

‘An emotionally intelligent thriller –
a little gem of a book.’ *Caro Ramsay*

THE PARADISE TREES

LINDA HUBER

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Linda Huber was raised in Glasgow and trained in physiotherapy. Her writing is heavily influenced by her experience learning about methods of behaviour and how different people react and deal with stressful situations.

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The Paradise Trees is Linda's debut novel.

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To Matthias and Pascal

Chapter One

Friday, 7th July

He had found exactly the right spot in the woods. A little clearing, green and dim, encircled by tall trees. A magical, mystery place. He would bring his lovely Helen here, and no-one would ever find them. No-one would hear her when she screamed and begged for mercy, and no-one would come running to rescue her, like they'd tried to with the first Helen. This time it was going to be perfect. A sacrament - something holy. He was looking forward to it so much.

He'd first noticed her in the village shop last weekend. She was buying bread and fruit, and he'd even helped her when she dropped an orange and it rolled down the aisle towards him. He'd picked it up and handed it back to her, and just for a second their eyes had met. In that brief moment he'd known. He had found another Helen. She had Helen's brown eyes, Helen's long dark hair; even the shape of her body was Helen. Slim, but with delicious curves in all the right places.

Of course he hadn't said anything then, just 'you're welcome' when she smiled a quick 'thank you'. Her eyes were dark and troubled, and a sudden rush of sweat prickled all over his body. He went and hung around behind the shelf with the soap powder until she'd paid and left, and then he asked old Mrs Mullen at the check-out who she was. Mrs Mullen was the biggest gossip in Lower Banford, and usually he was very careful not to start her off. He didn't want to be seen chit-chatting about the village people in their local shop. Now, however, he listened gratefully as she prattled on.

'That's Alicia Bryson, Bob Logan's daughter. She's up for the

day to see poor Bob after that last little stroke he had, his fifth one I hear and he's not doing so well. Margaret Cairns – his sister, you know, she looks after Bob but it's getting too much for her, she's nearly seventy herself after all – was saying yesterday that Alicia and her little girl were coming for the summer too. I suppose... '

He hadn't listened any more. Alicia Bryson? No, she was Helen... his Helen. And she'd be in Lower Banford all summer, that was all that mattered. He would find her and make her his own darling love. And there was a child, too, another Helen? Little Helen? How perfect.

And now it was Friday and the sun was setting behind his beautiful woods. Most schools had broken up today, so his Helens might be packing now, getting ready for their journey even as he was thinking about them. Mrs Mullen would know when they were due; he would go and find out first thing tomorrow. And then, whenever it was, he'd be waiting for them. Big Helen and little Helen, and very soon they'd be on their way to join his first Helen, in Paradise.

He would do it all in a beautiful ceremony at the holy place in the woods, and surely then he'd be able to lay the ghost of his own special darling to rest. Helen, haunting him from Paradise.

She wouldn't be alone for much longer.

Chapter Two

Sunday, 9th July

Alicia

Alicia Bryson eased her elderly VW back into fifth gear after what seemed like the hundredth lot of road works, and glanced across at her daughter. Eight-year-old Jenny was dozing in the passenger seat, dark hair already escaping from her precious pigtails – Pippi Longstocking was the latest craze – and a selection of soft toys on her lap. Poor kid. This wasn't the best start to the holidays for her, a long, boring drive up the motorway when she could have been out celebrating the start of the summer holidays with all of her friends in Bedford.

Alicia grimaced. This was so not what she wanted to be doing today. Just exactly how was she supposed to give her daughter a fun-filled summer holiday in a tiny Yorkshire village where they knew no-one except her father and Margaret and there wasn't as much as a swing park?

And now they were stuck behind a smelly white van, hell, even on Sunday everyone and his dog was travelling up the M1. Tight-lipped, Alicia pulled out to overtake. Lower Banford here we come.

You're going back to the bad place.

The thought came into her head as clearly as if her childhood self had spoken aloud, and Alicia winced. Other kids had had loving homes. She'd had 'the bad place', the house where her father still lived, and it was even coming back as a ghost in her head now.

It just hadn't seemed fair. How she'd longed for parents like her friends had: friendly, strict only when they had to be, and caring. Instead she'd had family prayers for hours every evening, listening to her father's rants about God and the good life and lectures about the devil and all his works. The devil's works included things like women wearing trousers, novels, all music except hymns and psalms... As a child Alicia had been afraid of her father, and when childhood gave way to puberty the accompanying hormones and tantrums had turned life into a nightmare. The climax came when she was fourteen and her punishment for sneaking off to the cinema with a boy was the loss of her hair, hacked off by her father in a sickening fit of self-righteousness.

Remembering her teenage angst brought tears to Alicia's eyes, and she blinked repeatedly. The fast lane of the M1 wasn't a good place to start bawling about something that had happened half a lifetime ago. How lonely she had been back then. Mum had been no help at all; she had prided herself on being obedient and submissive right up to her death. Alicia had been left to fight her own battles.

'Bo-ring. Are we nearly there?' said Jenny, sitting up and pouting out of the window.

'We are, and you're being very good,' said Alicia, patting Jenny's jeans-clad leg. It wasn't all doom and gloom, Jen was here too. Time to put stars into her daughter's eyes.

'You know what? Aunt Margaret's got a dog now. We kept it a secret to surprise you. His name's Conker and he's huge, he's a Newfoundlander. Chocolate-brown colour. You'll love him.'

Jenny stared, her face lit up like Christmas and Easter rolled into one, stuffed animals clutched to her chest. 'Did you hear *that*?' she whispered. 'A new friend. Conker.' Eyes shining, she gazed back out of the window, and Alicia smiled to herself. Oh, how very much she loved Jen. Her dreamer.

'Why did we never go to Grandpa's for the holidays before?' said Jenny, turning back so quickly Alicia jumped. 'Tam goes to her Grandma's all the time.'

'Just a sec,' said Alicia, thankful that a speeding motorcyclist halfway up her exhaust was giving her a couple of minutes' thinking time. What could she say to that? That 'Grandpa' had been a terrible

father and she had run away to Margaret the day after her sixteenth birthday and could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she'd been back in Lower Banford since?

Hardly. She didn't want to shatter Jen's illusions about her one remaining grandparent who was going to die soon anyway. And how awful did that sound?

'Well, Grandpa hasn't been well for a few years now,' she said. 'And before that you were just a baby.'

And the whole purpose of this 'holiday' was to find another solution for her father, she thought grimly. A care home was going to be the best option, and as his next of kin – as uncomfortable as that felt – Alicia knew that she was the person to organise it.

A road sign loomed above them and Alicia flipped on the indicator. At last, here was their exit. She swung off the motorway, her shoulders up to her ears with tension.

Here was Merton, first place on the road back home and nearest big town. The fateful cinema was still here. Alicia glared at it as they passed, then grinned. It had got her a free haircut, hadn't it? Better just practise the irony, she'd need it again before the summer was over, she could see that coming a mile off.

After Merton came the Banfords, a trio of villages along the River Ban. Her old secondary school was in Upper Banford, with memories of French homework done on the bus, and agonising over boys and spots. And always being the outsider, the only one who didn't have eyeliner or jangly bangles or whatever the latest fashion was. Then came tiny Middle Banford whose one claim to fame was the ambiguously-named Ban Theatre Festival; four weekends each June when the South Yorkshire Drama Club performed whatever it was they'd spent the past several months rehearsing. This year it had been *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the press reviews for once had been favourable.

Two miles on was Lower Banford, nestling between the river and the wooded hillside, quiet and peaceful. *The bad place.*

'Lower Banford!' said Jenny, sitting up straight as they passed the road sign. 'Mummy, we've arrived!'

'We have indeed,' said Alicia. Her voice came out a hoarse whisper, and she cleared her throat a little too hard, aware that Jenny

was still looking at her.

The village street was deserted. Apparently shops still closed on Sundays here. It was a yesterday kind of place, old houses with old people living in them. Her father's house was right at the back of the village, the garden bordering on the woods that crept round the hillside. A pretty place that held dark memories.

Alicia turned up the narrow lane, inching past the row of cars parked along one side, and then through the gateway to pull up under the Scotch pine in front of the house. Two storeys of crumbling red brick covered in green ivy, a weed-and-gravel driveway leading round to the long back garden. Home sweet home. Or something.

This is the bad place. You've come back to the bad place.

The young voice was tinged with fear now, a haunting little whisper in her head. Where were these thoughts coming from? Panic fluttering in her throat, Alicia stared up at her father's bedroom window. Was the voice her childhood self? A sudden wave of nausea made her gut spasm and her legs shake. Bile rose right into her mouth and she swallowed, desperately trying not to retch. This was the bad place and for the first time since the night of her sixteenth birthday she was actually going to sleep under this roof. For six long weeks there would be no escaping this house and the parent she had run from.

The nausea passed as suddenly as it had come. Knuckles still white on the steering wheel, Alicia took a deep breath, cold sweat on her forehead. She needed to get a grip. All that was left of her father was a frail, old man, and she was an adult now. She could do this. Jenny was staring at her, puzzlement all over her small face.

'Mummy?'

To Alicia's relief, Margaret opening the front door created the necessary diversion, for as soon as Jenny saw Conker prancing about the hallway she was off, soft toys forgotten for once.

Resignedly, Alicia turned and lifted her handbag from the back seat, knowing that all she wanted to do was grab her daughter and drive away and pretend that everything was all right. But grown-ups didn't do things like that. They faced reality.

She fixed a brave smile on her face and opened the car door.

The Stranger

His vigil started just after lunchtime. He had been quite unable to stop himself. The thought of Helen coming to Lower Banford, driving along the village street and then up Woodside Lane... he had to be there to see it. An early-morning visit to the shop yesterday and a casual remark about summer visitors had set Mrs Mullen off, he'd listened to a long monologue about tourists before she provided him with the only detail he was interested in: Alicia Bryson and her daughter were expected on Sunday afternoon.

At twelve on the dot he stationed his car near the bottom of Woodside Lane, and settled down to wait for Helen. He had an excuse ready, in case anyone saw him and tapped on the window. One of the houses further up the lane was empty, and he was going up to have a quick look round, wasn't he? After all, his own place was nothing special. Looking at property was a perfectly natural thing to be doing.

Nobody noticed him so he didn't need his excuse. There was nothing he could do except sit and wait, but the thought of Helen driving towards him, getting closer by the minute, nearer and nearer... how wonderfully exciting that was, an amazing feeling, almost orgasmic. It made his entire body tremble and the sweat, never far off, soaked through his shirt yet again. He was waiting for Helen... he didn't want it to end.

And then suddenly, they were here. Fortunately the lane was narrow, so you had to slow right down when you turned in from the main road. Helen's car crawled past him and there she was, and oh, she was just as perfect as he remembered, with such a beautiful

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worried expression on her face. If only he could hold her and kiss that frown away.

An instant later he saw the little girl and knew straightaway that here was another true love, an even greater love, if such a thing was possible. Little Helen, gazing out of the passenger seat window, and oh! – she'd seen him, she had looked straight at him – what had she thought? Did she realise that here was the man who was going to send her to Paradise? No, of course not.

But send her he would. And soon. What a wonderful time he would have, planning his ceremony, making sure that the road to Paradise was smooth.

His Helens had arrived.

Alicia

‘Aunt Margaret! Is that Conker? Can I pat him?’

Margaret was still clutching the front door, and Alicia noticed that her aunt looked as distraught as she herself was feeling. Margaret’s thin face was pale, and the strain was apparent in her voice.

‘Hello darling. Yes, of course, he loves children. Why don’t you go and play with him round the back? I’ll shout when tea’s ready and you can come in and see Grandpa.’

Jenny’s face clouded at the mention of her grandfather, but she trotted off obediently with Conker at her heels. Alicia hugged Margaret. However bad she felt about coming here, help was definitely needed.

‘Margaret, are you okay? How is - he?’

As usual, it was difficult to say her father’s name. She hadn’t called him ‘Dad’ since she’d been a very young child, in fact she didn’t call him anything at all if she could help it.

‘Hello, lovey, he’s not so good - oh, Alicia, it’s as if there’s less of him every day.’

Alicia allowed herself to be led into the gloominess of the living room. Her parents had preferred to keep the place frozen in the 1930’s when the house had been built - or maybe modern fittings and light were part of the devil’s works too. The furniture was mahogany, dark and heavy; the thick brown curtains were worn stiff with time, and even the paintwork was brown, providing a muted contrast to the walls, where the wallpaper was a nondescript beige flowery pattern that had possibly looked fresh just after World War Two.

Her father was sitting by the fireplace, at first glance a distinguished old man... except he wasn't old, not by today's standards. And as for distinguished...

'Hello,' said Alicia, bending down until her face was level with his. His eyes lifted slightly but didn't quite meet hers, and his face remained expressionless as his gaze slid round towards the television. Like many stroke patients, his arm was more badly affected than his leg, and his right hand lay stiff and useless on his lap. Alicia bit her lip. She hadn't expected him to say anything; the first stroke four years ago had robbed him of his speech as well as the use of his arm, but even last Saturday there had been some kind of recognition, acknowledgment that someone was there. Today there was nothing.

Margaret pulled her over to the window and they stood watching Jenny and Conker running round the neglected garden.

'He's been like this since he woke up,' said Margaret in a low voice. 'The doctor's been, he said it might have been another mini-stroke in the night. He's coming back tomorrow. I don't know what to do, poor Bob – he can still walk alright but his arm's stiffer than it was and – it's as if he doesn't know me anymore.'

Alicia looked back at her father, sitting sucking his teeth, blank-faced. A tyrant no longer, in fact he seemed little more than a vegetable now. What a terrible way for anyone to end their life. Even him. The devil's works again...

She blew her nose. 'Margaret, we'll have to find a place for him somewhere. He can't stay here like this.'

Margaret drew herself up. 'Alicia, he can. It's only his mind. He's still quite alright on his feet and it's so much better for stroke patients to be in their own familiar surroundings. You know that yourself, you're a nurse for heaven's sake. I won't consider him going into a home.'

She swept out to the kitchen, presumably to make tea, and Alicia stared glumly after her. Championing her baby brother was the habit of a lifetime for Margaret. She had never stopped idolising him, not even when his 'religion' had led him to break away from the rest of the family. But what was Margaret expecting now? Did she think Alicia was about to move in for the duration and care for him like a dutiful daughter? Well, she wasn't. He'd been no kind of father and

Alicia was going to get him into a place where he'd be looked after by professionals. It was more than he deserved.

She flopped down on the sofa and sat staring at her father, whose eyes were fixed on the blank TV screen. They'd been older parents, him and Mum, both nearly forty when she was born. Now he was simply a wretched old man, broken in body and mind yet still managing to make his family unhappy. She almost felt like a teenager again, rebelling against his restrictions, his righteousness, and his... punishments... and...

Why had that little voice, that *very young* little voice, come into her head today, talking about 'the bad place'? The events she'd been remembering during the long drive north had all taken place in her teenage years, but the little voice in her head had been much, much younger. What other bad things had happened here? Something she'd been too young to remember? But if it had been so bad, surely she wouldn't have forgotten?

Or maybe it was better to forget.

The Stranger

They were here, his darlings, and he had seen them. Helen would have unpacked by now, they might even be having tea. Or maybe his wonderful girls were snuggled up on the sofa, whispering and exchanging sweet little kisses. How he would love to snuggle and kiss with them.

Soon he would have to make a difficult choice. Big Helen or little Helen, which of them should he take first? The little girl was wonderful: long dark hair, and such a sweet face, so very like his first Helen. He would never have thought he could love a child this way. His own Helen as he had never known her. How lucky he was to have her now.

He would make plans carefully. He would meet them around the village first, talk to them and gain their friendship, maybe make occasional visits. Then one by one he would take them to the special place in the woods and send them off to Paradise where they belonged. Little Helen first, yes, that would be best, because then big Helen would turn to him, her friend, in her grief. He would comfort her, hold her close to his heart and feel how trusting she was and how grateful, and she would hold him too, moaning in her distress and oh, how good it would feel, and then he would tell her gently that he was sending her to join little Helen in Paradise. She'd be pleased, of course, but afraid, too, and the very thought of it was making him shiver and sweat all over again. It would be so perfect, so holy, yes, truly something sacred. Soon he would have three Helens in Paradise.

He was going to be rich.

Of course the first Helen had been a mistake. He hadn't meant for her to go to Paradise, she should still be here, with him, on earth. But accidents happen and Helen had died, and in a strange kind of way it was better like this, otherwise he'd never have known how sweet it was to have an angel in Paradise. Ever since then he'd been searching for another Helen. Many times he'd thought he'd found one, only to be disappointed. Now he had two at once. And when it was all over, surely then he would have some sort of peace again, because the thought of darling Helen alone in Paradise was just too unbearably sad. Helen needed company, a sister and a little daughter. Soon now she would have them. How happy they would be.

Chapter Three

Monday, 10th July

Alicia

‘Mummy? What did Aunt Margaret mean last night when she said there were too many strangers in the village?’

Alicia smiled, brushing out Jenny’s tangled curls. Trust Jen. She had ears like an aerial, constantly picking up signals not necessarily meant for her. Margaret had been speaking generally, but the bottom line was she didn’t approve of the fact that villages were for commuting from nowadays, which meant people moving in and out. Change and strangers all over the place in what had once been an intimate, stable community.

And her aunt must know, deep down, that big changes concerning her own life in this house would be inevitable soon. But none of this was explainable to an eight-year-old. Alicia reached for Jen’s hair slides.

‘Nothing really. A lot of new people have moved into the village this year, that’s all.’

‘So they’re not bad strangers?’ Jenny’s eyes were still troubled, and Alicia shook her head.

‘Nope. Just people,’ she said firmly. ‘But the rules here are the same as at home, never go anywhere with someone you don’t know. Okay, that’s you.’

Jenny ran to the window and waved down to Conker who was sniffing about the grass below. Alicia smiled ironically. At least her

daughter was going to have better memories of Lower Banford than she herself had. And actually, she was beginning to realise just how few memories she had of her pre-teen self in this house. Years and years of life and almost no memory of them. Was that normal?

It was horrible, living here again. Twice that night she'd wakened, her heart pounding. And that same lingering feeling that she had been afraid like this before, a long time ago when she was even younger than Jenny. She'd been so vulnerable back then, so afraid of... of what? Was that one of the blanked-out memories? Or maybe it was just the whole situation with her father that was making her so uneasy now.

Jenny grabbed her sandals, as yet unworn. 'Woohoo, summer holidays and new sandals! Can we go to the river today? And the woods?'

Alicia nodded, trying to smile. This 'holiday' was going to turn into a constant battle to keep Jen happy, and at the same time sort out things that had to be sorted. Margaret was obviously going to need a considerable amount of persuasion about the whole care home idea, and Jen would want to be here, there and everywhere. Diplomacy would have to be the name of the game and there was no time like the present to start.

'Grandpa's doctor is coming after breakfast, and I want to see him first,' she said, shaking out the duvet. 'Then afterwards we'll do something together. Alright?'

'S'pose. But I do want to go and see the river today, okay?'

Jenny raced downstairs, and Alicia sighed. The river they would manage, but oh for some eight-year-old energy. All the same, having fun here with her daughter might help her lay some ghosts to rest.

She finished tidying the room and stepped across the landing, taking care to avoid the creaky floorboard in case it woke her father. She could hear his breath rattling as he snored away, and realised that she felt no emotion towards him whatsoever. Except contempt. Hell, was it normal to still resent your father at her age?

His bedroom door was half open, and Alicia glanced in. The old iron crucifix was still hanging above the bed, stark against the whiteness of the wall, and she could feel her heart thump as she stared at it. Something here really was giving her the creeps, a

horrible sense of unease was crawling over her skin. And yet she had lived here for years... she had been born in that bedroom, and apart from a few days spent with Margaret every summer she had slept in this house every night of her life until she was sixteen. There had been no escaping the bad place for little Alicia. Thank God she'd be able to talk to the doctor today and set the ball rolling about finding a place for her father.

'What time's Doctor Morton coming?' she asked Margaret after breakfast.

'Half past ten,' said Margaret. 'But it's Doctor Carter now, he's taking over Doctor Morton's practice. Frank Carter, you might remember him, his family lived here way back before they moved down south. His wife died in some kind of accident a few years ago apparently.'

Alicia stared. 'Frank Carter? Yes, I do remember him. His sister was one of my friends at primary school. Sonja. They left just before we went to secondary school.'

And just after her father had been so mad at them both... She hadn't thought about it for years. They'd been about twelve, her and Sonja, and they'd spent an evening secretly making Valentine's cards in Alicia's room. Unknown to Alicia, her father had been standing outside the door listening to all their girly talk about boys and who fancied who. He had stormed into the room, sent Sonja home and then dragged Alicia down to the kitchen where he'd made her stand reading the bible aloud. For two solid hours he'd sat there, his eyes fixed on her as she stumbled through the Old Testament. She had loathed him then and the feeling had probably been mutual.

Margaret sniffed. 'Well, Frank's back. I don't know why on earth he wanted to come back to a little place like this.'

'Maybe because he has happy memories here?' suggested Alicia gently. 'It must have been tough for him, losing his wife like that.'

She looked at her aunt, concerned. Margaret was rinsing round the sink and blinking back tears.

She really does hate change, realised Alicia. But things couldn't go on like this, Margaret must see that. Her beloved Bob's condition was only going to deteriorate.

A dull thud upstairs sent Margaret scuttling to the door. 'That's

Bob. I'll help him dress and you make fresh tea. I expect the doctor'll take a cup too.'

She was gone before Alicia could draw breath. Grimly, she put the kettle on. Being independent was fine and good, but Margaret was overdoing it. At this rate she'd have a stroke too if she wasn't careful. Anyway, her father wouldn't realise if he was here at home, or somewhere else *in* a home. Or would he?

Something to ask the doctor about, she thought, hearing a car door slam outside.

Frank Carter was in the hallway before she got to the door, and Alicia blinked. She would never have recognised him. He was slight, only a few inches taller than she was, with overlong dark hair and a thin, lined face. Had the lines come when his wife died? A mere divorce had just about doubled her own tally of frown lines. What must it be like to lose the person you loved most of all, just like that? Please God she would never find out. He smiled, showing not unattractively crooked teeth, and held out his hand.

'Hello, Alicia,' he said. 'You've changed. I saw you in the village last Saturday and I have to confess I didn't recognise you at first. You've grown up since we last met.'

The hand gripping hers was warm, and Alicia felt comforted. This was her old friend's brother, and he'd been a part of her world back then. He was a few years older, too, he might remember things she couldn't. They could jog down memory lane together and maybe he could help her dig up some of the forgotten memories.

She wrinkled her nose. 'Well, it wasn't exactly yesterday.'

Frank laughed. 'Mrs Mullen, ah... reminded me all about you,' he said, leaning against the cutlery drawer. 'She even remembered how you and Sonja once let down the tyres on my bike while I was in buying sweets. I suppose you had your reasons but I can't remember at all what I'd done to deserve such... such wrath.'

Alicia grinned at him. He seemed nervous, but that was ridiculous. Maybe he was shy, or possibly it was awkward, having your sister's old school friend's parent as a patient.

'I expect we were just being brats. What's Sonja up to these days?'

He pulled a face and grinned. 'Sonja's an architect, married to

an ambassador, three small boys and at the moment they're living in Paris. Posh dinner parties all the time.'

Alicia laughed. 'Not much like life in Lower Banford, then.'

'You could say that. They'll be here in a couple of weeks, actually, passing through on the way up north to John's mother in St Andrews first of all, and then staying with me the first two weeks in August on their way back. You'll still be here then, won't you?'

Alicia took a deep breath. Wow. Something to look forward to. Summer in Lower Banford might be more fun than she'd anticipated. But first they had to sort her father out. She smiled her most persuasive smile at Frank Carter.

'I'm glad you're here. I could use some support to convince Margaret about a care home for my father. It's getting too much for her here.'

He looked at her sympathetically. 'I know, but she's adamant about keeping Bob at home. And of course she's right about him still being able to get up the stairs and so on, but that could change any time and in all other areas he does need a lot of care. I think you'll have to ride gently for a bit but hopefully she'll agree in the end. I suppose you're only here for the holidays?'

Alicia suppressed a shudder. 'Only' for the holidays... six weeks in Lower Banford sounded like eternity. She nodded at Frank and he leaned back against the table.

'Right. With your say-so I'll put him on the list for St. Joseph's, the geriatric hospital in Middle Banford. It's an excellent place, Alicia. They have a new chief of nursing now, Doug Patton, and he's really keen. We can try to get Margaret over there for a visit one day this week, let her see the place for herself.'

Alicia looked at him appreciatively. At last, someone who was going to help her. 'Sounds good. I'll talk to her and get back to you.'

She handed over a mug of tea, noticing the threadbare cuffs on his jacket and the purple tie that was screaming at the fawn checked shirt. Didn't he notice what he was putting on in the morning?

Margaret appeared in the hallway with Bob shuffling beside her, not looking at any of them. Alicia saw stubbornness written right across her aunt's face, and felt her own jaw tighten as she poured tea for her father. The sooner they got this situation sorted, the better.

Frank followed her into the living room. 'Let Alicia take over for a bit here, Margaret,' he said firmly. 'You should have a complete break, you're tired and you deserve it. Does - '

'Aaaaah!' The wheezy, guttural sound was coming from deep in the old man's throat. Alicia stepped back. Her father's eyes were fixed on hers and his mouth was open.

Margaret bent over to hug him. 'Yes, dear, it's Alicia, back home from Bedford! Isn't that nice?' She turned to Alicia, beaming. 'He knows you, lovey! Isn't that wonderful?'

'Aaah ha ha ha,' said Bob, his eyes never leaving Alicia's. It almost sounded as if he was laughing.

'That's right, dear. Alicia. She's home now. Look, here's your tea.'

Margaret helped him with the mug, and Alicia rubbed her face. Shit and hell. As far as she knew her father had never tried to speak to her since the first stroke... but then she had never been living here, before. *Had* he been laughing just now? It was a horrible thought, and there was no way to tell. She forced her attention back to Margaret and Frank, who were discussing Bob's medication. Alicia drew breath to help Frank convince Margaret that sleeping pills were a good idea, then froze at the sound of Jenny's high, agitated voice outside.

'Mummy! Aunt Margaret, come *quick*, it's hurt, its back leg's all blood...' She crashed into the room and pulled at Alicia's arm.

'Jenny, darling what's hurt?'

'It's a kitty, out in the lane, I think it's been run over, oh, come quick!'

Frank lifted his bag. 'Show me where it is and I'll see what I can do.'

Jenny looked at him, her eyes wide. 'Are you a stranger?' she asked, and Alicia hugged her daughter.

'It's okay, Jen, this is Doctor Frank Carter, he's here to see Grandpa. I was at school with him when we were children.'

Jenny's face brightened immediately. 'Can you help animals too?' she said, stepping towards him.

'I'll try. Let's have a look.'

Margaret handed Bob's mug to Alicia. 'I'll come too. It might be the Donovan's cat.'

She followed Frank and Jenny outside and the room fell silent. Alicia turned back to her father.

‘More tea?’ Again, she couldn’t bring herself to call him ‘Dad’. With immense discomfort, she held the mug to his lips and then wiped away the dribble after he’d taken a loud slurp. Hell, she was a nurse, and before she’d taken her present job as school nurse she’d even worked with geriatrics for God’s sake and she still couldn’t cope with this, she literally couldn’t stand having to touch her father. Trembling, she put the mug down on the mantelpiece. Six weeks of this would kill her.

Her father coughed, then cleared his throat and leaned back in the armchair, his eyes fixed on her again. His mouth stretched to one side and she couldn’t tell if he was smiling or leering at her. Alicia managed a quick grin in return, watching his face as he chuckled away to himself. This was quite appalling, and there was no way to tell what he was thinking, sitting there in his chair. Did he know who she was? The first stroke had put an end to his ability to communicate; the speech therapist had tried various non-verbal methods but he had been uncooperative and the end opinion was that his understanding of the world was very limited.

She had never been so glad to see Margaret come back into the room.

‘It isn’t the Donovan’s cat and it isn’t badly hurt, just a scrape and a fright,’ she said. ‘Frank suggested taking it to Kenneth Taylor at the pet shop and Jenny wants to go too. I’ll stay with Bob.’

Jenny was standing beside Frank’s car, cradling a half-grown tiger-striped kitten wrapped in a green cloth, presumably from Frank’s bag. Alicia could see that the cat wasn’t the only one who’d had a fright.

‘Doctor Frank said the man at the pet shop might know whose kitty it is,’ said Jenny, looking up with wide eyes. ‘And if he doesn’t know, can we keep it? Please, Mummy?’

Alicia let out a small sigh. Jenny had always wanted a cat, but up until now Alicia had managed to banish it into ‘someday’. But if no-one claimed this poor creature, ‘someday’ might just have come. There was her father, and Jen, and Margaret – not to mention Conker – and now a kitten. It was too much.

'We'll see,' she said.

Jenny settled into the front seat of Frank's car, clutching the kitten tenderly on her lap. Frank chatted away to her about animals in the village, and the little girl answered, her fright forgotten again. Alicia thought sadly that conversations with adult men were all too rare in her daughter's world.

But at least now she had a break, a thirty-minute breather away from her father's house.

Had he been laughing at her?