

DEVOTED SISTERS

An Excerpt

Alison Buck



An Alnpete Book

Devoted Sisters

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The long, gentle day was almost over, the low evening sun almost gone.

But before dusk settled its stillness on the house, the softly blazing clouds parted briefly. For those few moments, the old red brick wall glowed warm again and the blistered paint of the window frame came back to life, gilded to fantastical baroque beauty. Then the moment passed, the clouds slipped back across the sun and the golden touch began to fade.

Beyond the window's dusty glass, the last drowsy shaft of light slanted across the quiet room and settled on the smiling face of an old woman. At ease in her armchair, feeling the warmth of the last light of the day, she stilled her hands and let her knitting come to rest on her lap. She held her breath a moment then sighed, a long, comfortable sigh. Had May been asked how she felt, at that moment, she would have described the joy of glorious summers in her early childhood; picnics in fields of swaying grasses and skies of the dazzling cloudless blue that filled your soul to overflowing. Mother laughing, braiding flowers into their hair. Everyone smiling, golden, all cares forgotten in the embrace of balmy summer air. It was the delight of bare feet running on hot dusty earth, the freedom and the laughter of childhood, all summoned

in an instant as the fading sunlight touched her face, the intervening years fallen completely away.

Utterly content, May sat entranced, watching dancing motes swirling silently in the pale shaft of light; continuous, aimless motion while everything else in the room was at rest.

Sunset had always been a special time of day, even from May's earliest memories. She remembered she had sat watching sundown on an evening just like this, a lifetime ago. Mother had come to speak to her and May could, even now, picture the glowing halo that the sun had made of the hair framing her mother's face. May was so fascinated that she didn't listen to what she was being told. Her tearful mother had to repeat herself and finally grasp the little girl's shoulders to break the spell and gently shake her to attentiveness. Father was missing. Mother hoped that they would hear news of him soon, but for now May had to be a good little girl and pray as hard as she could for his safe return. But even as she nodded gravely, promising that she would pray really, really hard for Father, May's mind had still been focused on the prettiness of the light on her mother's hair.

Over the years, May had occasionally recalled and regretted her childish inattention, but she could only have been three or four at the time and, spellbound by the wonderful evening light in her mother's hair, she simply hadn't grasped the importance of what was being said. She hadn't understood.

Dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief, May smiled again and gently shook her head. She had always been easily confused, so often misunderstanding what was going on; but, throughout her life, she had been fortunate in having people around her who cared for her and loved her. Especially Lizzie. She always had Lizzie, her elder

sister, the sensible one. Lizzie understood how things were; always knew what had to be done. She was bossy of course, but that was just her way. She had always cared for May, her baby sister.

It had been on another such warm and golden evening, some years later, that May had sat out on the verandah on the day that Father finally came home from the war. He had been a prisoner in a camp, but now his war was over. Mother had been given just a few hours notice that he was coming home to them and the house was in uproar while preparations were made. Everyone else was excited. Lizzie and their brother, Frank, hurriedly made a banner from scraps of stiff blue wallpaper. It read, 'Welcome home Father' and it flapped crisply in the breeze, above the front door. Frank and Lizzie waited at the gate all afternoon, keen to get the first glimpse of their father. But May chose to hide away on the verandah at the back of the house. So much younger than the others, she no longer remembered her father at all. She had no memory of any adult man in the house and the prospect of a stranger being thrust into her world was quite terrifying.

But gradually, as she crouched in a corner, the comforting warmth of the setting sun calmed her. She began to feel protected, safe. The garden darkened and moths came to the verandah, drawn by the light from the kitchen window. Watching them, oblivious to the passing of several hours, May became so enchanted that she didn't notice the sounds of activity at the front of the house when her father finally arrived. The verandah had been in near total darkness when Mother came searching and found May kneeling by the window, marvelling at a tiny moth resting on her finger. Despite May's pleading, Mother insisted she leave the moth behind. Mother led her into the very room in which May was sitting now

where, then, Father had been waiting.

That meeting with her father was a strangely silent and stilted affair. Deeply affected by his imprisonment, he would never again be the lively, loving man who had been swept away to war. Father and daughter were foreign to each other; complete unknowns. At a loss to know what else to do, May simply stared up at this stranger's face. While her father, similarly ill at ease, looked down at her from across the room with an equal lack of recognition and with such apparent coldness that May struggled in panic, like someone drowning, when her mother gently urged her to go to him. Neither father nor daughter said a word.

Eager to get away, May ran from the room as soon as her mother released her hand. Subsequently, as was to become her habit when dealing with any of life's unpleasantness, May had put the encounter out of her mind and she had recalled it on very few occasions in all the time since. In fact, the only thing of importance that May consciously carried with her from that momentous day of her father's return to his family was an abiding fascination with and love of moths.

The light had now faded, reducing the dancing motes to invisibility and May let her eyes close, her mouth a contented smile. But the peace was rudely shattered when, with sudden noisy activity, Lizzie thrust open the door, snapped on the light and marched into the room.

Unlike her more frail and dependent younger sister, Lizzie took great pride in her own relative strength. She stood erect and had about her an air of purposeful fierceness, always busy, always watchful, always alert. She refused to let the years weaken her and she had far too much to do to allow herself to slide into a gentle old age and inactivity, as had her younger sister.

Lizzie strode over to the window and pulled the blinds down.

“For goodness’ sake, May, don’t leave the blinds open after dark. I’ve told you before, the light in here lets people see in and you never know who’s out there just watching for a house that’s worth breaking into.”

With a resigned sigh, May adjusted her glasses on her nose and picked up her knitting once more.

“It’s no good you sighing like that. You won’t be so calm when some young thug breaks in and kills us in our beds.”

“The sun has only just gone down Lizzie. I’m sure thugs, young or old, would wait till it’s a good deal darker before they go out prowling.”

Not for the first time, Lizzie had the nagging suspicion that her sister was mocking her. It was too much! May didn’t take any of Lizzie’s concerns seriously. Never had. May lived from day to day in a cosy fantasy, her only activities: knitting, breadmaking and gardening; her only interest, those blessed moths. Comfortably cocooned in her safe, familiar surroundings, May had no understanding of the bigger world that lay beyond.

Lizzie on the other hand had to deal with that dangerous outside world and she felt the burden of responsibility increasingly heavy on her shoulders. They were alone now, just the two of them, and Lizzie had promised Mother that she would always look after her little sister. Though they were both now old women, Lizzie still felt herself bound by that promise.

Lizzie had never married; how could she when there was always May to care for? Perhaps because of this, their brother Frank had become her closest friend. He had been privy to all Lizzie’s secret hopes and dreams. Long ago, when May had simply been ‘the baby’, Lizzie had

been a fearless tomboy: playing soldiers and climbing trees with Frank and his schoolmates. She and Frank had shared such adventures, such wonderful times.

Now it was Lizzie's turn to sigh. She missed Frank so very much.

He had grown to become the sort of man that Lizzie might have looked for as a husband. Indeed for years she and Frank had been partners, in their shared life here in this house. Sadly their comfortable rhythm and routine had ended abruptly when Frank met a girl at work, fell hopelessly in love and, all too soon, left home to marry.

Lizzie had never warmed to Frank's wife, Vera and while she magnanimously conceded that some of her reaction was jealousy, there was no escaping from the inexplicability of Frank's choice; it was abundantly clear to Lizzie that Vera was silly, weak and even more irritatingly foolish than May. Try as she might, and she did try a little, Lizzie could never understand what Frank saw in Vera. Why was he always so protective of her, giving in to her every whim? Why were Vera's wishes always paramount? Lizzie felt her beloved brother had been stolen away, wrenched from her life.

After Vera's arrival, Lizzie and Frank had precious little time or opportunity to talk as they once had. On one treasured occasion though, on Christmas Eve, Vera had retired early to bed and Lizzie and Frank had been able to talk together, in earnest confidence, far into the quiet hours of the night. Lizzie had remembered that stolen conversation for the rest of her life. Frank told her of his love for Vera and his hopes for their future together. With tears in his beautiful eyes, he also confided that Vera was apparently too delicate for the demands of pregnancy, so his long-held wish to become a father would never be realised. It seemed that Vera was similarly too fragile to cook or manage a home and Frank would

have to work extra hours to pay for a cook and a housekeeper. Lizzie was unconvinced; Vera was slim certainly, but frail, no. Also it seemed strange to Lizzie that Vera's delicate constitution was sufficiently robust to allow frequent visits to the beauty parlour and equally frequent shopping trips, during which Vera purchased the exquisite tailored suits she so loved. Exploiting Frank's inexperience and trusting nature, Vera had him dancing entirely to her tune, and Lizzie grew to hate her for it.

Just before dawn on that long ago Christmas morning, Lizzie had looked into Frank's sad, lovely eyes, lit solely by the dim glow of the lamp on the table between them. In that otherwise darkened room, his face was luminous with his tragic infatuation for the undeserving Vera. Frank had paused, waiting for Lizzie to speak, wanting her reaction; wanting her approval. If ever she had had a chance to save him from Vera, it was in that moment, in the dark silence of the sleeping house. Moments passed and time seemed to slow, awaiting Lizzie's response. But how could she say what she so desperately wanted to? Frank loved Vera with an all-consuming surrender of himself. To tell him how truly ordinary and lacking in merit the woman was would have been to break him, or forever shatter the wonderful friendship that he and Lizzie had all their lives enjoyed. In the lengthening silence, Lizzie had to choose a future, either sharing Frank with Vera, or losing him to Vera completely and probably forever.

Lizzie chose. She looked across at Frank's open, trusting eyes and forced her own face to convey both her love, which was intensely real, and an understanding, which was utterly beyond her. Even as she mouthed the supportive and sympathetic platitudes, her mind had been filled with doubts and questions. Above all, how could it be possible that she was losing her beloved brother in

such a way, to such a dull and feeble person? And how could Frank not see what a burdensome, utterly worthless woman Vera really was?

Frank and Vera were married just two years. But it wasn't poor, 'fragile' Vera who succumbed. It was Frank. He had died, quickly and unexpectedly, from a haemorrhage in his brain.

Lizzie's heart had been broken then and she always felt she had never truly recovered from the shock of his death. In her mind, she could see still Frank the boy; laughing, sharing some silly joke, cheering the gang with his infectious enthusiasm, encouraging everyone to join him in a childhood of fantastical adventures. She could see also the caring and gentle young man who quietly eased the burden from Father's shoulders, working hard to provide for them all. Eventually, as Father became ill and Mother slowly faded, Frank had become the heart of the family, a source of comfort and strength for them all. Then all too soon and with no warning, he was gone.

Even now after so many years, not a day passed without Lizzie thinking of him and missing their special friendship. Growing older without him, she had felt the loss of his strength and his reassuring presence ever more keenly with the passing years. He would have protected both her and May. With him, Lizzie would have been safe from the many terrors that populated the outside world of her imaginings.

Less than a year after Frank's death, Vera had married a shoe salesman from Rochester. To Lizzie's immense relief, she and Vera had never so much as exchanged a Christmas card since.

Maybe Vera was dead by now, Lizzie mused, with no little amusement.

But the pleasure was short-lived and her half smile quickly turned to a scowl, at the sudden, awful thought of Frank and Vera being reunited in death.



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Watch out for these titles from Alison Buck:

Devoted Sisters

Alison Buck

Elderly sisters Lizzie and May live quiet, ordered lives in the house in which they were born; their self-imposed seclusion and the unchanging predictability of their lives shielding them from the changing world beyond.

But the day comes when this protective isolation is broken; the world outside forces its way in. A stranger appears, unsettling them, bringing with him the threat of danger, upheaval and violence.

Fearful and alone, with all semblance of comforting routine wrenched from them, Lizzie and May are driven to desperation. Dark memories emerge from their buried past as the sisters gradually slip from reason into their own confused realities, within which even their former carefully regulated world seems only a distant memory.

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Abiding Evil

Alison Buck

A sleeping menace is roused deep in the darkness of the forest. For decades it grows, biding its time, reaching out to tug at the ordinary lives of those living beyond the shadow of the trees.

Their children begin to disappear.

Unaware and unsuspecting of the danger, a group of families, friends for many years, journey to a newly opened hotel. It stands alone in a clearing a mile or more within the forest boundary.

For some this will be their last reunion.

Coming Autumn 2006 ISBN 0-9552206-3-7

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About the author

Throughout a science-biased education and subsequent years employed in graphic design and web site development, Alison Buck has all the while been scribbling away, committing her stories to disc. Although, as a rule, she concerns herself with apparently quite normal, everyday characters, populating what appear to be quite normal and everyday surroundings, the events and dangers they encounter are rarely commonplace; Alison's can be very dark, unsettling tales.

But whatever the origin of these often menacing undercurrents in her stories, Alison assures us that they are completely at odds with the happy and relatively menace-free family life she enjoys with her husband, son and daughter in Kent.