

~ The Other Side ~

by Devize

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Disclaimer:

They look like them, they aren't them, they are the product of a very strange imagination which, worryingly, seems to belong to me.

There is a smidge of bad language, a hint of attempted sexual violence.

The spelling isn't wrong, it's British.

With a huge thank you to Lynne and Boots for their photographic minds, squirrel anecdotes, whip-action and killer recipes.

To my cariad, DG, without whom....

It started like this.

I'd dreamt about flying again that night.

I was being chased. A terrifying unseen pursuing me down corridors, up stairs, footsteps pounding after heartbeat until I'd trip, or fall or simply run out of anything beneath my feet. At which point, the would-be nightmare would transform into an all-singing, all-dancing liberating shindig of a dream, as I'd swoop and float or take giant, laughing moonsteps away from the suddenly insignificant people below.

I've never known such freedom.

Honestly, I hadn't.

You see, you can't help but feel a little captive when you've lived in the same old flat, in the same old tower block for years. You've looked at the same old view from the same old tenth floor for all that time until the concrete pathway all that way below looks just about as interesting.

Recently, I'd found myself staring down at that concrete a lot. That shade of grey appealed. I'd lean over the railings across from the flat's front door and look down... and down... and down... losing myself in the height and the grey and the question of whether a person would feel pain if they fell, or whether the whistling flight down would be the last thing they'd feel.

Trust me, it's a far less vexing issue than some things I chose not to think of. Like the past, like relationships, like the question of the annual Halloween party.

Hang on. Back up. I ought to introduce myself.

My name is Kate. Kate Smith, if you insist, but I try not to use that surname anymore. Hardly the most dynamic of names, I know, but for a long time I wasn't the most dynamic of people. Storey says differently, of course, but she's biased.

And I'm getting ahead of myself.

Where was I?

Ah yes, Halloween.

The horror had already started, bright and early. The Samson boys screaming up and down the balconies, banging on people's front doors and lobbing water balloons at them as the poor unsuspected dwellers peered, blinking, into the morning, then watching in dripping bewilderment as the little brats tailed it away laughing.

You could hear screaming and banging and swearing from the floor below, and it was a given that they'd be up here next.

And this was part of the problem. If I stayed at home and missed the party, aiming for the 'quiet night in', I would have been plagued by the Samson brothers and their demonic acolytes demanding chocolates with menaces under the guise of trick or treating.

Curses, threats, arguments and screaming. A typical Halloween at Eden Towers.

And if I'd gone out? An evening of interminable misery. Who needed things that go bump in the night when you could have drunken come-ons, alcohol-fuelled jibes, self-consciousness and guys that would hump in the night? If they could.

The choice seemed easy.

But I'd never had the choice.

It had been the phone that had caught me mid-dreamflight and plummeted me back to wakefulness, the morning scream of reality and a pool of saliva on the pillow.

My first thought, as always, was in number form: three years, four months, two weeks and five days, accompanied by the daily burgeon of the knot in my stomach.

Funny how emotion can wake you up better than an alarm clock. I groped for the phone, knocking my overdue library books onto the floor. *Must take them back.*

"Kate, you comin' to the party tonight?"

No hello. No good morning. No sorry to call you so early, but....

"I'm not sure. I haven't decided yet."

"But you've *got* to come." Kelly had almost shouted. She had a very forceful voice at the best of times, but especially at pre-coffee times.

Phrases pounding my head with the force of an aural pneumatic drill.

"It's only a party, Kate. And you never come out with us anymore. It'll be fun. Everyone's going."

"Adie's not going." I remember twisting the phone cord round and round my finger. "He's away again."

"Hey, when the cat's away, girl...."

"I really don't...."

"Come on, don't you like us anymore or something?"

Oooh, go on, Bookie, answer that one!

"It won't be the same without you."

"...."

"Oh, course you'll come. Me and Sonia will pick you up at eight."

And that was that.

See? No choice.

It had always been 'the group', you see. Four of us, from primary school. And especially Kelly. We'd been through a lot together: Kelly's break-up from Robert, her parents' divorce, Kelly's break-up from Liam, her father's cancer scare, Kelly's break-up from every *Oh-God-Kate-I-think-he-really-is-the-one-this-time* Mr Right, her pregnancy scare... that was a tough one. My mother and Kelly's mother were friends, and so we were going to be friends whether I liked it or not. Besides, relationships are habit-forming. It was easier to go along.... Always has been. Almost.

Once upon a time - I think it was when I was eight - I had a friend of my own. It lasted a whole school term. But it seems that in this city, if you speak differently, if you look differently, then you aren't welcome, and her family moved away. I don't even remember her name now.

But that affected me. It left me with an anger inside that had simply stagnated. In fact, pretty

much everything had stagnated from that point. Emotional constipation. Heaven help anyone in the vicinity when I find a laxative that works for that one.

Another scream drifted from beneath as the junior thugs caught another unsuspecting victim. They were moving up.... It crossed my mind to check on my grandfather, who lived on the floor above. An elderly gentleman, confined to his home if the lift wasn't working... perfect target for them. But I couldn't move. Not even for Granddad.

All I did was pull my robe more closely around me as the morning tickled with a feathery cold. And I carried on concentrating on the grey oblivion below, blocking out the morning's rude awakenings, blocking out the lack of choice, blocking out the years, the months, the weeks, the days, until....

Until....

"You have a wonderful view here."

The voice was in my head. Low and gentle. A strange accent. Cultured, yet tinged with an urban familiarity. With a brief thrill of excitement I wondered if it was foreign, although the tone didn't seem to settle anywhere. There was something strangely warming about it.

For a moment, it didn't even occur to me to look up, just a little passing schizophrenia, I thought - until I realised that there was a presence next to me.

So I lifted my gaze and momentarily lost myself in eyes so pale they looked...

...dead.

Then they blinked, and like the clouds parting to reveal pure blue sky, the orbs sparkled with azure, and there was so much life in them I couldn't help but... smile.

"Sorry, what did you say?" I said, feeling foolish.

Beneath the eyes, a bright, full-toothed, inexplicably-pleased-with-itself grin dawned. "I said, you have a wonderful view here."

"Um...."

I was so focused on the paving stones below that I hadn't seen my surroundings in too long. Eden Towers was a misnomer. There was only one tower, surrounded by monochrome foothills of apartment blocks, as if, after the one, the planners had run out of steam, and concrete. But from the top of the one tower I could look out across the expanse of city - the city I'd lived in, worked in, cried in, married in, argued in, gone quietly crazy in... my entire life. And I suddenly saw again the hues of existence, the architecture that measured the passage of time as surely as any clock; the history, the culture, etched in every street and spire and avenue. And beyond, in the distance, that beguiling hazy green that promised different and new and other. I'd always wanted

to see what was over there, on the other side of that green.

"Yeah," I said, "yeah... I suppose I have." And for a moment I got the strangest urge to actually appreciate it, to explore it, to see it through new eyes.

She looked as if everything was new to her: the tingle of the wind on her skin, let alone the sight of the city expanse before us.

Yet my eyes found myself instinctively drawn back to the face of this stranger. Tall and broad, she seemed to fill my vision. And I couldn't work out how such a sharp and angular face could be so soft. No make-up, but then, neither had I at that time in the morning; besides, pale, pale skin seemed to emphasise naturally the live blue and shadow of her eyes, the pink, full mouth. Dark hair, cut short and ragged round her ears, swept back off her face. I couldn't tear my gaze from her... there was something so different about her... no... something so familiar about her... as if she'd been at my side the entire time.

And then I blinked and I realised she had been staring back at me. An odd look - somehow... unearthly - deep and sad, except it seemed veiled. It felt as if we'd been staring at each other for a lifetime. It had probably been about two seconds.

She smiled again, this time close-lipped and wistful, turning back to the view, and wrapped her long, black coat around her. A big, black duffel coat, protecting her from the cold wind and water balloons of the October morning. Between the coat and the short hair she looked like a little boy - a very tall little boy who seemed to know far too much.

Until then, it hadn't concerned me that I was still wearing my old pyjamas and robe. Now I shivered. She glanced round, guilt peeking out from beneath that veiled gaze.

The old, pink towelling bathrobe was wrapped further round myself, but I was unwilling to go indoors quite yet. "Have we met?" I asked.

Again that glance - a little flash of sky. A pause.

"Not yet," she said.

Funny. I'd grown wary of any strangers round here - it was incredibly easy not to trust anybody when no one else trusted you. It was the fashion. Besides, when you have Satan's progeny living in the building....

But this woman....

I stuck out my hand.

And tried to remember the last time I had to introduce myself to anyone new. My name sounded alien as I spoke it. For a moment she seemed to shrink back from me, shrink into herself; it looked as if she became smaller. I wondered if she wasn't used to introductions either. She

looked away again, down at the concrete so many metres below, as if following my earlier gaze, and then back. Then, hesitantly, she took my hand in her own gloved fingers and held it - a firm grip, not too strong, but determined, steadfast. The black glove was warm and soft against my own skin, and it seemed to melt the autumn cold inside.

"I'm...", those sapphire eyes fixed on mine, and again that smile, "Call me Storey." And in my eyes, she grew in stature.

I should have known then I was lost.

Her eyes seemed to bore into me. She looked into me, not through me, as if she could see what was inside - and for a moment I felt desperately shy, aware that I had a tea stain on my robe, aware that my pyjamas were old and frayed round the ankle, and had a hole in a particularly vulnerable place, aware that my hair was sticking up at an odd angle on top, aware of all my self-doubt, all my fears, every single wicked thought I'd had since I was a child....

Storey lifted an eyebrow. And smiled.

Damn it, she was reading me like a book, paragraph by sordid paragraph, in a nano-second, but there was no judgement there, just understanding and something....

...screaming came tearing round the corner.

I jumped out of my skin.

Storey turned her gaze away from mine and fixed it on the bundle of yelling, laughing, swearing brat that was charging along the balcony. He seemed not to see us, until elongated, gloved fingers stretched out and caught the hood of his sweatshirt as he passed. And he boinged back.

She looked down as he looked up, and for a moment he seemed as if his knees might give way. He dropped the water balloon he'd been clutching, and it bounced dangerously onto the concrete at his feet.

The other hand moved slowly, plucking at the chin of the ghoulish mask he was wearing and drawing it up, revealing an eight-year-old face.

I'd never seen any of the Samsons like this. Usually, if one of the adults in the flats caught them, they'd be yelling curses, kicking out, throwing punches, landing a few, threatening them with the police, social services, their dad.

This time... this Samson....

As the mask came off, he went white and rigid and deathly silent, and his mouth opened.

For a moment I thought he was going to scream. Again.

Storey crouched down so she was at eye level, a hand still holding his hood in a loose grip. She smiled, reassuringly, which seemed to cause a frisson of terror to run down his body. And then she spoke, quietly, her voice low and sweet.

"James Samson. Jamie, isn't it?"

Jamie's jaw shuddered. And then his head followed in speedy affirmation. His eyes seemed to grow even bigger than they were before.

"Don't worry," Storey continued, "I know your father." I could see her in profile: her white skin vibrant against her dark hair, her angular face soft and warm. Her teeth gleamed.

"Do you know what it's like to be scared, Jamie?" she asked, gently, so quietly I could barely hear. It was a whisper that was meant solely for him.

Jamie's eyes were now so dilated, his black pupils seemed to swallow any colour or brightness in his gaze. A little noise came from his mouth, almost like a whine. He nodded again. A quick, single nod.

Again Storey smiled. "Then why do you scare other people?"

Jamie's mouth opened and closed. I could see the beginnings of a tear form at the corner of his eye. However unpleasant this little horror was, I felt the need to comfort him. He was still a child, no more than nine years old, and his fear was palpable. I moved towards him, a hand stretched out, only for Storey to glance up at me.

The expression on her face sung volumes of understanding and love. How could I add any more to that? She turned back to Jamie.

"Think about it, Jamie," she said. "Think about what you do and then don't do it any more, because you know where it'll lead you, don't you?"

Jamie was crying now. Little sobs hitching his breathing. He nodded again, this time leaving his head hanging - a picture of abject childhood.

Storey let go of his hood and settle a hand, briefly on his shoulder. Then she stood up to her full height. Taller than me, towering over Jamie.

"All right?" she said.

Again a nod, still his head hanging, and then a sound, the tiniest of whispers. "Sorry, miss."

"That's fine, sweetheart. Be good now. Maybe you could help your mother today?"

A desperate, zealous nod of the head and then he turned... tried to run... but something stopped him. Jamie Samson walked quietly, sedately to the end of the tenth floor balcony and

disappeared down the stairs.

"How in heaven's name did you do that?" I asked.

Storey looked almost sheepish. "Sometimes a quiet word from a stranger means more than a thousand words from someone you see everyday." She looked at me sideways, for all intents and purposes looking as if she was seeking approval.

Hell, I approved!

"You're certainly not from round here."

"No," she said. "Just come to visit someone." Suddenly, she looked round, as if trying to catch her bearings. Then, a glove dived into her pocket and fished out a mobile phone. What I can only assume was a text message lit up its fascia with a neon yellow glow - dull in the morning light. Storey's eyes lit up with it, brighter. "I must go. It was...." Again she caught my gaze and for one extraordinary moment the veil of her eyes was drawn back and I could see every cerulean emotion written before me.

In a language I couldn't understand.

But it had felt as if... something inside me was changed.

I couldn't breath.

"It was lovely to meet you, Kate Smith," she said. She held out a hand as if wanting to take mine, but the hand and her were suddenly sidetracked.

She stooped and picked up the water balloon that had been abandoned by the new and improved Master Samson. She looked at it quizzically, regarding it almost with disapproval, and gently tossed it to me.

And then she was gone.

As if she'd never been there.

But I still held the balloon, and the sense of her inside. It made me feel alive and excited and humbled, and incredibly confused as to what the hell had just happened.

I realised I'd been holding my breath and gave in to a breezy inhalation of tenth floor air that was almost better than coffee. But not quite. Leaning once more on the balcony, I looked down... down... down to the grey concrete of the pavement below, which suddenly seemed to blink blue. Weird.

I could feel the balloon in my hand, the weight of, the strange feeling of liquid moving against skin, but leaving it dry. It felt odd, it felt....

An unidentified head appeared ten floors below.

Oh, what the hell....

I watched the balloon's downward plunge, and dived back through my front door as I heard a spluttering and anguished cry echoing back up.

The phone started to ring as I shut the front door behind me.

"Hi, babe," the voice came.

Adie.

His voice made one small part of me light up like Storey's mobile phone. Pavlovian conditioning - I'd start drooling at the sound of him. But now, that's all it was. The rest of me felt rip-roaringly indifferent.

"Hi," I said. Indifferent enough? I wiped my mouth.

"You okay?"

I was about to answer my usual: *Yeah, I'm fine. Everything's fine. Your wife is fine, so you don't have to feel guilty about leaving her for weeks on end.*

But I wasn't fine. Today... today I was different. There was something inside that was....

"Kate, you there?"

"Yeah... I'm fine."

"Good."

"Where are you?"

He chuckled, loudly, cleared his throat: "God knows. Up North somewhere. Motel rooms all look the same any way."

Up North. The phrase suddenly seemed extraordinarily exotic. "Adie... could I come with you some time? I wouldn't be any trouble. I could explore while you were...."

"We've had this conversation before. You'd be bored out of your mind. Besides, you've got your job to think about."

There was a silence. A no man's land between peace and argument.

And then: "It's that party tonight, darlin'. You going?"

Oh no.... "I haven't made up my mind."

"Come on, babe, you ought to go. I hate to see you stuck at home all the time."

"I really don't want to go on my own, Adie."

"You won't be on your own. All your mates are going, aren't they?"

"Yeah, but...."

"Well there you go then. Go. I know you'll enjoy it."

"Adie...."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Kate. Just go, will you. I'm fed up with you mooning around that flat. You always sound so miserable."

"Adie...?"

"Look, I've got to go. I'll speak to you later, 'kay?" His voice had softened, but I still heard his sharp tone echoing as he disconnected, leaving me with the familiar feeling of blanket disappointment that seemed to cover everything. I pulled the blanket round myself and headed for the coffee.

* * * * *

How come it always happens that way?

It doesn't matter how early you get up... you still end up almost killing yourself to stop yourself being late for work.

Nuts.

But then, talking to Adie, the interlude with Storey, breakfast - in the background, radio chatter of death and music: a local man beaten to death outside a pub, the latest number one - all took their time, as did staring at myself in the mirror for God knows how long.

It had been weird. I'd been doing the usual: plaiting my hair, putting on a little make-up, trying to make myself look - if not feel - presentable, when I could have sworn my eyes changed colour. I was putting on mascara, a little black touch-up, when I looked in the mirror and saw blue.

Angled cheekbones, blonde hair turned suddenly dark, a different face staring back at me.

It scared the hell out of me. I went cold, completely cold all over, and simply couldn't move. Memories of what had been lost started creeping in: loss of what I'd had, loss of my role. Until my hand jerked, I stuck the mascara brush in my eye and blinked black streaks all over my cheeks.

Now I looked like me. Blonde hair already coming loose, watery green eyes staring back at me, make-up all down my face.

I told you, nuts.

Damage limitation with the face cleanser, then...

I slammed the front door behind me. Double-locked it. Flung the keys in my bag as I winged it down the walkway to the stairs. Went back to pick up the keys that I'd dropped when I missed the bag. Picked up the mobile phone that had slipped out of the bag as I'd stooped to reach the keys. Winged it down the walkway. Reached the top of the staircase and... stopped.

"Granddad," I said. "Are you all right?"

My grandfather was there, just a few steps down, staring out across the cityscape, in much the same way I had with Storey not long before.

He looked up at me, "Yes, love, never better." His soft, round face lit up in a smile. Age and laugh lines showed round his bright eyes.

I was bemused. I knew the lift wasn't working, but my grandfather had made it down a flight and a bit of stairs with a dodgy hip. "Do you need some help?" I asked, tentatively.

"No, I'm fine just here, Katie. Honestly. Just wanted a little fresh air and a look around, that's all, love."

"Okay, Granddad." It was good to see him feeling better. He hadn't been feeling well when I had dropped by the day before. I'd made him some lunch, another plate in the refrigerator for supper, made sure he was warm enough, and left him resting in front of the television.

Of course, I'd been late for work as a result, but priorities, right? Seeing the smile on my grandfather's face was worth a million times more than my boss's approval.

And now he was here. I was glad the rest had done him some good.

"Shouldn't you be on your way by now?" Twinkling grey eyes looked at me.

"I'll drop by this evening, okay?" I called back over my shoulder as I built up speed again, down to the main yard.

To lose one bicycle might have seemed like misfortune. To lose three, to Adie, that was carelessness. So, I was relieved to see my bike, and its three locking chains, were still determinedly where I'd left them. I rattled as I rode.

I could drive. But we only had one car, and that was up north. Somewhere. So the cycle to work was as familiar as the view from the balcony and the dull ache of memory.

I'm still not entirely sure how it happened. Perhaps the route had become so familiar, I wasn't paying attention. Perhaps I'd just remembered I'd left those overdue library books at home. Perhaps the driver was just as mired in familiarity. Perhaps it was just one of those cosmic convergences of small cyclist jousting with large, solid, blaring truck.

I lost.

With another burst of hornpower, and Dopplered expletives, I swerved and a set of railings at the side of the road suddenly appeared, lunging at me from a peculiar angle, catching the bicycle. In a move which would have made my childhood gym teacher proud, I found myself sailing over handlebars and dropping with a thud onto the pavement. I saw stars.

I opened my eyes, to find myself looking up at a little patch of blue, which in turn was looking down at me.

Blinking, breathless and in pain, strangely I felt in the mood to be sociable. Unfortunately, I was upside down with my legs in the air and my second most comfortable pair of panties on display to anyone passing. This particularly passing stranger, however, was apparently more well-mannered than most, and the bright sapphires stayed fixed to my burning cheeks.

The ones above.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," I said, uncomfortably.

"I saw you fly in."

"Thanks."

"Are you all right?"

My head stopped spinning, at least as a result of the impact. Something inside was still waltzing like an octogenarian on multi-vitamins. So I simply breathed for a moment, recovered my senses and gave myself a mental check-up. "My elbow hurts like hell. And I think I've sprained my pride." I extracted myself from underneath my bicycle, with the help of a pair of gloved hands. "But I don't seem to be dead."

Storey smiled. Her eyes gleamed. "That's for sure."

"I can't answer for my bike though." I attempted to extricate it from between the railings, but the bent wheel was proving a little too much for me. Storey added her... considerable... strength and together we pulled it back onto the pavement.

"I think you might have killed it," she said.

I said something rude under my breath. "My husband is going to kill me."

"No he won't," Storey said. She leant the bike against the railings and, sitting on her heels, attempted to carry out some impromptu bike maintenance. "I wouldn't let him."

"And my boss is going to kill me too," I was beginning to whine. "I'm going to be so late for work."

Storey looked up at me and smiled. It seemed I had protection from murderous restaurant managers as well.

I crouched at her side. She'd taken her gloves off, and I watched her long fingers playing the wheel spokes as if they were harp strings. Aware of my presence, she glanced at me, her fingers paused. "How's your elbow?"

I rubbed the joint. "Painful, but okay. I'm going to get one hell of a bruise."

"You'll take a moment, won't you? Late or no, you should catch your breath." Funny that that comment should make me breathless again. "You've had a shock...."

She looked round at me, and I was stunned at the sudden intimacy of her face to mine, the pure concern etched into her expression.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, my voice catching. "I mean," my voice sounded awkward, feeling each molecule of air that separated my mouth from hers, "apart from saving manic cyclists?"

Storey glanced round, away from me, the air on my face suddenly felt cold. "Visiting someone at the residential home up the road," she said, and stood up. The gloves went back on. "I think you should be able to wheel it."

"Thank you."

"Are you going to be all right? Do you need...." She put her head on one side, as if listening for something, then pulled the mobile phone out of her pocket. "Looks like we both have to go to work."

And she turned, but then, almost as an afterthought, "Did you know there was a big to-do at Eden

Towers, this morning?"

"What?"

She flashed me a smile. "Apparently, Mr Samson received a baptism from above." My eyes widened. "Take care, Kate," she smiled. "Perhaps I'll see you later?" she said, but didn't wait for a reply.

* * * * *

Marcus the Manager's head emerged pink and furious around the office door. "Kate, you're late."

And then disappeared.

"Marcus, I...."

"*Again!*" came loud from inside the office.

"I got knocked off...."

Something slammed down on the desk, and the greying curls appeared once more. "This really is the last time. I'm not paying you to piss about. Consider this your final warning." He disappeared again, and the door slammed shut.

I put my apron on, gingerly rubbed my darkening elbow and went to check on the morning coffee.

The machine kept clogging up, showering me with hot, wet coffee grounds. Marcus reprimanded me for wearing a dirty apron and told me to change it... as I was on my way to change it.

I broke two cups as someone shoved into me as I was clearing away dirty crockery from a table, splattering the dregs of tea over my clean apron. Marcus's response was: "For goodness sake, Kate, I thought I told you to change your apron?"

I missed my break. I was merely passing the staff area when I heard my mobile phone ringing. I'd forgotten I'd left it on. I was idiot to answer it.

"Hi, princess, you okay?"

"Adie, I'm at work, I can't talk now."

"Sorry, princess. Forgot to say earlier. I won't be around tonight. Got a dinner meeting with some

prospective clients, you know? So I'll have the phone switched off."

"But Adie, I haven't...."

"But you'll be at that party anyway....," my concentration was interrupted by some distinct voice in the background - his background, "...won't be a problem."

"I missed that. You got the radio on or something?"

"Yeah.... I was just saying you'll be at that party, so you won't need to phone anyway."

"I haven't decided if I'm going yet."

"Oh, come on...."

"Kate!"

Well, that was a given. Marcus was behind me. His voice was worryingly quiet. "Table four have been waiting for their food for twenty minutes."

"Adie, I've got to go."

"Kate...." I cut him off.

"Sorry, Marcus."

Marcus didn't say a thing, but his eyes were burning. I went and served table four.

One guy kept changing his mind about his meal. I brought him three different main courses before he finally decided he'd "actually just have the soup and roll, thanks, love." So, with infinite politeness, patience and gritted teeth, I fetched him his damned soup. I didn't notice that some kid had spilled cola on the floor. I slipped.

Everything went quiet. And slow.

The entire café watched the soup - special of the day: cream of tomato - as it arced through the air, leaving a descending vapourtrail of orange-red, symbolising the sunset of my waitressing career. So, it splashed the customers a little - it landed on me, bowl and all, and yes, I was sitting in the puddle of cola.

The customers laughed, the other staff laughed. I didn't laugh. I looked up and found that the child who'd spilt his drink was none other than Ryan Samson.

He wasn't laughing either. All he did was smile. A nasty, thirteen-year-old, know-it-all smile. And all he said was, "That's for having a go at my little brother."

I got to my feet, sodden and sticky, and all I said was, "You little...."

"Kate Smith, get in here!"

Marcus's voice silenced the café.

I dripped through to his office, the only sounds being the squeak of my gummy shoes on the floor and Ryan Samson's snickering. Once the door shut, statements hit me like bullets:

I've had enough of you.

I've had enough of your attitude.

I'm trying to run a business here.

More trouble than your worth.

And the inevitable: *You're fired, get out.*

I got out, dried myself and my now streaked face (mascara and tomato soup) in the staff restroom, and left through the back door.

In the back yard, still shaking with rage and shock, I was almost gratified that sometimes bad things come in ironic packages.

Someone had pinched my bike.

Who the bloody hell would want to pinch a broken bike?

It was almost a relief. At least I wouldn't have to push it home now.

It was a bright day, but I was feeling dark inside - angry, and desperately sad, the knot in my stomach tighter than ever. But someone was starting to untie me inside. I bumped into light wrapped up in a dark package, as if she'd been waiting for me.

I didn't have to tell Storey what had happened; somehow she knew and therefore it went unmentioned, except: "You smell nice."

"They make good tomato soup."

"How's your elbow?" she asked.

"Painful," I replied, and was aware of my bottom lip still threatening to wobble.

Storey looked at me - I could feel her concern and indecision. As she looked away, my eyes couldn't help but trace the ridge of her cheek, the incline of her skin. And then, a tentative smile,

changing the geography of her face. "Maybe... maybe we could have some lunch. Together?" She grinned, apparently thrilled that she'd managed to get the sentence out.

"Yes, I'd like that." Very much.

"I promise, we don't have to have tomato soup." I actually laughed.

It was a pleasant afternoon, warmer than the morning chill had promised. We bought sandwiches and ate out. At least, we went into a sandwich shop, I ordered sweet chilli chicken with green salad on granary, and Storey spent about half an hour staring up at the menu board, chewing the tip of a glove, and getting her dark, arresting form in the way of other customers.

"Sorry," she'd murmur, and then the finger would return to her mouth and the study would continue. Finally, she turned to me, "What do you think?"

"Well, what do you like?"

"Anything," she said, with the tone of someone who had just crossed the desert and would find parboiled cockroach a luxury.

I ordered her sweet chilli chicken with green salad on granary and pushed her out of the shop.

She seemed more than happy with the choice, taking small, appreciative bites of the sandwich, and enjoying the feeling of air on her skin. We sat on a free bench in the park near the main shopping centre, Storey's long legs stretching out in front of her, ending in thick black socks and neatly laced, sturdy-looking ankle boots. We sat in a comfortable silence while we ate. Strange that it should be comfortable with a stranger. Normal, social niceties didn't seem important with Storey: silence was every bit as polite as small talk. From time to time she'd make a comment, as passing as bird flight - the splash of a duck on the pond, the shape of a cloud, the colours of autumn leaves against the sky. Maybe some might consider that this talk was small, but with Storey it seemed as big as the world.

And the silences gave me the time to study her, although she seemed not to notice my regard, or the glances cast in her direction by passers-by. Fact is, she was more than arresting in appearance, she was downright peculiar. At least, I'm sure my mother and friends would have thought so, which means the rest of the city would have thought so too.

Her short hair was too dark, her skin too pale. To all intents and purposes she looked like a goth. Except she didn't need the make-up to make her look that way. And her clothes were... you know, it almost looked as if, from the glimpses underneath that coat, she was wearing a uniform. Except all in black.

My gaze returned to her face, and I wondered again where she'd come from. Her features were gaunt, her high cheekbones could cut glass, the cheeks themselves hollow even as they filled out with sandwich. Maybe the desert analogy hadn't been so wrong. Uniform... starving....

I watched her, and wondered if she'd just come out of prison and whether I should be enjoying her novel company so much. Hell, hadn't she said she knew Mr Samson?

I sucked sweet chilli dressing off a finger and blurted out, "You're not on day-release from prison, are you?"

Storey paused, her lips hugging bread and filling. A dark eyebrow arched. She made a little noise in her throat that sounded like a laugh trying to negotiate chilli chicken.

I suddenly realised what I'd said. *Okay, Bookie, take your foot out of your mouth and start again.* Through a fierce blush: "I mean... what do you do? For a living?"

She smiled round her mouthful. "A living," she repeated to herself. She finished chewing and swallowed. Licked her lips. Regarded the area. Children played, teenagers loitered, a drunk challenged the world to a fight.

A slow, sad smile broke onto her face. "I suppose... I help people."

"What do you mean? Like a doctor or something?"

A chuckle now. "No. More like a... therapist."

"Oh."

"Although I can get a lot of work from doctors."

A moment of silence.

"Do you earn a lot of money doing that?"

A laugh outright. "Goodness no."

"Why do you do it then?"

She glanced at me. "I've been asking myself that a lot, of late. I suppose... job satisfaction." She flicked crumbs off her coat.

"So how do you help people?"

A sigh. "Talk to them. Sometimes people just need reassurance."

"Don't psychiatrists tell people how to live their lives?"

That smile again. "No. I'm not a psychiatrist and, besides, I'd never do that. Everybody must make their own choice, all I can do is offer guidance. Lay out the possibilities for them."

"It must be hard."

"It can be. I see people at what might be the worst time of their lives. When they're angry, sad, terrified.... People can be terrified to see me...."

A woman was walking her dog up the path. The dog stopped, seemed to flinch back from the bench on which we were sitting, yapping sharply, and then turned and pelted back the way they'd come, woman pulled after it, eyeing Storey curiously from over her shoulder.

Her low voice had trailed off, leaving an almost audible note of regret.

"I'm sorry...."

A smile. "Nothing to be sorry for. That's my job, and making people feel better about me and about their choices. Sometimes... sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes people turn from me and what I have to offer, but that's right for them at that time. They'll always see me again, me or someone like me... sometimes a long time after... but by then, they're ready for our help."

"So you let them have your number for when they're ready?" She looked at me, puzzled. "Your phone."

"Oh!" She pulled it out of her pocket. "No, that's... um...."

I fished for the word that she was failing to find. "The office?"

She smiled a big smile. "Yes, the office. They tell me who I should visit." She fingered the phone, uncertainly. "We don't usually use these. We have different ways of communication, but today...." She frowned at the object that would seem as familiar as a limb to anyone else. With some relief, she put it back in her pocket.

There was a silence while simultaneously, I tried to figure out how to ask Storey how much she charged for her services, how long it would take to scrape Adie off the ceiling if he knew I was thinking of spending money on a therapist, and precisely how many seconds it would take my mother to say, "A therapist?! You'd be bloody mad to see a therapist!"

However, Storey seemed to take the pause as the rest stop for that particular conversation, and decided to take a side-route. "So now waiting on tables is in the past, what would you like to do?"

What would I like to do?

I couldn't remember the last time someone asked me that.

And what I'd like to do came to me in a rush of cold reality: I'd like to get the hell out of this city, the hell out of this marriage, and the hell out of my life. And I'd like to get *her* back... but that was impossible.

"Just something different," I murmured, and I surprised myself at how melancholy my voice sounded. The world suddenly seemed grey again, as I ceased to see it through Storey's eyes.

I felt the softest pressure on my knee, and looked down to find a gloved hand just touching. It tingled, and something inside jiggled with the digesting chilli chicken and the feeling wasn't the tiniest bit unpleasant. "I'm sorry," she said, words that opened up worlds inside. "I was supposed to be cheering you up."

"No, it's...." I looked up into the softest perception, which made me feel as if I was rising and falling at the same time. "I should apologise. I can feel low... at the best of times." I drew strength from the gentle touch. "My husband works away from home."

"And you miss him." It was a statement, not a question.

Although I answered with a hesitation.

"I wish I could go with him sometimes. Or... simply leave the city just for a little while. But there's always a reason not to. Adie won't let me. There isn't enough money." I sighed. "I've always lived here. I've never really been anywhere... a few family holidays when I was little, before my dad.... And we went to Spain for our honeymoon - first time I'd ever flown - but once we got there I spent most of the time in the bathroom... well, I was ill."

The hand was still resting on my knee. It was still tingling.

"So you're an expert on Spanish bathrooms?"

The arched eyebrow teased with a gentle humour.

"No, just that one in that hotel."

Storey chuckled. It was a lovely sound that seemed to echo quietly in the autumn afternoon. From somewhere I found the courage for my hand to meet hers where it lay. There was a long silence. I actually felt contented.

"Funny," she finally said, "when you travel a lot you come to realise that faces and places may change, put people.... Well, the world isn't much different from here."

"I'd just like to see the different faces and places." I smiled with the little tinge of fantasy. "Have you travelled a lot?"

"Quite a lot ... mostly for work."

"Where?"

"All over the place... everywhere... for better or worse."

"Tell me about it!"

Storey grinned. "About everywhere?!"

She did, though.

And I listened and listened.

I didn't want to interrupt her, although questions kept chattering in my mind. But more important than answers was her smooth, pure voice that painted pictures as freely as brushstrokes on a blank canvas, until I was bathing with her in the purest Ganges; I could feel the sand of the Sahara between my toes as we tracked the wavering dunes; the moist green air of a Welsh hillside as we followed the enchanted flight of an eagle from peak to distant peak; hear the rolling echo of the voices of Russian monks across ancient Moscow cupolas; the shimmering chill of a Scandinavian night caressed as we watched the Northern Lights dance between the stars.

All this from a monochrome woman who sat demurely on a worn park bench with the colours of an Arctic sunset in her eyes.

Time passed. And it didn't. The world moved around us as Storey talked, and when the city hall clock chimed across the park I realised it was still only three o'clock. We'd only been at lunch for just under an hour, including buying the sandwiches.

I was happy to sit here for the rest of the afternoon.

Hell, I was happy to sit here for the rest of my life. I was beginning to understand how tramps became so attached to park benches.

Storey was quiet now; her head down, her thoughts turned inward. "How are you feeling?" she asked, quietly.

"Better." One big fat hell of a lot better.

I looked down at the black glove. It was still on my knee. She moved it, quickly.

"Um . . .," she said (was that slightly off-white shade that diffused her pale cheeks a Storey-style blush?). She cleared her throat. "Any immediate plans?"

Apart from taking up residence on the bench?

Either that or do something wild like strip naked and run through the shopping mall singing *We have no bananas today*.

...I ran my fingers through my hair, thinking...

"Get my hair cut."

Storey looked at me, a little crease between her eyes. Her gaze touched my plait where it lay on my shoulder.

But she smiled and said, "Maybe that's a good idea. It would be a change for you, wouldn't it?"

And then she stopped. Almost as if she was listening to something beyond my hearing. For a few seconds there seemed to be silence, penetrated only by birdsong, children playing and the ever-present hum of traffic from the road.

Until...

From somewhere in the distance there was the sound of skidding wheels and an almighty crash. I started at the noise, but Storey didn't even blink, continued speaking: "Sometimes a change is as good as...." She stopped again, reached into her pocket, drew out the phone. She sighed.

"Problem?"

"Work."

"You've got to go?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm sorry about what's happened. But I know you'll be fine. Um... maybe I'll see you...."

And she was gone, apparently carried away by the sudden swarm of people heading towards the drama unfolding round the corner.

* * * * *

I stepped out of the stylists feeling fresh and new... and was almost surprised that Storey wasn't there. I wanted to show off my new look. More to the point, I wanted to show *her* my new look. And I'd kind of got used to her popping up when I least expected it. Maybe that was the problem... I was expecting her now.

I looked up and down the street. A normal weekend day in the city: hordes of zombies in and out of the chain stores, several witches laughing and flirting with various monsters in football shirts, idling in front of the pubs; imps causing havoc down the pavement. Stubbornly, Storey continued to be conspicuous by her absence.

I was beginning to get withdrawal symptoms. I was feeling fidgety. I missed her smile; that strange light in her eyes when she looked at me. I missed that blue. I missed her presence. Even though I still felt it, stronger than ever, a treasure inside.

Opposite, across the road, was a pedestrianised square, dotted with tired shoppers, benches and rubbish. For a moment - just for a moment - I thought I saw her. An old man sat slumped on one of the benches. Even from this distance, he looked worn and tired. He reminded me of my grandfather. A tall, dark woman was crouched in front of him, talking to him. She was holding one of his hands in hers, her pale skin, long fingers uncovered, cradling the dark of the man's rough paw. I felt an inexplicable pang of jealousy that she should lavish her touch on this old man rather than me; but his grizzled face was smiling down at her, nodding as she talked, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by her kindness.

Then a bus passed by in a whoosh of exhaust fumes and muddy red, and when I next looked, all that was left was the old man, slumped alone on the bench, ignored by passers-by, his eyes closed to the world.

And I wondered if I was seeing things.

Gingerly, I ran a hand through my nice, short hair. Seeing my long blonde locks fall to the floor had been a strange experience after all this time. It felt weird - light, a little cold - but I liked it. I liked it a lot. I wanted to show it off.

So, why the hell I went to see my mother, I don't know.

The first thing she said was, "What the bloody hell have you done to your hair?"

"I've had it cut, mum."

"Makes you look like one of those lesbians. Why on earth did you get it cut, especially that short?"

"I wanted a change."

"Adie will hate it."

"Adie's never here to see it."

She glared at me. "No, he's away working for the two of you. The least you can do is make yourself look nice for him when he is around. Especially now that you've got more time on your hands." She gave me a final, disapproving glance, before heading for the kitchen to make tea.

And I debated whether to follow. I shouldn't have come. It was going to be the kind of visit where I'd be dodging bullets.

My mother was always angry. She could be like an animal with a festering wound, lashing out at

anyone. She didn't mean any harm. And sometimes it could be all right. Sometimes that anger wasn't directed at me. It could be the local council or next door's dog or the new postman's annoying whistle. Anything could set her off. But today....

It shouldn't have surprised me that she knew. The grapevine gives good service in my family. You see, I'd got the job in the café through word-of-mouth. Marcus the Manager was a friend of Kelly's mother, and the moment my employment was finished, the gossip had started.

Besides, my mother always knew everything. She said she did.

"Mum, can I help you with the...."

"You told Adie yet?" she said, her voice raised unnecessarily over the heating kettle.

"About what?"

"About the fact that you've lost another job."

"I haven't had a chance yet, mum."

"No, you've been too busy making a mess of yourself."

On your marks, get set....

And she was off. "I despair of you, Kate, I really do. What on earth do you think you're doing with your life? Adie does everything for you and you don't seem to show him the slightest bit of appreciation. All he asks is that you make a little contribution to the budget, and you can't even do that."

She sloshed boiling water into a couple of mugs, and squeezed the tea-bags as if she meant it. I sat down at the kitchen table. Heavily.

"No. You lose your job and spend what little money you have left on some haircut that makes you look a real sight."

Milk followed, dripping down the bone china sides.

"How much did that cost anyway?"

It was a rhetorical question. There was a tone in her voice now. I knew full well what she was building up to.

"All you seem to want to do is mope around in that flat, feeling sorry for yourself." She tipped sugar into my mug - since when had I ever taken sugar? - and banged it down in front of me. Tea slopped over the table.

"Thank you, mum," I said, quietly, but the anticipation was almost funny.

"You always were like that, though. Hiding yourself away, nose in a book. Or you'd go running off to your dad."

Oh God.

"Mum...."

"You could always wrap him round your little finger, couldn't you?"

And it occurred to me, as it always did, just how jealous my mother was of my relationship with my dad. An everyday epiphany. But I was missing the onslaught. The inevitable was coming....

"And you expect everybody else to do the same. Always got to be your way...."

"Mum, I don't even know what my way...."

"Just because you got a few good grades at school you think you're better than everyone else."

Wouldn't be long now....

"Work, Kate. You've got to work at your marriage, you've got to work to get the things you want. That's what Adie does. That's what your sister's done."

Altogether now: "Why can't you be more like Jenny?"

Had I not been feeling so upset, I would have been laughing.

My perfect sister. Happily married, successful husband, two healthy children, nice house, popular, attractive... need I go on? She was always mother's golden daughter, while I had been daddy's girl. In our family, it had balanced perfectly. Until dad died.

A week ago, Jenny had left a message on my voicemail, timed, of course, to perfection, so that Adie wouldn't pick it up.

"Kate, I heard you had another row with mum. I know how tough she can be. Are you all right? I've been worried about you lately. You've seemed so down. If you need to talk, you know where I am, okay? Love you, Katie."

That was the thing about my sister. She really was perfect. Even as a big sister. At least, she tried to be. And I loved her back because she tried.

But Jenny had other people who loved her too. And geography and circumstances had distanced us. She had escaped from the city. And that distance had grown in the three years since... since I married.

I had returned her phone call that same day, genuinely wanting an outlet. She hadn't been in. I hadn't wanted to talk to my brother-in-law.

I called her a couple of days later. They were all out. I hadn't left a message.

I hadn't phoned again.

And there was no answer to mum's question.

But there was to her next.

"What the hell do you want from life, Kate?"

I sighed.

"I want something different, mum. Just a change. Is that too much to ask?"

Apparently it was. "Why? Why the hell would you want a change. You've got a roof over your head, a husband...."

I opened my mouth.

"Fact is, your father spoiled you."

Spoiled me?! I watched her as she took a sip of tea, her lips pursing as the hot liquid burnt her mouth.

Again I opened my mouth.

"And now you're complaining because the world isn't being handed to you on a plate."

"That's not...!"

"No wonder Adie's away all the time. I'm not surprised he doesn't want to be around you, brooding all the time. Stop living in the past, Kate."

"Mum...." It was as much a final word to stop me screaming at her, as a way to warn her from anything further. *She doesn't mean it*, I kept thinking....

But she went ahead anyway. "You can't change what happened. Just get on with it."

She took another sip of tea to punctuate her point.

The chair legs scraped on the linoleum as I stood up. I was scared at the anger that welled up inside me. I didn't want to hurt her. *She doesn't mean it*. The knot inside tightened, rubbing

harshly against my nerves.

Her voice followed me to the front door. "That's right... run off in a sulk. Just like you always do. You can't take the truth, that's your problem."

I slammed the door behind me, and stopped on the pavement, breathing hard, my eyes closed. The world seemed to be spinning, lies echoing in my ears, truth ripping my soul apart.

"Are you all right?"

Unexpected.

The warm, low voice behind me made me jump... it gave me something to hold on to. "Yes...." At least, I seemed to feel better round this woman, even though I was fighting back tears. I found myself trying to smile, as I'd always been taught. Laugh it off, Bookie, laugh it off. "Just another happy visit with my mother."

There was a pause.

"What?"

Storey was staring at me, apparently drinking in my appearance. The look in her eyes made me inexplicably warm. She lifted a re-gloved hand but failed to make contact with anything, let alone any part of me. "It's lovely," she said. "It makes you look...." She licked her lips and I found myself gazing at the action, lost at the sight of her pink lips, moistening. The lips moved again, and she said decisively, "It suits you. You look charming."

"You think so?" I felt sceptical, and I couldn't help fingering the short strands again, running fingers over my now clipped neck. "Mum hated it. She thinks I've lost my mind."

Storey put her head on one side. A little, half-smile. "Maybe you're just finding it."

The comment blossomed.

"May I walk you home?" she asked.

We walked back to Eden Towers together, not really talking, just enjoying each other's company, although constantly, she seemed to be on the edge of speech. Words waiting to be spoken, but never being formed. I would look at her, her drawn face pensive. She would glance at me, a quick smile, and then look away.

I didn't care. I was merely treasuring her presence. There was a solidity, a sureness about her that gave me such strength. An innocence about her that made me joyful. A beauty about her that made me want to find out if she was beautiful underneath that coat.

I suddenly felt the urge to slip the toggles of the duffel, and creep into the warmth inside. To

hold her, touch her, explore that darkness, feel the coat close around us both. I was beginning to tremble inside with something more than strength and joy. I had started to wonder if the rest of her skin was as snow-white as her face. I wondered what it would be like to touch a woman like that... to touch her like that. I wondered what Storey would think if I started pawing her in the middle of the street.

My body started to thrum at my thoughts. Then I wondered if she'd noticed that my face had gone a shade of red that would stop traffic.

But she wasn't looking at me.

"Is that Ryan Samson?" she asked suddenly.

We were in the shadow of the tower now, and from that shadow stole the middle spawn of the devil, the same boy who had calmly got me fired. He was slinking from parked car to parked car, testing doors. As if anyone in this area was stupid enough to leave their car unlocked with the Samsons around.

We stopped, watched him... until he became aware of his audience. He stood up, abruptly, and made the kind of play at being nonchalant that would be classed as bad acting at an amateur dramatics society. "Want some more soup?" he started.

I opened my mouth to make my countermove, but it was as if I felt a long gloved finger at my lips. I had to check that her hand was still at her side. Storey was simply watching him, and he was beginning to squirm.

"What're you lookin' at?" he said, loudly, brimming with early teenage bravado. "You fuckin' stupid or somethin'?"

Charming boy.

Storey's smile softened. Her voice barely seemed to reach me, so how he heard it I don't know. "I'm sorry if I'm scaring you, Ryan," she said.

Ryan's eyes widened. He reminded me of his little brother. He ignored me, staring at Storey. "I'm not scared of you!" He looked terrified. "Who are you, anyway? How do you know me?"

"I've seen you around. You and your brothers, you do things that make you noticed."

He paused, not sure how to dispute that. "You got a problem with that?"

"No, but I think you do." There was a pause. "How's Jamie?"

"He's... he's... been hanging out with Mum all day. It's weird."

Storey nodded. "And how are you?"

I could see Ryan's throat moving, swallowing. He was desperately trying to show he wasn't scared. Desperately trying to think how to win an impossible battle with this dark stranger.

His eyes flitted to me - whether he was asking for help, or searching for a diversion, I couldn't say. His comebacks seemed to be sinking into a verbal quicksand. "Lay off me, or I'll tell my dad," he shouted, suddenly, and the five years between him and his brother melted to nothing. For a moment, we could see the spark of tears, before he pelted off down the road, barely looking where he was going.

Storey stared after him, her eyes glinting white. "Sometimes I hate this."

"I know. But you did get to him."

A flicker of puzzlement. "How do you know?"

"Because you get to everybody."

She looked at me, reading me - captured my gaze until I felt wrapped in sky. I could feel arms go round me. I was being held, treasured, loved.... A voice whispered in my head: "Kate, I wanted to say that...."

And then, a discreet paving-stone distance away from me, she closed her eyes. A deep sigh.

And pulled the mobile phone out of her pocket.

Hell, it was like being friends with a superhero.

"Go," I said, and she did. Leaving behind one of those smiles.

* * * * *

The lift was still out of order. I walked, increasingly slowly, up ten flights of stairs. I was grateful I'd had a cut, as even my hair was feeling heavy by the top. I was about to turn onto the walkway that led to my front door, when I got a glimpse of something grey moving unhurriedly up the next flight.

"Granddad?"

His face appeared. "Hello, love, you're home early."

I could feel my face turning a sheepish pink.

And my grandfather grinned. "Got the push, eh? Good for you, never did like that café. That Marcus always was a tight so-and-so. Their 'Pensioner Specials' were smaller than child portions."

"Not when I was serving you."

"No, not when you were serving, love."

He smiled. You know, he looked younger today: his eyes seemed excited, full of the joys of life. He held himself taller, prouder - and fleetingly, it was as if my father was standing there. Yet his colour seemed to be fading. He must have been tired.

I put a foot on the next step, closing the gap between us. "D'you want some help up, Granddad?"

"No, love, I'll be fine. You get on, now."

I felt a little at a loss. "I'll come and see you later, though, all right?"

Again Granddad smiled, turned, disappeared.

His new painkillers must be working really well.

* * * * *

Three years, four months, two weeks and five days.

It had hit me again, like a punch in the gut. It did that too often, when I was least expecting it, and I'd feel as helpless as if it was yesterday.

After a wash to get rid of the last of the soup, I had intended to visit Granddad, was heading towards the front door, but the tightening knot inside had set off a runaway train of thought, which had led me from my grandfather to my parents to *her*.

Three years, four months, two weeks, five days since she'd gone.

I found myself on my knees on the sitting room floor, bent with pain, crying dry sobs that racked me further. Everything was grey, heavy, pulling me down - I was so heavy I couldn't move. I could hear myself begging: help me, help me, help me, *help me*. Ringing round the walls, filling the flat, chiming over and over in my ears.

SOMEONE, FOR GOD'S SAKE.

I sat on the floor for a long time. Simply breathing, hoping against hope that there would be a knock on the door. A black-clothed woman coming as the softest shadow to comfort.

I felt her close - a treasure inside me - but there was no knock.

* * * * *

Eventually, I dressed for the party, half-listening to the radio - still music and death, the naming of the man who'd been beaten to death. I pulled out clothes strangely aware that I was dressing to impress.

Not that there was anybody going to be present that I had any intention of impressing. Not even remotely. In fact, my automatic reaction was to the opposite. Only my second last shred of social dependency stopped me from putting a paper bag over my head.

That and the look of interest in a pair of blue eyes.

As if those blue eyes were going to be there.

Didn't stop me from pulling on the tight black skirt that even Adie had commented on, and a dark-patterned burgundy blouse, cut short at the waist. Suitable Halloween colours, I thought, without resorting to the exertion of a costume.

I applied make-up - mascara, shadow, a little lippy. Was mum right, was my hair too short?

I had liked it.

And then I saw blue again and smiled. Storey liked it. At the very least, it'd do. Until the judges arrived.

Right on cue, there was a knock on the door.

"You ready? They're waiting downsta... what the hell have you done to your hair?"

"I've had it cut. Don't you like it?"

Kelly's eyes narrowed as she regarded my head. "It's okay," she said, and let out a breath I hadn't even realised I was holding, until she winded me with, "but I prefer the long hair. That's much prettier."

Feeling suitably demoralised, I flung my wool jacket round my shoulders and followed Kelly out

and down.

The small car was rattling at the side of the road, and I found myself pulled into the back seat, squashed between Sonia and Kelly. Cheryl was in the passenger seat. Jason at the wheel. I should have known he'd be there. He grinned at me, and winked. He too was sporting another new hairstyle. It looked as if he'd had an accident with a tube of gel in a windtunnel.

It was warm in the car, and I could smell the heavy scents of perfume and alcohol. They'd started already. Cheryl thrust a bottle of something sweet and strong in my face. I shook my head. "Oh, go on, Bookie, stop being so boring," she shouted as Jason gunned the engine.

Cheryl had a face like a pugdog. Sounds vicious, I know, but in a certain light she could look cute.

Very dark light.

Tonight she was a vampire pugdog.

I ought to explain. There was no love lost between Cheryl and me, despite having been friends since childhood.

I thought she was a stupid bitch. She thought I was a stuck-up, know-it-all cow. She was probably right. And while we didn't acknowledge our true feelings, we could pretend to be the best of buddies.

She'd always called me Bookie. I had been a straight-A student at school... that and my surname before I married had been Booker. It had become a mantra throughout my life: *Bookie, stop being so boring. Bookie, stop being such a smart-arse. Bookie, you don't want to wear that. Bookie, don't be such a prude. Bookie, you'll babysit for me, won't you. Bookie, stop being such a doormat.*

I took the bottle from her and took a swig of something that burnt down my throat.

She grinned as I handed it back to her, with my eyes watering. She'd won again. She handed the bottle to Jason, who necked it back as he drove.

He was Cheryl's cousin.

I was even less pleased to see him. It was my fault, I admit that fully. I was a complete idiot. It was a couple of years ago. Adie had been away. I'd been dragged along to some party or other, I'd had a little too much to drink.

I know what you're thinking. I didn't sleep with him. I'm not that stupid.

But we'd flirted. Heavily. And it had been enough to give him ideas.

"Hey, Bookie," Cheryl said claiming the bottle back from her cousin, "what the hell have you done to your hair?"

Sitting in that car, squashed in between Kelly and Sonia and watching Jason, wrestling back the liquor as he drove, I realised just how much I had been dreading this party. I'd even have babysat Cheryl's pugkids rather than go to this party.

But I didn't have a choice.

* * * * *

So I hid. I grabbed a glass of wine and nursed it in a corner.

That was fine. From time to time, someone bedecked in Halloween finery would pass me by, stop to say hello. I could make nice, talk the small talk, and go back into hiding behind the voluminous decorations: pumpkinheads, streamers and paper skeletons stuck to the walls. It looked like suburban hell, with music made up of the cries of the damned. Although, I did like the pumpkins. Their bright smiles reminded me of someone.

It had started with Spencer, our host, and Adie's friend and colleague:

"Isn't Adie coming?"

"No he's up north."

"Oh." The tiniest wrinkle of bewilderment flickered on his forehead. "Of course. I'm glad you could..." and he moved on. But the merry-go-round of pleasantries continued.

No, Adie's not here.

I'm fine, thank you.

I had it cut.

No, Adie's still not here.

It would have been even easier had I been allowed to stick a sign round my neck with the answers to the niceties aimed in my direction. That would have done it.

Except, of course, you lose the insinuation with a sign, which was happening with increasing regularity as the alcohol flowed.

"So, here on your own, Kate?" A pitying glance.

"Adie's not with you?" An arch look.

"So the boy's out and about, is 'e?" A wink.

What the hell are you implying?

Of course, I'd give a polite little laugh and change the subject.

After all, I knew exactly what they were implying, but like so much else, it was never acknowledged. I tamped it down with the other sludge of my reason.

Pretending done, I'd sip my wine and watch the crowd, grateful to be alone. I wasn't the only one who had chosen not to wear a costume. Demons talking to mermaids talking to witches talking to suits talking to jeans talking to a short, gold lamé mini-skirts with purple fishnet stockings. (I really hoped that was a costume.)

But no piercing blue eyes. No one dressed in a black duffel coat. Why I'd ever thought....

"Hey, Kate." Kelly grabbed me by the elbow, and shouted in my ear. "You seen that woman?" Her breath smelt of rum and coke and cigarettes.

"What woman?"

"We reckon she's a gatecrasher. Maria didn't invite her, and no one seems to know who she is." She stood on tip-toe to look over the throng of heads in the spacious sitting room. "You haven't seen her, have you?"

"Kelly, I don't even know what she looks like."

Kelly stretched her neck even further, and tottered forward on her stilettos. She looked like an intoxicated flamingo. "Can't miss her," she said, missing her. "She's tall and dark. I think she's s'posed to be Death. You know, all black and that. Weird."

I looked round, more than interested, regarding again the familiar crowd around us. Still there, the devil costumes, the fairies, the baggy jeans, tight skirts, cleavages down to your knees - and from the corner of my eye a black glove, elegantly playing with a glass of red wine. Behind it was a shirt cuff, long, dark and neat, that flourished into a loose sleeve. I followed it up, past dark material, and caught sight of a blue eye, regarding me from across the room. The eye winked.

The room did a neat backflip. Or it might have been my psyche.

"I can't see her," Kelly said, and the eye disappeared. "Spencer's furious. He wants to throw her out."

"Well, maybe she's gone already," I said, searching in vain for another sighting.

"Yeah, I s'pose...."

"Let us know if you see her, 'kay?"

She left me to my own devices.

My own devices were involved in plunging into the horde, aiming for the place I'd seen that wink. No sign, just a mass of people, dancing, sweating liquor and promising sex.

I felt like screaming, bodies everywhere, except the one I was longing for, until I felt a pull so strong it was as if the centre of gravity had been temporarily repositioned.

And she was there. Retiring and out of place among the partygoers. There was a space around her as if people were repelled by her decency. Either that or she was better at hiding than I ever was.

"Hello," I said, suddenly feeling shy.

She smiled, her eyes laughing and joyful. She regarded me bashfully. "You look lovely," she said, her voice quiet under the beat of the music.

I felt a little sparkler of pleasure inside. "You look...."

Odd.

The duffel coat was nowhere to be seen, but I knew she had made no attempt to change for the party. I rather admired her for it.

All black: trousers held at the ankles by bunched-up, long, thick socks; a shirt like a tunic, buttoned up at the front - two buttons daringly left undone so the neat collar hung loose. There was the shadow of pale flesh underneath. Her clothes looked rumpled, as if she'd been wearing them for a lifetime rather than a day. But they were clean, smelt clean.

And it did look like military dress, except....

Storey looked down, shame crossing her face like a tide. Her voice a whisper, which I could feel rather than hear, despite the polite distance between us. "I didn't get an opportunity to change before... I...."

I touched her arm, just briefly. "You look amazing." She did, to me.

She didn't reply, her pleasure gently blushing across her pale features, although she tried to hide it with a sip of wine.

"So, these are your friends?"

I paused - I wasn't sure what friendship was anymore, until I looked into the eyes of the woman in front of me - and answered her question with another.

"I didn't know you were invited?"

"That's because I wasn't... officially."

"You gatecrashed?!"

Storey glanced around, then bent her head still further until her mouth was at my ear. I could feel the heat of her against me and it made my head dance. Her voice was intimate. "No, I came with someone. She just doesn't know it yet."

In a single breath, the rest of the room, the rest of the world, seemed to disappear into some meaningless oblivion, leaving only the two of us, Storey and me, locked together in time.

I could feel the most obscenely wide grin spread like peanut butter over my face. Gloved digits interlaced themselves with my fingers and held me close.

"Oi, Kate...." The cry was sharp and painful and split the moment in two.

I turned, my hand still joined to Storey's, although desperately trying to make it look as if I hadn't heard.

Sonia was pushing her way through the crowd. Momentarily I turned back to Storey, "I'm sorry," quiet on my lips.

But she was gone, although I could still feel her fingers against mine.

"Who was that you were talking to?" Sonia asked.

"It was my fr...."

"We're having a conversation upstairs." Apparently it was a conversation with lots of s's in it, because that's the way Sonia pronounced it, loudly, right in my ear. I wiped my ear.

"And?" I asked.

Sonia giggled.

Deep joy. I could feel another in-depth conversation about the pros and cons of spitting or swallowing coming on. I was pulled back through the crowd and couldn't find the energy to resist.

I weaved with Sonia up the stairs, past neck-locked couples - a superhero doing something to a nun that I'm sure wasn't in the code - and found myself in the guest bedroom.

The door shut behind me.

"Why is it so dark in here?" I asked reaching for the lightswitch. I felt a hand on mine, stopping its progress. I heard the lock click. There was giggling.

"I thought you were going to light the candles?" Sonia sounded annoyed.

"Hey, Kate, did I see you talking to that woman?" It was Kelly's voice I heard next.

I suddenly felt extremely nervous. "What woman?" I said, squinting into the dark. Light from the street outside glinted off fittings. Dark shapes in the room were beginning to take the form of my friends.

Kelly was sitting like a queen on an easy chair. "The weird one, you know. D'you know her?"

I wasn't sure what to say. A need to protect Storey washed over me with an almost palpable strength. I didn't lie... not really. "I don't really know her...."

"Fuck, Kate, you don't half pick 'em, do you?"

Suddenly, the room flickered into substance as Sonia lit a candle.

Kelly crossed her hands over her chest and she turned her face away into a thundercloud of umbrage, and the shoulder of her latest, temporary Mr Right. I hadn't seen she was sitting on top of him. He nuzzled her neck and glared at me.

"Well, I wouldn't have anything to do with her," Sonia intoned as she lit wicks - illumination flickering across the mirrors in the fitted wardrobes . "She looked like trouble to me. I'd leave her I alone if I were you, Kate."

"Who's that then?" Cheryl suddenly appeared from behind the bed, where apparently she'd been lying on the floor. She climbed up, waving a bottle of vodka around for balance. "Anyway, are we going to do this, or not?"

"What?" I asked.

"The Bloody Mary thing...." Cheryl said, or something like because she suddenly dissolved into giggles.

I turned, put my hand on the lock to open the door. Get out of this and find Storey, if she hadn't gone already. And go the hell home. But someone stopped my progress. "Stay here, darling," I heard Jason whisper in my ear. He'd been there all along, in the dark.

I could hear Cheryl again now. "She's supposed to come from the other side of the mirror and pull you in. Or kill you, or something."

"You haven't a fucking clue what you're doing, have you?" Sonia was sniggering. I turned, Jason's body was heavy against mine. I could see the rest of them beyond, bright in the candlelight, lost to themselves.

"Nah, nah, nah... I do, I do," Cheryl said, almost falling again. She took another swig from the bottle and passed it, unsteadily to Sonia. "You see... you see...."

"I've always fancied you, see?" A whisper dampened my ear. I tensed further, already shocked to find Jason had got so close, so quickly. I tried to shy away from the moist breath that suddenly seemed to be plastering my face.

"You see... you say it five times...."

"Bloody Mary?" Sonia asked.

"Yeah, Bloody... and she's supposed...."

"I know, I know."

"Well, come on then..."

"Come on, darling, just a little kiss."

I tried to break free from him, but his arms were now round me tight. "Jason...." I hissed. "No."

"I'm not doing it!" Sonia's voiced bounced around the ceiling.

I struggled against him, but his bodyweight turned me and pressed me up against the wall. There were cold lips on my neck, now. His hand came up, pressed against the underside of a breast.

"You scared?" Kelly taunted, grinning now, as her new friend's hand disappeared down her cleavage.

"Nah, I'm just...."

"Do it then."

"There's no harm in it, darlin', Adie'll never know." A damp hand on my thigh.

"No...."

Sonia: "Kate can...."

Cheryl's voice. "Don't bother Bookie, she's busy." Laughter. "Besides, if Adie can have a little fun on the ssside...."

"Fuck, Jase, get a room...."

"Get off me!" That was loud enough for the whole bedroom to hear. But no one did. I could feel him hard against my stomach, rubbing himself against me.

"It was Cheryl's idea."

"You're kidding, aren't you? Cheryl can barely talk."

"I can...," she slipped again, clutching onto a chest of drawers for dear life.

There was laughter. Shrill merriment grating against the paintwork.

I was jammed against side of the wardrobe. I slipped against varnished wood, trapping me further, as his hand pulled at my underwear. "Jason... please...."

"That's it, darlin'," he said. "I knew you wanted it." His hand was fumbling at his zip.

"Okay, I'll do it." Sonia's voice. I could hear her clear her throat as mine tightened. I couldn't breath.

"Bloody Mary...."

"Jason..."

"Bloody Mary..."

"Please... don't...."

"Bloody Mary..."

"Help me..."

"Bloody Mary..."

"..no...."

"Bloody Mar...."

...a scream.

Crashing.

Fragments flying.

Angry, scared voices.

I felt Jason's weight snatched off me and I opened my eyes...

..and was confronted by a dark spectre - eyes blazing white fire, cloaked in fury and vengeance. Inside the cold wrath of that timeless moment, an elongated hand reached out to me, and swathed in a now stunned and echoing silence, I took it.

I felt the glove surround my palm, warm and comforting, and felt protected from the burning figure of Storey, tight by my side. She regarded my friends, frozen in varying degrees of shock and indignation; Jason, now on the floor, pulling at his trousers; then glanced at the unbroken mirror - her own reflection black, white and startling in the dim glass, the forced door gaping open behind her like an open hellmouth. In candlelight she looked dead; skin so pale it seemed to light itself; shadows playing across her sharp cheeks until flesh was pared to bone.

At that moment she looked more beautiful to me than anybody. Fire inside and out of her, turning the night fantastic. It was breathtaking.

As was the sight of Jason, caught in his fly.

Slowly, a gravestone gaze was fixed on Cheryl. Storey's voice, quiet, sounded like the tolling of a distant bell in the hushed dark: "You shouldn't meddle with things you don't understand."

Cheryl opened her mouth as if to reply, but the look on Storey's face stopped her. Pity. Sadness. Abrupt realisation.

Then she turned, sweeping me with her, a protective arm round my shoulders.

All I could hear behind us was a single stunned intonation: "She broke the bloody lock."

* * * * *

I yanked my jacket from underneath a mess of writhing bodies, and we made our way into the relief of night air - free from cigarette smoke and the jungle chatter of party noise.

Storey behind me. "Are you all right? Did he...?" Her propriety couldn't find the words, but her concern blazed in her eyes.

"No. I... I think his zip stuck," and for a strange moment, all I could see was the funny side: the

look of complete horror on my friends' faces, Jason spread-eagled on the rug, his fly half-open, the zipper teeth chewing where he'd feel it.

I had to stop for a moment not sure whether to laugh or cry. But then I swallowed down both, blocking out the memory of his hands on my body, and made it to the front gate.

Storey looked pensive, as if her thoughts were divided by the here and now, and my friends in the house. She glanced at me, and I could see her nibbling her bottom lip.

We started walking, back into the city. I could see Eden Towers even from here. Lights blinking in the night, glass mirroring fireworks. It was a long way up to my flat. Storey moved sturdily, as if she was used to walking everywhere. She held her hands clasped behind her back, face down, watching the pavement.

I finally felt able to speak. "Thanks for getting me out of there," I ventured - the closest I could come to acknowledging what had almost happened.

She flashed a genuine smile. "I'm glad I could help."

A pause.

"Are you all right?" That was me, not her.

And she hesitated before she replied. "Yes," she said. "I'm fine."

I didn't believe her. I'd used that phrase far too much myself to know when it was being misused. So I ventured another comment, hoping it would lighten the moment, hoping it would open her up. "I hate Halloween."

Her reply was sudden and surprising, her eyes an earnest glowing azure in the dark as her steps hesitated. "Oh, I love Halloween." She smiled shyly for a moment, looking as if she'd been caught out. "It's a special day."

"Why?"

"The day the veil is drawn aside. The day you can journey to the other side. The day the dead walk..." I wondered if she was teasing me. There was a lightness in her voice that didn't fit with the subject matter. "Rules don't apply on Halloween."

"You mean we can see the dead on Halloween?"

I hadn't meant for the catch in my voice, which so obviously betrayed my feelings, and she looked round, concern shining white. Again, she stopped, and her voice came softly from behind me.

"Kate, is there someone you'd want to see?"

I could feel my shoulders slump. My head felt heavy. But I tried to make light of it. I smiled, a smile that hurt. "Long story."

Suddenly, she drew out her mobile phone, and for a horrible moment I thought she was going to say that she had to go. But she pressed a solid looking button at the front and simply stated. "We're off the clock."

"You can do that?"

"For a little while."

There was another pause.

She moved closer, her presence stirred me from top to toe. "Long story," she said, and I felt a covered hand take my fingers, interlace them as they had been before. I looked up, into her eyes, and felt myself swallowed whole by her gaze.

But even now, when I was at last free to talk about her... I couldn't find the words.

Storey prompted. "You've known some death in your life," she said. It was a statement, not a question, as if she already knew everything I was going to say.

I still couldn't open my mouth. I felt ashamed.

"Family?" she asked, hesitantly.

I nodded and added quickly, "My father."

"I'm sorry," a respectful pause. "When did he...?"

"A few years ago. He was only forty two."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"Too young." Her hand was warm in mine. And then: "But it's not him you'd like to see."

How did she know?

Slowly, I shook my head.

Storey waited.

And I blurted out, the words sounding shrill: "Adie and me, we kind of got married in a hurry."

I hadn't talked about this to anyone in too long. She frowned a little. An expression that merely queried rather than censured.

"I fell in love with him, because he was different. He didn't come from round here. He was exciting. He promised... adventure. And I was flattered that he went for me and not one of my friends. I think I was just realising that maybe he wasn't everything I wanted, when... we had to get married. We thought it was the right thing to do."

Storey didn't ask, but her palm pressed itself into mine. A gesture of support. "I was pregnant." The words seemed stark against the chill of the night, standing out in sharp relief against the dull noise of the City at play.

Storey was still looking at me, but now I couldn't look at her. I kept my eyes on my feet, as I started to feel the pain flood through me again. But the truth came quickly and quietly and I heard my voice as if everything else had hushed.

"Funny, isn't it, how they label it? Stillborn. As if they can't say 'dead' of a baby." The words surged out. I couldn't stop. "We called her Holly. Mum and Adie organised it all, afterwards. They thought they were being kind. But I wanted to. I wanted to look after her. Even then. They cremated her. And then she was gone. And it was as if she never existed. No one talks about her. Ever. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy and I imagined her. But she did exist. I know, because I feel her inside and it hurts... so much. Every single day it hurts." Unconsciously, I tore my fingers away from Storey's grip and wrapped my arms round myself, in a last vain attempt to keep the pain inside. "Three years. She would have been three years old." I could stop myself sobbing. "Three years... four months... two weeks... five days...."

And I was crying and crying and crying.

For a moment, Storey didn't seem to do anything. And then I felt her, her arms sliding round my body, holding me so close it felt as if she was surrounding me. It was warm and soft and as loving as I'd ever felt.

Then more words came faintly, thought rather than spoken, although I could sense that Storey still heard them.

I didn't deserve her. I'm a bad daughter, a bad wife... I would have been a bad mother. She's better off without me.

The embrace tightened.

We stayed like that for a long time. Storey simply holding me as I cried out everything on the shoulder of her duffel coat. Hands stroking my hair, my back, sweet nothings stroking my soul.

As softly as a lullaby, I heard her, her cultured, unearthly voice: "Kate Smith, you have a daughter. A beautiful, sweet child, just like her mother, who will always live... *always* exist..."

just as long as you love her."

And my heart felt so full with sorrow and release and this woman's words that I couldn't speak.

Instead, I looked up, and in the darkness of Storey's eyes I saw her: my baby. Different from the cold, silent child I had held in my arms so briefly. She was cooing, smiling, alive. For one joy-filled moment, I had her back.

And slowly... slowly... the image faded and I was left with the kind blue of a different gaze - unearthly, sad, almost apologetic, but strangely hopeful....

"Storey....," was all I could manage, a word that seemed to crystallise in the chilly night air.

She smiled, a tiny, shy smile and I reached up and kissed her.

It was a platonic kiss, then. A gesture, I suppose, of gratitude and friendship. A gentle connection. It wasn't until later, when it was way too late, that I realised that she'd tried to shy away before my mouth caught hers.

It was only a second or two before we parted, but the feeling of the kiss continued to linger on my lips.

No, not linger.

More than merely linger, that connection invaded me. I could feel Storey in my mouth. I was breathing her in, my chest filled with her. Fact is, from a single peck on the lips I could feel Storey in me right down to my toes. She had invaded me with a drumbeat of sense and senses.

I stood there, on the ordinary suburban street, feeling extraordinary, staring up at Storey, thrilling like a neon light and beaming like a love struck teenager. I must have looked a sight: nose snotty and red with crying, make-up flowing like a polluted waterfall down my cheeks, and a big, fat grin plastered over my face.

Storey, in comparison, looked shocked.

And the grin dimmed as a result.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I shouldn't...."

"Are you all right?"

A question I hadn't been expecting.

And I wasn't sure how to answer. My initial reaction was: *BLOODY HELL, YES!* But I thought that might seem a little forward, considering Storey's reaction.

I settled on, "I'm fine." A pause. "Are you all right?"

The white-sapphire gaze seemed to be reading me again. And then it was as if daylight rose on her face. Who needed streetlamps when you had Storey's smile?

"Yes," she said. It was a little sound coming from such a tall person, via such a large smile.

The love struck teenager returned with a vengeance: a moment of shyness that screamed with its intensity. It was all I could do to stop myself from toeing the cracks in the pavement.

For a moment, all I could do was pussyfoot around her, unwilling to look at her, even more unwilling to move on. I was entranced by her. Overwhelmed by her. And - my head spun at the admission - I was deeply attracted to her.

Hell, attracted was an understatement. Lust was busy sending an APB south, leaving the northern lands doing goldfish impressions.

But it was more than lust. It was an attraction to her personality, to her humour, to her kindness, to the sadness in her eyes that came from too much experience and knowledge - something that I understood.

I was attracted to her mystery, and I wanted to be part of that.

My gaze was fixed to the pavement - grey filled my vision again, but colours were dancing inside for the first time since... since....

I glanced up, she was looking at me, but not quite meeting my gaze, shifting uncomfortably in those big military boots, twisting her hands behind her back.

She paused, hesitant, her eyes darted. There was a battle going on inside her, and my own shyness surrendered. I took a step closer.

I thought she was going to take a step back, but she stood her ground, looked at me - not at me, but into me.

"Kate..."

The solitary sound echoed on air. It filled the street with meaning. Extraordinary that a single word - such an everyday name - could be charged with such longing.

She took a step closer now. Her presence seemed to fill my vision, fill me, the child breathing poetry in her cultured tone: "You're astonishing... like a... a caged bird. Beautiful... exotic...."

I looked away from her, half smiling... *exotic?! Me?!!* But the words weighed heavy on me. Words like that had been used before. Abused. I didn't believe in their power any more.

A touch on my cheek - so soft I barely felt it, so powerful I felt its resonance deep inside and through to my toes. Yet, when I looked up, her arms were at her sides.

But her eyes were on me.

"You are, Kate. Believe it."

She lifted a gloved hand, and I thought again she was going to touch me, but she still hesitated. Although, her words alone played havoc with my senses.

"You're beautiful. It's as if... you shouldn't be here. In this city... in this life."

And when I met her gaze I felt the tears swell in me again and spill out into an almost overwhelming tide.

This time, her hand came up, gloved fingers wiping black tears from my cheeks. "It shouldn't be like this. I want... I want to see you free. I want to see you fly."

I opened my eyes and saw her swimming vision in front of me - dark, with her eyes the sharp-bright centre of everything.

I risked opening my mouth, and through tears and inhalations, hoped something halfway sensible would come out. And I heard my own breathless voice: "I've never kissed a girl before."

Cool, Bookie.

That smile that twisted me so gently inside. "Would you like... to kiss... a girl... again?"

"Yes."

And she bent down and kissed me. Again, just a connection, her lips on mine - no assumptive tongue, no invasion - simply soft and giving, astounding innocence, twinkling desire between my thighs, and so intimate it made my soul buckle, let alone my knees.

And then another, and another. Lips flirting like fireflies.

A car raced down the street, a mother hustled her late trick-or-treaters past us, costumed revellers from our Halloween party, maybe another nearby, gallivanted down the pavement, whooping. Until you've been wolf-whistled by a werewolf, you haven't experienced Halloween. A giggle bubbled up and quivered against the kiss.

Above us in the night sky, I could glimpse bursting fireworks, but the sound of them was inside - their tender fire falling from the heavens as gentle showers from Storey's lips.

I could have stayed there forever, a part of me did, but we separated, smiled.

I took her hand and led her home.

* * * * *

We got as far as the communal garages of Eden Towers.

A shadow peeled itself away from the mass of darkness at the base of the tower block, tracking us to one side. It was Storey who noticed it first, as she always takes note of the shadows, and I, in turn, could sense her slowing, a turn of the head, like the turn of the world. Her hand slipped out of mine, and she stepped away becoming enveloped by shade. Lit by the lights of tower-dwellers above, and a single sputtering, undecided streetlight, I could see the faint glow of her skin, the faint glint of a knife.

The faint lustre of her voice: "You won't hurt me with that."

"I'm not scared of you."

"Good, I'm glad."

"You hurt my brothers."

"I'm sorry if I scared them."

"Not sorry enough."

Storey's dark presence almost hid the shape of Bradley Samson, but I could see him, unafraid of her size, her bearing. He moved quickly.

And in the stillness, under the fire and excitement of Halloween, all that could be heard was a quiet, slicing *thuck*.

Storey stepped back, her eyes widened, white in the black, and she let out a single hiss. At that moment the streetlight temporarily won its battle, briefly highlighting the scene in front of me. The knife had pierced the duffel coat, just under her ribs.

A tableau vivant - Brad's hand still raised in attack, his face torn in a kind of fearful victory; myself, trapped between horror and disbelief - not knowing whether to scream or laugh, not knowing whether to move; Storey, her palm under the knife handle, as if supporting it. Her face was down, looking at the blade where it disappeared into her body. And then...

...she chuckled. It was a sad sound.

Brad and me halted by time, and Storey's hand moved, fingers wrapping round the knife handle, and pulled. Dark-scarlet shining on the metal.

She held the knife out to him, handle first, blood wiping off on her glove. And time started as the streetlight whispered out, and I heard her say: "I told you, you can't hurt me with that. Now...."

"You think it's funny, do you?"

This voice was rough, low and like sandpaper against my reason.

"You think it's funny to chuck balloons full of water at people, eh?"

I turned round to see Mr Samson's furious face full in mine.

"But...."

"You wet me through, you did." A stubby finger stabbed my chest.

"I...."

"Don't even try and wiggle out of it, I know it was you."

"Mr Samson, your son lost me my job today."

"Don't you go accusing him of that. It was an accident, he told me, before you and your friend got to him. You should...."

And then he saw past me. Storey had turned her head, her angular profile in dark relief against Brad's bright terror. She smiled in greeting.

Mr Samson's eyes bulged. His mouth moved, and something squeaked out.

"Jesus Christ!"

"No, but we might be related on his mother's side."

"Don't you touch my boy."

"You recognise me, don't you, Mr Samson? You know who I am."

Mr Samson didn't reply, but the look on his face made me believe that he knew exactly who Storey was.

A reticence washed its way across Storey's features. "Of course, you've been close to me in all sorts of ways, haven't you? And I've been close to you."

Again, no response, merely his staring eyes - a rabbit caught in the blinding headlights of oncoming fatality. He reminded me of his youngest son, trapped in Storey's enduring gentleness. The woman's voice was almost musical now, soft as song. "I comforted your mother after she'd had her stroke. She was there alone, surrounded by photographs of you and your sons, but I was the one at her side. I was there for the man who you beat to a pulp outside that public house. I was there when you delivered that final blow and left him there bleeding. You might say you left him for me. I'm there each time you hit your boys, your wife. I'm there when you abuse your neighbours. Each time you or your boys lay hands on someone, Mr Samson, you take a step closer to me."

And at last he spoke, his voice low and trembling. "Don't you judge me."

Storey's voice was quiet, reasonable, even friendly. "Judge you? I wouldn't know how to begin. You're nothing, Mr Samson. I've seen things that would make you weep - carnage, genocide, children crying over the bodies of their murdered parents, parents torn apart by grief..." She paused, swallowed for me. "I can't live by your rules. At the end, it's not my job to judge you. I'll leave that to you and your sons, and whatever god you believe in." She glanced round at Brad. "You know I'm no threat to you or your boy, Mr Samson. Not now. But you know you can't escape me."

Mr Samson stared at her. Hands clutched together in front of her, her head down, she no longer looked at him. And then he moved, careful not to touch her, he drew close and looked her full in the face. Finally her eyes rose to meet his.

"You might not be a threat to us, freak, but what are you going to do to her?" His head jerked in my direction, then grabbing Brad's arm, barely noticing the knife still held in his son's hand, he pulled him away, melting into the dark of the garages.

I stared at Storey, my mouth open. She seemed afraid to look at me.

I took a step towards her, reaching out, needing to check if she was hurt. But knowing intrinsically that she wasn't.

I dared a hand to her abdomen. Against the softness of material, I could feel the slight flakiness of blood under my skin, but it was dry, dead.

"What just happened?"

Her gaze flicked up, landed on me, looked away.

"Storey... what's going on?"

She closed her eyes.

"Why aren't you hurt?"

Her lips moved.

"Who are you?"

"Please," she said, quieter than light. "Please don't ask me, Kate."

Fury exploded inside, and I shouted at her. "Don't you lie to me. Not you."

The blue beseeched, "I can't...."

I turned, running to the stairwell. I could feel her behind me.

I took the stairs two at a time, my breath bruising my lungs.

I could hear her, "Kate... please...."

Four flights up and I whirled round, my voice barely making it past the pain of breathing. "Explain then."

I couldn't hear her breathing at all, yet she couldn't talk.

I tried to make it easy for her. "Then tell me how Mr Samson knows you. Did... did you say he killed someone?"

She was barely visible in the dark of the staircase, but somehow I could see her pale, beautiful face, tragedy chiselling her features. "Please," was all she said.

I turned and carried on upstairs, walking now. She was still following me, as if I was dragging her with me, but I didn't acknowledge her the rest of the way up.

Finally reaching my front door, glancing out at the dark view of the City - the stars greeting fireworks across the canvas of night sky, pearls of light tracing the streets - yet the only thing I could see was the regret in her eyes.

So I looked at her, taking in the guilt on her face, the regret in her gaze, and felt betrayed.

I shut the door in her face.

* * * * *

Time didn't seem to be working any more. I found myself, seconds later, hours later, crouched against the front door in the pitch of my flat, dry tears burning a hell down my throat.

Nothing made sense any more. Logic had taken a holiday. After what I'd just seen... Storey couldn't be human. But what else could she be? My thoughts clamouring, incredulity swimming with images: Jason's hands on me, flying through the air to be caught by the softest gaze, Mr Samson's fiery expression, the sight of a blooded knife, the warmth of arms around me, the sweetest of kisses.

And dancing before me the image of my daughter in Storey's eyes.

And I wanted her back. I wanted them both back. A breath, another breath, burying the pain. I did what I always did with the people I love: I placed myself fully, firmly and knee-deep in denial. It might be Halloween, but right now Storey was a human being. She had to be.

I opened the door, ready to rush back down the flights of stairs to find her, apologise for my lack of trust, my stupidity. Desperate to call over the balcony at her retreating figure below.

Only to find she hadn't moved an inch.

I crashed head first into a solid wall of duffel coat.

A beat... a heartbeat.

"I'm sorry," she started, "I..."

"I don't care. I don't care whether you're the Devil himself. I want... I need you."

Storey's mouth edged up, and I held the front door open for her. "Rest assured, I'm not the Devil," she said, as she stepped inside, "although he is an acquaintance of mine. And he really does have all the best tunes."

She was teasing me again. There was that twinkle in her eye. Yet, underneath, she was ill at ease.

"With you, I'm beginning to believe it." I didn't bother switching the light on. Somehow, it didn't feel right to subject Storey to the glare of a sixty watt bulb, and the uncurtained window provided enough illumination to see by. "Make yourself at home."

I left her in the living room, as I headed to the bathroom to wash the remainder of the ruined make-up off my face.

Again, in the bare lights, I found myself staring at myself in the mirror. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. In the last few hours, my understanding of life, of reality, had been turned on its head, and now I had someone in my living room who was bigger than life, bigger than reality. I wondered at myself, and the all-powerful need that was pushing me towards this woman - something that I didn't understand or want to question. And when faced with the greatest mysteries of life, the whys and wherefores of sexual orientation went out the window, shinned down the fire escape and disappeared into the night.

Instead, I wondered how you went about seducing a supernatural being.

I wondered how the hell you went about seducing anyone.

But seduction was something that Adie did. What I wanted with Storey wasn't some pretence. It was far better, far deeper.... and so powerful it was beginning to hurt. My wedding ring was tight and cold on my finger. For the first and last time in almost four years, I slid it off my finger and left it on the basin.

Then washed off the rest of my make-up and opened the bathroom door.

She sat on the edge of the armchair, her long legs tucked together neatly, her still-gloved hands nervous on her lap.

I could have sworn that she jumped when I entered the room. I went to her, knelt in front of her, tentatively I put my hands on her coat-covered knees. "Please don't be scared."

She smiled nervously. "I thought that was my line."

"Take your coat off?"

She paused, then stood suddenly, and from my position on my knees I realised just how breathtakingly tall she was. She seemed to stretch above me to the heavens. Long fingers unbuttoned the duffel coat, button by button, then shucked off the heavy mantle, revealing her black clothes beneath.

A hand reached down to me, ebony, gloved, and I took it, and felt her pull me up, my body lifting, weightless in her arms. We didn't need contact for me to feel every inch of her body pressed against mine.

The material of her glove seemed hot and fascinating against my palm. My hand wriggled from her hold, and ran down the hard-soft length of her middle finger, feeling the subtle web of fabric that covered her. The glove was tight, like a second skin, but it didn't stop me from trailing a finger along its hem, slipping it inside.

She pulled back as if she'd been burnt.

"Don't be scared." A susurrant of air.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You could never hurt me." I didn't know, but I felt sure - more sure of this, and her, than anything. So, again, my finger found a home on the hem, and down gently, so gently, onto the skin almost hidden between cuff and glove.

There was a catch of air, like a gasp - I'm not sure whether it was me or Storey - but my skin tingled into flame at this merest contact. Two fingers continued the slow, careful journey, disappearing into the shelter of her glove; the material constriction enveloped me, pressing me against the crenellation of her wrist. I stopped a moment, reading the fragility of her under the pads of my fingers. And then moved, adding a third finger to explore the rising knoll at the base of her hand.

And now, as I pushed upwards, the material came with me, unveiling the palest skin, the dark shadows of capillaries beneath the white, the fibres and grains of flesh like silk. Lines ran along her palm - lines that didn't make sense to me, short and long and deep that denoted life and fate and love. My touch translated each length to a different meaning about here and now and us.

Little by little, I uncovered the columns of her fingers: long, slender-raw, a fine definition of knuckles, emphasised as if delicately carved.

They were elegant, lithe, winding round my own hand as the glove at last dropped away; caressing my face as I replaced my own fingers with my lips. I kissed her palm, nuzzling the soft flesh. She smelt of air, of nothing, of clean, warm earth, freshly turned.

"Where have you been all my life?" I whispered against her skin.

I meant it as a joke, and I felt rather than heard the chuckle beneath my lips, but when I looked up I could see tears in her eyes.

"Storey?"

She smiled, wryly, and sat down. "Sorry," she said.

I moved with her, kneeling between her legs, my hands kneading the dark material of her trousers. "Why?"

"I wish I could have been there for you."

"My love...."

"I wish I could be there for you always."

"But...."

And then words that stopped the night. "Katie... I can't do this."

Silence. "Why?" It was all I could say. Suddenly, my throat felt thick .

The blue eyes fixed on me. Blue eyes so alive with sadness that they sparkled white, trying to make me understand solely with the raw emotion within. "I have a day a year. That's all. One day to see things on the other side. To experience...." But she couldn't finish.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

That sinuous hand moved back to my cheek. Her lips moved as if words were poised there, eager for their revelation. And, finally, they came.

"It means...

..it means...

..I can't be in love with you."

For a deep, unfathomable moment I held her gaze...

...before she looked away.

But I was glad, because I wasn't sure if I could look at her, so afraid of her answer - both the yes and the no - as I spoke. My voice was quiet and trembled.

"Are you... in love with me?"

Time was standing still.

I could hear nothing from outside, despite knowing the world around us was alight with noise and fire. Nothing mattered any more, but the sound from within. My whole life balanced on a word.

A single word, that was uttered without sound into the dark.

Yes.

And then we didn't need words any more.

* * * * *

Crystalline moments of memory, framed in time like photographs.

I remember the feel of Storey's mouth on mine.

The lucid softness of her skin under my fingers.

Her sweet surprise as my tongue caressed her lips, taking advantage of the sudden opening to

steal inside.

That first faltering exploration; that tiny sound of wonder that Storey made as I became bolder.

Her hands at my waist, one glove on, one glove off, inching up my back, the pressure of them through the material of my blouse.

Her innocence...

..God, her innocence...

..in a woman so travelled, so understanding...

Her innocence so eloquent as she willingly surrendered control to me.

I'd never been in control before. I almost tripped over my own nervousness as I took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

But it didn't matter, not with Storey.

Her timidity outstripped mine, even as those nervous fingers struggled with the buttons on her shirt, the buttons on mine.

She kissed the bruised skin of my elbow - little, mothlike kisses as if her lips were settling on the petals of some night-time flower. It felt better for her care.

I remember the first sight of her body. Soft eburnean, mottled only with the brief crimson, painted by a knife. There was no sign of a wound, just dried blood, removed by the brush of fingers and forgotten. Beneath, she was rangy and hard - so thin as to be gossamer, flesh insubstantial between the firm curves of her ribs. But I felt the silky stretch of her thigh slick between mine, the velvet yield of her breasts, awestruck as they materialised to solidity beneath my hands. It was like making love with moonlight.

I didn't know what I was doing. Storey certainly didn't know what she was doing. But we made it work. Her hands under mine as I guided her over my own body, over paths well-travelled from meaningless self-pleasure; but her touch like fire, purifying my skin. Long fingers, stealing inside, gained confidence but remained so gentle, so reverential, as to leave me overwhelmed.

Her hands under mine as she touched herself for the first time. She flowed as she reacted, a breathless, sinuous curve of quiet passion, which I followed with my lips.

I remember her, so well, as she came. She hadn't understood what was happening to her. My only words: *Let go, my love. I'll catch you, I promise.*

She looked at me, anxious longing bright with blue, clutching at my hand.

And with a voiceless cry, the heavens bloomed in her eyes.

I felt it. Her climax emanating from her in waves, resonating through me as it exploded through her. Her head thrown back, her frame arched off the bed, her mouth open in silent ecstasy.

And it released me.

* * * * *

"Are you a guardian angel?"

Storey almost chuckled. "Right job, wrong... office."

The silence seemed to cocoon us. A thousand thoughts, ideas, emotions, living and dying in the dark. Through the uncovered window, Halloween fireworks turned the bedroom wall into an artist's palette.

We lay in a muddle of limbs, Storey's grasp on me tightening blissfully as each moment ticked by. These moments seemed timeless, yet I was aware of Storey's words. She only had one day. I could see the neon glow of the digital alarm clock on the bedside table behind my lover. I couldn't make out the display - numbers hidden behind the dark shadow of Storey's mobile phone. I didn't want to look at either of them.

"But you help people," I said, running fingers over the smooth ridges of her back.

A sigh in the dark. "Yes... I do."

I was reasoning: whatever she was, whoever she was, she called herself a therapist. And I needed someone. For a brief moment I did something that I normally avoided at all costs - I touched that pain inside, where Holly had once been.

Somehow, it didn't seem quite so sharp. Already Storey was working her magic, but I still asked. "Could you help me?"

This pause seemed as long as night. Nothing seemed to break it. Storey seemed to be holding her breath as she considered her response. And then:

"No."

I caught my breath. "No?" I shifted in her arms. "But what about...?" In the faint light coming from outside, I could see cold anguish in Storey's eyes, deeper blue than the ocean. "Storey?"

She looked away, hugged me even closer.

Her voice was urgent, warm against my forehead. "I can't help you, Kate. I can't get close to people. Never. If I do... I couldn't carry on. With you... I've already crossed that line, and... I shouldn't have done."

"Shouldn't have done? Why?"

"I told you, I can't...."

And she stopped. Her whole body tensed against mine.

"What?"

A vibration against wood. The cellphone's facia lit up.

"They've found me."

She was pulling away from my embrace. Sitting up....

"Storey, please...."

"I've got to go." She sounded flat, tired.

"No... Storey... wait...."

"I've got to go, Kate."

"Why?"

"Because I've got work to do."

"It's night, they can't expect you to...."

"That's my job. Every hour of every day of every year."

She bent down, reached for her shirt. I could see her hands shaking, the dark material shuddering as it lifted.

"But what about *you*?"

"Someone needs me...."

"I need you!"

"Do you?" The question wasn't hostile. It was a genuine question, asked quietly and sincerely. I

didn't hear its sincerity.

"You don't understand, do you? I feel alive with you. Everything's different with you. You've made me feel more alive than I've ever felt." Storey buttoned her shirt, reached for more clothing. "Please, Storey. Please stay with me."

"I can't."

"Then let me come with you."

Another pause, and for one moment I saw indecision flutter across her face. But then: "No." She pulled her trousers on, one leg at a time, just like everyone else.

"So this is it? You tell me you love me. And then you just leave? You're just like everybody else, aren't you? Out for what you can get."

For a moment, I thought she was going to be really angry. For a moment, the shadows seemed to rise around her as she herself grew in stature. Her face was cold white in the dark, and her eyes, as she looked at me, were white lightning.

Her mouth opened. And closed. And her eyes shuttered as her head went down. She sat back down on the bed, although the mattress didn't seem to register her weight. "I wish it didn't have to be this way. I do so much... I try so hard... why can't I... for once... do something for *me*?"

And it occurred to me then that she wasn't just talking to me, but talking to the darkness. And it was as if, momentarily, the shadows around us shifted in reply.

Storey's head came up, her face held up in defiance, but her voice was soft and low. "One day... it's not enough any more. Not now." Her head turned, her voice softened still further. "They've known about you for a while, Kate. I've been keeping an eye on you, just in case you needed me... and I found myself needing you, instead. I was sent here to help others, but it was you I wanted to see this Halloween. I wanted you to see me. And I'm sorry if I've hurt you, but...."

In the gloom, her mobile phone lit up again, vibrating against the wood of the bedside table.

She gave out a sound that seemed to be the tiniest of cries. Then, a whisper I could barely hear, "Just let me... *please*...."

Another vibration, another glowing light.

She grabbed the phone, pressing buttons. And then a hiss. And in the faint neon gleam her skin suddenly seemed to turn still more pale. She glanced back at me. Her eyes shocking blue. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Storey...."

"I've got no choice." She picked up the long, thick socks, sat down, pulled them on, viciously. Her voice had hardened.

"Why? Everybody has a choice, you said that yourself."

"Everybody else, maybe. I have to do this...."

"You have to?" I watched as the trouser legs disappeared under the socks. "Fine. I'll make the choice for you."

"You can't do that." Her head came up for a moment, looked me in the eye.

"Why?"

"You, of all people, should be able to answer that."

She was right. I knew exactly. I thought of my mother, of Adie, of my friends, always making my choices for me.

"Storey," my voice sounded so quiet I wondered if she could hear it. But I knew, even if I didn't speak, she could hear my voice. "Storey, why did you come to me?"

Her long fingers hovered over her boots. "I was told you might need me."

"Need you to help me make a decision, yes?"

"Yes." A single finger, resting on leather.

"Then you've done your job. You've helped me, and I know I have a decision to make."

And now her eyes came up to meet my gaze, frightened, almost terrified and what I might say. "Be careful. Know your choices, Kate. You have a life here. You have a husband... family...."

"I don't want them. I want you."

"You have friends..." her voice trailed off, for a moment - she glanced at her mobile phone - and then tried again, "you have people who love you."

"Who? Where are they? Storey, you've given me more love today... tonight... then I've felt in years."

"And I meant it, Kate. All of it." A hand lifted... and then fell. "You deserve to fly. You deserve to *live*. I have nothing. Nothing but the work."

"But there's more to life than work, Storey."

Her eyes were huge and bright in the dark. "Who's talking about life?"

The night echoed around us.

Time broke.

Storey laced her boots - the tight, criss-cross of the ties, neatly secured by a tidy bow. Her hands were still shaking as she let them fall into place.

"I've got to go." She rose, long fingers stroking the creases out of her dark, shirt. Her broad, determined strides echoed across the bedroom, disappearing into the living room. She grabbed at her long coat, flinging it across her shoulders. I heard the rattle of the chain on the front door, and dived to follow her. For a moment, all I could see was her tall form hesitating in the doorway, silhouetted against the dim light of the balcony lamps. She seemed to draw her fingers up her body, across her face - following paths that my fingers had been travelling barely a blink of time before.

She stopped at her mouth, resting the remnants of my essence against her lips. And then she turned, her profile sharply defined in the dark-light. Her voice was earnest and as keenly defined in the muted night.

"You're right, this is your choice. I'll come back for you, Katie. Before midnight. It *must* be before midnight. Let me know your decision then."

And she was gone.

And in that space and time, where once nothing but that voice had been, suddenly a multitude of noises invaded. Screams - playful and painful - the explosions of fireworks, cars, shouts, laughing and crying, sirens, heartbeats from a million lives across the City.

I blinked, and wondered if Storey had ever been there.

But my body still thrummed with the aftermath of pleasure. Traces of my own desire, sticky on my thighs. Traces of another passion covering my fingers. And from the corner of my eye, I saw it, abandoned on the floor, a single, black glove. I stooped, picked it up, and pulled it over my own fingers. It seemed to mould itself to my small hand, clinging to me with Storey's warmth.

I closed my eyes, wondering if I ought to feel confused.

I could feel a shiver run through me, and realised it wasn't just desire. The front door was open and I was stark naked in front of it.

The door closed with a crash, the noise acting as warning to the world outside, I then shot the bolts, pulled the chain across, and wandered back to the bedroom.

The alarm clock showed 11.02 p.m.

I blinked. It couldn't be 11.02 p.m.

We had left the party an evening ago. I had been in her arms for hours.

Unreality descended on me like a mantle. Storey's touch still echoed on my body, the rumpled bedclothes screamed of adultery, but it was if barely a moment had passed. Just the blink of an eyelid and everything and nothing had changed.

I was still here, in the bleak, unfriendly flat, and I hated it.

Without thinking, I pulled on some clothes - comfort clothes: jeans, an ancient sweater my father had bought me, trainers. In polite society I wouldn't be seen dead in them. But polite society wasn't important any more. I left the glove on.

It was quiet, the silence so different from the ardent serenity that had consumed me moments before. It felt alien and forbidding and it terrified me.

I jumped as the phone pierced my thoughts.

"Hey, princess, sorry it's so late. It's been murder here. Haven't stopped all day. Wasn't sure you'd be in. Thought you'd be at the party."

And guilt descended like a grand piano, complete with dramatic chords.

I felt my voice tinkle amongst the debris. "Yeah... um... I went for a... a little while." I clutched the receiver with Storey's hand.

"Good. It's about time you got yourself out. Did you have a good time?"

"It was okay. I..."

"Their parties are always good for a laugh. Why did you come home so early?"

His voice seemed rushed, a little loud. As if he wanted me to listen to him, but didn't want me to hear....

I paused, thinking of an answer to his question, trying to listen.... "I was feeling tired, it's been a long day." Life in the background. A sound, I'd been aware of before, but never *heard*.

Something simmering inside me and something hushed at the other end of the telephone.

"Anyway, I hate going to these things on my own. Adie...?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"How come Spencer was home and you can't be?"

"I'm working." Flat answer, flat voice.

"But you do the same job as Spencer - sell the same things - and he's home far more often than you."

His tone was cold. "I do a fucking lot more overtime than Spencer. It's what keeps a roof over your head."

My voice was heating. "Yet he and Maria live in a three bedroom house, and we live in a tower block. Why is that, Adie?"

"I won't have you questioning my work."

"Why not?"

"Because it's none of your business."

And with that, the knot inside ripped apart. Years of anger found a voice. "What is my business, Adie? Staying at home and being the good little token wife? Is it my business to do your laundry, cook your meals, and be a convenient fuck when you decide to come home? Is it my business to pretend that I'm happy and everything's all right? To pretend that we never had a baby? That she never existed?" My mind was shaking, my voice was steady. "Is it my business that you've got some tart in your room with you right now?"

There was a long pause, and for a moment, total silence. And then, slowly, I could hear his breathing, short and stunned. And, there, in the background, a voice. Quiet, questioning, saying his name... female....

And he knew that I'd heard it.

Finally, he spoke, "Kate... I..."

I put the phone down.

* * * * *

Confusion rushed down my cheeks in a wet rush.

I wanted to scream along with the outside world.

I felt an uncontrollable need to hurt build up inside.

I needed someone to talk to.

I needed someone to talk to *badly*.

I picked up the receiver again, dialled the number.

Jenny. Jenny always said that she was there for me....

Their voicemail answered. A cheery message that jarred inside.

I put the phoned down.

Mother... she might listen to me about Adie. She might, for once, hear what I was trying to tell her.

She might disown me once and for all if I told her about Storey.

No.

Granddad.

I pulled a cardigan over my sweater, shoved keys into my pocket and slammed the door behind me.

Over the balcony, the City looked blue. There were lights winking through its streets, police cars blinking in the entertainment district, mopping up the drunks, breaking up the fights. Police cars playing tag along the ring road. Police cars, emergency services, flickering warning lights not far away. A road was blocked. Someone was having a bonfire. No. A fire blazing from metal and tarmac. I recognised the road; could picture myself and Storey walking down there not long before, as if our two figures were still there, hand-in-hand, where now....

I went cold.

And took the staircase two at a time.

Granddad lived just two doors away from the stairwell. I was worried that with all the exercise he'd had during the day he would have been in bed long ago. But as I stood outside his front door, beneath the noise of a Halloween night, I could hear the faint reassurance of a television.

I knocked. The usual knock so he'd know it was me.

No answer. A firework exploded close by, making me jump. Coloured lights flashed across my vision.

I turned my back on it, rubbed my damp face, and knocked again.

He'd fallen asleep in front of the television.

I fished the spare key from my pocket and hoped that Granddad hadn't followed my constant advice to keep the chain across the door.

He hadn't, of course. I let myself in.

Everything was still in the room, except for the flicker of the TV screen. It was warm, a little too warm and unpleasantly musty, as if the room hadn't been aired for a while. I could see the back of my grandfather's head against the headrest of his favourite armchair.

"Granddad?" I said quietly. My voice shook.

Somewhere, I thought I heard a fly buzzing. Late for flies.

"Granddad?" I said again, a little louder, moving round the armchair. "I'm sorry to wake you, bu...."

His skin was grey, stretched taut across his face. Her eye sockets were sunken, but the balls seemed to be bulge underneath half-closed lids. Light from the television flickering deceptive movement across his grey irises.

One hand was rigid on the arm of the chair. The other rigid in rest, on his lap.

But as I watched there was genuine movement: a fly crawled out of his mouth, paused on his lip to flick its wings, and flew away.

The last taste of Storey drowned in bile, and I threw up on the carpet.

It was while sitting there against the wall, the noise of the TV rattling in my head, breathing in the stink of stomach contents and the beginnings of decomposition, that the truth hit me.

With my eyes closed, beyond the indelible image of Granddad, were my friends. I could see an emptying vodka bottle, Jason's car rattling at the side of the road, the distant sight of a burning car blocking the street, and the insistent flashing of Storey's mobile phone. *Come on, Bookie, catch up.* And I knew I'd never see them again.

Strange that I didn't feel horrified or angry. Perhaps I should have felt sad. In fact, I felt cold, calm peace. Everything finally clicked into place.

And when I opened my eyes, I noticed my grandfather was smiling.

I should have been there for him, but he hadn't gone alone, or frightened, because there had been someone there to guide him, reassure him... hold his hand.

Storey.

She had helped my grandfather, given him one last day of freedom before he left, and right now she was guiding my friends to the other side. And she had spent her one day reassuring me, cheering me, listening to me.

Loving me.

She had given me a choice, and, for just a moment, she had given my daughter back to me.

My legs shaky, I stood up, moved over to my grandfather and with Storey's glove, closed his eyes.

And left, locking the front door after me.

I knew I wouldn't see anyone again.

Funny, the things you think to do when you know your time is limited.

I cleaned the kitchen, vacuumed the living room carpet, phoned the twenty-four hour bank phoneline and paid some bills. I left the bed as it was.

I wrote a note, leaving it on the two unreturned library books: *Please could you take these back.*

And I made one last phone call. I admit, it was anonymous - cowardly perhaps, but then I had to protect the real witness. I felt it was what Storey would want me to do.

All that time I was listening out for a knock at the door.

Before midnight.

For the hundredth time I looked at the clock. It was 11.52 and there was no sign of her. So, I went outside and waited.

Fewer police now, fewer warning lights flashing along the streets. The road still seemed blocked, but the fire had been put out. It was all over. Even the fireworks were dying out. All that was left was the faint pulse of a Roman candle in the distance, marking where the green lay in the dark, beyond the urban sprawl. The city seemed quiet... waiting with me.

Though, Eden Towers was still lively around me. Lights through windows; stay-at-homes closing up until tomorrow; stragglers trailing home from parties, clubbing, the nights of their lives.

A police car broke away from the slowing carousel and made its way to the foot of the tower. I knew where they were going, but for a better lookout point I pulled myself up so I was sitting on the balcony, feet dangling over the edge. It felt exhilarating, having all that space below me.

Time was ticking.

Concrete ate into my one bare hand where I was clutching the balcony.

One of my neighbours opened her front door, and stopped in shock at the sight of me. We didn't know each other very well, just to say "hello" to, and the indecision at the best course of action danced across her face. It would be so easy for her to shut the door - not her problem. She dithered. Finally, she opened her mouth. "Hello," she said.

"Hello."

A long pause.

"Can I help at all?"

"No, thank you, just waiting for someone."

"Oh." Confusion now did a little salsa on her features.

"Would you like me to wait with...?"

"Katie...."

My head turned so quickly I almost lost my balance.

She was ten storeys below, her black coat merging with the shadows, although I could feel her voice with me.

"I have a wonderful view from up here," I said, quietly.

My neighbour said something, as if I had been talking to her, but I couldn't listen to her.

"Do you understand now?" Low and gentle. A strange accent. Cultured, yet tinged with urban familiarity. And I knew I'd been hearing it in my thoughts and dreams for years.

"Yes, I understand." I didn't need to shout. I knew she could hear me. A breath. "I need to ask.... When you took Holly... did she cry?"

She looked away, wondering whether to answer. "No, my love, she wasn't scared. I took care of..." And she vanished, as if the night had swallowed her up. The dark shape against the concrete below simply faded into nothing.

"Storey?"

For one brief, fright-filled moment, I couldn't feel her. The presence that I had felt for so long, that I had carried inside me all day, had gone.

Now, I addressed my neighbour, "What's the time?"

"What?"

I shouted now. "I said, what's the time?"

"Okay, okay, it's... it's midnight. Dead on."

Dead on.

And in the distance I could hear the city hall clock chiming, deep tolls resonating. It was a new day. Three years, four months, six days, and I wanted so badly to see her again.

I screamed into the night: "Don't leave, Storey, please."

More people: other concerned faces peering out to see what the fuss was. And in the centre of it all a small voice.

"Halloween's over." Still there. I felt as if I was clutching on to our connection as I was clutching on to the balcony. "Another choice, Kate. You could wait, I could come back... next year."

"I can't wait that long. Do you want me?"

"More than anyone."

I looked down, and the grey concrete seemed to fly up to meet me. I could still see Storey down there, clear as day now - as if the world had merely blinked and she'd been there all the time - but I knew that no one else could.

There was a growing crowd around me, coming out of their front doors, hanging back by the staircase. Unwilling to move. Some I knew, some I didn't. To one side, away from Storey, I could see emerging two policemen with Mr Samson. Someone called out: "Kate, what the hell are you doing? Don't!" And the group looked up to see me.

Another unknown voice: "Be careful, girl. Don't do anything stupid, now."

A hushed panic gripped the air - blocking the way along the balcony. But the panic didn't belong to me. It was no longer any part of me. All I saw was the freedom in the darkness below, and Storey's arms held open. "Then come with me," the low sweet voice said. "Let go, my love. I'll catch you, I promise." The love in those eyes was velvet blue and pledged a peace that seemed to pull me.

"Storey," I said, my own voice quiet, but I knew my lover could hear me. My arms hurt for holding on and I knew the air and Storey could carry me.

So I gave myself a little push against the parapet.

And jumped.

Distantly, retreating, I could hear a scream.

But it wasn't my scream. Everything behind me died, and all I could feel now was elation, the wind rushing past my body - forcing the breath from my lungs, making the blood speed to oblivion through my veins. I could scream - but mine would be a scream of pleasure.

For a pinprick of time, bitterly cold and agonising pain erupted through my body, as if every single bone was shattering, splinters slicing through nerves. My heart burst.

Just a pinprick, until there were arms around me, soft and welcoming and eternally strong, and I felt like a child again with the joy of life ahead of me.

And there was Storey, cradling me, lips catching mine in an ardent kiss. I felt words against my mouth. "I've got you now, my love."

There was only one thing I could say: "You're a good catch."

I moved, trying to get my bearings, aware that I still seemed to be at Eden Towers, but Storey stopped me, turned my face away with her ungloved hand. "Don't look." Although, I'd caught a glimpse. There was a body on the concrete; the remains of a woman it seemed - smashed and bloody. I don't know who she was.

Another kiss took me away from it, tender and innocent, and yet promising forever, and I looked up into Storey's sky-blue eyes. There seemed to be nothing else now. Only me and Storey and sky, as if we were part of the air, and the smile that lit everything. "Storey," I said, my heart leaping as the smile seemed to widen even more, "what happens now?"

And that's how it started.

THE END