hand when the time comes.'

The breath catches in my throat. 'Did you ...?'

'Did I what?'

The clock's ticking is metallic and harsh. There are no words on my tongue and I feel weak, stupid. Who or what sent me here? Which entity planned that I should meet this old woman, drink tea with her, watch the dentures wobbling about as she stuffs herself with angel cake?

'I am terminally ill,' she says softly. 'At this great age, most of us are knocking on death's door. But I've a definite and specific condition. The diagnosis was made on the Friday.' She pauses, drags a dry, age-weathered hand across her mouth. 'And Richard passed away three days later. Just before the ten o'clock news.'

'Alice?'

'Yes, dear?'

'Are you suffering?'

Her smile is bright and brave. 'No, I'm just dying an inch at a time. I've no regrets, Laura, none at all. Will you wash

the dishes for me?’

‘Of course.’ I stand, lift the tray. ‘Thank you.’

The kitchen is tiny. In the parlance of today’s estate agents, it might well be a ‘galley type’ or a ‘kitchenette’. There’s a porcelain sink, a gas cooker, a 1950s-style unit with glass doors in the top, two shallow drawers, a letdown centre cupboard, two further drawers, then a couple of cupboards at the base. Tomato plants flourish on the tiny sill next to a miniature brown, blue and cream teapot with DEVON announced on its belly. Home-made recipe books are propped on a shelf, their covers made from school drawing paper, yellow, purple, fading magenta. There’s a rack of pans, a kettle whose whistle has been lost, an aged toaster, a colander on a hook. So clean, so poor.

Her garden is long and narrow, is not suffering. Someone has cut the grass, weeded the borders. No, she is not poor. They come and look after her, keep up her standards, love her for educating their families. This lovely lady is rich beyond measure and deservedly so.

‘Many of them have gone, moved on.’ She is behind me, reading my mind. ‘The cottages are mostly sold, bought by first-time buyers with babies and cars. But the farms have been handed down, you know. It’s the farmers who look after me. I miss your aunt.’

‘So do I.’ Auntie Maisie Turnbull was a wonderful woman, a giver of love. She was the only real mother I ever knew. ‘Anne’s living in Bromley Cross.’

‘She sends me flowers and plants, ruins me.’ There’s a catch in her voice and she covers it with a quiet cough. ‘And she takes me to her home at Christmas. She never married and that’s a pity, because she would have made an excellent mother. Have you kept in touch with her?’

I smile grimly. ‘Oh, yes.’ Without Anne, I would have been insane years ago. Anne does not discuss me, has not shared my troubles with Miss Armitage. Like her mother, Anne is caring, trustworthy.

Alice Armitage walks back into the sitting room, shuffles as she goes. 'He might have lingered for a while longer,' she mutters quietly. 'But I was unable to calculate my own span. Perhaps it was all for the best.'

I replace the Doulton, pile it carefully into the top of the unit where a mixture of china gathers in happy confusion. Did she help him on his way? Did she?

She is tired, has placed herself in the armchair. 'Is this jeweller husband of yours going to get better?'

Ben's face leaps into my mind. 'No.' I bite back an unexpected sob. 'He suffers. Like ... Richard did.'

She smiles sweetly. 'God is good. Be His messenger.'

Again, she is asleep. I creep from the house, tiptoe past the window, have almost reached the Black Horse before I breathe normally. Something is working in a mysterious way today. Questions, answers, an old woman who drinks flat cider and smokes a pipe.

I shall not go up to McNally's, because my father is not there. But I'll visit his grave, drive through Bolton, head for home on the M62. In Crosby, I shall rest until the morning, then the future will begin. But first, I shall wade through my past, look through the pages of my life and try to make some sense of it.

They've done things to my town. I always feel proprietorial about Bolton, wonder why I haven't been consulted by developers. How dare they tart up the old Market Hall, get rid of the Palais de Danse, stick a fast-food place just yards from the Victoria Hall? I can't drive through the main square, as it's been pedestrianized, but I can see the clock. When my insecurity showed, Dad used to say, 'Laurie-child, I'll leave you when the Town Hall clock strikes thirteen.' It never did strike more than twelve, but my sweet father went softly into his own night.

I'm going to my other home now. And I'm going to write everything on bits of paper. Elsie grinds her gears up Derby Street's slope, seems to be in a temper since I changed my

mind about the motorway. This is the old route to Liverpool – St Helen's Road, Atherton, Leigh, Lowton, East Lancs Road. When this long stretch was laid, families used to come and picnic on the verge. Watching the great road coming to life was easily as much fun as sitting in a picture house.

We take so much for granted, refuse to take the world seriously. Wars on TV, real wars with real victims. And we fail to notice because our senses have been dulled by over-indulgence in passive pleasures. I have just been cured of a disease that would have seen me off ten years ago, yet I sing no songs, fly no flags. Somewhere inside, I'm relieved to be alive, yet I feel nothing except the worry about my husband, my Ben. Perhaps I'm like the rest, then, all Barclaycard and Big Macs, no effort, no gratitude, no wonderment. Oh no, I tell myself firmly. If Ben could be cured, I'd be dancing on air to celebrate a double reprieve.

I am in Merseyside now, driving past Kirkby with its tower blocks filled with displaced persons who used to have a real life in a wonderful city. Again, we didn't scream our displeasure when Liverpool lost its soul.

Anyway, I'm all right, Jack, should be happy, relieved, shouldn't be thinking all these morbid thoughts. Was the fear my prop? Did my illness sustain me, allow me to be justifiably self-centred?

Now, I have to face it all. I have a fresh start with a mended body and a healed mind. Not many people get a second chance, an extra stab at life. A lot to think about now. There's Mother, Ben, my children, the activity I laughingly call my career. Time has been given back to me. And time is the most precious gift of all.

I must use it and use it well.

Chapter Two

I am forced to sleep alone these nights, and I miss his arms, his breath in my hair, even the snoring I once recorded for him on a thirty-minute cassette, a din that might have registered high on the Richter scale. He laughed, of course. Laughed, stroked his chin thoughtfully, chased me round the kitchen and, armed with a wooden spoon engraved with the legend A SOUVENIR OF SKEGNESS, threatened me with GBH. I love him so much. If I love him so much, then why can't I bestir myself on his behalf, why don't I keep him with me and ...? Yes, Dr Ashby, I heard you all right. Even now, your dulcet tones echo in my lughole. 'The treatment has taken a lot out of you, Mrs Starling. An all-clear doesn't mean you can pick up a broom and start sweeping the world's problems into a neat pile.' Bloody doctors. They carry on as if every last one of them is an emissary from God.

Benjamin Starling is here in this house, so I must not let the bubble of self-centred guilt rise up. I must go and see to his breakfast, paint on a smile, be happy. Yes, I'll do all that in a minute.

We had our honeymoon in Skegness, bundled the children into the car, deposited them at Anne's house, then went off to find a boarding house on the other side of the Pennines. It took a while to pick out the right place. People must have thought us weird, because we pressed our noses against a dozen windows before we found what we wanted. She stood in the hallway of the Shoreside Haven, wrap-around pinnie, arms folded, a turbaned scarf failing to hide

the curlers. Mrs Hyatt was her name. She was terrifying, of a breed that had begun to die out in Blackpool.

Ben was courteous, as always. He wanted a double room for six nights, plus full board with HP Sauce, the *Daily Mirror* and a gingham tablecloth. She didn't do papers. 'I don't do papers,' the dinosaur said.

'This isn't the Park Lane,' I advised him gently.

'Then I shall manage without my newspaper,' he said gravely.

His humour was infectious, virulent. The bed did not squeak, so he loosened a few springs, tested the tone until he achieved what he chose to identify as middle C. According to him, 'Air On A Bed Spring' should be played on everyone's wedding night. The next day, my disgraceful husband sat for two whole hours on the beach in a string vest, knee-length swimming trunks, flippers. And he wore a knotted handkerchief on his head. He was getting into the swing of it, he said, was becoming a comic figure from a postcard. Skegness was not ready for him, had become too sedate. But I was not sedate and I was ready for that lovely man.

This bed is vast, king-sized. Entombed in its barren acres, I miss the squeaks and I feel like a pea on a drum, a pimple on the moon's cold surface. Perhaps I should buy another, a single bed for a single woman. No, I'll never be single in Benaura. What a name that is! He manufactured it, of course, took one syllable from Benjamin, two from Laura. 'It's daft,' I said. He had prepared an answer. For him, it almost translated into 'bene' and 'atmosphere', implying that our house is surrounded by a halo of goodness. Has it been extinguished, then? Ben, Ben, my poor, sweet, gentle man.

As soon as the curtains are opened, I smell rain and feel the wind rushing across the creaking leaded window. Weather can be shut out now by a second sheet of plain glazing, costly interior panes supplied by some company in

Speke. The rep did not understand my desire to hold on to the frail lights, but I studiously resisted his photographs of patio doors in pale-brick dormer bungalows, of square pebble-dashed semis with sturdy plastic bays that were 'a dead ringer for mahogany'.

After a quick wash in the *en suite* so-called master bathroom, I make up my face. Sometimes, when he isn't here, I loll about in Jodie's old cast-offs, frayed jeans, long sweaters that almost cover my knees, then ankle boots or, if the climate is friendly, those thonged sandals called Jesus-wellies. But today, I pat my face dry, apply moisturizing foundation, blusher, lipstick, a greyish shadow that emphasizes my irises, still clear and blue after fifty-odd years. The 'odd' doesn't matter – half a century is enough, a reasonable number at which to stop counting.

I have kept my hair long, because Ben loves flowing tresses on a woman. All the fashion magazines insist that ladies of mature years should have short hair, but what do they know? The comb catches in a knot, twangs its teeth while breaking free. Perhaps those women's weeklies are on the right track after all. Tresses is definitely the wrong word. Wires might be nearer the mark, because my hair has toughened over the years and with various treatments, some performed by an effeminate and very pleasant young man called Adrian, others delivered in a hospital and against my better judgement. Still, they saved my life, I have to admit grudgingly. But my once healthy mop has faded to a salt-and-pepper blonde that performs cruel dentistry on many a comb.

I pull on my French navy suit, a good jersey wool with a scooped neck and elbow-length sleeves. A pearl choker hides the slight creping at the throat, while a quick dab of Chanel does its best to lift my spirits. She will be here shortly. She will stand on my doorstep with her back to the sea and she will make me know my guilt, my inadequacy.