

Time to Surrender

Alice couldn't remember what had started the feud. Alice Pepper versus the Sweetings. What started as an occasional practical joke had escalated into a mini war and Alice had begun to feel weighted down by the whole sorry show. She was beginning to wonder whether or not it was time to offer the Sweetings a white flag. Especially after the greenhouse experience.

On Sunday, she'd been walking her dog, Hera, when she spotted Geoffrey Sweeting tipping grass cuttings into her ornamental pond, presumably in retaliation for her own act of persuading the paper boy to let her throw the local paper, just once, and launching it so hard that it shattered a pane in the Sweeting's greenhouse. It had been an accident. Alice hadn't realised her own strength. It had been years since she'd done anything remotely sporty, not even a round of golf. Not since Bill had died.

How had they gone from silly messages to criminal damage, Alice thought as she walked up and down the aisles of *Esme's Emporium of Everything*? She heaved out a sigh in front of the novelty condiment sets. Time to plan a surrender speech.

"Look, Dawn, this has gone on far too long. It was funny to start with, all the prank pizza deliveries and the silly answer-phone messages, but now... I'm sorry for whatever nonsense I've been a part of, but it's time to get over it." Then she'd offer her hand and they'd have a laugh and end up enjoying tea and scones together.

Too sickly? What about...?

"I'm sorry, Dawn, for all the utterly silly things I've done and said over the years. You're my neighbours, and I think it's time to bury the hatchet and move on. I mean, if Palestine and Israel can talk, then I'm sure we can."

Too dramatic?

"It's gone too far, Dawn. I'm over it. Let's put the past behind us."

Too short? Too apologetic? Too clichéd? She picked up salt and pepper shakers in the form of a pair of little red devils and instantly thought of Dawn and Geoffrey. Perhaps, she wasn't ready to move on just yet.

She turned into the haberdashery section and browsed the assortment of fabrics, enjoying the kaleidoscope of colours and textures, looking to see if there was anything appropriate to add to her friendship quilt. The news of a cousin's first great-

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granddaughter being born was the perfect reason to add a new square. She'd brought the quilt with her and as she pulled it from her bag to check what colour and material might be appropriate, she heard Dawn Sweeting's nasal tones. Alice shoved the quilt back into the bag and went to hurry out, but realised that she'd be spotted. The only option was to wait for Dawn to leave. Alice slunk down. The woman could talk for hours, so she figured she'd be in for a lengthy wait.

"You should have seen her, Esme. Honestly, that woman is mad as a hatter," Dawn was saying. "She threw that paper like a javelin and it smashed into our new greenhouse. All of Geoffrey's tomato seedlings were covered in glass."

Alice cringed, remembering the shattering sound.

"Did you call the police?" Esme asked.

"We thought about it, but, she's just a lonely old woman, isn't she?"

Alice stiffened. Was she a lonely old woman? Old? She was 74, but the Sweetings were no spring chickens themselves. Lonely? She'd been widowed for five years. She had friends. The ladies from the Book Club were very kind. And she still had the occasional afternoon tea with Hetty from the Golf Club. Although, that only ever seemed to be at Hetty's behest, when she had some amazing story to share, or new outfit to show off. No, she was sure that she'd know if she was lonely. Other people are lonely. The ones who die on their own at home, and nobody notices for three weeks. That wasn't Alice. Someone would knock. Wouldn't they?

Dawn seemed intent on chatting forever. Alice's back and hips were getting sore as she sat on the yellow lino. What was she doing? Why didn't she just get up and walk out? Neither woman would probably think any the worse of her than they already did. Alice Pepper, that poor, lonely, old mad woman.

"So, how's Geoffrey?" Esme asked.

"I left him in bed, actually. He was feeling a bit under the weather and he didn't fancy a long trip down the street."

Alice clutched her quilt. Who was she making it for anyway? She had no children to pass it to; no close family nearby. It would end up in the spare room on the bed nobody ever stayed in, along with the fluffy towels and sequined cushion she'd won at the Golf

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Club raffle last year. It seemed ridiculous to be making a friendship quilt, when quite patently she had no friends to pass it on to. She wriggled her aching buttocks, ready to haul herself up.

“It’s very quiet today, Dawn. Why don’t we head out for lunch? I’ll put a sign on the door.”

Before Alice could pull herself up, the door shut, the lock clicked and she was left in the Emporium of Everything with nobody but herself to complain to.

Alice pulled out her quilt and analysed the squares. There was one for her dear old Bill: a blue and green fabric, onto which she’d sewn little figures representing them playing a round at the Links course. Then there was one for her sister, Alma. A twin who hadn’t survived, but one she’d always felt close to. The square was a deep shade of purple, almost black. It shone in certain lights, creating a two-tone effect: light and shade, living and dead. She’d sewn two squares for her parents: one, a quirky print with cows and pigs and other farmyard paraphernalia. It was her father all over. For her mother, there was a lacy swatch, delicate and regal.

Alice checked her watch. Nearly twenty minutes had passed and she was still sitting in the same aisle. She pulled out the mobile phone Hetty had persuaded her to buy. In the four years she’d had it, she’d hardly ever used it. Hetty had punched in her own number and on a whim, Alice had entered the Sweetings home number too. She’d used it to order a family pizza deal and several taxis. She felt so guilty she put it back in her bag, and picked up the quilt again.

There were two red squares, devoid of any pattern. They represented the two children she’d miscarried. She’d dared not make them pink and blue. She had no idea what gender they’d been, and she cared not. She felt her eyes fill as she fingered the fabric, soft velour. She put it to her cheek and let the tears spill.

She got up and wandered the aisles, cursing her own stupidity. She could have been at home, drinking tea and eating spiced apple cake. It had been nearly an hour since Esme and Dawn had left. She could call Hetty, but at this time in the afternoon, chances were that she was on the golf course. She could call the fire brigade or the police but that

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would be deemed a nuisance call and she'd hate to bother them in what was really a ridiculous mess, not an emergency.

She pulled up the Sweetings number. Perhaps Dawn had taken Esme to her house for a spot of lunch. There was nothing to lose. She held her breath and hit the green button, listening for the tinny bleeps of the connection.

An eternity seemed to pass before a muffled voice answered. "Geoffrey?"

A long pause.

"Geoffrey, is that you? This is Alice Pepper from next door. Well, I'm not next door. I'm in a bit of a predicament."

"Huh?" Geoffrey Sweeting's voice sounded gravelly and distracted.

Alice remembered that Dawn has said he wasn't feeling very well and she felt at once embarrassed and weepy. "I'm sorry, Geoffrey. I believe you're not well. But I need some help."

Geoffrey was silent momentarily and then sucked in a huge breath before uttering what sounded distinctly like, "Heart."

Alice stiffened. "Geoffrey, are you all right? Are you feeling sick? Can you talk?"

"Heart...pain."

"Oh dear. Hang on, Geoffrey. I'll call for help. Put the phone down and I'll call you an ambulance. Then I'll ring you again. Do you understand?"

His voice was barely audible, but he definitely whispered a yes. Alice disconnected and called for an ambulance, giving them the address. She immediately called Geoffrey again and after an agonising delay, she was relieved to hear his croak.

"Hello Geoffrey. Just hang in there. An ambulance is on its way. I'll stay on the line with you until they've arrived. I know you can't speak much, but I'm going to talk to you and you can just say yes or grunt occasionally so that I know you're still with me. Okay?"

"Yes."

"Well, you'll never believe where I am. I'm sitting in *Esme's Emporium of Everything*, in the haberdashery aisle, trying to select some material to make a new square for my friendship quilt. Dawn came in and she and Esme got talking, and well,

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the funny thing is that they decided to go for lunch together and they locked me in. Isn't that hilarious?"

Geoffrey coughed, a hideous rattle that gave Alice the shivers. She went on to describe to him the different materials on her quilt and the reasons that they had been chosen.

Alice listened to muffled voices in the background, and when an ambulance officer spoke to her, she was finally convinced that Geoffrey was in the best hands. The problem was that she was still stuck in the shop and she hadn't had the heart to mention it to the ambulance officer.

After a while, Alice came across a beautiful print of a peaceful village scene, houses and a pond, fluffy clouds, golden sun, neighbours leaning over the fence talking. It was idyllic and perfect. She took the roll up to the front counter, pulled out Esme's fabric scissors, cut a square and took out a large note from her purse.

On her way back, she saw a roll of pure white material. She cut a square of that too, and added another note to the pile.

It was nearly five by the time Esme returned to the shop. She was astonished to see Alice sitting at the front, sewing.

"What are you doing?"

"I was waiting for you to come back. You locked me in."

Esme looked miffed. "There was an emergency. I couldn't get back any earlier. You should go home, Alice. I haven't got time for silly nonsense. It's been a big day."

Alice picked up her friendship quilt and gave Esme a tight smile. "It certainly has."

She spent the rest of the evening sewing her quilt, edging the coloured patches with the plain white squares. She knew who she would be giving it to and she knew what she'd tell him the white squares were for. It was time to surrender.