

The Cottage

Karen Lawrence

The young woman barely noticed the cottage on the kitchen shelf anymore. It was a thing of her past, not her future.

She was an only child; her brother had died suddenly in infancy. Her parents accused her of killing him. The authorities looked into their claims and went away satisfied that five-year-old Alice was innocent. No one bothered about their disappearance.

Pieter worked in the same factory as Alice. He was good looking; all the girls thought so. When he asked if she'd go out to dinner with him she'd agreed. As she sat at her kitchen table, carefully applying make-up she rarely had occasion to wear, she heard a small voice.

'Don't go out, Alice. Please. Feed us, it's been two days. Please.'

She glanced towards the tiny woman standing at the doorway of the cottage. Alice fought the temptation to ignore her. Instead she crushed a biscuit and threw the crumbs onto the shelf. Some landed near enough for the woman to pull them through the door with her broom.

'We need water, please.'

'Later. My taxi's here.' Alice hissed.

The evening started well enough. The restaurant was pleasant, neither expensive nor cheap. It was after the entrée that Pieter started talking about himself. He didn't stop until they were at the train station. They were alone on the platform and he was still droning on about his wonderful life, full of adventures.

'Shut up,' Alice said.

'What did you say?' Pieter looked affronted. 'You turn up for a date with me looking like a poor relation and then boss me about. You ...' He jabbed his finger toward her.

Alice grasped his arm and mumbled a few words.

'You will fit in quite nicely with my parents.' She put him in her bag and hailed a taxi.