

The Little Theatre on the Seafront

Deleted Scene

This deleted scene was originally the opening chapter of *The Little Theatre on the Seafront* when I submitted it to HQ Digital back in 2018. My lovely editor at the time felt that opening a romantic comedy at a funeral (albeit a funny one) wasn't the best place to start and instead, I started the novel at what was chapter three; the scene where Sid picks Lottie up in the car and they head to Mrs Harker and her incredible singing parrot. Elsie's letter became the prologue and I think it was very good advice indeed!

Lots of love,

Katie

xxx

Chapter One

The vicar stood in front of the coffin, his hands steepled, rocking from side to side. Behind him, the bright sun shone through the large stained-glass window, illuminating him in a saintly glow.

‘I remember when our beloved Elsie was a young girl, and I, a young boy, we went scrumping for apples over Mr Jacobs orchard and do you know, as she climbed the wall, I quite clearly saw her knickers.’ He laughed to himself. ‘Stripy, I seem to remember...’

‘Oh no,’ Lottie whispered to Sid, burying her head in her hands. ‘He’s going off script again.’ She was half laughing, half crying. Her blue eyes, red and puffy, teared and the corners of her mouth lifted to a nervous smile.

The grey haired, bespectacled vicar had a reputation for his rather unusual eulogies.

From her seat at the front, Lottie glanced at the pews behind, wondering what the other mourners thought of this strange service. Some were smiling with heads bowed to hide their amusement whilst the older crowd, her nan’s friends, were sniffing and wiping delicately at their noses with linen handkerchiefs.

‘Your nan would’ve loved this,’ Sid replied, leaning towards Lottie. He pulled at the collar of his shirt unused to the restriction of a tie. ‘Did you tell him to keep it short?’

‘Of course I did. We all know what he’s like, I must have reminded him at least twenty times.’

‘It didn’t work, did it?’ He tried to stifle his laugh with a cough. ‘He’s already been going for half an hour.’

‘We had such fun when we were children,’ the aged vicar continued. ‘There was another time I recall distinctly, when we were at a tea dance, before I joined the church, of course.’ He paused and pressed a finger to his lips. ‘I was rather a tearaway then and—’

‘This one should be good,’ said Sid, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest. ‘I bet right now Elsie’s having a good old chuckle up in heaven.’ He scratched his neck. He and Lottie had been best friends since primary school and Elsie had been as fond of him as she had been her own granddaughter.

For a moment, all thoughts subsided as Lottie was struck by how good Sid looked in a suit. It made a nice change from the scruffy jeans and t-shirts he normally wore. The tight collar showed off his short, dark brown hair that maintained a stubborn unruliness, no matter how it was cut, and the bright white shirt illuminated his deep hazel eyes. If Sid was her type, she might have thought him handsome, in a geeky way, but he wasn’t.

‘What do I do?’ asked Lottie. ‘Do you remember my cousin’s wedding? The service was only supposed to last forty minutes, but it took an hour and a half. He kept repeating himself and telling everyone stories about her when she was little. She nearly died of embarrassment. And the dinner went cold.’

‘You’re going to have to go up there.’

‘I can’t do that.’ Lottie shook her head, her eyes wide in panic.

‘Go on,’ said Sid, shoving her up out of her seat. He smiled to himself. Elsie would have approved of this send off. Funerals shouldn’t be funny, but this one was. Had Elsie been a guest and not the departed, she would have been sniggering and giggling like a schoolgirl, nudging him to share the joke.

Lottie stumbled up the steps to the podium and turned to the guests. A wave of emotion rushed over her and instead of being embarrassed at standing in front of a large crowd, surprising the vicar, her heart swelled with gratitude at how full the church was.

Elsie Webster had been well loved in the pretty seaside town of Greenley-on-Sea and had lived there all her life. Lottie lifted her chin when she saw the full pews, proud that so many of their friends had gathered to say goodbye.

Lottie saw Sid’s wide, childish grin and turned to the vicar. He, however, did not have a grin on his face. He was so shocked to see her standing there, interrupting his reverie, that he stood stock still and stared at her wide eyed.

‘Umm, th...thank you, Vicar, so much. Yes, ummm, thank you for your kind words.’ Lottie edged closer to him. ‘Perhaps we should move outside now and, you know,’ she nodded to the church door. ‘Pop her in the ground.’

The mourners reacted in a mixture of relieved sighing, guffawing, and uncomfortable shuffling.

‘Oh, yes, well. Quite,’ said the vicar, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. He turned to the congregation. ‘If everyone would like to stand, the bearers will take the coffin outside.’

Sid and the three other men Elsie had requested in her will, stood up and made their way to the front. As Sid reached the stage and turned around, he shifted his gaze to Lottie in concern. The sunlight filtering in through the large stained-glass window reflected off the tears forming in her eyes and Sid did the only thing he could think of: he winked. The funeral was always going to be hard for Lottie, but he knew she could get through it. It was life afterwards that was going to be the biggest challenge.

Under the direction of the vicar the bearers bent down, placed their shoulders under the coffin and on his signal, stood to begin the solemn walk outside.

Lottie gave a small smile and followed the coffin from the church into the bright sunshine outside. She clutched the tissue in her hand as her eyes adjusted to the light and took a deep breath of clean sea air.

Saying goodbye was going to be hard.

For the rest of the service the vicar read from his little book without wandering into old reminiscences and thankfully, the time passed quickly. Afterwards everyone dispersed from the graveside for the wake being held at the house Lottie had shared with her nan.

Lottie stared down at the coffin, contemplating life on her own. Her chin trembled as she fought to hold back tears but, in her head, Nan’s voice told her to, ‘get on with it’. A rueful smile crept over her face and her shoulders eased back down, the tension disappearing from her neck.

It was done now.

Her long blond hair, normally un-brushed or pulled into a scruffy ponytail was tied into a tight bun at the nape of her neck that pinched and stung. She reached back and scratched, hoping to loosen it, wishing for the end of the day when she could let it down.

Mrs Pargeter, her nan's best friend, lingered with Sid and, after a few moments tottered towards Lottie, her high heels puncturing the grass as she walked. When she reached Lottie's side, she studied the newly cut grass bending in the gentle breeze then glanced at Lottie. 'Hello, dear.'

'Hello, Mrs P. How are you?'

'I'm alright, dear. More importantly, how are you?' Mrs Pargeter placed a reassuring hand on Lottie's arm.

'I'm okay thanks,' Lottie replied, mustering her courage.

Mrs Pargeter had lived next door to Lottie and her nan ever since she could remember. Elsie had always described her as well dressed, though others called her mutton dressed as lamb - her skirts too short and her tops too low for a woman 'in her golden years'.

Lottie watched a cloud scudding across the sky. There hadn't been many nice days that summer, but today had been bright and warm. Her nan loved hot days of clear blue skies and would sit in the garden admiring her flowers and drinking homemade elderflower wine.

Mrs Pargeter smiled and there was more pink lipstick on her teeth than her lips.

Tears formed in Lottie's eyes. She wiped as one caught at the corner, threatening to remove what little make up remained. 'I think Nan would've been happy with that send off, don't you, Mrs P?'

'Yes, I do. Though,' She leaned into Lottie. 'She would've been looking forward to the wake more. You know how she loved a good buffet, especially with free wine.' Mrs Pargeter paused. 'I'm sorry your mum and dad couldn't make it over for the funeral.'

Lottie scowled. ‘What good would they have been anyway? They’ve never been very interested in me, or Nan. Too busy.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Mrs Pargeter. ‘What embassy are they in now?’

‘Some country in Eastern Europe no one’s ever heard of.’

Mrs Pargeter opened her handbag and rummaged inside. Amongst the numerous free pens she collected from the bank on her weekly visit, and the cough drops rolling around the bottom, she found a letter and carefully removed it. Mrs Pargeter cleared her throat. ‘I’m so sorry to do this, dear, but your nan made me promise. She said I had to give this to you today and was very specific about it. Here.’

Lottie took it with trembling hands, a bemused look on her face.

Mrs Pargeter dabbed at her eye. ‘Your nan wrote it a couple of days before she died, when she knew she was nearing the end.’ Mrs Pargeter had considered not handing it over the letter at all. But Elsie made her do the special Girl Guide promise they had learned as children and could never be broken.

A gentle breeze blew stray hairs into Lottie’s face.

Mrs Pargeter waited with an outstretched hand.

Lottie swallowed the lump in her throat. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t cry too much at the funeral. Whenever she cried her skin turned red and blotchy and her nose became a bright pink beacon on her face and seemed to double in size. All in all, not a good look. Instead, her tears had been shed in the days immediately following Elsie’s death, when she had felt so lost and alone.

‘She said I was to ask you to read it after everyone had gone to the wake,’ said Mrs Pargeter.

‘What? Now?’ Lottie’s heart beat faster.

‘Yes, dear, that’s what she said.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Lottie.

‘Just read it, dear, please.’ Mrs Pargeter placed her hand over Lottie’s. ‘It’s what Elsie wanted.’

Lottie stared at the envelope. She was so focussed on the unknown item in her hand she didn’t notice Mrs Pargeter walking away. When she glanced over, Sid had offered the old lady his arm. They chatted as she took it and they headed back to the house.

She ran her fingers over the pristine white envelope with ‘Charlotte Webster’ written on it in her nan’s beautiful copperplate handwriting. Her stomach twisted into an uncomfortable knot. Elsie only called her Charlotte when she was in trouble or she had something important to tell her.

She took a deep breath, slid her finger under the edge of the seal and lifted it, careful not to tear whatever was inside. She took out the sheet of white paper and opened it.

To my dearest darling girl,

What a wonderful life we’ve had together. I’m sorry I will miss so many things, such as seeing you get married and have children, but my time has come and I’m off to see your granddad. It’s been a long time, so we should have a lot to talk about, which will be a pleasant change from our married life together.

With all this death business I’ve been thinking about you and what you’ll do after I’m gone, and I’ve decided something - you need a shake up, my girl!

I love you, dear, but you go to work and then come home and that’s it. You’re thirty years old and you should be doing more with your life than spending your evenings with a little old lady like me.

If you remember, I have tried to get you enjoying life a bit more, but to no avail. Last year I set you up with that lovely handsome window cleaner, but you didn’t bat an eyelid. In fact, I’m not entirely sure you even knew what was happening. Or at

Christmas, when I tried to get you to go to your school reunion, but you stubbornly refuse to enjoy anything that takes you out of yourself and out into the world.

So, I decided that a bit of emotional blackmail was in order. And as spending your evenings fussing over me won't be an option anymore, you are going to take over my place as chairman of Greenley Theatre and carry on my, dare I say it, good work, on the 'Save Greenley Theatre' campaign.

Good luck, my dear. I know you'll make me proud.

Lots of love,

Nan

P.S. I haven't actually arranged this with the committee yet, so that will be your first job. Have fun!

Lottie calmly refolded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. She looked down to the wooden coffin and shiny brass plaque.

'What the bloody hell did you go and do that for?' she shouted into the grave. 'If you weren't dead, Nan, I'd bloody well murder you.'