

Thirty years ago, in a village in East Anglia where the land is swallowed up by mudflats and marshes and a hard wind blows in from the sea, a woman went missing.

It was midwinter, sleety and dark, but Christmas was coming. There were festive lights in the high street, decorated trees in the windows, smoke curling from the chimneys of the houses. And in a barn on the edge of the village, people were gathering for a party.

But one person never arrived, and life was changed forever in that ordinary little village. Her disappearance was the start of a chain of terrible events that for more than three decades blighted the lives of two families.

This is a story of dark secrets that were buried a lifetime ago, but which never lost their power, and of the grip that the past has upon the present.

It is the story of the people whose lives unravelled from that winter day: sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, partners and friends.

It is the story of a woman. She is a wife, a mother, a confidante. She is impulsive and warm-hearted and full of life. When people describe her, they use words like 'radiant', 'vital', 'generous', 'optimistic'. She is a woman of appetites: she loves food, red wine, long hot baths. She loves dancing. Walking in all weathers.

NICCI FRENCH

Jigsaw puzzles. Gossip. Weepy films. Nice clothes. Crumpets. Marmalade. Chance encounters. Peonies and sweet peas. Candles. Mangy dogs. Lost causes.

She loves life. She loves people. Above all, she loves her four children.

Her name is Charlotte Salter.

He looked up.

‘Does that seem all right?’

‘It was fine. More than fine. It was good.’

‘Then it’s a wrap.’

PART ONE

1990

ONE

‘Where’s Charlie?’

Etty couldn’t make out the words. The party had only just started, but there was already the bustle of voices and Neil Young on the sound system. She pulled her curly hair away from her face and leaned in towards Greg Ackerley.

‘What?’ she said, smiling into his troubled face.

She was happy and light-hearted, a sense of excitement running through her. It was the end of term. The excitement of Christmas was on her, parties and outings and mornings lying in bed heavy with sleep. Greg smiled back. She was so close to him she could smell his scent and see the sweat glistening on his forehead. He’d been working hard, preparing all of this.

Etty had enough brothers already. Maybe too many. But he’d always been a bit like another brother to her. She looked at his prominent cheekbones, his blue eyes, his air of being preoccupied. He was attractive, sweet, a bit shy. If he hadn’t been like a brother. If he hadn’t been

three years older than her. It was all rather confusing. Anyway, she had another boy on her mind this evening.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Where’s your mother?’ he said, speaking more clearly and slowly, as if to a deaf person. ‘I want her to see how beautiful it all looks. Before it gets trashed.’

Etty looked around the barn. It had taken all of yesterday for Greg and his father, Duncan, to clear out the rubbish and then sweep and clean it. Now it was decorated with flowers and garlands and ribbons and coloured lights. The long trestle table Greg was standing behind was crowded with bottles, glasses and a vast bowl of punch with a spray of greenery around it. At the other end was an array of quiches and dips and finger food.

‘Isn’t she here?’

‘No.’

Etty gave a snort of irritation.

‘She tells me to get here early and then doesn’t bother to turn up herself. She probably wants to make a grand entrance.’

Greg, looking at her flushed and vivid face, thought that Etty didn’t understand how special her mother was; how lucky she was to be Charlie’s daughter rather than, say, the daughter of his own mother, Frances, who sometime lay in bed most of the day, or sat hunched in a chair with a vacant expression. Etty took her mother’s vivacity and warmth for granted, was even embarrassed by it, not understanding it was like a fire to warm yourself on.

Etty saw the surprise on Greg's face and felt a flicker of betrayal towards her mother. But she pushed it away. Her friends were waiting for her at the entrance of the barn. Kim and Rosa were there, and Robbie, who was in the year above them and who Etty knew had come because of her.

A flash made her blink. Her brother Niall was squinting through the lens of a Polaroid camera.

'It's Keith's' he said, aiming again. 'It won't really capture it.'

'My mouth was full,' said Etty. 'You shouldn't take pictures of people when they're eating.'

Niall looked at the table and pointed an accusing finger at the greenery around the punchbowl.

'Isn't that a wreath? The kind you have for funerals?'

'They delivered it by mistake,' said Greg. 'It's for Doris Winters. She died last week, aged ninety-seven. They'll probably come for it tomorrow. I thought she wouldn't mind if we used it first.'

'Is that really what you're wearing?' Niall asked Etty.

Etty glanced down as if she was seeing her clothes for the first time: a short black dress with a flannel shirt over the top of it and her Doc Martens.

'Looks like it.' She didn't feel she had anything to apologise for. Niall was dressed in a grey suit that looked a couple of sizes too small for him and a purple silk tie with a large chunky knot; Greg wore paint-spattered jeans, an old shirt rolled up to the elbows and, on his head, a shabby flat cap that his father often wore.

She saw her other two brothers standing a few yards

away, deep in conversation. She spoke in a tone that was almost a shout.

‘Paul. Ollie. Get over here.’

The two of them slouched towards her. Ollie raised a hand to Greg, who had been in his year group all the way through school but who had never been his particular friend. Greg lifted his beer bottle in response then took a hefty swig.

‘Niall thinks I’m inappropriately dressed,’ said ETTY.

‘What does that even mean?’ said Paul.

Ollie grinned. ‘Nice tie, Niall.’

‘I came straight from work,’ Niall said, as if this was some kind of rebuke to all three of them.

Seeing her three brothers in this strange social setting, ETTY felt there was something comic about how different they were. Niall was tall, solid, heavy-footed. His sandy hair was cut short. Even though Ollie and ETTY were still at home, Niall already had the resigned, resentful air of the child who had stayed, the son who had entered the family business.

Paul seemed not just different, but a different race. He was small and thin, with a soft, round face that made him look younger than his twenty-one years. He was the child who had left, gone to college. He never talked about it, but ETTY had a feeling that it wasn’t working out, that there was bad news somewhere, but Paul hadn’t told them about it. Paul didn’t tell people things.

Ollie was the brother who was like her. At least that’s what people said. They were the fun ones, the partygoers, the sex and drugs and rock’n’roll ones. Of course,

it wasn't as simple as that. Nothing is. But Etty felt that that was how people saw them. People got irritated by Niall and alarmed by Paul. But things would always be fine for Etty and Ollie.

'We should get a photo,' said Etty, making a gesture to her group of friends to say she would be with them soon.

'Why?' said Niall.

'We're all together. It's Dad's fiftieth birthday.'

She took the camera from Niall and gave it to a middle-aged man she didn't know and asked him to take the picture. They formed themselves into a group.

'Smile,' said the man.

'Smile like we're at a party we want to be at,' said Ollie.

'Oh, for God's sake,' said Niall.

And when the Polaroid image emerged, it showed Niall glaring at Ollie, Paul looking blank and only Etty smiling at the camera. In the background was a fuzzy Greg, chugging beer.

'Perfect,' said Ollie, 'and now I'm going to meet some people outside and get out of my head enough to deal with the rest of the evening.'

As he moved away, Etty turned to Paul.

'You OK?'

'I'm not really in the mood.'

Etty thought to herself that nowadays he was never really in the mood, but she answered as cheerfully as she could.

'I don't think any of us are really.'

‘I thought you had another party to go to?’

She jerked her head towards her friends.

‘Yeah, we’re going to sneak off when we can.’

Paul mumbled something indistinct, picked up a bottle of beer and drifted away. He was six years older than her, but he still looked young and unformed. When she was a child, she’d been close to him, but nowadays she felt oppressed by him. He was so quiet, solitary and watchful. He made her feel guilty for having friends and boyfriends and fun, and the guilt made her angry.

Kim came up to her and put a hand on her arm.

‘Let’s go,’ she whispered.

‘Hang on one minute.’ Etty turned to Niall. ‘Have you seen Mum?’

Niall frowned. ‘Didn’t she come with you?’

‘I didn’t come from home. I came straight from Kim’s. Is Penny here?’

Penny was Niall’s girlfriend and at the mention of her name his frown deepened.

‘I’m not sure she’s coming.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t want to have a big discussion about Penny just at this moment.’

‘Fine by me.’

‘If Mum doesn’t get here soon, she’ll miss Dad’s speech.’

‘He’s not making a speech, is he?’ said Etty. ‘He can’t.’

‘He can.’

Just a few minutes earlier, the barn had felt awkwardly empty, with scattered groups and large spaces

between them. Now there were enough people that she had to force her way through them to get at her father.

Alec Salter was wearing a suit, almost flamboyant, in brown with white pinstripes, and a blue tie with a red swirling pattern. As Etty got closer, she saw he was talking to Greg's father, Duncan Ackerley, and another man she didn't know. Alec put an arm round her shoulders. He looked like he'd come straight in from the open air, his face flushed, his pale brown hair a bit frizzy. There was a strong smell of lavender and of cigarettes.

'How's my favourite daughter?' he said.

She was his only daughter, and it was a joke that had worn thin long ago. She shrugged off his arm.

'Have you seen Mum?'

'I came straight from work,' he said without any sign of concern.

'She should be here by now.'

His expression was slightly amused and slightly contemptuous.

'It's a woman's prerogative, isn't it?'

'You mean, being late?' said Etty. 'I thought the sexist saying was about changing your mind.'

'You're not going to be boring, are you?'

'Niall said you were going to make a speech. You can't make a speech before Mum gets here.'

'Why not? She's probably heard it all before.' Alec looked at his watch. 'If she's not here in fifteen minutes, I'm going ahead. If she misses it, then you can describe it to her.'

Alec ended the conversation by turning back to his

friends, but Duncan stepped aside. He was blond and big-boned, and when he bent down towards ETTY she could see her face in his horn-rimmed glasses.

‘Hi, ETTY. OK?’

‘Have you seen Mum?’

‘Not since just after lunch. She came to collect some extra bowls and a ladle. Have you tried ringing her?’

‘This is a barn,’ said ETTY. ‘It doesn’t exactly have a phone.’

There were two large wooden doors at one end of the barn. Once, many years earlier, it would have been where the cows were brought in and out. At the other end was a smaller door which led out into a field at the back. ETTY held up her hand in another waiting gesture to her friends and took that exit into the darkness. She was hit by the December cold. From here she could see the shine of the broad river.

The smell of weed wafted into her face from further in the darkness and she saw a group and the tell-tale glow.

‘Ollie,’ she said.

One of the silhouetted figures turned towards her.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked, as if she was a little girl intruding on the big kids’ game.

That felt cruel. Usually they were so close, but sometimes, when he was with his friends, he pushed her away. Ollie was nineteen, three-and-a-bit years older than she was, and they’d always been a gang of two in the family. He had left school in June and gone travelling for several months. Next year, he’d be going to university, and not just any university but Newcastle, almost as far from

Suffolk as it was possible to get. Etty was dreading it because then it would just be her left at home.

‘I was wondering where Mum was.’

‘How should I know?’

She looked at the boys with Ollie. She recognised two from his year, and also Morgan Ackerley, Duncan’s second son. He was younger than the others. In fact he was in Etty’s year, although they weren’t particular friends. He was clever, nerdy and painfully self-conscious.

‘I don’t think she’s here,’ Etty said. ‘And Dad’s about to give his speech.’

Ollie smiled slowly. ‘That’s probably why she’s not here.’ He held up the spliff. ‘A bit more of this and it’ll be like I’m not here.’

‘Can I have some?’

‘You’re too young.’

‘It’s not like I haven’t had it before.’

‘Then get it from someone else.’

His tone made Etty furious and ashamed, but she forced herself not to reply.

‘It’s just weird,’ she said instead. ‘She’s been talking about it for days and she’s done so much for it. She wouldn’t miss this.’

She heard the clink of a glass and someone shouting something inside. A shape appeared in the doorway.

‘You need to come in,’ called a voice. ‘Alec’s making a speech.’

‘He can’t be,’ groaned Etty. ‘He said he was going to wait for a few minutes.’

‘It’s his big moment,’ said Ollie. ‘He’s not going to wait for anybody.’

Etty went into the barn with Ollie, but they didn’t push their way through the crowd, instead standing just inside with their backs to the wall. Robbie slouched across and stood close beside her, in the shadows. She could feel his heat and smell the nicotine and beer. Her body tingled. She felt another presence close to her and looked round. It was Greg again. He was holding a bottle of beer.

‘Have you seen her?’

‘What?’ said Greg.

‘My mum.’

‘No.’ He took a gulp from the beer. ‘She’s probably here somewhere. Probably organising some special surprise for Alec. That would be just like her, doing something special that nobody else would think of.’

‘Jump out of a cake?’

He smiled and took another swig from the bottle. Ollie was getting stoned; Greg was getting steadily and quietly drunk, while she felt horribly sober. She felt she was at the wrong party. It was time to leave.

‘You could try ringing her at home,’ said Greg.

Etty shook her head.

‘You’re probably right. I’m sure she’s here somewhere.’

She stepped a bit closer to Robbie and he took her hand.

Her father began to talk but she couldn’t make out what he was saying and she couldn’t see him. Someone shouted and he stopped and then appeared above the

heads of the crowd, swaying slightly. He was standing precariously on a chair.

Etty knew that her father wasn't nervous. He didn't worry the way most people worried about a speech going wrong. He knew that it probably wouldn't go wrong and, if it did, he wouldn't care about that either.

'I thought someone should say something at an occasion like this,' he began, 'and if someone is going to do it, then it had better be me. Apparently, this is a birthday party ...' There was laughter from the crowd, but Alec didn't smile. He just waited for the noise to die down and then continued. 'My darling wife hasn't arrived yet. At least, not as far as I know. If you're here, please make yourself known in some way or other.'

He paused and there was almost a silence. Etty could feel Robbie's hand caressing hers.

'Answer came there none,' said Alec finally. 'But I have reason to believe that the rest of my family is here. My children. My brood. My jewels. I mean, what can I say? There's Niall, the one who has entered the family business and is waiting for me to retire. Put your hand up, Niall.' This had the form of a joke of some kind, but Alec was still entirely unsmiling. Niall looked uncomfortable as the partygoers turned to him.

'And then, counting down, there's Paul who does ... what do you do, Paul? Studying something somewhere. Where are you, Paul?'

Etty could see Paul, over to one side, also by the wall. She couldn't make out his expression, but she knew what it would be. Wretched.

‘And then there’s young Oliver. How can I describe him? Artistic. Creative.’

‘He says it like it’s a bad thing,’ Ollie muttered in Etty’s ear.

‘Ollie, make yourself known.’

Ollie raised his hand, his face flaming almost as red as his hair.

‘All right, Oliver, you can put your hand down now. And then finally, last and least, or do I mean last but not least, there’s my little flower, the comfort of my old age, who brings all the charming feminine graces to the Salter household, my daughter Elizabeth. Where is she? Where are you? Make yourself known.’

Etty was, briefly, glad that her mother wasn’t there to witness this. She would have hated it. She stepped away from Robbie and folded her arms defiantly across her chest, turning away from her father. Across the room, she saw Rosa and Kim grinning and rolling their eyes theatrically. She made a grimace at them.

‘Look at her,’ Alec continued. Etty felt her cheeks burn as some of the partygoers actually did look at her. She wasn’t sure if they were burning with embarrassment or just simple anger. ‘Isn’t she a picture? But don’t look too closely. She’s only fifteen and, remember, she has three older brothers.’ He paused. ‘Where was I? Oh, yes, I’m fifty. Fifty. Half a century. Why did anyone think that was worth celebrating? Anyway, thanks for coming.’

The speech came to a sudden end. Alec climbed down from his chair. There was a little ripple of applause,

and someone started to sing 'Happy Birthday', but it didn't catch.

'Arsehole,' said Ollie in ETTY's ear.

'Where is she?'

'Can we go yet?' asked Robbie.

The dancing started. ETTY could hardly bear to watch. Duncan was gallantly trying to encourage guests on to the floor. He swung Mary Thorne round in a circle and then tried to twist her under his arm, but it went wrong and they ended in a tangle. He roared with laughter, while she adjusted her dress and her husband, Gerry, sat by himself at the side of the barn and stared sulkily at them over his beer.

Her father seemed to have disappeared.

'Let's go,' said Rosa. 'The other gig will be in full swing by now. This is seriously boring.'

There was an end-of-term party at a house on the outskirts of Glensted. The parents were away and everyone would be there. ETTY had persuaded Kim and Rosa to drop in on her parents' celebrations on their way.

'Give it a few minutes,' she said. 'Until Mum gets here, sees I've turned up. Then we'll go.'

For a few minutes, she and her group danced ironically to Abba. ETTY loved dancing, but not here, with the uncomfortable sense that her father and his friends were watching them and they were putting on a performance of being teenagers, showing the middle-aged and the old what it was to be young and carefree.

Duncan galloped past, waving his arms wildly above his head.

‘I’ve got a tape,’ said Robbie. ‘Shall we shake things up a bit? What do you think? My Bloody Valentine? Let’s make their ears bleed.’

‘I’d prefer just to go,’ said Kim. ‘You said just an hour. We’ll be missing the fun.’

Etty hesitated. She caught a glimpse of Paul, who looked wretched, and a spurt of anger went through her.

‘You go,’ she said. ‘I’ll join as soon as I can.’

She half expected them to protest, but they didn’t, just shrugged and nodded. Kim put her arms round her and hugged her too tightly.

‘You’ll be OK?’

‘Sure.’

‘See you very soon.’ She nudged Etty and glanced meaningfully towards Robbie. ‘It’s going to be a great evening.’

Etty watched as they left, and then made her way along the edge of the room, her eyes stinging from the cigarette smoke. She kept thinking her mother would suddenly be there, with her cascade of dark blonde hair piled on her head, wearing the red dress that made her look like a film star, smelling of Chanel and smiling so the dimples in her cheeks deepened.

Where was she? Etty looked at her watch. It was half past nine. Charlie was often late but not like this.

‘Your mother,’ said Alec – who must have been drunk, because Etty had seen him empty glass after glass of punch, but who only seemed more sneeringly precise

than ever – ‘your beloved mother likes to be the centre of attention. She wants everyone to be asking where she is.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Really?’ Alec brought his face very close to hers. ‘Quite the mummy’s girl nowadays.’

Etty went looking for Niall and found him at the side of the barn, an oblong of light from the window illuminating him and Penny. She was sobbing and punching him in the chest. He kept saying, ‘Whoa, whoa!’ as if he was calming a skittish horse.

She looked for Paul but she couldn’t find him.

Ollie was sitting slumped on a chair near the make-shift bar with his eyes closed, rocking slightly, making a humming sound. She shook his shoulder and he opened one eye, nodded at her, then closed it.

‘Sorry I was a shit,’ he said, barely audible. ‘Some fucking party, eh?’

Quarter to ten. Ten o’clock. Five past.

She thought of the party she wanted to go to, the boy she fancied.

The dancing continued. The candles Greg had put on the food table guttered.

Etty collected her jacket. She would call home to see if Charlie was there, and then she’d go on to the other party – although the fizzing excitement had gone out of her, leaving her tired and dispirited. Outside it was damply cold, with a wind coming in gusts, whipping her hair against her face. The track to the road was quickly

swallowed up into a thick darkness. She had to walk slowly, trying to make out which way it went, her boots scuffling on the rutted surface, massy trees on either side like sentinels.

She thought she heard an owl, but maybe it wasn't an owl. Maybe it was Penny crying, or someone having sex in the bushes. As she reached the phone box, a figure loomed up at her.

'Morgan! You gave me a fright.'

She could see his face now: so different from Duncan or Greg. He was thin and pale, glasses glinting, a shock of dark hair. He was holding a cigarette, whose tip glowed when he lifted it to his mouth and inhaled.

'I'm going to ring home,' she said. 'Mum's still not turned up.'

The booth smelled of urine and tobacco and the receiver was greasy so she held it slightly away from her. She dialled the number and there was a ringing tone, then a static hiss on the line. ETTY pushed in the coins.

'Hello?' she said.

'Mum?' The voice at the other end crackled into her ear.

'Paul?'

'ETTY? Is that you? I thought it was Mum calling.'

'She's not there then?'

'No.'

'Where is she?'

There was a silence at the other end. She could hear him breathing and she could hear the emptiness of the house, with no Charlie in it.

*