

FORGET-ME-NOT

I was sitting at the counter at the far end of the shop working on my accounts when the door opened and the man walked in. Before I could put the papers together and get up he tapped on the counter and looked round before calling "Hello: is anybody here?" Although his once-dark hair was turning grey his voice was the same and I recognised it instantly.

"Peter", I cried in surprise and the memory of the love we'd once shared returned as I came round the counter and embraced him. We had after all parted on good terms.

It was twenty years since we had met at the horticultural college. Peter had a warm and magnetic personality and I was thrilled that he'd chosen me to be his girl. Learning came easily to him and he had patiently stayed in with me during the evenings while I wrote my dissertations, helping me assemble my thoughts and cope with the Latin names for the plants.

Then in my second year I became pregnant and a baby at that stage of my life was definitely not part of the plan and Peter and I both cried when we lost our baby. After that we gradually and imperceptibly drifted apart and became absorbed into other groups.

"So, it's a very nice shop you have here," he said, looking round at the banks of colourful flowers.

"How did you come to get it?"

"Thanks", I replied. "I was lucky. It belonged to a friend of my parents and I started working here after". I swallowed hard and Peter stepped towards me and patted my arm. I breathed deeply.

"She taught me everything about running it and I enjoyed it so much that when she retired it was the natural progression for me to take over. What are you doing now?"

"I've been lucky too," he replied. "There was an opening for someone with my experience on the Eden project so I've been working on that since then. However," he paused, "I'm here because there's someone who wants to meet you. She's just made contact with me and now she's keen to meet you as well. She approached me first rather than you because she lives in Cornwall and I was nearer." He went to the door and looked out. "She said she'd meet me here."

“Shop!” called a cheery voice and in walked Steve, my husband, with our two daughters Phoebe and Serena. He was carrying a plastic bag and the smell of fish and chips filled the air.

If it hadn't been for a spider I might never have met Steve. One night a spider had crawled across the infra-red sensor in my flat above the shops while I was away and set the alarm off. The central monitoring unit automatically notified the police when my security code wasn't entered to turn it off. Steve – that's his name – came round to check for a break-in and my keyholder allowed him access to the flat with her. While he was there he noticed the photographs I have on the bureau and he came back to see if the girl he liked the look of was the owner of the flat.

“And she was!” exclaimed Peter.

“Yes”, nodded Kate, “and the rest, as they say, is history.

“Have you any children?” queried Peter.

Kate smiled. “Yes, two girls, Phoebe and Serena. Wrongly named, I'm afraid. Serena is anything but serene: she takes after me. It's Phoebe who's the calm one.

At that moment the bell rang and a cheerful voice called out “Shop!”

Kate ran to the door and hugged Steve. “Hello darling”, she welcomed him. “Where are the girls?”

“We brought fish and chips home. I've sent them upstairs and told them to set the table and that we'll be eating soon. He looked towards Peter. “Is that all right?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes, of course,” said Kate. She turned towards Peter. “Did I mention we have a flat over the shop? the entrance is at the side, which is why you haven't seen the girls. She turned back to Steve.

“Steve, let me introduce Peter, an old friend from college. We've been catching up on old times.

“Oh, right! Pleased to meet you,” Steve shook hands with Peter, then looked at Kate. “But I thought you'd told me all about your old friends, Kate. Teasingly he said “Is there anything else I should know?”

“No, of course not,” Kate answered quickly. “Peter was always the clever one. He was the golden boy, weren’t you? Learning came easily to him but he was always very helpful and patient with me when I was trying to get to grips with all those Latin plant names and the chemical preparations we used in weed and pest control.

Steve asked Peter if he was staying in the area and Peter went on to explain that he was hoping to set up a meeting between Kate and ‘someone from the old days’ as he rather nervously explained.

“That’s OK by me,” Steve laughed. “Any friend of Kate’s is a friend of mine. The more the merrier.

The bell rang again and a young woman entered the shop. Kate stared at her transfixed, and was totally aware of the gasp that Steve took as he stood beside her.

“Hello, Louise,” said Peter as he walked towards her and grasped her arm. “I was beginning to think you’d got lost.”

“No, no,” said Louise. I was window shopping and lost track of the time. It’s such a nice little town. Anyway,” and her voice became slightly sharper, “You said there was someone we were going to meet. Where is she, then?”

Peter looked from Kate to Steve, then gathered himself together and took hold of Louise by the arm. “I don’t think it’s convenient just now,” he mumbled. “It was a mistake. Goodbye, Kate. Goodbye, Steve. Nice to have met you. Come along Louise” and he hustled her out of the door.

Louise just had time to turn round for a quick “Goodbye, everyone,” as she was hurried out of the door.

Steve and Kate looked at each other in silence that was only broken when Steve said “I don’t think you told me quite all about your college years did you?”

“No,” said Kate and hung her head. “She’s just like I was at that age, but she wouldn’t have realised that, of course.” She sat down and turned to Steve. “What on earth am I going to do? She burst into tears and her anguish came tumbling out. “I’ve imagined meeting her for so long, felt so dreadful about giving her away, wondering what she looked like. But you know what it was like in those days – it brought disgrace on the family, well at least in the little village where I lived – and

Peter and I were in no position to give her a stable family life with no support from either of our parents.”

“But I’d guess you want to meet her, don’t you?” persisted Steve.

“Of course,” Kate sobbed, “but what about the ramifications? You know Us.”

“Come on,” Steve gave her a squeeze. “We’re tight, aren’t we?”

Kate nodded vigorously.

“And I bet the girls would really love to have a beautiful, grown-up sister. Artfully he said “I’m sure I noticed an engagement ring on her finger and who knows – she might just need two little bridesmaids. So, come on.” He pulled her to her feet, “put your skates on and run after them. I don’t think they’ll have got very far. Did you notice the shoes she had on? I bet they haven’t even got to the corner of the road yet.”

Kate was just stuffing her feet into her shoes when the door opened again and footsteps were heard on the hard floor. She looked up from her awkward squatting position and hauled herself to her feet. In front of her were Louise and Peter. Louise stepped forward. There was a pause.

“Hello,” said Kate tentatively.

“Hello, Mum,” said Louise and Kate moved forward to hug the daughter she had given up for lost and never thought she’d see again.