

~ Dwelling in the Past ~

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Synopsis

Abbie Jameson needs to escape her life. A writer with no muse, and a marriage with no love. She retreats to Yorkshire in a bid to find her true self. But the 'self' she finds is not what she was expecting. Only the dark, enigmatic Kate Thomas can help her discover the truth.

Although a supernatural vein flows through this story, it is ultimately about love, self-discovery and the realisation that all we have to do is let go ... and believe.

This is a revised version.

Disclaimer

This is my second attempt at Uber fiction - I thought I'd have another go. The 'being gentle with me' still applies - very sensitive . The characters do resemble a couple of ladies from a very well known TV show, BUT they are all mine ... eventually. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those fantastic writers out there who have filled my head with images, stories and fantastic plots for so long. I just hope you get a millionth of the joy I have received from them from reading my story.

Lister Lane Cemetery exists, but it is not used for burial anymore.

Language: English! Again! Not as much swearing as 'Hearts and Flowers Border', but still plenty of good old-fashioned 'effing' and 'jeffing'. Can't help myself ... sorry.

Violence: Some scenes are a little intense, but nothing bloody or gruesome - I'm too much of a pussy for that. It has more of a creepy factor than anything else.

Sex: Is that an offer? Okay then ... This piece does involve very graphic scenes between two yummy ladies (and others), so if you are under the legal age to read such '*filth*', or live in a place where this is illegal ... I'm sorry. Wait until you are a little older, or move, or both. Be warned - there is quite a bit ... but I did do it for a reason.

This story is mainly set in the North of England (Yorkshire), but does tend to move about to Norfolk and London. If you find any spelling mistakes please put it down to one of three things. Firstly, I'm English. Secondly, I can't spell. Thirdly, I'm just too lazy (and my grammar - well ... don't get me started).

This story is different Hearts and Flowers, and you may find the narrative quite rigid to start, but it does loosen up - eventually. I wanted it to reflect my narrator is some weird way - so stick with it. Please let me know what you think about this story ... try not to be too harsh, as I am really

sensitive and will probably cry for weeks, or maybe even months.

Acknowledgements: I have quoted from various people - Joss Stone, The Cure, Sappho, and the Goddess herself, Melissa Etheridge. All music quoted has been used without the permission of the artist - couldn't get hold of Sappho - I think she was out. This is not an attempt at plagiarism: just a tribute to their great words.

Dedication: This story is dedicated to the love of my life. Without you, I would still be clearing tables. Thank you for everything - and especially for listening to me go on and on and on. You need a medal! And also my little boys of the furry variety - The Border Terriers from Hell.

Special Thanks: To all the people who have written to me showing support and giving fantastic comments about 'the other one'. Extra big thanks and giant hug goes to Poppet - you are a star, who cheers me up no end - and has fantastic taste in music!

Prologue

Sometimes ... the unbelievable is possible.

Sometimes ... you have to question your sanity.

Sometimes ... the only explainable reason is that it only *happens* ... sometimes.

*but come to me now, if ever before
you heard my remote cry,
...why did I call you,
what did my mad heart want to
happen
...So come to me once again and free me
from blunt agony.*

***To Aphrodite
Sappho circa 630 BC***

Part One

Chapter One

My eyes flew open ... heart racing ... sweat coating my skin.

What the *fuck* was that?

The blackness of the room drowned out my vision - my heart banging in my chest muffled my

hearing. Dryness enveloped my mouth, whilst goose bumps guarded my skin. All I had was my sense of smell.

Lavender.

So clear. So ... potent.

It wafted in front of me like a haze. I didn't wear lavender. Couldn't stand the stuff. But it seemed so familiar ... comforting in some strange way ...

I forced my breathing to slow down. Deep gulps, holding the air tightly in my lungs before expelling it back into the cool night air. My heartbeat slowly regained its natural rhythm as my eyes acclimatized themselves to the darkness.

Nothing there.

But I *knew* someone was watching me.

And then I heard it. So close. A voice so soft my soul wept.

'Come back to me.'

I honestly can't tell you if it was real, a dream or my overactive imagination.

The next thing I remember was waking up on the floor of my room; blankets tangled around my legs; raw eyes blinking out the morning's rays.

I needed to get out. Take stock of my life. I was stressed - obviously. I needed to take the offer from my agent from the previous day. If I went away maybe these dreams, and voices, would stop.

Maybe.

Two days later saw me packed and driving towards the retreat set up for me by my agent's secretary. Six months sabbatical to get the creative juices flowing again - just what the doctor ordered.

My life was a mess. Four years of hiding in a sham of a marriage. Four years of indifference and hell - almost a paradox. Pete, my husband, had found it difficult keeping his dick in his pants, and increasingly more difficult keeping it a secret.

I didn't care that he slept around - quite the contrary. At least if he was getting it somewhere he was leaving me alone. Pity I couldn't say the same about his fists.

It was partly my fault - for marrying a man I didn't love in the first place. Telling him that I didn't love him, though, was an even bigger mistake, and it had been pretty much downhill from there. The only reason he didn't divorce me was because I was worth more to him while we were married. The pre nuptial had guaranteed that. But that didn't stop me divorcing him.

I had five successful novels to my name and they were still bringing in the royalties; how could any red-blooded male refuse that? Problem was, my muse had flown; the ink well had dried and I was becoming anxious. Not for the money ... for the escapism. I'd do anything to escape my life. Even drive over two hundred miles to be cocooned in a house in the middle of nowhere. For six months.

If I wanted solitude to take stock, this was the place to do it. It was very selective and only a handful of people were accepted at any given time. That suited me just fine. The further from my life the better.

A fluttering of excitement was building in my gut. I don't know why or what for. I just had a feeling that this trip was going to change my life.

For the better? I wasn't too sure.

Only time would have the answer.

Chapter Two

The journey was uneventful. Well ... nearly.

Countryside slowly overtook the images of the grey city skyline. Trees marked the way to my haven standing resolute at the side of the road, like sentries. Fields sprawled in all directions until the hills appeared majestically and showed their superiority.

I only stopped once for petrol, to freshen up and get directions. The man at the petrol station seemed a little gob smacked when I asked for directions to Forester's Dwell, the retreat I had been booked into. He seemed almost embarrassed when he asked if I was sure I wanted to go there. My puzzled expression spurred him on.

'It's not a very happy place to go,' he spoke quietly, like he was scared of being overheard.

'Well, it will suit me down to the ground then,' I turned to leave. A firm grip halted me in my tracks and I spun around, ready to give him a piece of my mind, until I saw his eyes. Fear and concern radiated from them.

'Be careful, love. Things go on there that can't be explained.'

'Like what?' My voice seemed quite cold and distant, like the question had come from someone

else.

'Things happen. Unexplainable things. That house is ... not all that it seems. It's cruel ...' Cue Scooby Doo and the Mystery Van. I was beginning to believe I was in Deliverance country.

'How on earth can a building be cruel?' I laughed, but his face stayed sombre. 'Okay ... I'll watch my step.' I shook my head in disbelief trying to clear it: another nervous laugh escaped.

I left him on the forecourt; shoulders slumped, with an indescribable look on his face. Talk about dramatic ... but still ... a sense of foreboding washed over me. What was I doing? I nearly turned the car around and headed back to London. I should face my life. Not go running off into the hills. I should be there to deflect the comeback, as my lawyer presented Pete with the divorce papers. Shouldn't I?

'Fuck him,' I snarled through clenched teeth. He would only get even more nasty when he realised I had cut him off financially, and that the locks to my house were going to be changed as soon as he left that morning.

A smile curled itself around my lips. He wouldn't have a clue where to look for me.

Decision made, I accelerated the car and turned the music back on. Joss Stone. Nice choice. I turned the volume up until it bordered on distorted, and began to sing at the top of my voice ...

I've got a right to be wrong I've been held down too long I've got to break free So I can finally breathe I've got a right to be wrong Got to sing my own song I might be singing out of key But it sure feels good to me I've got a right to be wrong

And I was singing out of key ... but a sense of freedom washed over me like a cleansing. Whatever I found at Forester's Dwell wouldn't be a patch on what would have been waiting for me at home.

I didn't realise how wrong one person could be.

Chapter Three

Wrought iron gates were the only blip in the twelve-foot wall that surrounded the retreat. I had to use the intercom to gain access to the grounds. God ... this place was huge. It seemed like forever I was driving around sharp bends, nestled in between statuesque trees, before I glimpsed the house. My heart stopped in my chest, whether out of fear or reverence I don't know. The building came straight from the pages of a gothic novel: it was, in short, a writer's dream.

Red brickwork coated the exterior, only separating every now and again to allow leaded windows to peek out across the lawns. Turrets raced upwards towards the dull sky, birds resting on the top like a portent. I was definite there appeared to be a Keep running around the top, and I

was more definite I could spy a something balancing precariously from the side of it.

It was a figure. A lone figure.

I slammed on my brakes and shot out of the car and screamed, '*Don't do it!*'

Racing forward, the panic evident in my speed and lack of coordination, I shouted further, '*Don't jump!*'

The figure's head looked up sharply. I could feel an intense scrutiny passing over me. I was being digested. I stopped, frozen into place by the stare. Long raven hair fluttered out and danced freely in the breeze that swirled across the upper levels. That was the only movement. We stared at each other, motionless. All sound seemed to cease. The air was filled with expectation and my blood was cold.

The scream from a nearby bird broke the spell. The figure, who I now knew to be female, pulled a long leg back over the precipice. Turning, she disappeared.

My breath left my body in a rush. I didn't even know I had been holding it. I felt weak and had the distinct impression I was going to faint. I bent over and pushed my head between my legs, gulping down mouthfuls of air, waiting for the shaking to stop. I didn't know whether it was the prospect of what could have happened if I hadn't turned up when I did, or the look of absolute desperation on the figure's face, but the experience left me feeling fragile.

Maybe it was the instant recognition, or connection, or whatever it was, that left me weak. Maybe it was the glimmer of hope I saw flit over those chiselled features that left me breathless. Or maybe, just maybe, it was the feeling of déjà vu that had gripped me.

I had to get some sleep. My over active, yet lately dormant, imagination was kicking in and I had to get some rest before the muse took me.

I felt absolutely drained and didn't remember, parking the car, checking in or being shown my room for the next six months. The bed seemed overwhelmingly soft and inviting, and I crashed onto it allowing myself to be swallowed up in the covers.

The next morning I awoke refreshed, hungry and a little curious of my surroundings. After I showered and demolished the breakfast that had been delivered to my room, I felt like investigating my surroundings a little further.

The door to my room was in heavy oak, but opened easily, and the hallway beyond lived up to expectations. It was narrow and dark, with wall hangings adding the extra atmosphere that was needed to complete the picture of opulence that the outside had promised.

Strolling down the corridor I sensed someone watching me, but each time I turned I was greeted

with nothing but air. A tingling sensation stirred at the nape of my neck and travelled down my spine, jostling the fine hairs to attention. My step increased dramatically as I reached the top of the main staircase, where I gripped the banister and spotted a couple of guests milling around below. A soft chuckle escaped me.

'Come on, Jameson. Stop freaking yourself out.'

The woman at reception was busy shuffling papers and clicking her tongue with annoyance.

'Excuse me,' I tentatively asked, and was immediately comforted by warm brown eyes. 'Is it possible I could have all my meals delivered to my room?' She looked puzzled. 'Abbie Jameson, Room 4.'

A smile lit her lips and she held out her hand. 'A pleasure to finally meet you Ms Jameson. I'm a huge fan of yours.' I took her hand and allowed her to pump it up and down with quite a force. 'My name's Jenny, by the way.'

'Hello ... and ... er ... thank you. It's always a pleasure to meet someone who likes my work.' I gave her the book cover smile and pulled my hand away.

'To tell you the truth, your stories scare the life out of me.' A big grin. 'You must have one hell of an imagination, or maybe you have seen some of the things you describe?'

I laughed out loud. 'Nope. Never. And between you and me I don't really believe in the supernatural. When you're dead, you're dead.'

'But you're so convincing,' she gushed. 'Maybe your stay at Forester's Dwell will change your mind. We have resident ghosts here.' I looked at her with amused scepticism written all over my face. 'You'll see.' She replied to my disbelieving look, one eyebrow hiding underneath my fringe.

'I'd rather not,' I laughed again. 'Anyway. About those meals ...'

'Certainly. Please excuse my lack of professionalism, I was just star-struck.' She did look embarrassed, so I smiled reassuringly at her. 'You are more than welcome to have your meals in your room, unless the host wants to have everyone attend dinner.'

'Does that happen often?' I felt a little pressured by this.

'No. Quite rarely. But she does insist that everybody attends.'

'She?' It was out before I could stop it.

'Yes. Ms Thomas. That's her portrait on the wall.' I turned to look into sad blue eyes looking down at me, raven hair framing a chiselled face. She was perched in a leather high backed chair, arms folded across her lap.

'She looks so sad,' I whispered. 'So beautiful, yet so lost.'

'Ms Thomas has endured a lot of personal tragedy. That portrait was commissioned just after her return to the house two years ago.'

I was transfixed by the portrait. Lost in the expression on the woman's face, and absolutely sure I had witnessed the same woman hanging off the Keep the previous day.

The clearing of a throat from behind me broke my reverie and I turned to see the concerned eyes of 'Jenny,' my number one fan. 'Every thing okay, Ms Jameson?'

I nodded, images of Kathy Bates in *Misery* racing around in my head. I swallowed ... or should I say, gulped quietly, and returned my attention to soft brown eyes - nah - she's wouldn't ...

I cleared my throat. 'I think I'll go and do a little investigating,' then winked at her before venturing out into the morning air.

The day was crisp and held the vestiges of early morning mist that coated the grounds with an air of uncertainty and mystery. I breathed in deeply, and set off on my walk.

The amazing thing about walking in the mist is that your footsteps echo, giving the feeling of someone stalking you. However hard you try to rationalise, an air of creepiness steals over you taking away the remains of reason. Trees looked distorted and twisted, reaching out to capture their victims, like the trees in *The Wizard of Oz*, but more sinister. Every noise reverberated within the surrounding area, like it had been vacuum packed for maximum effect. Gravel crunched underneath my boots, suggesting a miniature army was on the attack.

It was only early autumn but the fingers of winter were beginning their grip on the landscape, stripping the trees of their leaves, killing everything ready for the onset of complete barren ness.

Before I knew it I was beside a lake. The water was tranquil; all noise had ceased as I approached. A couple of ducks rested at the edge but soon scuttled off in their comical way. I smiled. This was the life ...

I sat on a bench at the edge and took in the scene before me. If only life was as simple as this. I felt saddened and blessed at the same time. As soon as I got that bastard out of my life, the sooner I could begin to live. It wasn't just the fact Pete couldn't control his fists, or other bodily parts, it was the loneliness I felt within our marriage ... or the apathy I felt towards him ...

A sigh escaped me. Hopefully it would all be done and dusted before I left the retreat.

I leaned back on the seat and rested my arms along the back. A noise from my left alerted me that I was not alone. My eyes dug their way through the mist to rest upon a dark, tall figure standing by the water's edge. Long raven hair was swept back off the beautiful face as she stared out at nothing.

'Good morning!' I called, wanting to make contact with my hostess. I felt like I needed to see her smile, needed her to lose that look of despair that clung to her features.

She slowly turned to face me, her eyes widening with recognition. 'You?' Her voice croaked.

'Yes, me.' Don't tell me I have another fan? My head was big enough as it was.

'You've come back.'

I looked at her gone out. 'How can I have come back? I've never been here before.' The confusion in my voice was evident. What I didn't expect was for her to spin on her heel and run off like the hounds of hell were after her.

This place was weird. That woman was weird. How rude to just dash off like that. She must be one of the eccentric types. Well ... it takes all sorts.

I stood and dusted the moisture from the back of my jeans before making my way back to the house. Images of blue eyes kept flitting through my mind. Why was I suddenly thinking about blue eyes?

Beats me.

Two weeks passed and I hadn't written a word - well, anything worth publishing, and nothing you could say in front of your mother. A blank computer screen greeted me every day, and I left it the same way every night.

Sometimes I would just walk the corridors hoping for inspiration, other times found me staring into the clear water of the lake or holding conversations with ducks who seemed more interested with the bread in my hands.

It was early evening on the fifteenth day that I first heard it. I was sitting staring at the usual blank screen when sobbing reached my ears. It was coming from just outside my room. I tried to ignore it but my interest was piqued.

I opened the door and peered into the corridor. Empty. But the sobbing was still audible. I stepped into the hallway, closing the door soundlessly behind me and I followed the noise. It seemed to just be ahead of me and was becoming more frantic.

I increased my pace.

As I turned the corner, I saw an open door slightly swinging like someone had just gone through. I stood at the base and stared upwards, my eyes following stone steps. I admit, I was scared. The passageway looked daunting and I was pretty much certain this wasn't part of the usual tour.

I was just about to turn around when a woman's voice filtered down; filled with so much pain I couldn't resist comforting her. 'Why did you do it?' What? Who was she talking to? The sobbing escalated into a wail, and I knew I had to do something.

Gripping the banister, I sucked in my courage and began my ascent. I didn't know what I was going to meet, but then again I didn't really care what happened to me at all.

Cold air fingered my face as I approached the top of the steps, and I felt a strange sensation of impending doom. I know - cliché.

The door at the top was ajar and I could make out the darkening sky peeping through. So - this led to the rooftop, eh?

The crying was closer, and I had a vivid sensation of *déjà vu* once again, as I pushed the door open and stepped out into the night air. My eyes quickly accustomed themselves to the darkening sky and I scanned the area, my ears directing me to the sound of the distressed woman.

I spotted her near the wall, her hands covering her face. She looked like my hostess, yet slightly different somehow. Maybe it was the full-length dress she was wearing, or the fact her hair was piled high on her head. I don't really know, but she looked changed somehow.

'Ms Thomas?' I gently asked. 'Are you okay?' A tear stained face greeted me. Blue eyes betraying her agony. She looked startled.

'Why, Vivian?' She sobbed and held her hand out to me. 'Why him?'

I looked at her. She didn't seem with it. I stepped back holding my hands in front of me. 'Vivian? You must be mistaken. I'm Abbie Jameson ... one of your guests.'

'Still denying me, then?' With that she spun around, and with one deft movement, she vaulted over the side.

I stood there, frozen, waiting for the inevitable thud as her body hit the ground. But it didn't come.

When my blood started to circulate again, I found myself at the edge staring over the side, dreading the bloody mess that would greet me.

But there was nothing there. The ground below was clear. No body. Only the gravel from the driveway graced the ground.

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. I had seen our hostess throw herself from this edge, just like she threatened to do when I first arrived. But there was nothing there.

My stomach seized and I lost the contents of my lunch. Repeatedly. I slumped against the wall, a cold sweat coating my body. What the fuck was going on? I pushed my fingers through sweat-

dampened hair and allowed myself a few minutes to gather my emotions. I was shaking and my teeth were beginning to chatter.

'Are you okay?' Such a warm voice, so familiar. I closed my eyes and searched for the memory of it. It was hiding behind all my other memories and I couldn't quite reach it.

I felt someone crouch down next to me. 'Ms Jameson?' I opened my eyes and was captured in an intense blue gaze. 'Are you all right?'

'You're alive,' I croaked. Her face took on a mask of confusion. 'I saw you jump and ...'

She stood quickly; brushing her hands down the front of her jeans. 'Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm still here.'

'But I ...'

'I'll take you back to your room.' Her face devoid of emotion, she held her hand down to me. As my fingers tightened around hers, a jolt raced up my arm and through my body.

Green eyes locked with blue. I knew she had felt it too but she was still sporting that look of nonchalance. She pulled me up and into her and I felt my skin moulding into hers. I could smell her skin, her hair. I could feel her breath, slightly ragged on my face.

I pulled away as if I had been stung. I had never experienced this before and, to tell you the truth, I was a little freaked out. It was like I had done this a thousand times before, yet it also felt so new.

'I can make my own way, Ms Thomas.' And I turned and scuttled back to my room, all the while admonishing myself for my rudeness.

Was I cracking up? Had I dreamt the whole thing? I knew I was a writer, but this was a little too realistic even for me and *my* imagination.

I must be coming down with something. I did feel slightly feverish. It was probably all the events leading up to this moment - the divorce, witnessing my hostess climbing off the same wall, the urgency and anxiety I had been feeling when I couldn't get my ideas on paper.

I did the only thing a girl in my position would do. I had a long soak, a hot chocolate and an early night. Things would make sense in the morning.

Right?

Something woke me in the middle of the night. I couldn't really tell you what it was, but I knew that all was not well. I lay there, covers clutched firmly in my hands just below my chin, very

much like a black and white horror film. My eyes were stretched into glistening white orbs and I was breathing noisily from my nose.

My ever-vigilant ears picked up something in the corner of my room. A dragging noise. I was nearly too afraid to look ... nearly.

I turned my head into the direction of the semi scuffling noise and focused on the shadows in the corner.

'Who's there?' My voice sounded braver than I felt. The scuffling, or dragging, stopped briefly, like it was contemplating answering me. Then it started again, but this time it began to move away from the corner and approach my bed.

Instinctively I drew my legs closer to my chest, believing this would save me. I still couldn't see anything, just a pillar of darkness moving slowly around the foot of my bed. I felt the covers move at the base as something brushed against the bottom. Sweat coated my bottom lip and if I had had the ability to scream I would have right then and there.

But I couldn't. All the moisture in my mouth had been swallowed in fright and I had nothing to work with. The temperature of the room had dropped dramatically and I could see my breath leaving my mouth in short gasping clouds of air.

My eyes pinned themselves to the shape and tracked its every move. Right in the centre I saw a small round orb of light appear and hover in the darkness before it skipped downwards to the base of my bed to sit there for an agonising moment. It seemed to deliberate before venturing further up the bed towards my cowering frame. It stopped as it reached my feet. I felt the coldness oozing from it, freezing my toes with its mere presence.

Before my eyes the orb seemed to morph into something imitating a hand, a man's hand, thick and clumpy. My eyes blinked rapidly hoping to expel this image to mere fantasy. But no ... it stayed there, the fingers trembling.

It felt dark and sinister. There was malice in that hand and I knew, I don't know how, that it had made people suffer at some time or another. Alive or dead. Dread prickled its way up my spine and made my throat constrict. I never took my eyes from it, and I watched it transform itself into an orb again.

At lightning speed the orb raced across the room and lingered over my computer, which sat idly in the corner near the window. To my amazement the screen saver disappeared and I heard the distinct clicking of the laptop's keypad. I could see a word appearing but couldn't read it.

Then as fast as it appeared ... it was gone. I could feel that it had gone as the room's temperature began to rise once again, my breathing becoming less visible.

I lay there for what seemed like an age before working up the courage to look at the message on the screen. Slowly, I threw the covers back and gingerly put my bare feet on the floor. My legs

were weak and I wasn't too sure if they would support me on my journey. I breathed in deeply

As I approached the computer the fear in my gut took centre stage. I didn't know what to expect and that's what made things worse. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

'Whore.'

That did it. The scream left my lungs like a freight train and I flew to the door, threw it back and raced down the corridor like the spawn of Satan was attacking my heels. I wasn't looking where I was going and nearly died of fright when strong arms grabbed me and pulled me to a firm body.

I struggled to escape but the arms were too strong, almost crushing. Then I passed out.

Chapter Four

When I came to I was greeted by a very concerned pair of blue eyes, leaning over me, in a strange room on a strange bed.

'Where am I?'

'Shush. You've had a bit of a scare, but you're safe now.' The voice was so comforting, so gentle, I felt myself being lulled. 'Here ... drink this.' She held a glass of milk out to me. 'It's warm and will help you sleep.'

I cupped the base of the glass and brought the beverage to my lips taking tiny sips of the contents.

'I found you running down the hallway, screaming. When I tried to stop you, you freaked out, then passed out.' Concern once again glistened in her eyes. 'So I brought you to my room.' A sad smile graced her lips. I wanted to stroke them. Wait a minute? Stroke them? What on earth?

I shook my head to clear the image, and the questions.

'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

I shook my head. 'Not tonight. I feel so tired.' A yawn escaped my mouth and I passed the nearly empty glass back to her. My head was fogging, like I had been drugged.

The last coherent thought I had before I fell into a deep sleep was, 'Such beautiful eyes.'

The next morning found me bleary eyed and foggy about the previous night's events. I wasn't too

sure about whose bed I woke up in, as I was too concerned with the raging headache that I had woken with.

I looked around the room, searching for clues of my whereabouts. The room seemed cold in appearance, oak panelled walls playing host to a multicoloured arras, and the window ran from one side of the room to the other. The curtains were still closed, but I could see the promise of a new day lurking behind.

I snuggled down underneath the covers and soaked up the warmth, ready to doze off again, when I heard the door opening. Green eyes blinked wildly, the memory from the previous evening crashing down upon me.

A soft, yet husky voice trickled over to me. 'So. You're awake.'

My hostess stood in the doorway, dressed in sweat pants and a sweat soaked top. She had a tray exuding delicious smells which was balanced precariously on her left arm. 'Thought you might be hungry.' And she came in, kicking the door closed behind her.

I held the covers up to my chest. I don't know why, it was instinctive. Her eyes narrowed as she witnessed my actions and she faltered in her step, hesitant about coming forward. I felt foolish, so I threw the covers back revealing my pyjamas covered with tiny piglets.

'Nice choice in nightwear,' she teased, her eyebrow raised in mock appraisal. The ice was definitely broken as I grinned fully at her.

'A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do,' I teased back and held out my arms for the tray, my stomach waking up suddenly and screaming for nourishment.

She hovered it above me and moved it away before my clinging hands could get purchase. I glared at her and lunged again, ending up the victor - a victor who nearly ended up covered in orange juice.

After I gobbled down my breakfast, talking between bites, I felt refreshed and ready for action. Funny how the daylight can change your perspective on things. My hostess, Kate, barely had the chance to talk, but listened like she wanted to hear me babbling on about ducks and writer's block.

I wasn't nervous. No. I just wanted to keep her there as long as possible so I could eventually pluck up the courage to ask her about what had happened the previous night.

'I took the liberty of getting you something to wear from your room.' She seemed almost embarrassed. 'You ... you can use my bathroom if you like?' Bashful?

'Thanks.' She got up to leave. 'Erm ... Kate?' She turned and looked down at me. 'Could I have a chat with you after I shower?' Her face showed her confusion. 'About last night ...' The confusion disappeared and I visibly saw a screen rise up in front of her, blocking out her

emotions. 'I can't remember getting here. I ... I ... need some answers.' My voice seemed to lose impact at the end, leaving the words dangling in the air.

'Sure.' A smile. 'I'll just get some coffee.' With that she turned and left the room leaving me staring at the closed door.

I was standing under the shower, water hurtling off my body in hot waves, soaking up the feeling of joining the land of the living, when I heard the door to the bathroom open. A cool draught brushed against my legs where tiny goose bumps came to life.

'Kate?' No answer. 'Kate ... is that you?' Still quiet.

I opened the stall door and peeked outside. The room was filled with steam and I could see someone in the corner fiddling with something near the sink. 'Can I help you?' My voice was cold. Who the fuck? My eyes spotted a pile of fluffy white towels perched on the stool near the shower. The maid. My heart rate slowed down considerably at this realisation.

A soft scraping sound was coming from the corner where the maid was and I looked back over, ready to dismiss her. She had already gone. But I didn't hear her leave ... didn't hear her close the door. She couldn't have left that quickly as I had only turned to look at the towels.

Weird.

I leaned into the shower and turned it off, stepping from the cubicle. I picked up one of the large towels and began to dry myself vigorously. The steam in the bathroom began to dissipate, allowing me to see things more clearly.

My eyes travelled over to the corner where the maid had been doing something a couple of minutes earlier, and I spotted the mirror hanging over the sink covered in condensation. Well ... almost covered. Something had been written on the glass.

Curiosity piqued, I ambled over, securing the towel around me in the process.

One word adorned the glass. One word.

'Whore.'

A scream burst out of my mouth just before I made contact with the cold wet tile. A pain soared through my temple and I felt the tell tale sign of liquid trickling down the side of my face. I knew I was going to faint ... something I had never done before last night.

Everything went black, but I was still vaguely aware of the door to the bathroom flying open and someone racing in to kneel down next to me. Strong hands gripped my shoulders and lifted me into a sitting position. I felt my body being curled into strong capable arms, warm breath on my

face. 'Abbie? Abbie? Come on sweetheart.' The concern was evident in Kate's voice, as she gently rocked me backwards and forwards.

And once again ... it all went dark.

I awoke with a blinding headache and two pairs of concerned eyes looking into my own. Blue and grey. The grey ones were obscured by small black-framed glasses and were observing me intently.

'Miss Jameson? Do you know where you are?' A man's voice wafted towards me as I looked around the room with confusion. A cool hand landed on my arm and I jumped a little, startled by the contact. 'Do you hurt anywhere?'

God yes. My head felt like it had survived a steam rolling incident and my stomach was ready to rebel. 'My head ...' I lifted my hand up and tentatively stroked my temple, flinching at the feel of congealed blood and a definite soreness.

'You had an accident. I'm Dr Robins.' I looked at him. 'I'm a guest here. Ms Thomas phoned through for my assistance as soon as she found you.'

I looked at my hostess, whose face sported a mixture of concern and fear.

'How did I get on the bed?'

They looked at each other, a silent message passed between them. 'We both carried you after I checked to see if it would be okay for you to be moved.' He came closer and touched the wound on my head. 'You'll probably need a couple of stitches. It's a good job it is bruising as I would have advised for you to go and have a scan.'

My face said it all. 'It's okay,' he soothed, 'as long as someone keeps their eye on you for the next twenty four hours for any signs of concussion...' The last part of this was directed at my hostess who nodded vigorously at this point. 'Could you get us some hot water, clean cloths and something to drink?'

Kate nodded again. I was beginning to believe that she had lost the ability of speech until she turned at the doorway and looked me straight in the eye. 'I'm so sorry.' Then she left.

Sorry about what?

Doctor Robins began to rummage through his bag looking for his suture kit and antiseptic wipes, and I took this time to reflect on what had actually happened.

What had actually happened?

My stomach began another dance as I recalled the figure and the message on the mirror. Was I losing the plot? My mind? Or was something going on that I couldn't rationalise?

Was someone fucking with me? And if yes - *why*?

The door to the room opened and Kate came back in with a steaming bowl of water and a bundle of clean white cloths. 'Tea is on its way.' A shy smile graced her lips as she looked at me. I returned the smile and she visibly relaxed.

Thirty minutes later I was cleaned and stitched up, resting on puffed up pillows sipping a hot cup of tea. The doctor had excused himself after performing his duties, leaving a prescription for painkillers and sleeping tablets behind. He informed me that I should steer away from the sleeping tablets tonight; just until he was sure I didn't have a concussion, and left me a couple of painkillers to get me started.

The tension in the room was slowly building and I was feeling uncomfortable with Kate's fidgeting as she sat in the chair next to the bed.

Finally. 'I've taken the liberty of moving your things to the room next to this one for the unforeseeable future.' She coughed. 'The room is part of my apartment, but I thought ...' I looked at her, a question in my eyes. 'I thought it would be best since ... whilst ...erm ... while you recovered.'

I stared at her and felt time dragging by. Eventually I lowered my eyes and nodded. 'Good idea.' A sigh broke free from deep within me. 'I didn't really fancy going back to that room anyway.'

'Well, that's sorted then.' A crooked smile slipped onto her face.

It's amazing how a smile can change a person's whole appearance. Every time I had seen my hostess she had looked moody and withdrawn, her persona drowned by a sheet of blackness that suffocated her.

I yawned - widely. 'Well ... I'd better let you get some rest. I'll just be in the living room through that door.' She pointed towards the back of the room. 'If you need anything just shout.'

After she left, I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, thoughts racing around my head. The painkillers were beginning to work and I felt sleep gripping me. Another yawn and then I allowed myself to be pulled under.

Chapter Five

I was standing in a great hall. Music was playing. It sounded distorted and ethereal. Couples were gliding around the spacious floor dressed in formal attire. I think it was a waltz of some description. I felt confused.

Their faces were all directed at me. Distorted faces ... leering. I thought I could sense them laughing ... not in a good way, but maliciously.

Panic pounded in my chest and I wanted to escape. I didn't belong here.

A hand gripped my arm and pulled me. I turned and found a cold pair of blue eyes glaring down into my own. The face was cruel and hard, framed by midnight black hair and sliced open with a perfectly trimmed moustache.

Fingers were digging into the top of my arm and I felt trapped in this man's grip. He shoved me, roughly, and his eyes directed me to look out on the scene again. I knew that I had to play a part, a part I didn't want to play.

My eyes swept across the dance floor. The music had stopped, and the sea of people were parting to allow the entrance of a solitary figure making her way down the centre.

The woman was tall, elegant, and beautiful. Her raven hair was piled on top of her head exposing her slender neck. I could feel my mouth watering for the taste of her, and funnily enough, I didn't feel surprised at this. Purposefully, she made her way towards where I was standing and my heart raced with expectation.

Her blue eyes never left my face as she approached and I could feel the man's fingers digging deeper into me.

She stopped in front of me, looking down into my eyes. The air of the room was filled with anticipation, the crowd were standing to the side, leering expressions gone, replaced by an empty space, a blankness, where their facial features should have been.

A slender hand was held out to me, steady and strong. 'Come with me.' It was a plea that tore at my gut and ignited my soul.

Hot breath landed on the back of my neck and another hand came around and gripped the top of my free arm in warning. The woman's eyes were pleading with mine. 'Come with me.' Whispered, the despair evident.

A growl was heard in my ear. 'Whores!' I felt the spittle hit the back of my neck and I knew what I had to do. It was the only thing to do.

'I can't.' Her eyes misted as tears threatened to brim over and expose her pain. I could feel my heart breaking.

'Please!' It was so quiet, almost mouthed.

'I can't. You must understand ...'

'Only too well.' Her voice choked; a solitary tear escaped and raced down her cheek. Then she turned and fled, pushing her way through the crowd who were jeering and laughing. The pain in my chest burst open and bled like an open wound.

'Wait! Don't leave me!' I tried to get away but the man's grip held me fast.

'No you don't. Even though you're an abomination you're still my wife.' Fingers dug into my arms and I could feel the skin breaking apart.

'No!' I screamed over and over, trying to pull myself away from him, panic gripping me.

'Sssshhh.' Strong arms held me as I sobbed, tears burning my face and my eyes. 'It's okay ... I've got you.'

My head shot up to be captured by beautiful blue eyes, concern radiating from them.

'You've come back!' I sobbed.

Confusion slipped over the beautiful face, which was quickly masked by concern once again.

'You were dreaming,' she soothed.

I fell into her embrace and began crying once again until my breathing became erratic and made me hiccup and snivel.

It was an age before I was calm enough to let go of her, and I missed the warmth and comfort immediately.

'I'll just order some hot milk and I'll be back.' She stood and made her way to the door. 'It was just a bad dream Abbie, probably an after shock of your fall.' I nodded, trying to placate both her and myself.

There was a slight problem to her conclusion. This being, I had bruises down both of my arms. Bruises in the shape of fingertips.

How do you explain that one away?

True to her word, my hostess was back within five minutes, and ten minutes after that I was sipping hot milk whilst she straightened the covers on the bed.

'Sorry to wake you.' I mumbled. Her hands stopped their stroking of the duvet. 'My dream ... it seemed so real, I ...'

'No worries.' She smiled a full smile and her eyes joined in for good measure. 'I wasn't sleeping. I was reading some trashy fiction.' Another grin.

I smiled back. 'Not mine, I hope?' A gentle laugh escaped her, and I felt a sense of calmness envelop me.

The room went quiet and we both felt the atmosphere change. Kate sat down on the chair next to the bed and began to fidget with the hem of her top.

'Would you like to talk about it?' The question surprised me, even though I had no reason to feel surprised.

'Erm ... well ... it seems ludicrous now that you're here and the room is all light and ...' I drifted off, suddenly feeling foolish.

'Sometimes it's better to get things out in the open. That way it doesn't come back to bite you on the butt.' I laughed feeling more relaxed already. 'But before we do I need to check your eyes.' I looked at her, startled for a moment. 'To check your pupils for abnormalities ... you know ... concussion?'

I nodded in understanding and sat up straighter on the bed. Slowly, she raised herself up from the chair and made her way over to the bed. She produced a small torch from her pocket. I looked at her once again with surprise. 'Present from the doctor,' she grinned and cupped her hand underneath my chin to tilt my head back for inspection.

I felt a jolt whiz through me and separate into tiny jolts that raced to every inch of my body. I jerked away from her touch only to note the look of disappointment and hurt on her face. 'Sorry ... my head is still sore.' She nodded, seeming content with my cover up.

What on earth was that? I couldn't rationalise the feeling that had encompassed me. The electricity that flowed from her when we touched ... It seemed to awaken something dormant inside: shock it awake from deep inside.

Kate busied herself shining her new toy into each eye, checking for anything amiss, her hand once again planted firmly on the underside of my jaw. I sat there like a well-trained puppy, and like a puppy I had the urge to spring up, cover my master with licks and then chase my tail for the rest of the afternoon.

Weird?

Most definitely.

After I had passed inspection and my pupils given the all clear, it was time to tell my hostess what had happened to make me call out in my sleep.

I patted the bed in invite and she sat next to me, slightly turning to face me. I told her about the

ball and the strange man, and eventually about the entrance of the tall woman. Her face closed up at this point and I felt disappointed once again.

When I got to the part where the woman asked me to go with her and I refused, Kate stiffened and looked away.

'What's the matter, Kate?' I reached out and grabbed her arm to pull her back. Initially she seemed insistent that the wall was better company, but eventually pale blue eyes once again met my own. 'Have I offended you in some way?' I was confused and my eyes told her this.

'No ... it's nothing ... just ... nothing.'

'It must be something if you are reacting like this. Tell me.'

'I can't. Not yet.' Her eyes, eyes that were so familiar, pleaded me not to push, so I took a deep breath and lowered my gaze - freeing her from a confession. Now where did that word come from? Confession? An unusual choice of word to just go popping into someone's head. 'I promise you, Abbie. I'll tell you soon.'

I nodded in understanding. I was prepared to wait, mainly because I didn't what to put Kate on the spot, and, also, just a little bit of me didn't really want to know.

I took a deep breath and came to the conclusion I should let her know I knew something was amiss.

'I thought it was just a dream, but the man's hands were so strong and were digging into my arms ...' I sat up and rolled my pyjama top up to reveal the bruising on my upper arms.

A gasp left her mouth and she grabbed my forearms, bringing the appendages closer to her face.

'Oh Abbie!' A stifled cry left her throat.

'I'm okay. Probably did it myself.' I shrugged it away, half believing my own theory. Well it was better than considering the other option. I rubbed the flesh and then covered my arms with the fleecy material again. She still looked distraught. 'Hey ... don't worry. I bruise really easily.' I smiled at her, trying to comfort the woman sitting beside me.

I reached out and placed my hand on her forearm to reassure her I was okay. Her skin felt cold to the touch. 'You're freezing. Why don't you get under the covers? There's more than enough room.'

Blue eyes studied me intently before a quick nod of the head, a bit of shuffling, and she was next to me. I noticed her trying to stifle a yawn. 'We'd better get some sleep or we'll be fit for nothing,' I said.

She nodded and closed her eyes.

I lay there studying the enigma that was Kate Thomas. Such a mixture. On one hand she was strong and confident, yet on the other ... on the other she was so vulnerable with an air of sadness shrouding her. I wondered what her story was.

My eyes became heavy and I drifted off into a dreamless sleep. I think it was the best night's sleep I'd had in years.

Chapter Six

The next morning found me nestled into the side of my hostess, my head firmly planted underneath her armpit. Small snoring noises were coming from above me and I bit back a grin and tried to slink away. A firm hand gripped me and pulled me closer until my head was nearly buried. It was so warm and safe I did the only thing a girl should do in that position.

I fell back to sleep.

I don't know how long I slept for but when I woke up she was gone. Strangely enough I felt more alone at that moment that I ever had in my life.

I turned to my side and stared at the ceiling.

What was going on here? I was stressed, granted, and I knew that I had too much on my plate with the divorce and my writer's block, but that didn't explain half the things that had been going on.

The mind is a funny thing and can make your senses go into overdrive when it wants to - but this? My hand had started to stroke the bruising on the inside of my arm. How had that happened? Did I really do that myself?

Well ... there was such a thing as stigmata. That was mind over matter - so what was the difference?

But why think of the things that I had been thinking of? Why not envision something I knew something about? Why the mystery?

The incident with the computer - writer's block most definitely.

The person in the bathroom - probably just the maid.

But the writing?

That could have been on there before I took a shower and the condensation brought it to life. Sorted.

The dream. There were loads of portraits around the place, so maybe I just fell into a deep sleep and blurred reality with fantasy. And the bruising could have been made by me squeezing myself tightly when I felt nervous. Once again, sorted.

The woman throwing herself off the roof and no trace of the body. How to explain away that one?

I was saved the trouble by a discreet knock on the door. Brushing my unruly hair out of my eyes I shouted for the person on the other side to come in. Hope slipped away when I found the chambermaid entering with a tray filled with toast, marmalade and a pot of tea.

My stomach yawned awake and I puffed up my pillows in readiness to receive the food.

'Will that be all?' The girl looked nervous, as she had probably heard about what happened the previous day, or maybe she was wondering what on earth I was doing in the owner's room?

'Yes, thank you.' I took the tray and devoured my late breakfast. I had to get myself into gear. I couldn't lie around all day in Kate's bed; I had to get myself moving, sort out my new accommodation.

Why on earth was I still willing to stay in this place? I can't ever remember being so disturbed, yet so at home, in one place. My life was quickly becoming a paradox. I knew that something was not quite right, my hallucinations and nightmares put paid to that.

So why stay?

First and foremost I needed to get my writing flowing again. I didn't need the money: I needed the satisfaction of knowing that I was worth something. My writing did that for me.

But it was more than that.

Everything I had witnessed, either asleep or awake, made me want to stick it out. I had to get to the bottom of the mystery that haunted this place, and haunted the space behind my hostess' eyes.

Her eyes.

They mesmerised me. I can't deny it. She was so beautiful, but seemed so lost. I felt like I was a clue to her life in some bizarre way.

So, tell me, how could I leave her here on her own?

I had the weirdest sensation that I could help her recapture something that was ultimately lost to her.

Even though I knew I would probably lose my mind in the process.

Chapter Seven

The bedroom attached to her apartment was magnificent. Views of the house and gardens greeted me from every angle and I felt instantly at home there. It would be good for my writing; I could feel the muse rising from deep within.

After I unpacked all my things and set up my laptop on the side, I slumped into the chair exhausted.

I scanned the room, pleased with my efforts, whilst grinning widely at my lack of stamina. Writing was not good for the hips. I contemplated going down to the gym, a pastime I had neglected since my arrival.

My eyes rested on the bed and spied a small brown object lying on top of the duvet. I squinted my eyes, trying to make out what it was, and eventually decided not to be a lard arse and get up and check it out.

As I got closer I discovered it was a book. My hand grasped the leather bound cover and noticed it didn't have anything written on the cover. I frowned slightly and opened it up.

Flowing script met my eyes as I stared wide-eyed at the name written inside. Katherine Thomas. My hostess? Confusion settled over my features. Why on earth would Kate leave me her diary?

Intrigued, I turned the page. 1917. 1917? But ...

I flumped down on the bed and turned to the next page. Maybe this was Kate's way of telling me what she had difficulty speaking aloud. Maybe this diary held the key.

I settled back into the bed, getting myself comfy, and began to read.

May 12th 1917

My brother has finally decided he should go to war. He has tried to avoid it for the longest time. Locals have called him a coward behind his back and to his face. Edward, my oldest brother, enlisted as soon as war was declared. As for William, well the three white feathers he received in the post last week angered him so much he took it out on poor Billy, beating him until the poor lad could barely stand.

He leaves for London one week today. I am so happy, and God forgive me, I hope he never comes back.

All of the staff are frightened of him and his flying fists. But it's his philandering that is the worst. Two young women have left under suspicious circumstances - always the very young ones too.

He is a beast, a pitiable excuse for a man. I am going to enjoy living here without him; I nearly run the place as it is since daddy died and Edward left.

The next few pages went on in the same vein, the young woman writing about her sudden found freedom even though the country was gripped by war and supposedly living in fear.

I yawned widely and stretched out my legs. I needed to go for a walk, get some fresh air in my lungs, and take stock of the situation.

I considered asking Kate if I could use the woman from the diary as the basis for my new novel. Her character was so strong it called to me through the pages and through time.

Then it hit me.

Katherine Thomas. 1917. The costumes of the day raced around my mind, the hairstyles.

I needed to be sure.

I threw the book onto the bed and raced outside and down to reception. My eyes searched the walls frantically until they rested on the portrait on the wall.

Pale blue eyes stared down into my own, raven hair piled on top of her head, a slender throat revealed from the top of a white lace collar. So beautiful: so sad.

My eyes drifted to the brass plaque that accompanied the portrait: Katherine Thomas 1896 - 1919.

But it couldn't be ... could it?

There was no mistaking that chiselled face, that wan smile, the look of desperation in those mesmerising eyes, eyes that had haunted my dreams and waking moments since my arrival nearly three weeks ago.

It was her.

I staggered forward, my hand reaching out to the portrait almost believing I could physically touch the real her. My stomach was reeling from the shock; my eyes riveted themselves into her gaze.

I don't know how long I stood there. I don't know how many times Jenny asked me if I was okay. I was transfixed.

'Ms Jameson? Abbie? Is everything okay?' The touch of her hand awoke me and I started to turn away. That's when I spotted it.

In the portrait you could just make out that clasped tightly in her right hand, almost obscured, was the small brown leather journal I had just been reading. I looked back into her eyes, my own pleading for a sign.

I don't know whether it was my imagination but I could hear a voice, low, soft, sultry, whispering in my ear, the breath tickled the fine hairs on my neck.

'Vivian.' Just the one word, but it was enough.

I turned abruptly, pushed past Jenny, and raced back to my room.

I had to find out why I was drawn to this woman; why I had a burning need to find out what part I played in all of this; and, most importantly, why I felt a pull towards my hostess?

Throwing the door back, I charged towards the bed. It was empty.

It must have fallen on the floor, so I threw the covers back and looked around. Nothing.

I searched the room for nearly thirty minutes until I slumped, defeated, into the bedside chair.

The diary had gone, disappeared without a trace. Kate must have taken it back for some unknown reason.

Why would she give me the book only to take it back a couple of hours later? What was the point in that?

As I sat there pondering my idiosyncratic hostess, a sharp rap announced itself on my door, ultimately breaking my reverie.

'Yes!'

The door opened slowly and a worried Jenny poked her head round.

'Sorry to interrupt, Ms Jameson, but I have a message.'

I blinked my surprise.

'Ms Thomas asked me to notify all of the guests. She is hosting a dinner party tonight and she wishes for full attendance.' I widened my eyes at the flustered woman. 'Sorry it is such short notice, but she didn't tell me until she was leaving this morning.'

'She's not here?'

'No ... she left about six thirty this morning for a meeting in London. She should be back before seven tonight.'

My face must have said it all. 'You can always feign a headache, especially after ...'

I interrupted her, 'No, that's fine ... what time?'

Jenny filled me in on the details, but I'm sorry to say I wasn't paying much attention. My mind was decidedly elsewhere - especially thinking about how she could have had the time to put the diary in my room. I was almost definite, in retrospect; the diary was not on the bed when I first entered my quarters.

Secondly. Who took it away again?

Someone, or something, was fucking about with me.

And I don't like to be fucked around with.

Part of me wanted to believe that Kate was innocent in this ... but who else would have the motivation or inclination to feed me snippets of clues and then stop.

I was becoming more confused. Why me? And what did they have to gain?

Through the haze swirling around in my mind, I remembered Jenny mentioning the 'Dinner Party' was formal. I hunted through my wardrobe searching for something appropriate, and came across a very simple long black dress. I couldn't remember packing it; in fact I didn't remember ever buying it.

Confused, I slipped it from its resting place on the hanger and checked inside. My size. I held it against me. Right length.

Must be mine.

As I dressed, my mind was consumed by the journal, or diary, or whatever it was. Where had it gone? Someone had been in my room and taken it back whilst I was downstairs looking at the gallery of previous owners.

And it wasn't Kate.

I slipped the dress carefully over my head to avoid disturbing half an hour's work on my hair. The material clung to my body like a second skin, the cool silkiness tantalising my flesh like a promise. I looked squarely into the mirror, surprising myself with the result.

I looked refreshed, which was unusual considering recent events.

After applying a smudge of lipstick and a whisper of mascara, I was ready for my debut. Butterflies vied for attention in my stomach. I rarely suffered with nervousness, especially in my

profession. So why now?

I leaned forward towards the mirror checking for smudges. I ran my pinky across my lips to blend the lipstick further creating a soft rose hue, and then poked out the tip of my tongue to swipe across allowing a sheen to appear. Both my hands came up to adjust the plunge on my dress, pushing my breasts into place and snapping the material out and away. The final touch came as I stroked down my sides and along my hips.

Shoes on, a squirt of perfume, and I was ready.

I felt good. I felt ... *sexy*. Yes ... *sexy*. I don't know why. I don't believe I had ever felt sexy before, or ever dressed so carefully. Definitely not for Pete, that was for sure. In my head I wanted to look good, but I didn't know why or who for.

With a shrug, I picked up my purse and headed for the dining hall.

Anticipation rested in my gut. I was expecting something to happen and, in a strange way, I was looking forward to it.

Chapter Seven

After milling around in the bar area sipping cocktails for forty minutes, we were allowed to enter the dining room. I had spent the time watching, or should I say spying, on my hostess make conversation with a few of the other guests, intermittently giving orders to the waiting staff.

Occasionally our eyes would meet, and hold. I felt transfixed by this woman. Her blue eyes seemed to lock into mine, rendering me useless. Disappointment seeped through me when she made no attempt make contact. I had to be content to watch.

She looked stunning. Six foot of raw sexual energy released onto the general public. Her black dress showed every curve and angle of her tall toned body, and fell to her feet with abandon. Pretty much like everyone else in the room. Raven hair swept away from her face, leaving a few curls kissing her cheeks. Her features were animated as she engaged in conversation with her guests.

She smiled at them trying to put them at ease, but the smile never reached her eyes. I could sense there was something behind those blue orbs that spoke of tragedy.

I felt myself staring at her more and more, becoming enraptured by her presence. An aura surrounded her, something forgotten, denied. A couple of times I noted her looking me over, blue eyes gliding down my frame, her eyes holding something unmistakable, yet unidentifiable.

I was thankful for the bell announcing that dinner was served. As I moved I could feel a tingling desire rest between my legs. Now that was more unusual. Four years with Peter had seen me use

every trick in the book to avoid having sex with him. I didn't enjoy it. Never felt the need to lie writhing underneath him, groaning what a man he was when he fucked me.

That's all it ever was. A fuck.

Granted, he had tried at first. Foreplay, and all that ... but ... nothing.

I knew it wasn't him as he had not been my first. Actually, there had been quite a few, and all of them had ended the same. Them wanting more than I could give ... me wanting more than they could ever be. That was the story of my life: a lopsided seesaw. I knew, yet didn't know, what I wanted.

All I knew for certain was I didn't want them.

So ... yes. Feeling sexually aroused was a new concept for me, the dampness making a refreshing change to apathy.

Problem was ... why was I feeling aroused now? Looking at a woman and becoming sexually aroused? And, more importantly, what could I do about it?

The room was elegantly set out. What else did I expect? McDonalds?

A long table graced the room, acting as a centrepiece to the dark walls that allowed shadows to dance across aided by candlelight.

When I was shown to the seat next to my hostess, I felt a little giddy, and gulping down a couple of large mouthfuls of air didn't help much either.

I sat, making sure I didn't trap my dress underneath me like the klutz I tended to be. Everyone, eventually, got seated and the courses began to flow. I had expected our hostess to make some sort of speech - but - nothing. Sitting opposite me was Dr Robins, who spent the majority of his time whispering into Kate's ear. A niggling sensation rumbled around in my stomach every time that he leaned closer and whispered. I was unsure what the sensation was, as I had never experienced it before.

I was seated next to a very attractive woman who was at the retreat to 'Just get my life in order,' whatever that meant. I had to listen to her whole life story, nodding in all the right places, and smiling my book cover smile. My next book could have easily been her life story; honestly, she could talk for England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. All the while, I was taking sly looks at the secretive pair, the sensation in my stomach getting stronger and stronger. At one point Kate threw back her head and laughed and I glared at Dr Robins, who was snickering into his serviette.

Next thing I knew I had turned my chair away from the table to face Melanie Davies, twenty

seven, solicitor from London. She had just started to become disheartened with my stoic responses and took this move as a sign of interest. Little did I know what kind of interest she thought at the time. I honestly thought the Joe she was talking about, the Joe who had left her for another woman, the Joe who had been shagging everything in a skirt, was a man. But, in fact, Joe, or Jo, was short for Josephine. They had been together since they were at University and she thought it had been the real thing. Pity her other half didn't.

Then it would have stopped her coming on to me at the dining table in a room full of people.

I smiled when the realisation hit me. I was by no means a homophobe - couldn't stand narrow-minded people. Live and let live - that's my motto.

Over dessert I was once again surprised. Slim fingers landed on my knee, rested for a few seconds before they began to gently stroke in small circles. My eyes widened and I held my breath. Melanie didn't say a word. I looked at her from the corner of my eye. She was happily chatting to a middle aged man seated to her right, her hand gliding over the surface of my dress.

Strange. I didn't feel revolted. I wasn't gay - but ... the contact didn't bother me. A woman I barely (well - I say barely) knew was making a pass at me in front of everyone and I didn't react the way I thought I would. You know ... jumping to my feet, slapping her face, bawling her out. Actually, bizarrely enough, I felt turned on.

I stole a look at Kate, who by this time was watching me intently, looking from me to Melanie with a confused look on her face. I looked at my lap and then back at her. She couldn't see Melanie's hand from there, I was definite of it.

Fingers, slowly, began to move up my thigh, and I could feel the moisture between my legs begin to pool. I turned my head and stared at Kate, pinned by her gaze, her eyes boring through me. The fire was beginning to get out of control. My breathing was becoming more erratic. Short, sharp pants were masked by the inane chatter floating around the room. I stared at her; she stared at me; Melanie's hand was getting closer to her desire - and mine by this point. I was pressing my lower half into the chair hoping to get some stimulation. Kate's eyes held me fast, a question poised, her irises darkened in the candlelight. A pink tongue crept out of her mouth and swept a path around her lips. I was entranced and as horny as hell, although I couldn't understand why. I should be feeling repulsed ... nauseous ... and why, for the love of God, was I transfixed by Kate's eyes?

Melanie's hand landed between my thighs and pressed harder into my mound. Involuntarily, I jerked at the contact, my eyes fluttering for a split second. Dr Robins decided it was time to get Kate's attention and our eye contact was broken. Like all spells, when the charm is broken reality crashes back in and I jumped up from my seat, Melanie's hand banging into the table as it left the safety of my crotch. I felt shame cover me ... I had never - ever thought of another woman in that way before ... well ... before meeting Kate Thomas.

Amazingly, only a few heads turned towards me, Kate's and Dr Robins' being the main two.

'Is everything okay?' Softly spoken ... reassuring. Kate's eyes held concern.

Guiltily, I looked at Melanie, who was by this time nursing her hand surreptitiously underneath the camouflage of the dining room table, eyes downcast. 'Yes ... fine ... I thought I'd dripped some cream on my dress. Will you please excuse me?' And off I raced to the rest room, not daring to look back in case I saw disgust in her face.

Inside the Ladies, I stood in front of the mirror staring at my own reflection, my heart thudding in my chest, out of fear or arousal I didn't know. The door behind me creaked open and I could see the reflection of Melanie behind me. So close, I could smell her fragrance ... quite stimulating. Her arms slipped around my waist and I leaned back into her, feeling her breasts rubbing into the exposed skin of my back. I closed my eyes as her lips met my throat, trailing them over the sensitised flesh, making my breath catch. The feelings of disgust I had just experienced evaporated into the air and I melted into her touch.

She began to nibble on my neck, her hands rubbing my stomach, slowly teasing their way upwards to cup the underside of my breasts. A moan escaped me and she turned me in her arms. I felt different. It wasn't me doing this, right? I had never done anything like this before. I had never felt so charged with energy ... life ... desire.

My hand glided up the contours of her waist, slowly appraising her breasts, my eyes watching my ascent with childlike interest. She was so soft, so appetising. I licked my lips in anticipation as my fingers tied themselves into her shoulder length brown hair, and I tilted my head towards her waiting mouth, leaning forward ... our rapid breaths mingling.

Lips like velvet enveloped my mouth, and I drew back for a second to lick my lips, tasting her lipstick. It was all so new. I had never tasted lipstick from another woman's mouth before, and it tasted wonderful. Without thought, I pressed my own mouth back against hers, her right hand cupping my backside and drawing me in, her left hand squeezing my breast, a strong thigh pushing my legs apart. Hungry mouths tore into each other; our moans mingling; our tongues tackling for dominance. I could feel her pushing me backwards until cool tile met my skin. My hips were grinding into her with renewed force. Fuck, was I horny. I wanted her to take me, fuck me, taste me. I wanted her to throw me on the floor and bury her head between my legs. I needed to feel my legs wrapped around her, feel myself pushing into her, her pushing into me.

She had her hand down my top and was rolling a very pleased nipple between her fingers, her other hand scrambling my dress upwards; her blunt nails clawing at my panties. '*God yes! Yes!*' she panted into my mouth. Expert fingers slipped inside my underwear and delved in the wetness pooling there, my over-sensitised nub screaming for contact. I pushed my hips into her, repeatedly, her thigh stiffening. I could feel my orgasm building within me. I had never felt this way before. A climax for me was a very rare thing, unless of course I did it myself, and even then it wasn't a given.

Realisation dawned on me once again. What was I doing? I wasn't gay. And I certainly wasn't the kind of girl who got her rocks off in the Ladies, however nice they were. The moment was gone. The enchantment was broken.

'Stop! Please!' I pushed Melanie off me, her eyes springing open, her hand leaving its place between my legs.

'What's the matter?' Confusion coloured her beautiful face.

'I can't. This isn't me.'

'Well ... who is it then?' Her voice was cold, her eyes narrowing, her breath ragged.

'I'm married.' A confession? Regret? Who knows? 'I'm married,' I repeated, quietly this time. I lowered my head in shame, smoothing my dress back into place.

'You're married?' Her voice sounded incredulous.

'*Married?*' A colder voice sounded from the doorway and my eyes darted in that direction. Kate. Leaning against the frame like the wind had been knocked from her sails, her eyes dull and lifeless once again. 'You've never mentioned you were married.'

With that, she turned abruptly and left, the door slamming behind her. The bang intimating finality.

Shit. What do I do now? And why did I feel so guilty?

Chapter Eight

After a lot of explaining to a very suspicious, then understanding Melanie, we both made our way back to the dining hall. But for all the explaining I did to her, I couldn't explain why I had acted the way I had ... why, after all these years, I was feeling urges I had never experienced before.

Upon arrival we were told that everyone had now moved to the drawing room for drinks and conversation.

The room was magnificent. Comfortable chairs and sofas waited inside the darkened room, which exuded atmosphere. A roaring fire was the main source of light, and many people had drawn their chairs over and were chatting politely. I say many, but in reality there were only about ten people in total.

One chair sat empty next to our hostess and one was set at a distance opposite her. I opted for the latter knowing that I would have found it difficult sitting next to her after the incident in the restroom - God knows why. And why would I bother telling her about my marriage status - it's not just something that pops up in conversation - or is it?

Melanie glared at me when I claimed my seat, and made her way over to a very pissed off looking Kate. I saw the poor girl smile weakly at our dour faced hostess, only to be met by cold blue eyes. Melanie looked at me and shrugged her shoulders before sitting herself down.

'So. You're Abbie Jameson, eh?' I turned to be met by a friendly face, wrinkled and understanding. I felt like crying for some reason. The elderly lady held her hand out in mock appraisal. 'Enid Jones.'

'Pleasure to meet you, Enid.' The smile that adorned my face was truly genuine. I could tell this woman was perceptive and intelligent, and I felt at ease immediately. It was a relief to chat pleasantly with someone, without all the intense angst. The conversation went from one topic to another with unbounded ease, and I fell under her spell completely. Most young people today find the elderly a burden. Not me. In her face I could see a strength that belied her age and fragility.

All the time I was chatting to Enid my eyes kept on flicking over to my hostess, who looked increasingly pissed off.

'So. You write scary stories, do you? That's an interesting choice of career.'

My attention was back with Enid and I gave her the nickel tour of my life to date. Her eyes misted over when I told her I was getting divorced, and I took this as a sign she didn't agree with the disbandment of sacred ceremony. I could feel my face falling, because for some unexplainable reason I didn't want to disappoint this woman.

'I wish it had been as easy in my day. My husband was a bastard.' My eyes shot open at her admission and she laughed, tapping me on the knee. 'Surprised you, eh?' I nodded. 'Forty-four years I was married and it was the happiest day of my life when he died last year. That's the main reason I came here ... to catch up on some well deserved rest.' My mouth was hanging open at this point and I was just about to respond when a movement caught my attention from opposite me. I turned in time to see Kate leaning over Melanie and speaking quietly, yet heatedly, into her face. Melanie was shrinking back into her chair, hoping it would swallow her up by the looks of things.

I didn't have time to react as Melanie shot to her feet, pushing Kate backwards into her chair, and storming out of the room. Funnily enough, Enid and I were the only people to see the display.

Kate leaned back into her chair looking decidedly contented with the outcome. Her gaze met mine and I gave her a questioning look, which she responded to by shrugging and giving a crooked grin.

'Looks like trouble in paradise,' Enid whispered into my ear.

'Yes ... something like that.' I didn't know what else to say. What else was there to say?

After a while the conversation in the room turned to the supernatural, and I became the centre of

attention. The room did give off the essence of the classic ghost story: candles everywhere; roaring fire; unsuspecting guests; a sombre hostess who exuded mystery; and the house itself was in the back of beyond.

'Tell us, Ms Thomas. Is this place haunted?' Kate's eyes met mine briefly and her face became a mask.

'I'm not the storyteller here. You had better ask Ms Jameson if she knows of anything that will scare the living daylights out of you.' She looked over, one eyebrow raised in challenge. I gave her the same look back.

'No, no, Ms Thomas. This is your domain.' I smiled sweetly at her, feigning innocence. I was definite I heard a growl escape her throat.

'Please, Ms Thomas. It would be an honour to hear a story about this old place from the owner herself,' the same man asked. A rumble of agreement rallied around the room. Our hostess didn't look pleased at all.

'Well ... I can only give you the bare bones of it. As I said earlier, I am no storyteller.' Her eyes came back to mine, a small smile appearing briefly.

The room fell silent as shadows danced across the walls aided by the flickering candles. All eyes fixed on Kate as she sipped her wine before placing the glass carefully on the small table beside her. As she leaned back in her chair, we all leaned forward, readying ourselves for her tale. All was silent except for the crackling of the fire.

'There are rumours of many ghosts residing at Forester's Dwell. Some people have even alleged seeing the odd one now and again.'

'Have you seen anything, Ms Thomas?' One of the more eager guests asked.

'Now and again.' Again, her gaze met mine. She cleared her throat. 'As I was saying ... yes ... many sightings have been reported ... noises too.' She leaned forward and snatched her wine from the table, taking a sip before she settled back into her chair. 'There are three that make themselves known quite often. Two women and one man. It's the man you should be wary of ... not a friendly ghost by any means.' Another sip. 'People who have seen him, or even felt his presence, feel unnerved by it. Things have gone missing from people's rooms ... and then appeared in other's only to disappear not long after.'

I sat forward at this snippet. The journal. That had appeared and then disappeared of its own volition. Well, as far as I could tell. Jesus ... I was falling for it ... good ghost - bad ghost ... shit. Kate stared into her glass, watching the dark liquid swirl around ignited by the flickering flames in the room. I missed those eyes for some unexplainable reason.

'Who are they?' I didn't recognise my own voice. Kate's eyes shot to mine, holding them captive for a moment until she lowered them to look into her glass once again.

'My ancestors.' A pause for effect. 'The man was my great great uncle; one of the women was his sister. The other, his wife.'

'But why do they haunt the place?' I asked again. I had to know who they were; especially because I was definite I had seen the 'sister' and maybe part of the brother.

'Unfinished business I suppose. Who knows?' She sat forward intimating that her storytelling was over. 'Enough of this place ... Ms Jameson ... why don't you entertain everyone with your storytelling. Unlike me, you can really tell a tale.'

Everyone in the room concurred, begging me to frighten them senseless. Strange, isn't it? They have the opportunity to investigate real 'live' ghosts, and yet they are contented to listen to some fabrication. Safety, I suppose. If your audience feels distanced from the situation, they can still feel safe from the horrors the situation puts them in, if you know what I mean. A wicked smile graced my lips. I had the perfect tale.

'Okay.' I smiled at Kate before turning my attention to the eager faces. 'But before I begin ... I must tell you that this story is true, and you may find it a little disturbing. If you wish to leave, do so now.' My face held no emotion, neither did my voice.

Nobody moved. So, I cleared my throat.

'It happened about three years ago and not very far away from here. It involves a young girl who was staying at home whilst her parents were in Halifax for their anniversary weekend. She was sixteen.' I settled back. 'When the police arrived after the event it took them four hours to get her calm enough to tell them what happened.'

Eyes widened, and my rapt audience stole sly looks at each other. 'It all began on a Friday night ... she had spent the evening chatting to her friends on the phone, watching telly and generally chilling out. To this day, I think that was the last time she ever felt safe.' I paused here and took in my audience. I had forgotten how good it was to tell stories in front of people.

The story continued along in the same vein, I added bits of atmosphere and commentary along the way. I told how her parents had warned her to take special care when locking the house up: to check all the locks on both windows and doors; to make sure everything was turned off, etc. All the while she was doing this she could hear something in the house, but she put this down to her over-active imagination. She even called her Grandmother to tell her, and the old lady wisely, as she thought, told her it was probably the heating system cooling down.

My audience was enraptured. So was I. I added little details that delayed the plot and aided the atmosphere. They loved it.

When I got to the part where she was hiding under the covers, knowing someone was standing outside her bedroom door, squeezing the handle slowly down, I heard one of the guests gasp and I wanted to laugh. I used all my senses to create the climax of the figure sitting the girl's bed, and

said 'You know when you're in bed ... and someone sits on it?' They all nodded, well ... all except Kate. 'When the bed dips down and your covers slide slightly away from you, and the cool covers touch warm flesh?' More nodding. 'That's what she felt. Except she was supposedly ... alone.' I paused for effect, had a little sip from my drink and turned towards them once again.

'You can imagine how she was feeling. Her heart was hammering in her chest, so loud it drowned out everything else. Sweat coated her skin in clingy pools. She knew this was it. This was the end. Her end. She couldn't stand it anymore and asked, "Who is it? Who's there?" She knew the figure was leaning over her, she could feel its breath seeping through the covers, the raggedness of the breathing drowning out her own. Just as she thought there would be no answer ... "IT'S ME!" I shouted the last bit for effect. The screams around the room nearly deafened me. One man fell sideways off his chair and landed half on half off Enid.

I started to laugh, enjoying the effect.

Without warning, every candle in the room went out, the fire's flames dipped to an agonising low and we were plunged into darkness. The screaming started again, but this time my own joined the others. People were pushing away from each other, clambering to escape. I shot to my feet trying to distinguish which way the door was and felt a cold hand grasp my hand and pull. A soft voice whispered into my ear 'This way,' the breath tantalised my skin.

I allowed myself to be led towards what I believed to be the exit, completely giving myself over to my guide. The hand held me tighter and I felt safe in its grip as it pulled me along. The other people in the room were completely forgotten. It was as if I had entered another world. I could see the outline of my hostess holding me and it felt so natural to hold her hand, like I had done it a thousand times.

As we approached the blackness that suggested the door, I felt her lean closer to me and deliver a small delicate kiss on my forehead. My eyes fluttered closed, completely contented for the first time in my life.

'Open the door,' she whispered. And I did, flooding the dark room with light. I turned to face my hostess who was standing behind me and nearly swallowed my tongue when I realised there was nobody there. I could feel the hand still in my own, but there was nothing there.

I jerked my hand away, missing the contact immediately, and looked at my fingers. They looked the same. I then gazed back into the room where I could see the guests hugging each other, some crying, and some laughing nervously. Kate was right at the back comforting Enid. I could tell by their position that Kate had been there for a while.

I was confused. Kate had been holding my hand - I had seen her outline, hadn't I? Someone had led me to the door, and I could still feel the sensation of that cold hand gripping my fingers; the sensation of the breath on my ear and skin; and the feeling of the gentle kiss on my forehead.

Someone had started to relight the candles in the room and people began to disperse, either to their own rooms or to the seating that was now scattered around.

I swallowed hard and re-entered, making my way over to Enid and Kate. 'Are you alright, Enid?' I curled my arm around her shoulders and she fell willingly into my embrace, her head resting on my shoulder. I could feel her shaking against me and I held her more tightly, worrying that a shock like this might finish the old dear off. A rumble echoed through her and into my chest. I blinked with surprise when I heard a muffled laugh escape from somewhere near my chest. What the *fu*...?

'That was the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me.' Enid blurted out between laughs. Kate and I looked at each other, disbelief evident on our faces. 'With your story, and then the lights going off right after ...' she set off laughing full out, the tears running down her face. I was incredulous. There I was, worried to death for this woman's well being, and she was laughing her head off. I shook my head trying to get to grips with the situation. Kate looked at me, her face reflecting my own disbelief.

I couldn't help it. Maybe it was relief, I don't know, but I found Enid's laughter contagious and joined in, hugging the woman closer to me. Kate looked at me gob smacked before her face broke into a wide grin and her laughter escaped. What a wonderful sound. Rich and pure, almost musical. With no warning, she threw her arms around the both of us enveloping us in a bone-crushing hug. I stiffened, initially, and then melted into her embrace, relishing the contact and almost forgetting the squirming old lady sandwiched between us.

Kate lifted her head and looked into my eyes, the smile still evident on her face. Her blue eyes sparkled and I felt a connection between us ignite. The smile slipped from her face and she returned my look, her face unreadable. 'It's you,' she softly said.

'Yes ... it's me,' I replied, not really understanding what I was saying and not really caring either.

'And this is me ... who you are both crushing,' a gasping Enid uttered, wriggling herself free.

'Sorry Enid ... I ... we ... erm ... what was I saying?' I felt slightly shaky, but not from fear. My eyes were still entranced in Kate's smoky gaze, my heart rate picking up to a dull roar.

'I need to go to bed,' Enid said. So do I, Enid, so do I. 'Will you be a love and help me get upstairs?'

Kate pulled a face at me, making me laugh again, and consequently breaking the moment. 'Well, Ms Jameson ... that's an offer you can't refuse.' I smiled at her, sickly sweet and almost comical. She laughed at my antics.

I turned to Enid. 'Come on, trouble ... let's get you to bed.' My eyes flitted back to Kate's and our gaze locked for a moment before I took Enid by the arm and led her away.

She chatted all the way to her room, but my attention was solely fixed on the events in the drawing room. How could Kate hold my hand and then be on the other side of the room so quickly? What was happening here? I shook my head.

More importantly, what had happened between Kate and me? That connection was so new, and yet ... and yet so familiar.

I felt a warming sensation flood my stomach. The feeling was alien to me, yet in the distant corners of my memory it was the most common feeling I had ever known. I left Enid at her door and made my way back to my own room. I needed to think all this through.

I needed to think.

Chapter Nine

I lay in bed for an age, sleep eluding me; the events of the evening whirling around in my mind. I couldn't grasp what was going on here, but I knew core of the events led back to my enigmatic hostess.

How on earth could she have been holding my hand, leading me towards the light one moment, and the next be on the other side of the room?

I must have been pondering for quite a while before I heard the noise outside my bedroom door. My heart began to drum in my chest. Not again. I couldn't handle anything else tonight.

A slight tapping announced the arrival of my midnight visitor and I shot up in bed, adjusting my pyjamas in the process. I cleared my throat, which had become dry and rough with anticipation.

'Who is it?' I held my breath waiting for a response.

'Kate.' A solitary word, but at this admission my heart rate increased ten fold.

'Wait a minute,' I scrambled from underneath the covers and over to the door. Pushing errant locks of blonde hair away from my face, smoothed my pyjamas before gripping the door handle and pulling the heavy door back.

Kate looked terrible. Her hair was a mess, wild, which corresponded with the look in her eyes. My hands were out to her before I could think and I gripped onto her forearms and pulled her to me. I felt her stiffen in my embrace and then relax, melting into my arms. She was shaking, her strong body quaking in my arms. I pulled my face away from the confines of her neck and gazed into her eyes. The sadness that greeted me knocked the breath from my lungs.

'What's the matter?' She nestled her face into my hair and I heard a small sob escape from deep within. 'Kate ... what's happened?' My grip around her became tighter, as did hers around me. It felt like we were each other's salvation for some inexplicable reason.

'It's Enid ...'

'Enid? Is she alright? Where is she?' Panic overrode my senses and I pushed Kate forcibly away from me. She stood there, shoulders hunched, her face a picture of misery. 'Kate ... what's happened?' I grabbed her arms and began to shake her out of the apathy that had gripped her. 'For fuck's sake ... get a grip - what's happened?' I nearly raised one of my hands to slap her, slap some life into her like they do in the films, but before I could move, she stood straighter, her face becoming more composed.

'About an hour ago Enid called down saying that someone was trying to get in through her bedroom window. The night porter went to her room immediately and ... and ...' Kate looked at the floor.

'And?' My nerves were shredding now.

'And ... well ... the porter found her on the floor near the window. Steve, erm ... Dr Robins, said he believes she had a massive heart attack.' My stomach was in turmoil, and I staggered backwards, my hands reaching out for the doorframe to support me, but they missed their target and I ended up on the floor, one leg tucked underneath me. Kate knelt down next to me, a tentative hand reached out to try to comfort the myriad of emotions racing through my shaking body. Hot, salty tears trailed their way down my face and I swiped at them with a clammy hand. I felt a tentative touch land on my arm and rest there. I could feel the warmth oozing through before Kate began to gently stroke the length of my upper arm.

I looked into her face, a face full of concern and empathy, and I sobbed aloud, the emotion clogging my throat making it difficult to breath.

'Shush ... come here,' and she pulled me into her, my head crushing against her chest, her arms holding me safe again.

'Is she ...' I gasped.

I could feel her nodding before she muttered a simple 'Yes' into the waiting air.

She held me for a few minutes, waiting for my crying to cease, before she pulled herself free from my incessant grasp and tilted my head to meet her gaze. I sniffled and wiped my stinging eyes with the back of my hand. 'She didn't suffer,' Kate almost whispered, her eyes not leaving mine, the concern evident on her face.

'How do you know that? She must have been so scared.' Then the memory of what Kate had said when she first came into my room flooded into my mind once again. 'Did they find any evidence of an intruder?' I sat up straighter now wanting to know the answer, and already knowing what she was going to say.

She looked thoughtful, chewing her lip in consternation. 'I ... well we ... I don't think anyone's looked to be perfectly honest.'

'Where is Enid now? I need to see her.' It was amazing. I had only met Enid a matter of hours before but I had really taken to the old lady ... and now she was gone.

'She's already been taken. The ambulance came just before I came to get you.' I looked at her, my head tilted in thought at this snippet. She looked apprehensive. 'I've already spoken to the police who agree she died of natural causes.'

'I didn't say she didn't.' With that, I stood up and brushed myself down. 'I'm just going to get dressed.'

'Why?' Her voice sounded wary.

'Thought I might go and check Enid's room ...'

Kate interrupted me. 'I'll go now and meet you there.'

'No!' I coughed to clear away the sound of panic in my voice. 'No,' gentler this time. 'You wait here with me whilst I get ready and we'll go together.' The look on her face spoke volumes. She thought I didn't trust her. But it wasn't her I didn't trust.

No.

It was everyone else.

Kate waited for me to get changed. I could see her skulking around whilst I hurriedly threw on some clothes in the bathroom. All the while I had my back to her, I knew she was staring at me. For what reason, I don't know.

Within ten minutes, we were standing outside Enid's door, and I was feeling panicky. I reached out and grabbed Kate's hand before reaching out with the other and turning the handle.

The room was semi-dark, the light of the moon casting strange silhouettes across the floor, walls and furniture. I pulled Kate in and groped around for the light switch. I felt Kate shove my hand out of the way and flick the switch, bathing the room in a brilliant yellow light. I released the breath I had been holding and walked further in.

The covers on Enid's bed were thrown back, as if the occupant had just exited the bed. The rug near the window was ruffled, indicating that someone had been on it, not just stepped, but had struggled in some way, if you know what I mean.

Probably the ambulance men when they were lifting Enid up, I rationalised.

I approached the window while Kate went towards the bed. I knelt down and stroked my hand over the surface of the rug, hoping that the clues I needed would spring up and enlighten me.

Nothing. I stood once again and walked towards the window. I leaned on the sill and checked the locks.

All fastened tightly.

I peered out into the night sky, looking for what I don't know. My gaze skimmed over the gravel drive and then further away into the trees that surrounded the lake. A slight movement caught my eye and I sucked in a breath, freezing to the spot. A tall figure was standing at the edge of the trees looking upwards to Enid's room. I was almost definite it was a man.

'Kate?' My voice was low, as if I expected the figure to hear what I was saying.

'What?' She sounded harried.

'Come here ... slowly.'

'What's the matter?' Her voice showed confusion, but I could hear her approaching from where she had been standing near the bed. Her hand rested on my back and I felt a flood of warmth seep into my chilled frame. 'What is it?' she breathed into my ear.

'Look ... near the trees.'

'I can't see anything.' She leaned over my shoulder and peered into the night. 'Where am I supposed to be looking?'

'There ... just left of the statue.'

'Are you sure you're not looking at the statue?' But I knew she was peering into the night knowing that I hadn't made a mistake.

I felt her stiffen next to me and her breath catch. 'Can you see him too?' I almost whispered.

'Yes.' Her voice was flat, unfeeling. I turned to look at her in surprise and was greeted by a facial mask, void of any emotion. 'Do you know who it is?' I really didn't want to know the answer as she nodded. 'Who?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you.'

'Try me,' and I held my breath, waiting for the inevitable.

'It's William.'

'William? William who?'

'William Thomas. My great great uncle.'

I laughed. Nerves, fright, whatever, I laughed.

'I said you wouldn't believe me.' Her voice sounded hurt.

'Sorry, I ... well, it is a little hard to believe.' I turned away from her and looked at the waiting figure once again. 'I mean ... how can you tell it is him, from this distance and the fact he has probably been dead for years?' I was just about to laugh again when the figure melted right in front of my eyes, leaving nothing behind but a chill down my spine, alerting all the nerves in my body to react.

'That's how.' Her voice was matter of fact, and I felt my body slump against hers, her arms slipping around me, stopping me from hitting the floor. 'Come on ... let's get out of here.' She pulled me away from the window and further into the room. I felt numb. 'Wait ... just a sec.' She scuttled over to Enid's bedside drawer, and I saw her slip something from inside into her pocket. My eyebrows rose in question. 'I'll show you later, but for now ...' she grabbed my hand and pulled, 'we need to get back to my room.'

Like a lamb, I followed her. I needed to know what she had taken, and if it would be a crucial clue to solving Enid's murder.

Yes. I said murder. Now ... wasn't I the dramatic one?

Chapter Ten

Back in Kate's room, anticipation flooded through me. This little holiday was turning into so much more than a quiet retreat, somewhere to collect my thoughts, somewhere to call down my recent absent muse. Well, all things considered, I did have the makings of a very good piece of fiction if I chose to use it, but it seemed a little macabre somehow.

Enid was dead. The poor woman. She had waited years to finally do what she wanted without her domineering husband interfering. And look where it got her ... laid out on a slab in the local hospital, with no family around her.

Her family! Had anyone even thought to let them know?

'Kate?'

'Mhm?' The tall woman was pouring us both a drink from a small table in the corner of her living room.

'Did anyone notify next of kin?' She turned to face me, confusion evident. 'Enid's.' I gave her a look.

'Sorry ... God, yes. I called her son's number and left a message to contact here as soon as possible. If I don't hear anything by tomorrow I'll call again.' She strolled over, the dark liquid

swirling around the glass, a crooked smile playing at the corners of her mouth. I took this opportunity to really look at her. Long raven hair framed a chiselled face, a face that held the most amazing blue eyes I think I have ever seen. A vision of perfection.

My stomach clenched and then somersaulted in recognition, the events of the last hour almost forgotten.

'Abbie?' I could hear the concern in her voice and I snapped to attention again, my eyes pulling themselves away from her chest. Oh God - I had been staring at her breasts. What on earth was the matter with me? Nearly thirty years I had survived on this planet without the tendency of eyeing up another female in such a lascivious way, and then two - in one night!

I looked into her eyes again and saw a distinct twinkle harbouring there, a wry grin forming on her features. 'Sorry ... I was just thinking ...' Another grin. 'Erm ... about Enid and the intruder.' Her face became sombre almost immediately - and I felt like I had been let off the hook. I did feel guilty I had used Enid's death to get me out of a sticky situation though.

She passed a glass to me and took a delicate sip of hers. I followed suit, grimacing at the strength of the liquid, and settled myself back into the huge sofa. Kate sat at the other end, glass held firmly in her grasp, her eyes intently watching every move I made. I slipped off my shoes and brought my legs underneath me, pushing my back further into the sofa, but making sure I kept eye contact.

'What did you pick up in the room?' Her face broke out into a grin again and she stuffed her hand into the pocket of her jeans and wriggled her fingers around a little.

'This.' She looked pleased with herself as she held the scrap of paper aloft for my inspection. The page was darkened with age and I could just about make out a flowing script that I felt almost familiar with. Tentative fingers held themselves out to grasp the piece of paper. Just as they reached their target the paper was yanked away again. 'Ah ah ah!' I heard the playful note in Kate's voice and glared at her, lunging for the paper once again. 'Patience, my dear Abbie.' I huffed and narrowed my eyes. 'We'll read it together. Come here.'

I scrambled along the sofa until I reached her side, nearly falling into her in the process. She still held the paper away from me until I got myself sorted. The smell of her hit my senses. It was intoxicating. I don't know whether it was a fragrance or her - if you know what I mean - but it was exotic, yet delicate. My mouth started to water and I didn't know why.

After I cleared my throat and tucked my knees underneath myself once again, I was ready, although extremely close to my hostess. 'What does it say?' My voice was low and thick; my heart was speeding up with expectation. Kate straightened the paper out, smoothing the creases in the sheet. Her eyes widened, then narrowed. 'What is it?' I was eager now. 'Let me see,' and I tried to snatch the paper away. She pulled her hand back and continued to read, before her face turned to mine, disbelief masking her features. 'What? Tell me!' I sounded like a spoilt child, but I didn't care.

'It's from a diary.' I nodded. She screwed her face up and chewed on her lip. 'Quite an old one actually. See? 1919.' I looked at the date on the top of the sheet - November 16th 1919.

'Is it Katherine's diary?' Kate looked at me open mouthed. 'From the journal - you know - the little brown one you left in my room?' She looked at me incredulously.

'What diary? And when did I leave a diary in your room?' Well that answered that question. It hadn't been Kate who left the journal there ... so who could it have been? 'Abbie - what diary?' She leaned closer to me, her face dipping underneath mine to try and gain eye contact.

'It doesn't matter - I'll tell you later. Let's read this.' My fingers curled themselves around the sheet, and with only the tiniest of tugs, Kate released it into my care.

'Read it aloud.' Her voice was low, but she was so close to me. I was definite I could feel her breathing - it was ragged and erratic. Funny - mine was very similar - probably due to all the excitement.

My eyes lowered to the page again, I cleared my throat and began to read:

November 16th 1919

My life is a paradox. On one hand I am ecstatically happy whilst on the other I am so miserable - almost desperate. I love her so much ... I stopped my reading and looked at Kate whose facial expression was completely closed off. *I love you, Vivian - oh so much; my soul weeps for you when you are not near. .* I stopped again. Vivian? Where had I heard that name recently? I shook my head to clear it, cleared my throat and continued to read. *Vivian. Just her name makes me smile. I could look into her green eyes all day, every day, for the rest of my life. Her hair is the colour of the sun, and she puts the light into every day, the breath in my lungs, and gives purpose to my life. I am dead when she is away from me.'*

'Oh, isn't that sweet?' I turned and looked at Kate again, who was staring straight at me, her face softened.

'Go on ... what else does it say?' Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

I looked back at the page and read again. *I don't know how I can survive the torment of this situation. The woman I love ... the one I have waited my whole life for ... is married to my brother. The worst of it is, she feels the same way. How can that be the worst? William hates the fact we get on so well, always jibbing at us. He calls Vivian a whore and me an abomination.'* My eyes shot up, the words sticking in my throat.

'What's the matter, Abbie?' I felt Kate come closer, her breath on my face. A chill spiralled down my spine. 'Abbie?' Her arm enveloped me; I felt a current flash through my body. 'Oh!'

Kate flinched too. 'Did you feel that?'

I looked into her eyes that were only centimetres from my own. Her lips were parted in promise, and I stared with longing. I licked my lips to moisten them, and she mirrored my actions. Our heads closed the gap. My eyes fluttered closed ... My heart pounded in my chest, trying to fly through its cage of ribs.

'Brrring!' The phone screamed and we jumped apart like we had been stung. Kate scrambled to her feet and lunged for the phone.

'Hello!' Her voice sounded high pitched and strained. 'Yes ... okay ...'

My mind drifted from her conversation, my heartbeat erratic, making my breathing laboured. I felt like I had been caught doing something bad. I hadn't done anything wrong ... I hadn't done anything. I put my head in my hands to try to regulate my breathing, the events of the evening finally taking their toll.

'That was Reception. Enid's son has called and is making his way here tonight.' Kate's face had a distinct blush; her eyes averted from my own in an obvious manner.

'Good ... good. At least there will be somebody to make all of the arrangements.' I stood to leave, knowing if I stayed something, I don't know what, would happen. 'Well ... I'd better get going. We'll chat tomorrow - yeah?' Kate turned to me, her eyes showing concern.

'Abbie?'

'See you in the morning.' I turned and nearly fled the room, not looking behind; not daring to meet those perfect blue eyes again, scared of the disgust that I would see in them.

I felt so embarrassed. I had nearly kissed Kate. What the fuck was the matter with me and my libido? All my life I had never had the urges I was having now - not with men and definitely not women. It seemed the incident in the restroom with Melanie had awakened some kind of sex monster that had lain dormant all my life, and now it wanted freeing.

It wasn't until I slammed my bedroom door closed and leaned my back against the sturdy wood, I noticed the page from the journal in my hand. I turned to take it back to Kate, but stopped, wanting to know what else the page held in store for me.

After kicking off my shoes and throwing myself onto the bed, I again read the page.

'He calls Vivian a whore and me an abomination. How can the love we share be an abomination? She is my soul mate; she is 'the one'.

I know she suffers at his hand. She won't say anything against him, but I have seen the bruises. I just hope he has not taken her against her will - that would kill me - I would kill him. I know he is capable of it - the servants have told me as much.

I just hope the gratification he seeks on his business trips and from the poor girls on staff will be enough for him and his urges. He has the audacity to say we are the abomination. I wish he had died in France, as everything would be glorious now. I wish Edward would come back, as he always knew how to handle William. But he said he couldn't face life here anymore. He would have known what to do.

I am going to ask Vivian to come away with me, start afresh, maybe go to the colonies. I have enough money for the both of us, my mother made sure of that.

I am going to wait until...'

And that's where the writing ended. I felt exhilarated and let down in one fail swoop.

I was just about to fold the paper away when I noticed in the top corner of the sheet, in small writing, someone else's hand.

'AJ ... *this is about you.*' I blinked and reread the message. Who was 'you'? Did it mean me? And who had written the message? Who would be writing messages to me on a ripped out page of a diary? Get a grip, Jameson ... not all of the world revolves around you and your big head.

I folded the sheet into a small square and tucked it into my bra. Get that ghostie. A small smile crept onto my face. I had to show Kate the rest of the message tomorrow and I didn't want it going walkies.

Kate.

I smiled again. She was something else. I felt the butterflies fly around my stomach and a definite heat in my lower anatomy. Just because it is socially wrong to kiss your hostess in her living room in the middle of the night, didn't mean I couldn't fantasize about it. Even if I wasn't gay ...

Another, bigger, smile. Oh yeah. No rules about a little fantasizing, and maybe a little self-gratification. That's why we have an imagination, isn't it?

Oh girl ... you are incorrigible. And ... too tired ...

Chapter Eleven

Sensations were building in my gut. Hot jolts sparked from my insides, gravitating to that select place buried between my thighs. A moan escaped its prison of my dry mouth to hover in the air ... expectant.

A hot mouth coated my need like a lifesaver. Hot breath parted the hairs guarding my centre; a soft wet tongue glided between my folds. Nerves were beginning to spasm ... reacting to desires

long dormant. Strong hands tucked themselves around my lower back to rest resolutely on my gyrating hips, gently ... yet firmly ... holding them in place.

I felt ravenous. I needed to come; needed to feel the release I had been holding onto like a prize for years. My hands, who were grasping the innocent sheet, released their hold to snake into thick long hair. I twisted my fingers deeply into the rich silkiness, gasping at the familiarity.

I moaned ... again. This was followed by a muffled moan coming from the region between my thighs. I clamped my slick thighs around a busy head. With each stroke from a firm expert tongue, my eyes fluttered. I tried to keep them open; I needed to see the object of this desire ... my desire; the object of this carnal indulgence.

The room looked oddly different - yet ... the same. Darkness had blanketed most of the features that set apart this room from any other. My eyes fluttered shut once again.

Jesus ... this felt good. Throbbing ... pulsing away, only to scatter down every muscle; every nerve; every nuance that made up this want inside me. I knew deep down that I should stop ... but I was too far gone by this stage.

Tentative fingers played outside my core, like expectant visitors waiting to be welcomed. I pushed myself down, hoping to spear the digits inside me, hoping to quench this burning need that was building ... building ... building ...

They danced away, leaving me to gasp into the darkness. The tongue stayed, forever vigilant, stroking ... stoking, poking and prodding my saturated folds.

'Please ...' I begged ...pleaded ... for those long strong fingers to return and enter me.

There they were again. Teasing me. Coaxing me. Playing with my sanity, as desire ran rampant into the air charged with electricity and the smells of sex, arousal and ... and something else ...

'Please ... take me ... *please* ...' My hands threaded themselves more firmly into the long thick hair. Hips were moving forcefully, grinding themselves into the face immersed in my pleasure. My body was trying to escape the confines of my lover's hands ... wanting to quench this need; wanting to satisfy this ache; needing to see who was sending me over the edge. Nipples strained in the darkness, seeking comfort from hands or lips or a hot mouth.

They were not disappointed.

A long arm snaked itself up my stomach, gently stroking in soft circles until it reached its goal. Gentle fingers caressed the underside of my breast until a thumb tentatively circled the hardened nub. Another moan - or was it two?

A solitary finger entered me, the tongue still dancing near my clit. Sweat poured off me, soaking the sheets beneath; my hair was sticking to my face, shoulders and breasts.

I pushed down onto that one lonely digit, capturing it inside as the shocks circled inside me and sparkled over my body.

The finger escaped. I groaned. 'Please ...' Two entered, filling me. I moaned ... thickly, my throat losing the ability to swallow, and begrudgingly allowing the noise to escape from somewhere deep inside. I felt, more than heard, a moan in response drifting up from somewhere buried between my thighs. A strong arm pumped fingers into me; I pumped back ... hard.

'*God ... oh God!*' I was coming ... God was I coming. Fingers, slick with my juices, pumped harder ... faster ... in and out ... in and out ... my hips joining in the dance ... the quest for freedom ... the quest for release. I was forceful ... I was on the brink.

'*God ... oh Gods ... yes! ... Fuck ... me ... fuck ... me ... yyyeeeeesssssss!*' A third finger entered and the walls deep inside closed ... tightened ... constricted, as floods of sensations rocked my world.

Flashing lights danced in front of me. I wanted to scream ... but nothing would come out.

I pulled the head deeper into me, gripped wildly into hair in a frenzy of ecstasy that bordered on madness. Fingers plunged and plundered, leaving me silently sobbing my release into the darkness.

Little aftershocks spitted through my spent body - reminders of the intense emotions I had just experienced.

My mouth was dry. I licked dry lips as I untangled my aching fingers from tangled hair. I blinked the tears from my eyes, before looking down into blue eyes holding my gaze with unrestrained regard.

'Kate ...' I croaked and attempted to clear my throat. I should have felt revulsion, or guilt or ... something, but it just wasn't there.

The head lifted itself from its haven between my thighs, allowing a cool breeze to swipe at wet skin. A soft kiss landed on either thigh until blue eyes held mine again. My eyes fluttered closed with contentment.

'Vivian ...'

Eyes shot open to discover myself alone.

Alone.

Alone ... in my room ... with my hands down my pants.

A soft click from the door announced the departure of someone. And that someone had left behind the distinct smell of ... lavender.

I bolted upright, yanked my hands from their haven, jumped off the bed, and with extremely unsteady legs, raced to the door to peer outside.

Nothing.

No one.

Empty.

What the fuck?

I shut the door quietly and turned the key, leaned back on the door and expelled the breath I had been holding. Shaking fingers made their way to my dishevelled locks and pushed an unsteady path through, totally unaware of where they had last been. My heart was beating wildly in my chest ... chasing the emotions around my body like a mad dog. Legs were shaking, the sensation of standing upright becoming a burden.

'Fucking place ... I'm cracking up.'

I could still feel the dampness between my thighs. I could still feel the tongue ... the lips ... the fingers buried deep within me. I could still feel the remnants of the earth shattering orgasm.

I blew out a shaky breath.

'Fucking place.'

And then I smiled. Staggering back to bed, one thought was in my mind. I wanted to go back into that dreamscape ... wanted to experience it again ... wanted to give back what I had taken.

As I stretched into the now cooling sheets, I suddenly felt the vestiges of despair; the uncovering of loneliness exposed ... my loneliness ... raw ... painful. Why was I feeling this way for another woman? Why did I crave the touch of her fingers? Her mouth? Her skin?

Curling onto my side, pulling my knees into my chest in a foetal position, I held onto the grief that enveloped me ... the loneliness ... the want I had pushed down for nearly thirty years.

A solitary tear meandered down my face, crossing the bridge of my nose and plopping onto the sheet.

Alone.

The ache in my chest blossomed into a knife-edged pain, and I held fast to my cold body, like I was the only one to save me. And how could I save *me*, when I couldn't even control these emotions pulsing through this body I just didn't recognise anymore?

Chapter Twelve

Morning. Birds called to each other in a language reserved for dawn. Grey light sneaked and peeked through parted curtains, illuminating my cocoon of covers.

I blinked away the remnants of last night's exposure and stretched taut legs downwards, wincing at the pulling muscles stiffened from being in one position too long.

Tired arms stretched themselves over my head and rapped on the wood panelling behind me, a sad attempt to knock the life back into me. An elongated growl left my mouth to greet the stale air of the room.

I rubbed my hands over my face trying to get the circulation going. The smell of sex clung to my fingers and I froze. It was me then ... it had been a dream after all.

What did you expect, Jameson? The smell of lavender?

A small laugh forcefully left my mouth. There was no humour behind it ... it was sardonic.

'I need to get out of here ... *away* ... from here,' I mumbled to the empty room.

But the feeling of leaving this place didn't do anything to lift the blanket of disillusionment from my shoulders. In fact ... it only made things worse.

After a long shower, a vigorous towelling off and a light breakfast, I decided to go and see my friends ... the ducks.

Coat on, boots snugly fitting over thick socks ... I was ready.

The air was crisp and cool. It was refreshing. Air pockets announced themselves as they left my mouth and mingled in the frosty atmosphere. Life was seeping back into me and I felt ready to take on anything.

Decision made, I detoured from my path to the pond and made my way to the statue near the front of the house. I don't know what made me want to go - it just seemed ... right. I had this crazy notion that if I had a look ... a proper look, then maybe I could make some sense out of the events of the previous evening.

It didn't look anything special. Just a monument dedicating something to something or other. I was more concerned with where I believed I had seen the figure lurking last night. My eyes scanned the floor looking for clues to the mystery person.

Nothing out of place. No footprints marking the soggy ground.

I turned to leave, and that's when I spotted it. A discarded cigarette end. Not anything brilliant, I know, but it seemed a little more than a coincidence.

Bending down, I poked the remnant. It looked quite fresh ... not like it had been there for a while ... just a couple of days at the most.

Strange.

Why would anyone come this far from the house to have a smoke? It's not as if it was a no smoking building ...

I bent further and stretched out my fingers to grasp the butt... and that's the last thing I remember for quite a while.

All I had felt was a thudding at the base of my head, and that had been my lot.

Black.

I can't tell you how long I was out, but when I opened my eyes the sky seemed a lot brighter, the sun higher. I couldn't understand it. I seemed forever in a state of passing out since I had arrived.

I tried to sit up, but the movement caused an agonising pain to split through my head making an involuntary groan leave my lips. My shaky hand tentatively touched the back of my head making me wince and pull back. Blood coated the outside of my gloves and a tremor of fear went through me.

I had to get back to the house ... had to get help ... the police ...Kate.

I staggered onto unsteady feet, trying to get my balance, almost failing. I looked around on the floor for the cigarette end. It was gone. I looked closer, shaking my head to dispel the fuzziness that had begun to engulf me. Panic leapt into my throat. What if I collapsed here and died of exposure?

My eyes were frantic now ... the butt end long gone, long forgotten. I had to get back to the house.

Turning and stumbling, I readied myself for the short trek back to the main building.

I didn't make it.

Back in bed. Back in bed? But, how did I get here? The last thing I remember was staggering back towards the house, the scenery around me turning into some macabre painting.

A gentle tap on the door echoed into the room. 'Hello ... yes?'

The handle pushed down, and the door slowly opened. I sat, holding my breath, too scared to release it just yet. A clinking noise greeted my ears, and my nose picked up the smell of coffee.

'How are you feeling?' The gentle tones issuing from Jenny's mouth eased my fear, but not my disappointment. A little voice inside me groaned at the realisation it was not Kate.

'Sore.' I held Jenny's eyes. 'How did I get here? Who found me?'

She didn't answer straight away. Her eyes flicked towards the window and down to the tray. 'Just let me get this sorted.'

I sat upright, fluffing the pillow behind me, whilst Jenny made the necessary arrangements.

'Jenny?' I kept my voice low. 'Have the police been called?'

'Police? Why on earth ...?'

'Someone ... attacked me,' I almost whispered, like the perpetrator was going to leap out of the wardrobe and finish off the job.

'What? Don't be silly, Abb...'

'Someone cracked me on the back of the head, and left me out there. In my book that's called an attack.' I could feel the anger lifting in my voice now, totally pissed off with the place and the fucker who had so cowardly waited until my back was turned before knocking me out.

'You think someone attacked you?' Jenny seemed incredulous.

'Well ... yeah!' My voice was thick with anger now. 'How else can you explain the big gash at the back of my head?' I tried to get up, but a wave of nausea folded in on my world and I slumped back onto the pillows, covering my eyes with my hands.

Minutes passed. The room screamed in its silence.

A slight cough and a rustling of bedclothes told me Jenny wanted to say something.

I moved my hands away and squinted up at her, my face a mask.

I cleared my throat mainly to get her full attention, my voice quiet and slow not wanting to bring on another bout of nausea. 'So ... Jenny ... as I asked before ... how else do you think I got this ... this ... this whatever this is?'

My face took on a questioning pose, sarcasm tinted the edges.

'Well ...' A cough. 'I ... erm ... well ... I know you didn't get attacked, Abbie.'

My mouth jerked open and I was ready to respond when she held up her hand to halt me. 'No ... Abbie ... listen. I know you didn't get attacked because I saw you bang your head on the statue.'

'How dare you tell me what happened. I was on the receiving end ... don't you think I'd know the difference?' My voice was escalating now, the anger was begging to fly out and choke the living daylights out of this fucking liar standing in front of me. My head was pounding ... my eyes were swimming in the usual telltale tears of fury, and I was on the brink of losing it.

'Abbie ... please ... listen.' Her hand came out to restrain me, but I roughly pulled away.

'Get your *fucking* hands off me!'

'Abbie ... please ... I watched you ... I had been watching you all the time you had been outside.' I discerned a blush creep up her features, and I cocked my head to the side in mockery.

'And?' Was she squirming?

'I saw you look at the statue, look around and then go to bend down. You seemed to stop before you reached the ground and stumble backwards ...' My eyebrows raised themselves into my hairline, obviously telling her I didn't believe a word she said.

'You banged the back of your head on the corner of the statue and went down like a bag of spanners.' She stopped, inhaled, held the breath for a moment and blew it out shakily.

'I banged my head on the corner?' She nodded. 'Didn't you see anyone near me ... or around the area?' She shook her head. 'No one?' Again ... no.

I had to think about this. Something didn't ring true. 'Did anyone else see it happen?'

'Yes ... Dr Robins was just picking up his mail when you were near the statue. He was signing for it and wondered what I was looking at ... he ... he ...' her face became crimson, 'he was pulling my leg ... you know ... about ... erm ... you know?' I shook my head, wincing at the pain, knowing full well she meant her crush on me. 'Well ... erm ... he ... about my ... erm ... you ...'

'For God's sake, Jenny - I get the picture! What did he see?'

'Same as me.' She seemed relieved to be let off the hook. 'He actually said he thought it might have something to do with your accident in the bathroom ... concussion, or something.'

'Okay ...' I sucked in air between my teeth. 'If what you say is true, then why did you leave me outside so long?'

'We came as soon as you fell. When we got outside you were closer to the house, we thought you

probably tried to get back but couldn't'

I was confused. Her story seemed plausible ... and there were witnesses. But the sun had been higher ... I was sure of it.

Dr Robins. I didn't trust that man. I don't know why, but I didn't trust him. An image of him chatting to Kate popped into my head. Or maybe I just didn't want to trust him.

I looked Jenny in the eyes, capturing and holding her in place. 'Okay ... my mistake. I must be still suffering from the accident. And with the loss of Enid ...'

'I know, and I'm so sorry.' Her hand came out and covered my own, a slight squeeze indicating her support.

'Sorry for shouting at you.' I turned my hand over and clasped her fingers. Her eyes drifted down and I saw a small smile flit across her lips.

Gotcha.

If it meant playing along with her to find out what was going on ... then I was game. Although I wasn't too sure how far I would take it. But I didn't want either her or Dr Robins thinking they had got one over on me.

I was going to play this one right. Yes. I was paranoid. But don't you think I had reason to be?

Playing along to their game was going to be easy. I knew something was amiss at this place, and reason wouldn't have it that it was something supernatural that was causing it.

What did they take me for?

My mind drifted to Pete. Wonder what he's up to? Wonder if he's got anything to do with this? I wouldn't put it past him - especially where money was concerned.

I hadn't heard a peep from him since I had arrived. This was probably due to the fact he didn't know where I had gone - my agent wouldn't give him the address ... hell, she wouldn't give anyone the dirt from under her fingernails. And if she did, she would probably keep fifteen percent back.

The day dragged on in its usual way ... me being cooped up in bed, nursing a thick head, and stubbornly refusing to get it checked out at the doctors even though I was a little concerned about all the fainting I had been doing of late.

I hadn't seen sight or sound of Kate all morning. I felt a little bit let down ... disappointed. A little bit ... lonely. Why hadn't she come to see me? Was it because of the way we had ended

things last night?

Shit. I had tried to kiss her. Shit shit shit. I had tried to kiss my hostess. Christ ... could things get any worse?

To tell you the truth ... yes ... I was attracted to her - who wouldn't be? She was the epitome of sexual energy. I would be blind (and stupid) to say I didn't find that enticing, but ... I wasn't gay. I had never thought about a woman in that way ... before.

Who am I kidding? She was a goddess! It didn't take a genius to work that out. But ... to have sex with ... to kiss ... to hold ... caress another woman? It just wasn't me.

I know ... I remember Melanie, too. I had enjoyed our little ... tryst in the toilets, but I knew when to put the brakes on. It wasn't as if I had been looking for a quickie in the bathroom. I had gone there to get away from her.

Hadn't I?

I can't think about that now. What's done is done. I'll apologise to her as soon as I see her again.

Whenever that will be.

Chapter Thirteen

It wasn't until three days later I found out Kate had been called away on 'business'. I had, eventually, dragged my sagging carcass out of bed and wandered downstairs to mingle with the other guests.

Concerned faces hovered in front of me in the lounge area asking if I was okay, and was I sure I should be up and about. I used the fake smile and thanked them for their concern, pleading perfect health.

Jenny kept floating by, pretending she was interested in the magazines, and how they should be stacked. I kept my head down and feigned interest in a three-month-old copy of the *Radio Times*. She finally took the hint and buggered off back to reception.

It was Melanie, a very sheepish Melanie, who told me Kate had gone away. I felt unnerved talking to the woman who I had nearly had a close encounter with. Funny that. I didn't seem to have a problem sticking my tongue down her throat, but come to small talk ...

'About the other night ...' I began.

'Nothing to talk about. I read it wrong. My fault ... sorry.'

I wanted to tell her she hadn't read it wrong; that I had wanted what we had started, but ... just not there ... with her. My mind drifted to a pair of blue eyes, blue eyes that danced about inside my head, and I felt a tingle spurt up from my sleeping libido.

Instead, I just smiled, and tried to ignore the building sensation in my lower anatomy.

I shifted on the chair, trying to ignore the gathering between my thighs. What was going on with me? I had never ... ever ... had this before. The times I had slept with men had been nothing but a bad memory, a feeling of being obligated to do it in some weird way. But now ...

It had only happened since I had arrived here. I was sure something, or someone, had taken me over. Sex had always come second, maybe third or fourth, in my life. Work had always come first. That is why I had come here in the first place ... wasn't it?

'Are you okay, Abbie?' Melanie was looking intently at me, waiting expectantly for a response.

'Oh ... yeah ... sorry. I was away with the fairies for a minute.' She laughed out loud. 'What were you saying?'

A smile lingered on her lips, her eyes glinted. 'I was just saying ...' she prodded me in the ribs and I giggled (yes - I know - too girlish for words). 'Kate doesn't even know about your relapse.'

'Why? Where is she?' An eagerness pervaded my tone as I metaphorically grasped at the answer. My body language belied my need to know as I quickly leaned forward.

'Not sure,' she answered, chewing her lip in consternation. 'Last I saw of her, she was going to meet with Enid's son at the hospital. Next thing I know she calls in, saying she had to go away and didn't know when she'd be back.'

'Really?' Was that my voice ... my voice that oozed distrust? I cleared my throat in an attempt to sound more natural. 'Nothing since?'

'No ... not a peep.' She patted my leg in assurance, then stood to leave. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jenny come back into the lounge, stop sharply, and give the back of Melanie's head daggers.

Shit. I couldn't be doing with all this bloody angst. Two women interested in me, and me not slightly interested in either of them. Some luck, eh?

'So ... Melanie ...' I swallowed hard. I couldn't believe what I was about to do. 'Tell me about yourself.'

Three and a half hours later I managed to escape. Wiser, I'm sure, in the world of law, unfaithful girlfriends and how fantastic London is.

Jesus. That woman could talk. No wonder her girlfriend left her ... probably to give her ears a

break.

At least Jenny had taken the hint. For now.

It had been five days since I last saw Kate.

It felt longer.

Why I was missing her so much was a mystery to me. It's not as if we ... or ... I ... or ... whatever.

I had received an invitation through reception to attend Enid's funeral. Her son had come to the hotel the previous day to collect the rest of her things, and we had chatted. He was a nice bloke, and although I could tell he was completely devastated about the loss of his mother, he was still considerate to everybody's feelings except his own.

The funeral was to be held in Halifax, at Lister Lane Cemetery, and Melanie said she would come with me to provide moral support.

I know it is an awful thing to say, but all I could think about was seeing Kate again. For what reason, I was unsure.

The day was crisp, and the weak sun filtered through the clouds to say goodbye to a lovely lady. Although I had only just met Enid, I felt attached to her in some way. I also felt guilty.

The service was interminable. Hymn after hymn after hymn after hymn. How can people sing when tears are choking them? How can they gather around a hole in the ground and watch someone they love leaving them ... again?

I felt tears slinking their way out, peeping out at the sad scene, quietly exposing my grief to the world. Enid's son stood there, shoulders hunched, a woman holding onto him offering support. The mourners were few, and I felt the loss even stronger now.

That poor woman. All her life had been given up to a man who didn't appreciate her. She had wasted her life with a man who treated her badly, just because he thought he had the right to.

I felt a tingling sensation as the hairs on the nape of my neck stood to attention. I had the distinct impression someone was watching me. I shuddered, trying to dispel the sensation, but it was adamant, and clung to me like a portent.

Something caught my attention from the trees at the far side of the graveyard. A figure dodged behind one in an attempt to conceal themselves. I stared, knowing, eventually, it would have to come out.

And it did.

Why would Kate stand all the way back there? Why didn't she ...

Something was up.

I screwed my face up and looked more closely.

She looked ... different. I can't tell you why ... just different.

Maybe it was her hair. It wasn't flowing long and free like usual. It was hidden underneath a hat of some description, pushed away with only strands free at the sides, coating her cheeks like silk drapes. Her face was gaunt ... unmoving.

Or maybe it was her dress. Long, full and black. She was without a coat, and I was concerned. The day was chilly, though dry. She'd catch her death ...

'Are you okay?' Melanie's voice broke my gaze. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

I turned to her and whispered, 'It's Kate ... over there ... near the Yew trees.'

'Where?' She craned her neck past me to look in the direction. 'I can't see her ... where?'

'There ...' I stopped short. There was no one there. But ... She just couldn't have ...

My eyes scanned the area looking for evidence of Kate and where she could have gone.

There wasn't anywhere she could have gone. She couldn't have hidden behind the trees - they weren't thick enough. Kate didn't strike me as a woman who would start hiding behind gravestones ... would she? I shook my head, noticing the sensation of being watched, had also gone.

'Abbie ... where?'

'Sorry, Melanie. My mistake.'

I slipped my arm through hers and squeezed. The feeling of a body next to mine was exactly what I needed.

To quote Hamlet: 'Something smells rotten in the state of Denmark.'

And this was becoming quite a stench.

Mourners lumbered back to their cars and made their way back to Enid's son's house for a

gathering. I couldn't face the idea of chatting to people I didn't know, bringing up all the emotions again that I had fought all my life to keep locked away ... to keep pushed down.

Melanie insisted she came back with me, declaring she wanted to see me tucked up in bed (yeah - I bet she did), because she was worried about my 'spell' at the cemetery. I tried to convince her I was okay, but she wouldn't take no for an answer.

All I wanted was to go back and absorb myself in my writing ... get carried away by the muse into another time and place. I wanted to forget today ... forget I had lost a friend ... forget that I was slowly, but surely, becoming obsessed with my hostess.

How else could I explain seeing her at the funeral? #

I needed to get a grip.

The muse, bless her, was with me for the rest of the day. By ten thirty I had written eighteen pages. Good stuff too.

The protagonist was a reclusive woman, hiding herself, and her past, away from the world. I had her character down pat, but the structure ... the actual reason why she was a recluse was still just out of my reach.

I leaned back in the chair, exhaustion taking me over. I stretched my tired fingers out, then lifted my hand to scrub the tiredness away from my eyes.

Without warning, a tingle elicited from the base of my spine and raced up to the back of my neck. Involuntarily, I shuddered, knowing there was someone standing behind me.

I couldn't turn around. I didn't dare turn around.

Hot breath travelled along my back, and sat, panting into my hair. Hairs all over my body greeted the visitor, making up for my ignorance.

It wasn't fear that gripped me. No. It was worse than that. I wasn't scared, as much as aware ... very aware, in fact, that the presence behind me wouldn't hurt me ... it couldn't hurt me ... *she* ... would never ...

A voice, so soft, so pure, whispered into my waiting ear. 'Come with me ...'

When I turned around ... I was alone. Again.

I felt the loneliness cascade over me once more.

Chapter Fourteen

Coolness wrapped around me, invigorating a need inside of me a long time dead. Soft tendrils of air met ... then evaporated on hot skin. My clothes were floating around me, brushing past sensitive skin: skin waiting to be released.

I was standing outside my room, the soft lighting of the hallway breaking images into shadows; into moving, living, breathing reflections of what my dazed mind could comprehend.

A noise greeted me. A soft caress of a voice enticed me to follow. My eyes strained against the dusk of the corridor, failing to capture anything.

I stepped forward, my heart ushering me to look, to find, to discover something buried deep within myself. It begged me to let go, to walk forward, to follow its voice. A pain echoed around in silence, frightened of being discovered, frightened of being shut away.

A movement caught my eye. Was it a shadow? A figment of my mind sent out into the gloom to seduce me?

I moved out the doorway and glimpsed a trailing garment disappearing around the end of the passageway. That voice again. Ethereal. Beguiling. Bewitching. Siren like. I could not resist, like all those sailors, I, too, was drawn, helplessly to my fate.

Feet moved with no help from me, following ... something ... following ... someone. I seemed to glide, completely submissive in my role as the hunter. Or was I the prey?

Endless corridors passed. It was a labyrinth ... almost as confusing as the thoughts begging to escape from inside my head. Round and round, the figure just ahead of me. Whispers of cloth fluttered behind; raven locks swirling, coaxing, promising that special something I couldn't quite put voice to.

Stairs. Lots of stairs. Going upwards, faster, swirling. My eyes became unfocused: my stomach nauseous. My fingers reached out to grasp at empty air. 'Wait ... wait for me.' My voice seemed distant, different.

Outside on the roof the moon looked down. Exposing me. Showing me for what I truly was ... hungry ... I was hungry for her.

She stood, majestically, precariously balanced on the wall surrounding the edge of the building.

'Kate ...' The word came out in a gasp. God, she looked beautiful. It seemed I had waited a lifetime to swallow her image. 'Kate ... I'm here ... I need you ... please ...' Longing surged, coating my throat with desire, with love, with want.

She had her back to me, but I knew it was her. A strong back, toned, muscled, faced me. Her hair: black, flowing, wild, raced backwards, exposing the side of her face to my ravenous eyes. Arms outstretched: long, strong arms balancing her on the precipice between life and death.

'Kate ... look at me.' Statuesque. That's the word ... the word that epitomised her at that moment.

Slowly, she turned. A gasp escaped my chest as blue eyes met mine and rooted me to the spot. My heart rate increased, chasing the longing around my veins. I stepped forward. I needed to feel her in my arms, needed to feel those lips take mine and never let them go.

She turned away, facing the darkness. The moon had slipped behind a cloud as if refusing to witness what would happen next.

Long arms stretched above her head, pointing to the heavens, before she pushed herself upwards and forwards into a swan dive over the edge.

'NNNNNNNNooooooooooooooooo!' I raced forward, my legs no longer gliding, but stumbling. 'NNNNNNNNooooooooooooooooo!' Cracking pains shot around my chest, alerting me of the death of my heart; alerting me of the loss of my soul.

I gripped the wall and leaned over, knowing what I would see.

There she was. Broken. Twisted into an unnatural shape, her left arm bending backwards from the crumpled mess on the slabs below. Sobs tore from me, heart-wrenching sobs; sobs loud enough to wake the dead. Wailing broke loose ... it cracked past the stuttering stammering emotion of crying to excess.

I couldn't survive this. I couldn't survive being without her. I didn't know why I felt such a connection ... such a bond ... all I knew was I couldn't survive without her.

My hands gripped the wall as I made up my mind. Bare feet scraped along the rough stone of the wall as I climbed up. I stretched my arms out at the sides, glorifying in the feel of the breeze, knowing this would be the last time I would feel the air on my face.

'I'm coming.' A promise made into the wind.

Knees were bent, ready for the inevitable. I pushed down, ready to spring forward ...

Strong hands grabbed me from behind, gripping onto the flesh around my thighs, and pulled backwards.

'Let ... me ... go!' I screamed into the air. 'Get ... your ... hands off ... me!'

More pulling, and I was falling backwards into strong arms. A familiar scent met my senses as I struggled unmercifully in my captor's arms.

'Shushshushshush ...' That voice. That soft voice. I stopped struggling and looked into a pair of very concerned blue eyes.

'Kate?' My reasoning was shot. I had just ... 'Kate?'

Strong arms held me fast. A hand snuck around and into my hair, tangling fingers into the nape. She pulled me into her. My heart was still hammering in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Gentle, feather kisses landed in my hair, travelling to my forehead and finally to my cheek. I was so relieved to see her there, so enraptured by her presence; I did the only thing a woman in my position could do.

I kissed her. Softly at first, but with each brush against her soft enticing mouth, a surge of want pushed through me making my kisses more demanding, more urgent.

Tongues came out to meet each other for the first time. Tentatively, then with a growing understanding they wouldn't be rejected. Her hands gripped my hair with a feeling of possession, and my gut reacted, wanted nothing better than to push her down and ravish her mercilessly.

Teeth clipped, tongues vied for position, moisture raced into each other's mouths christening our coupling as we exchanged souls. My hands were questing, gripping her back, nails digging into strong shoulders only to ... release ... then to trail down her back and rest on her backside.

She followed my lead. Hands began to knead the flesh, pumping juices from parts hidden, parts aflame with desire and need. I pushed myself on her thigh, which forced her to purchase her centre on my leg.

I began to grind myself into her: she returned the gesture with a growing abandon.

My head was becoming hazy, fuzzy. God ... I was horny ... I was on fire for her. I needed to touch her ... to feel her beneath me ... writhing beneath me. I craved the feel of her skin; her breasts ... her breasts in my mouth ... budding open for me ... in my mouth.

Yearning turned into desperation as I gripped the sides of her top and pulled the two halves open to expose her curving chest, the crevice of her cleavage enticing me. I was transfixed. The moonlight illuminated them, spotlighting her nipples that strained into the air and towards my waiting lips.

Forcefully I gripped her right breast, kneading it, moulding it to my want. My head lowered to feast upon her other breast, my mouth trying to capture the whole of it ... but, finally, settling on her hardened nub. I sucked hungrily. I sucked and pumped and sucked and rubbed, her moans filling my ears and spurring me on.

Our hips were becoming frantic now, and I felt my knees giving way to the ground underneath. I pushed her backwards and down, my legs still spread apart, her thigh still boring into my need.

Groaning, moaning, sucking, pumping, grinding. Succulent skin mine for the taking.

I could feel her hands sliding underneath my night gown, nails raking up and down the backs of my legs, making me shudder in expectation, making me want her even more. If that was possible.

Frantic. I was becoming frantic. The events leading up to this moment forgotten. I needed to feel her inside me. Her fingers filling me. Her tongue tasting me, just as mine wanted to taste her.

My tongue left her breast and worked its way down her abdomen.

'Oh God ... yes ... Abbie ...yes!'

I froze. The sound of her voice brought me crashing back into reality.

I looked into her face; her eyes were on me, puzzlement taking over her features. 'Abbie? Are you okay?'

I stared at her. What was I doing? Christ ... I didn't even know her and I was going to fuck her on the roof of her house.

'Sor ... Sorry ...'

Scrambling to my feet, I avoided her eyes. I knew if I looked into her eyes I would be forever lost. 'Kate ... I ... sorry.'

And I ran. I ran back to my room and slammed the door. Then locked the door. Then sat behind the door until I heard her come down the corridor, stop outside my room for a few minutes, and then go into her own.

After a while, I left the confines of my room. Left the confines of the hotel. Climbed back into the confines of my life, got in my car, and went back to London.

I couldn't stand to be at Forester's Dwell any longer. I couldn't stand the feelings I had allowed to surface. It was too much. My obsession left a chasm of vulnerability I could not allow ... I couldn't stand more hurt.

And that is why I had to leave.

Without a backwards glance, I slammed the car into gear, and I roared through the gates and onto the road.

But for all my bravado, for the miles I was quickly putting between me and the place that had rocked my world, I knew I had left my heart in the strong loving hands of Kate Thomas.

Part 2

*...hold for the last time then slip away quietly
open my eyes
but I never see anything
if only I'd thought of the right words
I could have held on to your heart
If only I'd thought of the right words
I wouldn't be breaking apart*

Pictures of You - The Cure **Chapter Fifteen**

London greeted me like an old friend. As ever it was dirty ... bustling ... anonymous. I could blend into the background here, fade away into nothing, forget what I had left ... push all those feelings that had been crawling up my throat back down.

Go back to nothing.

By the time I had arrived, the sun was high and it made the autumn sky whitewashed. I decided to pay my agent a visit - touch base, tell her I was back.

Upon entering her office, I could feel the tension in the air. A knife would have difficulty slicing through the atmosphere. Welcome home.

Kenny, my agent's secretary, looked at me like he had just received news of an anthrax threat. The smile I had sported for the occasion slowly slipped from my lips, revealing a look of confusion.

'Hey, Ken,' I tried for casual ... but he just stared at me, mouth hanging open. 'I said ... *Hey, Ken.*' I gave him a glare. He shook his head and forced a smile from somewhere.

'Sorry, Abbie ... *hey yourself.*'

'I did for a minute ... Why the face?' I didn't wait for an answer, as I swept by him and towards my agent's office. 'She in?' I continued to walk, ignoring Ken's warnings of not entering.

Janet's office was a mess. Shelves had been torn down, books were strewn everywhere. Her table and computer were in pieces around the room.

'What the fu...'

'Exactly.' A cold, hard voice sounded from my right. 'What are you doing here, Abbie?' Janet Strome was not a happy person by nature, and her face could curdle milk at the best of times. But

now? Jesus. She should have come with a public health warning. Her face was ashen, naturally thin lips disappearing inside; her eyes were glacial - hardened even more than usual.

'What happened here then?' I tried to keep my voice light, opting to ease the tension screaming from every pore of her body - all of it aimed in my direction.

'You didn't answer my question, Abbie. I ... said ... *what* are you doing here?' She hadn't moved at all, and I was definitely feeling the bite of her anger.

'Can I just say I missed you?'

'No.'

Take a chill pill, for God's sake, woman, and I gritted my teeth behind my lips, cleared my throat to answer her once again, but she cut me off.

'You are *supposed* to be at the retreat, remember?' She shifted around a rather large piece of desk separating her from me. 'Why have you left?'

What could I say? I couldn't tell her about the weird dreams I had been having, the feelings of despair I had been feeling, the accidents, the *not* accidental accidents.

I couldn't tell her about the voices, the messages, Enid's death.

But they all paled in comparison to the reason I had really left.

Kate.

I couldn't tell her about the blueness of Kate's eyes, the way they lit up when she laughed, really laughed. Or her crooked smile, that lifted one corner of her mouth slightly higher than the other. Even the way my stomach danced when I thought of her strong arms holding me, loving me, caressing me. Strong fingers gliding down my legs, on exposed skin ... teasing.

Should I then tell her about the taste of Kate's skin; the softness of her lips, the wetness of her tongue stroking the inside of my willing mouth? Or the taste of her breasts ... pushing ..., willing me to swallow her whole: and my willingness to do just that?

What about the tightening in my gut when I thought of her saying my name, urging me on, needing me to take her as much as I needed to have her? I could tell how I pushed her away ... ran ... left her there ... waiting for me to let go ...

No. That was a part of me that would stay buried deep within, only to come out when I could take the desperation no longer.

'I was bored.' What a response ... from someone who was supposed to be good with words. 'Thought I would come back and write from home.'

'Bad idea.' She poked her head outside. 'Ken ... two coffees in here, when you've got a minute.' She turned and looked me squarely in the eyes. 'I'd sit down if I were you.'

I looked about me and noticed there was nowhere to sit. I looked back at Janet and shrugged my shoulders.

And for the first time since I had entered her office, she smiled.

'Fucking bastard!'

'Calm down, Abbie.' Janet tried to calm me down, but as you could see, it wasn't working. 'The police are not sure it was him. They ...'

'Oh ... it was him alright. It's his style.' The words shot from my lips like a confession. I paused to gather the information Janet had given me. 'So ... Pete came in looking for me?' She nodded. 'But you wouldn't tell him?' A shake of her head. 'Then ... two days later ... you started getting menacing phone calls?' Another nod. 'Then yesterday ... this?' I gestured to the chaos surrounding us, disbelief and anger vying for dominance.

Janet nodded, again. 'We are not too sure if he actually accessed the computer for your address. He was pretty pissed off when he came here.'

This stopped me. He would do all this just to get at me? The sound of the telephone broke through my thoughts, and I watched as Janet leaned down and pushed a piece of shelving away to answer it.

Her muffled voice drifted away as I sat contemplating what Pete had done. I knew he had a temper ... God did I know that ... but to smash up Janet's office? Even for him that seemed a little extreme.

'Abbie ...' Janet's voice brought me back into the scene. Her face looked wan and concerned.

'Oh ... don't worry about me ... it's just been a long day.' A small smile graced my lips trying to reassure the woman before me. She remained silent. 'Jan?' I noticed the phone she had been using still clutched in her hand, the conversation she had been having only on standby. 'What?' My tone was sharper than I had intended.

'It's your place ...'

'What about it?'

'You've been broken in to.'

My place was a mess. To put things mildly ... and without losing control ... again. I don't think Pete left anything untouched. Sofas were carved open, spilling their guts around the room. It looked like a furniture massacre. Paintings were sliced erratically, depicting the work of a mad man; the contents of the kitchen were thrown around the room; the bathroom ... well, let's just say I wouldn't be touching anything in there - ever.

But that wasn't the most shocking thing to greet me on my homecoming. Not by a long shot.

My bedroom, the room where I had spent four years sleeping vulnerably next to this man, was the worst. It wasn't the total devastation. No. It wasn't the destruction ... the feeling I had been violated.

No.

It was one thing. One thing stood out from the wreckage and smacked me hard in the gut. One word scrawled on the wall behind my bed. One word.

Whore.

Written in something I can't put my stomach to ... but it wasn't the medium ... it was the word.

Whore.

What had possessed him to write the one word that could cave in my world? How had he known that one word could create a surge of emotion buried so deep, it needed to be excavated by professionals?

Whore.

Jesus. The sweat poured off me. I felt the room closing tightly around my throat.

Before I passed out, the image of Kate's face flitted through my mind ... you know, like the experience people have before they die? When their life flashes unceremoniously in front of them, exposing their downfalls throughout life?

She embodied my life and all I could see was her face. And the hurt I saw there made unconsciousness seem like a blessing.

It was a matter of hours before I was back on the road. The police said they had tried to track Pete down - they knew it was him, as they had the CCTV footage of him entering the building, but had come up with nothing and thought it best for me to stay elsewhere.

My parents had moved to Norfolk, and it was the only place I could think to go. My options were becoming limited to say the least.

They owned a house on the outskirts of Norwich, five miles away from my sister and her husband. I knew I would be welcome there at any time, although I didn't visit half as much as I could have done. This was mainly due to my family hating Pete. They thought he was a sponger and an evil bastard.

They were right. I could see that now.

I felt guilty. I had not even told them about the divorce or even going away to the retreat.

The retreat. A voice deep inside me begged me to go back ... to go back to Kate ... to explain.

What was I thinking? The fact of the matter was - I wasn't gay - *I am not gay*.

Keep telling yourself that, Jameson, and maybe you will stop thinking about how soft her lips were.

I slammed my foot on the accelerator and drove faster.

Chapter Sixteen

It felt strange sleeping underneath my parent's roof again. I had left home when I started University at eighteen, and had only been home for the holidays (do washing, have a feed, borrow money they would never see again - the usual).

Initially, they had been surprised I had come home, as they call it, but soon realised it was, fundamentally, from necessity. I loved my parents, and in their own way I think they loved me back. Support had come from sealing the right connections, throwing money my way, the right tutors ... schools ... you name it (or put a price on it) and they did their best.

But, affection? Being told I had done well ... a hug when I was upset or hurt ... someone to confide in? No. Those jobs were left for the Nanny (five in total - who all left weeping - *snigger*).

Claire, my older sister, supported me no matter what. She was the main 'hater' of Pete - she could even start her own Pete Anti Fan Club. I was only fourteen when she had left home in a cloud of anger, swearing to never make contact with 'Those heartless fuckers' again. I didn't see her again until I was seventeen ... and I still feel the loss of those three years.

Today, they are on speaking terms, as she had married well and they had had a very public display of making up, much to Claire's (and my) embarrassment.

She had come to the house, dragging two screaming children with her, as soon as she found out I was back. As she put her arms around me, the stress and confusion melted away. My body shook. Emotions ran so high within me, I could feel the tears fighting to break free and expose my shame, deceit and fear.

Claire misunderstood this for my leaving my husband: understandable, really.

After a few glasses of wine, I had spilled out to the family the events leading to my visit. Pete being a twat ... petitioning a divorce ... going to the retreat ... Enid's death ... and returning to find almost everything I owned, decimated.

Obviously, I left out other details, like me slowly going insane, hearing voices, having visions, chasing ghosts into the night wearing nothing but my night dress. And I definitely didn't want to discuss my near sexual encounter in the Ladies with a complete stranger.

Therefore, I couldn't tell them about my near obsession with my hostess. Obsession - that's what it was. What else could it be? She had bewitched me ... her eyes had bewitched me. Her lips had beguiled me ... her fingers ... her fingers ...

I must admit, she turned me on. The mere thought of her made me wet; hot and filled with a growling ache between my legs, and around my chest too.

Thinking about her had brought up images of me on top of her, licking and stroking her breasts, my mouth and nose filled with her scent, my hands filled with her skin, breasts and abdomen.

God ... was I horny. It is the ultimate embarrassment, talking to your parents with a raging fire between your legs; clasp your need until you realise you are pumping it together, almost masturbating in front of them.

Jesus. I needed to sort myself out ... relieve myself before I made a bigger fool of myself than I had already.

I made my excuses and went to my room, a small smile creeping onto my face with the thought of what I was to come.

I don't think I gave myself a chance to back out of it.

I ripped off my jeans, dragged my jumper over my head, shoved my underwear away ... all to get to my want.

Lying on my back, on the bed, legs splayed into the dark, I trailed my fingers around already erect nipples. A gasp broke free on contact. Nails teased and tormented flesh, making it wait for release. My hips were beginning to buck with anticipation, pulling themselves from the sheet only to grind down again.

After the feeling of elation had passed, and my gasping for air had reduced, I opened my eyes and looked around. I was still alone. Still alone.

Aftershocks sputtered, my nerves totally destroyed. I leaned backwards, my knees arguing with the position, as I slumped onto the bed to stare blankly at the ceiling.

'Abbie?' My eyes shot open. 'Abbie, honey? Are you alright?'

'Perfect,' came my lazy response.

'We heard a ...'

'Night, Mum.'

And with that, she was gone, leaving me alone to gloat in my first double orgasm.

'And ...' I whispered into the dark, 'not my last. Not by a long shot.'

A full out grin.

Looking forward to it.

Obviously the next day I was embarrassed. It is not a good feeling to think your parents had heard you jacking off in your room. Jacking off, and loving it.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, as Claire had taken the boys home shortly after I had spilled the beans about my life. It felt as if I had been transported back fifteen years.

Dad was hiding behind the Financial Times, and Mum busied herself making breakfast for us all. It did seem strange watching her cook ... she had always had someone else in to do that before.

I wasn't looking forward to her creation ... cooking was definitely not the reason my father married her.

'Are you feeling better this morning, Abigail?' My father always insisted on calling me by my full name, and straight away the hairs on the back of my neck stood up in annoyance.

'Never better.' I answered, taking a sip of my tea to hide the smile playing on my lips.

'Your mother said she heard you ... erm ... heard a groaning from your room. Like you were crying, or something.'

I spat the tea back in the cup, creating frothing bubbles on top. 'Groaning?' I tried to look

quizzical, but my face screamed 'Guilty, Your Honour.'

'Yes. Groaning. Are you sure you're alright?'

'As I said before, Dad, never better.'

And that was it. Conversation over.

My mind drifted back to last night. The telltale tingle started up between my legs again. Shit. I was turning into a nymphomaniac.

'Ex ... cuse ... me,' I stuttered out as I stumbled from my chair. 'I've got to sort something out upstairs.'

As I was leaving, I heard my mother say, 'Bless her. You can see she's absolutely heartbroken.'

Yeah, right. A knowing smile sneaked upon my face. 'Little do they know.'

My hand gripped the bottom of the banister, and I stopped.

Heartbroken?

But I ... Heartbroken? Broken hearted? Me?

The image of Kate once again appeared in my mind. The words my mother had said kind of rang true.

Slowly, I made my way up the stairs, all thoughts of repeating last night's star performance a memory.

Chapter Seventeen

Three months passed. I was in hiding. I hadn't heard a peep from Pete, thank God. Christmas and New Year had come and gone and I had barely noticed, I was too wrapped up with staying away ... locking myself away ... forgetting.

Janet had called a few times to see how I was getting on, especially with the novel. Each time I told her I had everything under control.

The novel was writing itself, with no help from me. Every day I spent locked up in my room, pouring my ideas onto my laptop. Every day, doing nothing but filling the void in my life with words on a screen.

Even my parents were beginning to worry. I had no social life. I only came down for meals or if

Claire visited. But, I was learning to forget ... forget the feelings that had been brought to the surface since staying at Forester's Dwell.

It was early Tuesday evening when Janet called me from her home. The fact she called me from home didn't shock me - it was the reason.

I knew she was edging around something, but I wanted to make her suffer - life is full of these little opportunities if we take time to indulge ourselves.

After the phone went quiet for the fourth time, I had to ask her what she really wanted, apart from news on the novel, or the weather, or bloody Norwich market.

'Well ... erm, I don't know how to say this, but ... I've ... you've ... had a visitor.'

'A visitor? Like who?' As if that would interest me. A visitor - how cloak and daggerish.

'Remember the retreat place we booked you into?' The breath caught in my throat and I couldn't answer. 'A few months back ...' she felt the need to clarify, 'in Yorkshire?' Stupidly I nodded at the phone. Even more stupidly, she answered. 'Well ... the owner, a ...' I could hear shuffling of paper, and her rings clanking against the phone.

'Kate Thomas.' It supplied. The feel of her name on my lips was like a balm, a coating I had avoided for three months.

'That's the one, a Katherine Thomas, of Forester's Dwell. Well ... she's been looking for you, said you had something of hers she needed back.'

'Like what?'

'She wouldn't say. Said she had to personally get it back from you.'

What could I have of hers that would make her travel all the way down from Yorkshire to hunt me out?

'I don't think I have anything belonging to her ... but leave it with me, I'll have a think.'

The conversation continued for another minute or two, before I made an excuse and hung up.

It was only later, sprawled out on top of my bed, I remembered.

Enid's note. I had taken Enid's note, the one from the torn page of the journal Kate found the night Enid died.

Shit. I still had it.

But why would she still want it?

I hunted the note out from my messed up papers, rereading the messages before sealing it up in an envelope.

My mother volunteered to post it on her way to a coffee morning with the 'girls'. My parting words to her were not to forget ... to make sure it had enough stamps on it. I didn't want it to go missing; especially now Kate wanted it.

Thoughts of Kate entered my head once again. I wondered why she had felt the need to try to find me? Why I had to give it to her personally?

A flicker of hope ignited in my gut.

Hope? Why hope? I was used to desire at this stage, as I was now fully aware the events leading up to my trip to Norfolk had done something radical to my sex drive.

Like ... kick started it.

The problem was - I didn't have the key to turn it off.

No.

That was safely locked away behind the red brick walls of Forester's Dwell.

The dreams were back. Stronger, more forceful. I woke in the night covered with sweat, a familiar name on my lips, heart thudding in panic: hands gripping the duvet, like it would be my salvation.

Even my parents were getting worried. Instead of sitting me down and asking why I was screaming out another woman's name in the middle of the night, they called in the big guns - Claire.

I felt uneasy with her. For the first time in my life I felt uneasy with my older sister. I don't know why, I just did.

She came around on the Thursday morning after dropping the kids off at school. My parents made themselves scarce for the occasion. I knew something was up - I think that is what put me on my guard.

The air was thick with expectation. We sat in the living room of my parents' house like strangers. This wasn't us ... we had never felt ill at ease with each other, even after the fiasco of her leaving home.

I waited for her to begin, watching her shift nervously on the settee, plumping full cushions until they once again became out of shape.

'For Christ's sake, Claire!' My nerves were shot. 'What the fuck are you playing at? Just spit it out!' No. I have never been the patient type.

'Abbie ...' Her voice was low, soothing. 'We're all so worried about you. We ...'

'What? Wanted me to spill the proverbial beans? There's nothing to spill, Claire.' I must admit, my tone was sharp, and she flinched at my words.

'Then why are you walking around with the weight of the world on your shoulders?' Green eyes met mine and held my gaze. 'I'm here if you need a sounding board - you know that, right?' Her face softened, showing the sister I loved and admired. Waiting for me to share my nightmares; my hopes; my dreams, just like we had all our lives. I knew she would support me no matter what.

I looked away, the decision made for me. I had to tell Claire all of it ... all of it ... including ... including ...

'It started to happen about seven months ago...' And I began my tale, leaving no stone unturned, exposing everything I had become, everything I wanted to be. Her face stayed stoic throughout, but her body language bade me to continue. Gentle squeezing of my fingers when I explained Enid's death; the soft circular rubbing motions on my back when I spoke about how confused I was. The smile when I began to tell her about Kate.

Wait a minute ... the smile?

'It's about time, Abbie.'

I looked at her, startled. 'About time for what?'

'That you discovered who you really are.'

'What do you mean, *discovered* who I really am?' I attempted to stand up, to walk away, but she stilled my movement with a sisterly grip on my arm.

'Sit down.' I didn't move. 'Come on ... sit.' A gentle tugging had me back next to her. The tears came from nowhere, yet from everywhere at once. Years of bottling everything inside had finally got to me, and the floodgates opened.

For nearly thirty minutes she held me. For thirty minutes I felt safe, totally out of control for once in my life, but safe.

After the heaving stopped, her voice floated into my ears. I felt distanced, unreal, like I was

experiencing an out of body experience.

'I've had my suspicions for years, Abbie. No, don't interrupt.' She held me more firmly, when I opened my mouth to protest. 'For years I have watched you make a fool of yourself in a loveless marriage.' I tried to interrupt but she gave me the 'sister look' that warned me to keep mum. 'When you married Pete, honestly, I couldn't believe you actually did it. I was so sure ... so bloody sure you were ... you were ...' She gulped, hard.

'So bloody sure about what, Claire?'

She lifted my chin to look into my eyes. 'So bloody sure you were gay.' It seemed flat, this confession. Flat and false.

I pushed her away from me, knocking her backwards on the settee. 'How many more times do I have to say it - I ... am ... not ... gay!'

She laughed at me. Bloody laughed at me. The anger I had been holding back was raising its head from slumber. 'What the *fuck* is so funny?'

'You.' Simply and succinctly put. Obviously it fuelled the flame.

'What gives you the right to march in here ... play the loving sister ... then accuse me of being gay? What have I ever done in the past that warrants that?'

'More like what you haven't done, sis.' She looked smug, and I wasn't in the mood for smug. I turned on my heel and marched out of the room. Her voice followed me up the stairs.

'Okay. If you're not gay, how come you're obsessed with Kate Thomas?'

'*Fuck you!*'

'No ... why don't *you* fuck *her*.' And she started laughing again.

That was it. I wasn't going to sit around and wait for her to wind me up even more.

I slammed into my room, acting for all the world like a hormonal teenager, threw some clothes, CDs and toiletries into a bag. I had to get away from her and her half-cocked ideas.

I flounced down the stairs, into the kitchen, snatched up my parents' keys to the beach house and continued to flounce out of the door.

The car seemed quiet after the previous events. How dare she make assumptions about me? How dare she say ... I ... was ... you know? So what, if I had nearly shagged a woman I barely knew in the toilets? It wasn't her concern who I was sleeping with ... who I wanted to sleep with ...

'Oh God, no.' I groaned.

When I stopped banging my head on the steering wheel, I started the car and headed for Winterton beach.

I needed to think things through, and the beach house was the perfect place to do it.

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~ Dwelling in the Past ~

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Chapter Eighteen

Winterton- on- Sea lay on the East Norfolk coast. Beautiful, serene, eerily deserted. The cottage backed onto the dunes that framed the beach. Sloping hills added by Mother Nature to protect and serve. Coarse grass underfoot: dips and holes shaped to make any walker be constantly on their guard. Rumours about adders hiding in the long grass forced dog walkers to be ready at all times.

I was alone; just me and my thoughts of the future to keep me company.

I'd stopped at the local shop to purchase supplies for my stay; crusty bread, fresh vegetables, milk, but mainly alcohol, and lots of it.

By ten o'clock I was completely smashed out of my head, standing on the beach shouting Kate's name into the blackened sky. The sound of the sea drowned out my despair; it pulled it outwards only to send it crashing back to me, foaming, lifeless, on the shore.

Morning found me nursing a hang over from hell. My stomach had a fight with its contents - the contents lost ... miserably.

I, too, was miserable. Aching head, legs, arms ... aching everything. The echo inside my heart was the worst. It echoed her name, calling out to my soul, wherever it may have been.

There was no answer.

I picked myself up from the splattered mess I had become on the lounge floor; I needed to sort out my life once and for all. I needed to think about what I was going to do.

Swallowing rapidly, I raced to the bathroom. Round two of the match from hell was underway, and once again I thought my stomach would come out victorious.

It did. Unfortunately.

After breakfast, a shower and a thorough cleaning of teeth, I felt better. Alcohol and me had a past - I was renowned at Uni as 'half pint' because I couldn't take it. I wasn't a nasty drunk, or, usually, not loud, but I did suffer from a complaint called 'Homing Device' which turned itself on without me knowing. This meant one minute I was laughing and joking with my friends, the next, I was at home waking up in my clothes and the previous night's makeup designing art on my sheets. And the feeling of an empty birdcage at the bottom of my mouth.

Bless. What a picture. I looked like a zombie from *Shaun of the Dead* - especially around the eyes.

Never mind.

I hadn't brought my laptop with me, mainly because I needed to think things through. I couldn't go on living like this. I had to deal with what I was feeling.

I hunted around the cottage looking for a pen and paper. I should make a list - weigh up the pros and cons. Vigorous nodding of head - a short prayer for the miracle of aspirin - and I was off again.

Eventually, when my out of shape carcass sat down on the sofa, I felt foolish. How could anyone use a list to make decisions about their future? Big decisions. Big, life changing decisions.

I could.

Four hours and twenty-three minutes later, I was still none the wiser. I looked at the scribbled points I had made, both sides as equally full as the other.

I threw the pen down in disgust and went to make a cup of tea. You've got to love the British - any crisis - have a cuppa.

'Mr Prime Minister, Sir. The three minute warning has commenced.'

'Well, what are you waiting for, lad? Get the kettle on. And don't forget the Hobnobs.'

Two cuppas and a stack of biscuits later, I was still none the wiser. I threw my hands in the air and growled menacingly. I couldn't cope with the pressure - my list was too perfect.

Crap.

Doing what I did best, I chucked on a jumper and left. Not for good, just for a walk along the beach. Maybe the blast from the North Sea could disentangle the cobwebs in my head, and dispel the vestiges of my hangover.

Anything was better than sitting there, like a moron, pleading for someone else to tell me the answer to my unspoken question.

'Who am I?'

I sat on the beach staring out at the horizon. The day was fading away, taking my inhibitions with it.

I couldn't deny it any longer.

I was in love with Kate Thomas.

Screw the consequences. She was a part of me I couldn't ignore. Whatever made me 'me', all came from her. I knew that now.

All I had to do was convince Kate of the same thing and I'd see what came from that.

That thought hadn't occurred to me before. What if she wasn't interested? What if she told me to sling my hook?

Desperation raced around, stopping somewhere just beneath my left breast and slightly to the right.

I had to tell her ... I had to find her and tell her. If she knocked me back ... well ... she knocked me back. I'd deal with that later.

Without warning, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Electricity gushed through me like I had been struck by lightning.

I had only felt this way once before ...

Slowly, deliberately, I turned. In the fading light I could just make out a figure walking towards me. I screwed up my eyes to absorb the scene ... it couldn't be ... could it?

The figure was walking with a purpose, and walking in my direction.

I stood. Sand dropped from my clothes; sea gulls cried like babies into the wind.

It had to be a hallucination ... a figment of my over zealous imagination ... a demon conjured from the ache in my breast to drive me insane with longing ... with hope.

The figure stopped twenty feet away from me. Cool blue eyes met mine and locked, holding me in place ... stopping my heart from forever feeling any different from what it did at that very moment.

'Kate?' The disbelief was obvious.

She stood there ... silent ... watching me ... taking me in.

I felt exposed, yet fulfilled. Her eyes alone satisfied an ache within me, an ache I had fought hard to suppress ... until now.

One word showed me it was not a dream. One word.

'Abbie?'

And I was off at a run, my feet dipping into the sand like it was cotton wool.

Her arms were as I remembered them. Strong, fulfilling, filled with promise. I inhaled the smell of her, glorified in her touch, her breath on my skin the elixir of life. I couldn't speak, I just needed to hold her; have her hold me.

We stayed like that for what seemed like a lifetime. It was bliss ... utter and total bliss. If I had died at that moment I would have died knowing the secret to life.

I pulled away and looked deep into her eyes; eyes that exposed her to me in a way I would never have dreamed possible.

Reason clutched my brain and I pulled back a little more. 'What are you doing here? Didn't you get the package?' I searched her face for a clue. She gazed down at me, her eyes hooded.

No answer.

'Well?' I squeezed her for effect. 'I made sure you got it.'

'The package?' Her voice was distant, like I had brought her back from another place in time.

'Yes. The journal page ... the one from Enid's room?' Another squeeze. 'My agent told me you said I had something of yours that you personally had to get back. The only thing I had was the journal page.'

A smile flickered over her chiselled features. By God, she was beautiful.

'You do have something of mine, that I do need back, unless ... you want to keep it?' She held me to her and I glorified in her touch. My head rested on her breast, contentedly. 'But it wasn't the journal page.'

I looked into her face, my chest heaving: anticipation flooded my senses. 'Well ... if it wasn't that, what is it then?'

Another smile. 'My heart.'

My eyes were captured by blue, blue eyes that questioned me, pleaded with me for a response.

And a response they got.

I tilted her head downwards and brushed my lips over hers. So soft, so completely and utterly soft. She returned my kisses, gentle, coaxing and addictive. I craved them; I needed to feel those lips harder, with abandonment. I increased the pressure, a soft tongue begging entrance to my waiting mouth. My hands snaked up her body to land in her hair.

A moan. I can't remember from whom ... maybe it was both of us. The kiss became frantic, choreographed by desire. Breathing became erratic as hands snaked up and down each other's bodies. I grasped at her breast eliciting another moan my fingers kneading the wool-covered area, making me feel the urgency of my want.

I could feel her fingers in my hair, her tongue in my mouth: her thighs weaving themselves around my leg to thrust waiting hips into the mix. I craved her touch. I wanted to slip against her, naked. Taste her all over, suck at her skin ... her breasts ... enter her with my tongue, my fingers. I needed to feel her climax beneath me ... above me ... inside me.

I lowered her to the sand, the sound of the sea our only companion. 'God ... Kate ... I need you so much.' I was on top of her, pressing myself deeply into her. Hips dancing over her leg: my need chafing the seam in my jeans, exacting out the promise of fulfilment.

She broke away from my mouth and my lips began to devour her throat.

'Abbie? Abbie ... no.' I looked up from my task, startled into realisation once again.

'Oh God, Kate ... I'm so sorry.' I began to lift myself from her, the pain soaring through my chest at the rejection.

'I didn't mean no.' Her voice was filled with the desire that I felt. 'I mean not here. Can we go inside?'

A smile erupted on my face.

'Sure. Follow me.'

I jumped up, held my hand out for her. The feel of her fingers sent another spark to a promise waiting to happen.

And we went back to the cottage, holding hands, almost running.

I tore her jumper to get at her flesh. I ripped at the buttons of her jeans to get to her desire ... my desire. I clawed at her back, trying to rid her of the bra that stood in my way; my teeth nipped her neck, marking her as mine.

It was frantic. It was glorious. It was a liberation of the need I had been pushing down since I had first gazed into her eyes, first glimpsed her soul.

Her hands were unsteady, as she pulled the clothing from my aching body. I helped. I craved the feel of our skin meeting, reuniting, sliding against each other. Reuniting? Couldn't think about that ... the want in me was too strong.

I slammed her against the wall, pinning her there with my half clothed body, pushing myself between her thighs. Grinding my core into her own. I tried to possess her, own her ... love her.

Fingers snaked themselves unbidden in to long, thick locks, pulling it away, holding it in my grasp. Her hands were pushing my jeans down, past my hips, past my knees, until they reached the ground and I could step away from my inhibitions.

I licked her neck; long languid strokes from a tongue on fire for the taste of her ... all of her ... every nuance of her. I went lower, discovering her breasts with my lips, my hands following, leaving the safety of her hair. Gently, I cupped them; weighed them in my new found world of love and longing.

Dark brown nipples fought to enter my mouth, straining from their prime position on each breast like an offering, a sacrifice to my desire. I suckled, hard, like a newborn lamb feeding from its mother, knowing this was the only way it could survive ... the only way I could survive.

Sensations were building inside me, shocks spluttering and growing, a newly stoked fire created by her touch.

She pushed me into her, groaning, writhing, showing me she needed me just as much.

Who was I to refuse? I loved her.

'Kate ... oh God ... Kate,' I mumbled, her breast in my mouth, her hands in my hair, her taste on my tongue, the scent of her arousal tantalising my taste buds. 'I need ... you ... I need ... you.' She was moaning, her breath in my hair, her hips forcing back into me. 'I ... want ... you ... so

... much.' Each word punctuated by a short suckle, my hands nursing the underside of her breasts.

'*Oh Gods ... yes!*' Her voice echoed above me, deeper with desire, longing for release. Release I had within my grasp to give her. 'Please ... Abbie ... please.' She was begging now, not only with her words, but also with her body, her hands and her fingers praying to me, her hips pulsating the catechism that words failed to say.

I lifted my head and looked into her face. Closed eyes slipped open to greet me with forever. I was lost. Yet ... I had never felt so 'found' in my life. All my fears about reprisals ... gone.

She leaned in and snatched at my hungry mouth, eliciting a deep felt groan from the pit of my stomach.

'Abbie?' So soft, so quiet, I had to strain my ears to catch it.

'Yes?'

'I need to make love to you, so much.' She kissed me again, long and hard. I felt the earth shifting around me; felt my world spinning out of control. Lips left lips once again, and she stared into my eyes, pleading for a promise from me that I would never hurt her again.

'Let's go to bed.' Short and sweet. But effective.

I kicked off the left leg of my jeans and left her embrace. The coolness of the night more apparent now I had left the heat of her arms.

I held out my hand and pulled her from her position sloped against the wall. And without words, led her to my bedroom.

My heart was knocking hard in my chest and my breathing was laboured, but I knew, without her, I would surely die.

The last rays of sunlight danced along the floor of the room as we entered. Not a word was spoken. Expectation choked me.

I led her to the bed, turned her around and gently, oh so gently, lowered her backwards, her tall frame that once dwarfed my own now on my level.

Hot lips met my aching breasts, and I threw my head back with the agony of wanting her so much. Strong, capable hands cupped my rear and lifted me forward, pushing me, ultimately, between her legs. Gentle fingers kneaded the pliant flesh, until stray fingers looped the elastic of my briefs, to slowly, hesitantly, push them downwards. The moisture between my legs escaped the confines of my core to slowly slide out towards her hands.

I was naked. Exposed. Displayed in front of my soon to be lover as vulnerable and desperately in need of her.

Her lips left their place to allow her to lean back and allow her eyes to ravish my heated body. Electricity followed her every movement, glorifying in her gaze, rooted to the spot by this vision seated in front of me. I leaned down to capture her lips with my own, hungry kisses to fuel this obsession I felt inside.

The pressure I applied pushed her backwards, allowing me to stretch my small frame over hers, our naked bodies finally making contact.

I will never forget the feel of her skin: the feel of her skin underneath mine. Heaven. More than heaven ... it was perfection. Silky, warm skin fuelled the fire, as I slid up and down her body, my body between her thighs, her passion rubbing against me, marking me, leaving its scent of possession.

She held on to my backside, aiding the thrusting movements I was making, aiding the contact between her body and my own ... her soul and mine.

My hands were everywhere, unsure what to touch first ... unsure what to treasure and commit to memory. I settled one hand on her breast and then snaked the other underneath her to push her into me. I wanted her inside ... mind, body and soul. I wanted to feel her lips on me, everywhere, anywhere, but on me ... with me.

Hips were grinding together, building the contact between us to almost insanity. I felt my world dissolving, fading away until there was only her and me ... only me and her.

The pressure was forceful, almost painfully not enough. I needed more ... she needed more.

I slipped one leg over her thigh, and she groaned through loss of contact, and continued to pleasure myself, all the while slowly descending her body. She was so perfect ... so beautiful. I could feel the tears throbbing in my throat, begging me to release them inside her.

Soft silky hairs welcomed my mouth. An erotic, exotic smell greeted my senses. I parted her with my tongue, savouring the wetness, the taste, and like a bee to a honey pot, I dived in, suckling the font of desire; suckling her want with my own.

I was delirious. I was lapping up the juices like a kitten; soft ragged strokes, alternating with long, slow thick ones. Her hips were bucking beneath my head and I had to use my arm to hold her still. Rhythm of lovers stuck in a stage of perfection, of adulation, of expectation and bliss. My own need was at its height, pumping for all the earth on her leg, a leg ready and stiff for my pleasure. I could feel the orgasm building ... hers and mine ... they were joined somehow ... we had become one.

My free hand slithered its way around her thigh to sit waiting, expectantly, outside her core. I

could feel her pushing herself down onto my lingering finger, trying to spear her desire onto me, as I wanted to spear mine into her.

Short gasping breaths, 'Please ... Abbie ... please ... two fingers ... please.' Even through my desire soaked brain, I smiled into her.

Two fingers stood waiting to claim her, prodding at the opening with deliberate precision.

And then I entered her. Pushed my fingers hard inside, listened to the sharp intake of breath through clenched teeth, and waited. Waited for her to get used to the feel of me filling her: waited for the moment I could continue making love to this woman.

Her hips showed me when she was ready, and I pumped inside her with all I had.

I felt a giddiness seep up inside me, a feeling of elation I had never experienced before. I could feel her coming ... I thrust harder, my tongue and mouth loving her, my lips kissing passion with abandon.

'AAAAAAAbbbbbbbbbbbbbbiiiiiee!God AAAAAAAbbbbbbbiiiiieeee!' I continued to thrust, but I had to look at her face as she came.

Her head was thrown back, her slender neck slick with sweat, glistening in the dimming light, her mouth was open shaped into a perfect 'o', and her chest was heaving into the sex charged air. She was a vision.

As I watched, the sensations I had been feeling escalated so quickly, the climax took me by surprise. Blinding lights distorted her image sprawled on the bed, sensations heightened as her fingers grasped my hair, pulling it and gripping it like a drowning man trying to save himself.

I felt the sensation of pure ecstasy break free, as I crashed over the edge. 'Ohhhhh God ... ohhhh God ... Ohhhhh ... mmmmy ... good GGGGGGGGGoooooooodddddd!' My hips rained upon her leg, my hand pumped inside her, and I felt her go over, again, her grip tightening in to an agonising pleasure.

The sob was out before I could stop it, and almost immediately she had me in her arms. 'Baby, what's the matter?' Soft kisses danced over my sweat soaked skin, mixing with the tears I couldn't hold back, didn't want to hold back. 'Did I hurt you?' The concern in her voice only made me cry more. 'Abbie ... sweetheart ... come on ... I won't ever hurt you again.' A pause. 'I love you too much to ever hurt you.'

I threw my arms, clumsily around her neck, and sobbed into her throat. 'K ... K ... Kate ... God ... I ... love ... you ... so ... so ...much.' And then continued to cry even harder.

The air was filled with her breathing and my weeping. Her arms protected me, cocooned me with her love; soft gentle strokes from her fingertips painted my skin. I knew she was waiting for me to tell her what the matter was ... why I was sobbing into her chest when I should have felt

elated.

Time passed. Slowly, the darkening sky obliterated the light from all corners of the room.

But I could see more clearly now than ever.

'Kate?' I felt her body stiffen, her fingers halting their comforting path. I sniffed, dramatically, trying to compose myself. 'I'm sorry.'

I felt her hands slide from me; felt a distance between us grow. I lifted myself up by my hand and gazed into her face. Such a beautiful face. She tried to avoid my eyes but I continued to stare at her until she was forced to look. 'I'm sorry.' I repeated, quietly.

I could see her trying to swallow a lump in her throat; pushing it back until she had the ability to speak without her voice cracking. 'What for?' She had failed. Her voice was broken. I couldn't understand why she seemed so upset.

I had to ask.

'Are you regretting what we have just done?' Blue eyes looked at me incredulously, her mouth slackened into a comical expression of disbelief.

'Me? You're the one who is apologising!' Her voice was firmer now and laden with astonishment.

I smiled at her, making her more uneasy. A grin broke out across my face, and she seemed immediately hurt, like I was laughing at her in some way. 'I'm not apologising for this,' I threw my arm around in the air, generally taking in the position of our bodies. 'I'm apologising for leaving when I did, how I did. I'm apologising for being too scared to realise who I am ... who I *really* am.'

If we could measure a grin, it would be priceless. Her face split in half, covering the doubt and rejection I had witnessed there only seconds before. She lifted herself up and gripped my face in her hands and kissed me. Hard. And I loved it.

'So ... who are you then?'

I kissed her softly on the mouth before leaning back to stare into her eyes. 'Yours.'

I sealed this epiphany with a kiss, and then snuggled down into her arms once again.

My eyes fluttered closed, exhaustion from all the angst taking its toll.

A soft whisper trickled in my ear, 'And I'm yours.'

With that we both fell into contented sleep; something I had not experienced in years. I felt safe, loved and protected. I felt joy, life and desire. I felt ... that's just it ... I felt.

Chapter Nineteen

I felt her before I saw her. I knew she was watching even before I opened my eyes. She was propped up on her elbow, her face close to mine, her eyes dimmed by the early morning light.

She reached over and placed her fingertips on my collarbone, softly tracing the dips and curves. Her eyes flitted from my eyes to stare in wonderment at what she was doing. Gentle strokes, across and back, across and back. Rhythmic, soothing ... loving.

Her head leaned down and allowed her lips to place the gentlest of kisses in place of her fingers, slowly easing them across the bone. Sparks erupted within me, and I inhaled ... and waited.

Lips ventured lower and tantalised the top curve of my breast, a shy tongue poking out of glistening lips. The wetness between my legs was building, balming the heat from within.

The tongue entered the cleft of my breasts, slipping along the skin in familiarity, making my heart work just that little bit more, beat that little bit faster. I pushed myself up from the covers, wanting her to capture my need in her mouth; needing her to fulfil this ache she had created.

Fingers patted and stroked my stomach, alerting me of their descent. I was so, so ready. Firm fingers pulled my legs apart only to glide in between, on either side of my clit. Slow strokes, so slow, the firmness increasing with every touch. I was fascinated with it; fascinated with her; fascinated with this building of emotion, of desire, peaking inside me. Blue eyes caught my gaze and twinkled in the half-light. A thump of moisture shot out of me, almost ejaculated. Her expression never wavered; solidly capturing my look, watching me lick my suddenly dry lips, then mimicking the action, making me wet even more.

I could feel a tentative finger resting outside my core, her thumb still flicking my clit, a question in her eyes.

Slowly, I pushed myself down on her waiting digit, and it slipped, effortlessly, deep inside. I was mesmerised by her; bewitched by her beauty; hypnotized by her eyes. A second finger entered, shortly joined by a third. The rhythm of my hips aided her thrusts. I could see her hips joining the tempo, seeking purchase on anything, yet landing on nothing. I opened my legs wider, forcing my thigh between her legs. Her moan croaked from her mouth; her eyes fluttered closed for the briefest of moments, only to open ... revealing eyes violet with passion.

The feeling of her inside me again, her coating my leg with her love, painting her need upon me, marking me forever, made me quiver. I was hers. No one else could ever make me feel this way, no one else could ever make me ... feel ...

It was building. The maelstrom of emotions churned my gut into a paste of longing. Insides twisted and stretched: pulled and pushed. My hips danced the dance of the lover, her hips my

partner.

Fullness covered me, starting from the place between my legs and branching out like a map of the London Underground, shooting off into different directions until reaching the end of the line. My mouth opened and closed, trying to gulp down oxygen, but unable to get enough to satisfy the light-headedness that engulfed me.

She was unrelenting. Her fingers took me prisoner, holding me fast ... like her eyes ... her eyes ... her eyes ...

I was captured, enraptured, ultimately conquered. She was my jailor: she was the key. A lifeline thrown to a drowning woman on the verge of total ecstasy.

I can't remember exactly when I came. All I could feel was her: all I could hear was the orgasm she screamed into the cool morning air ... like an offering ... like redemption.

Fingers slipped free allowing me to clasp my legs fully around her thigh, only to switch positions, as I lay between her legs and began to pump myself into her, gazing into her eyes in wonderment.

I loved her. I loved her. I loved her. I loved her. The rhythm unrelenting.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

'I ... love ... you.'

We spoke at the same moment, voices mixing like our juices, the fire beginning all over again, cascading from our cores like a waterfall of love, lust ... desire, and a connection of something so much more. A bonding that filled the emptiness I had once carried.

But not anymore.

I was complete.

I was completely in love with the woman writhing underneath me ... I felt like crying all over again; I felt like taking her over the edge again and again and again. Loving her again: loving her ... forever.

Sounds of our need filled the air. The slapping of our skin: stomach on stomach; breast on breast. My senses were overwhelmed: slick, wet juices poured from within me; I licked the saltiness of her neck; felt the smoothness of her throat; my tongue traced a strong, chiselled jaw line; her lips slipped gracefully under my desperate mouth.

Hands sought out breasts; fingers pinched and rolled aching nipples; groans added fuel to the passion raging within. Need drove me forward, pushing my hips into her, again, and again, and again.

We came together, shouting release into each other's mouths, muffling the sound from the world ...holding it all inside. Perfection.

I slumped on top of her, sparks of my climax escaping through my pores.

And like that, we fell asleep. Me sprawled on top of her ... where I belonged.

With her.

Only ever ...with her.

Chapter Twenty

Morning passed by, unnoticed. Feelings flooded through me I thought only existed in fairytales.

Each touch ... caress ... stroke of her hands fuelled the fire within me. Each kiss ... lick ... suck attempted to cool off the engine of want throbbing inside. My hands couldn't get enough of her; I was addicted to her taste ... smell ... feel; the sound of her voice awakened a need in me, spoke to me in whispered words, called to me in the throes of her coming.

Emotion had never played a part in my life. Until now.

I was exhausted, weakened by this yearning for her, knowing I would rather die than stop.

How could I stop? I'd waited years for this ... and I hadn't even known it.

Time floated by unnoticed, but early afternoon dragged us from our bed and into the shower, only to start all over again.

Hunger stopped us ... finally, and we sat in pleasurable silence, eating, listening to the sea, coy in our movements, shy of each other.

'How did you know where to find me?'

Blue eyes looked up from her plate, a timid grin playing around the corners of her mouth.

'Well?' I nudged her leg with my foot. 'Tell me.'

She picked up her tea and sipped slowly, and deliberately, dragging out her response until I leaned forward and growled in her face. 'Spill it, Thomas.'

Kate threw her head back and laughed, her face changing from beautiful to perfect in a split second. 'What's it worth?' Blue eyes regarded me intently, flickering and dancing with

amusement.

'Right. *That's it!*' I dived over the table and landed squarely on her chest, knocking her backwards until we both landed on the floor in a heap. I straddled her, panting. 'Give?'

She laughed again. I tickled her sides, making her squeal and laugh even harder. 'Do ... you ... give ... up?'

'Sub ... mit ... sub ... mit!' Her voice held the note of fake surrender, pacifying me, pretending she couldn't just lift me off and place me on the floor next to her. 'Okay ... okay!' Her laughter was still there, bubbling like a stream through my blood.

A half-hearted attempt to get up. Twice. The third time, I shifted to the side, allowing her to move her torso upwards until she was seated with me still perched on top of her.

'I went to visit your agent ... got her address off your book.'

'You went to see Janet?' (although I already knew, it does a girl good to act coy now and again) 'And?'

'If you gave me a chance, I'd tell you,' and kissed my nose. 'As I was saying' Mock glare. 'I went to see your agent. Janet. She's a funny bugger, isn't she?' I nodded. *Well ... she was!* 'Eventually, she gave in and told me you had gone to visit your parents.'

'So that's how you found me?'

'Abbie ...' Her voice was low, and I knew I was being a pain in the arse. I mimed a zipper being pulled across my mouth. 'Finally!' I grinned hoping to play the cute card. 'No. She told me you had gone to visit your parents - other than that ... nothing. Getting information out of that woman was like milking a bull.' I laughed, and then looked at her puzzled.

'But ...'

'Abbie!'

'Okay ... okay ... message received loud and clear, Captain.' Then kissed her chin.

'I got the information from you.'

'Me?'

'Uh huh.' My eyebrows shot up into my hair. 'The letter ... with the journal page ...'

'But I di...'

'You sent it recorded delivery ... it had your address on the back.' I looked at her gone out. 'I left

home straight after ... because ... because ...' Silence ticked around the room, as I sat on top of her; my legs curled around her back; and gazed intently into her face. Her voice was almost a whisper, 'Because I needed to see you again.'

She looked straight into my eyes, displaying embarrassment and anxiety. I didn't say anything. I just sat and stared into those mesmerising pools of blue. My heart was hammering in my chest, blocking out all other sensations. I missed part of what she was saying, deafened to everything except emotion.

'... I didn't even care you were married.'

'But I'm not ... I am ... oh bugger.' Her face softened, hardened and then cracked into a smile.

'Well, missy ... are you *married* or not?'

I told her about Pete, about the sham of a marriage, about spending four years in hell, watching my husband flirt, cheat and spend as much of my money as he could. I told her about the years of feeling nothing. A stony expression appeared on her features when I told him about what destruction he had caused at my agent's ... at my home. Anger exuded her every pore.

My fingers traced her jaw line, and I could feel the tension radiating off her in waves, but I continued.

Eventually, her face softened and her eyes held mine with sweet abandonment. I gently lay a tentative kiss on her cheek, feeling her hot breath caress my skin. Chiselled features malleable under my touch. Heartbeats picked up and breathing became laboured ... I needed to feel her again ... feel her under me ... over me ... inside me.

Wish granted.

A short while later, I lay in her arms, totally content with life ... with her. A smile sneaked upon my face, as I thought 'Post It to self: Send Mum flowers.' Her writing my name and address on the back of the envelope had been the most innocent action ever. But the outcome ... it was the only thing I think my mother had done for me that was perfect ... that had brought me so much joy ... so much love. And she didn't even know it. You have to smile, don't you?

But it still hadn't told me how she had found me here.

Oh well. I'll ask later.

Burrowing my face in to her chest, I fell into a peaceful sleep, my arms wrapped tightly around her, on the kitchen floor to my parents' beach house.

Heaven.

Chapter Twenty-One

Days drifted by in a haze of loving that defied man's reason. We were cosseted by our love, a self-imposed incarceration, needing nothing and no one ... needing only each other.

Making love with Kate was the most beautiful thing I had ever experienced. Having sex with her was primal ... unadulterated bliss. Every room in the house had our mark ... our scent. With every touch from her, another brick was torn down from somewhere deep within.

We had not told each other 'I love you' since the night we first consummated our want.

Deep down ... this was beginning to bother me.

Don't get me wrong, I wanted to tell her, the words were stored in my throat ... waiting, but ... I don't know ...

By the end of the week I could tell Kate was becoming restless. My stomach churned at the thought of her leaving, of never seeing her again ... of never ... holding her ... again. But I didn't say a word.

She had been with me for five days when she told me she was going back to Yorkshire. The tightening in my gut began to wedge its way inside my throat and I found it impossible to voice my feelings. Please don't leave me ... please.

Instead I fully supported her, but I had to ask why, although voiced in an interested supportive tone instead of screaming 'WHY?'

'Business. I have to get back to the hotel.'

Simple enough. I should have just left it there really ...

'Isn't there somebody else who can run it for you? You know, another family member?'

Me and my fucking big mouth. I should only ever open it to change feet. The change in her was chameleon like. She had started to withdraw as the end of the week approached, but now ...

Her face paled, her eyes like blue chips in the whiteness, her lips a thin line.

'No.' The tone brooked no argument, but I couldn't stop my eyebrow rising upwards in surprise.

Swiftly, she turned her back me, the gesture signalling more than any words could say. She had cut me off.

It seemed like an age before I turned to leave the room: I had found it difficult finding the momentum to swing one leg in front of the other.

'Abbie ...' Her voice was soft, wistful ... alluring. I stopped, one hand on the door handle. 'Please ... don't go.' It was a plea; I could feel her heart breaking behind me.

Turning around I was captured by her eyes. Haunted. 'I need to tell you something ... something that has happened ... something that I still can't get out of my mind.'

I stepped further into the room, but the distance between us screamed out. Neither of us made a move to move towards each other. Instead, Kate walked over to the window, crossed her arms over her chest and stared out onto the dunes.

I waited.

And waited ...

'It happened just over two and a half years ago.' She stopped again, and I could tell she was having difficulty controlling her voice. 'My older brother, James, or Jim as I used to call him, ran Forester's Dwell.'

Jenny's voice came floating into my head unexpectedly, 'Ms Thomas has endured some personal tragedy'. I was guessing what that was before Kate continued.

'Jim loved the family business ... I was so proud of him. Even though our parents left it to the both of us, I had other commitments in London. And they had worked so hard building it up after my Great Grandfather had inherited it back in the thirties.' My God. The realisation dawned on me ... I didn't know anything about the woman standing in front of me ... any thing about her past ... I didn't even know what her 'business' was.

A shudder passed through me; I had made love to this woman, given her a part of me I thought I would never part with; showed her my vulnerability ... and I didn't even know what her job was. A fleeting feeling of disgust washed through me. How could I be so ... so ... so ... enraptured? How had this virtually unknown woman reached a part of me that no one else had even come close to?

Because I wanted her to reach it, I suppose. Because the thought of denying her was a hundred times worse than risking it all.

Kate continued to tell her tale and I felt guilty about having a crisis in the middle of it. 'I ignored his pleas to come home ... I was too engrossed in making money on the Stock Market and shagging anything in a skirt to worry about him huddled away in Yorkshire. Big mistake.'

Quietness invaded. We stood there, her back towards me, shoulders slumped forward. I saw her hand free itself from the insulation of her self-imposed cocoon, to swipe angrily at a stray tear.

I waited ... again. She needed to tell me; needed the release from the agony.

'He called the office early Friday morning, begging me to come home ... said he couldn't stand it any longer. I nearly laughed at him and told him to get a grip, but something held me back ... thank God. I left work and drove back ... but ... but ... I was too late.' Her voice was cracking and I had difficulty understanding what she was saying. 'He ... kil ... led ... him ... self ... Abbie, ... before I ... could get there.' A sob tore from her, raced around the room, echoing off the walls until it struck me right in the chest. I gasped at the impact, feeling unsteady, my hand reaching out to stop myself falling.

My poor girl. The tears were out before I knew it, and I staggered over, wrapping my arms around her from behind; holding her for all I was worth. I wanted to take away her pain, her suffering, but I couldn't ... it was her job to forgive herself, I could only be there ...

She cried, and I held her. She cried harder. I held her tighter. I began to rock her backwards and forwards, feeling the sobs wracking her body.

As soon as they had begun they subsided. I felt her stiffen in my arms and stare outside again, like she was blocking out the situation ... blocking out me. She didn't want me to see her so vulnerable, I knew that, so I held on.

Minutes passed. Long languid minutes. Our breathing the only sound filling the room.

'He left a note.' I stayed quiet. "'Can't take any more" - that's it. No signature ... nothing. I feel so guilty ... he had asked me for months to go home ... to help him, but I was more concerned with fulfilling my needs.'

'You weren't to know how serious it was. How could you?' I squeezed. 'And when you thought he really did need you ... you went.'

She turned into my embrace, her head tilted down, her face streaked with tears, her mouth moving but silent. I placed a finger gently on her lips, 'No more tonight, sweetheart. You can tell me more later.'

I felt her soft lips brush against my finger, until she oh so surely opened her glorious mouth and sucked it inside. My eyes fluttered closed. The feeling was exquisite. In it went, absorbed in her heat. The same heat was pouring from between my legs, begging her to use her mouth there instead.

'Not tonight.' Was that my voice? Of course it was. How could I take advantage of this vulnerable woman standing before me, expecting her to fulfil the promise of her lips, her eyes, her body pressing into mine? 'Come on ... let's get showered and have an early night. We've got a lot to do tomorrow.' Her eyebrow lifted in surprise, but a smile broke out on her beautiful face suggesting I had made the right choice.

And I had. But you try explaining that to a newly awakened libido - not a very receptive

audience I can tell you.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Feelings of pleasure tore through me. Shocks sparked haphazardly through every nerve ending, beginning from between my thighs and ending at my fingertips and toes.

She was between my legs, her tongue sliding around my lips, excavating hidden secrets within. Strong hands held me firmly by the hips as her head buried itself deeper ... and deeper into me. My throat was making little throbbing noises, keeping with the rhythm of her tongue.

My fingers threaded themselves into her hair, rubbing her scalp in a gentle caress that progressively become firmer as I pushed her into me. This was ecstasy ... euphoria. I parted my legs further to allow her easier access, silently willing her to fill me with herself, to crawl inside me and live there ... to never leave me. Emotions were welling up ... begging for something ... more.

A tongue rested outside my core, silently asking permission to enter. Granted. I felt it slide inside, filling the ache, until it slowly, oh so slowly, pulled back out, only to plunge in again and again and again. Hips were beginning to become frantic, obsessed with finding release, finding a place between heaven limbo where they could rest and reflect on the wonders of this woman between my legs. A hand loosened its self from my hip to trail up my body, stroking a fire of desire in its wake. It settled, momentarily, on the outside curve of my breast, then began its journey again until it covered my breast fully, slowly pumping in tune with the tongue that was forever diligent between my legs.

It was coming. I was coming. It was building. I couldn't stop it. Didn't want to stop it. Throbbing. Incessant throbbing. Filling me. Filling me. Taking me. Owing me. Thrust ... thrust ... thrusting ... thrusting until '*Kaaaaaaaaattttteeeeeee, ohhhhhhh gggggooodddddd!*' I tried to lean forward, to sit up, but her strong hand pushed me back, only to continue to push her tongue repeatedly inside me.

I didn't even have time to catch my breath before I was thrown over again into the abyss of rapture ... her fingers leaving my breast to descend onto my erect clit that was straining, screaming for attention. Two fingers either side, almost frantic with purpose. Over again ... my voice was hoarse from shouting her name over and over again, my body was shaking uncontrollably, the exertion almost too much. I felt weak. I felt alive. I felt.

Oh sweet torture, let me die now. Nothing can compare to the feelings raging through my body. Nothing can compare to being loved by this woman.

I now knew that until this moment I had been a virgin. Virginity cannot be taken from you - it has to be given. And I had just given mine to Kate Thomas.

And willingly.

I slept in her arms all night, blanketed by her body ... her smell. It was perfection personified.

As soon as I opened my eyes I felt a sense of foreboding. She was leaving me today ... Kate was leaving and there was nothing I could do about it.

I lifted my head from her chest and inhaled the sight of her. Her mouth was slightly parted in sleep and I could feel her breath skimming the top of my head. I reached out in reflex to tuck a stray lock away from her cheek ... allowing my fingers to graze along her cheekbone in quiet supplication.

Thudding heartbeats began in my chest, warding off the waiting massacre that heartbreak can bring. I loved this woman. Me. Yes me. I was in love with a woman ... this woman ... Kate.

So why couldn't I tell her? Why was I going to let her ride off into the sunset without a single syllable of love being uttered?

Because I was too scared she didn't feel the same way ... that's why.

Yes, I know she told me that she loved me - but haven't we all said something like that at the height of an orgasm? Yes, I also know she said she had come for her heart ... but I could keep it if I wanted to. But that didn't really prove anything now did it? Just that she can be glib (and cliché) when she wanted to be. I needed her to tell me how she felt now ... now we had been together to the fullest extent. I didn't have the nerve to just blurt out what I thought ... what I wanted. Cowardice does run in my family ... just look at my father for proof.

Unconsciously, my fingers continued to stroke her face ... caress her cheek, my thumb lazily traced her lip. I would miss these.

Eyes that were once asleep peered at me lazily in the early morning light. There was something written in them I couldn't quite decipher ... but it was written so plainly, there, on the surface. I stared deeply into them, hoping to read beneath that surface, use my analytical skills to uncover the truth behind the self-erected walls of Kate Thomas.

Her hand slipped down my back until it rested on the curve of my rear, only to gently squeeze on impact. Unbidden, a moan escaped from deep in the echelons situated in my stomach and groin. Throbbing reared its head again, the need for her never being satiated.

Her other hand came into play; tips of fingers awakened my skin. I couldn't break her gaze ... didn't want to.

Life was pouring back into her, as the foginess of sleep evaporated.

Slowly, her hands coaxed the hairs on my skin into action, alerting them of her presence, warning them of her intent.

I pulled away, for a moment annoyed at how quickly I allowed this woman to take me over: disgusted at my lack of willpower to resist her.

Hurt marred her face; rejection coated her like a second skin. I smiled at her, almost cruelly.

Leaning back on the bed, I stared at her lips as I spoke. 'What do you want from me, Kate?' Her mouth worked, but refused to allow any words to break free. My left hand trailed around her breast, my eyes following behind like a puppy.

Over each curve, gradation ... breast, nipple, fingers flat lining over her stomach, each move tortuously slow. I wanted to make her wait ... wait like I had been waiting.

I lowered my mouth to follow the path of my fingers, my eyes ... lips were wet, the tongue tender, yet focused on its task. The taste of her was intoxicating. She was intoxicating. I was forever under her influence.

Impatient hands pushed her legs apart, and I raised my eyes to meet hers. They seemed hooded, almost asleep, but I knew she was far from that ... the heaving of her chest gave her away. 'I repeat, Kate. What do you want from me?' A pause. 'What do you want me to do?' I changed it at the last minute, too scared if she said the wrong thing, and broke my heart forever.

In the morning air, her voice broke through the chill to warm all in its path. 'Touch me, Abbie.'

Not the answer I was going for, but it would have to do.

I slipped my hand between the soft hairs that guarded her secret. Slipped past her nub and hovered above ... nearly touching her, but keeping my distance. The heat radiating from her could power a small village. She lifted her hips trying to join her ache with my remedy, but I pulled away. 'Tell me ... what ... do *you* ... want ... *me* ... to do?' I completely missed out my first question. What was the point? Her silence had already answered for her.

But at this moment ... exactly that ... this moment, that was all that mattered.

I returned my hand ...

... and lightly brushed my fingers over her passion, eliciting a promise of satisfaction, but eluding the time of arrival.

God was she wet. She was soaked. I could feel it trickling from her, making my own juices begin to pump around and seek purchase on something.

But not yet. I wanted to watch as I took her over the edge, commit to memory the way she

looked in ecstasy, capture this moment in the hidden parts of my brain to call upon when desperation took a hold like I knew it would.

I slipped down each side of her, purposefully avoiding her clit; purposefully avoiding instant gratification ... for both her and me. And I stroked her, delicately, tenderly. The complete opposite of what I saw in her eyes.

'Please ... Abbie ... *please* ... I ... want ... *need* you to ... to ...' She bit her lip, trying to stop herself wanting what we both wanted. Or it could have been the slight brush against her throbbing bump that caused her to lose her ability to speak.

'What do you want me to do, Kate?' The question was back, but this time firmer, content in the knowledge that this time it was going to get an answer.

'Touch me ... *harder*.' The words were strangling her. I kept up the steady rhythm, but applied just a little more pressure. She was trying to push herself onto my fingers, so I eased off ... making her growl with frustration. 'Abbie ... *oh God* ... *please*.'

I caressed her nipples that were straining upwards, rigid and resolute in their need to be touched, pinched, rolled around between my finger and thumb.

My thumb rested on her aching nub ... just sat there, quietly enigmatic, but forceful in its stillness.

A cry broke free, and I watched mesmerised as she swiped her tongue over her lips, sucking in the bottom one, even teeth seeking out the pliant flesh.

Movements stopped.

I placed my finger at her core and left it there, paralysed, waiting for her to beg me to continue.

'What do you want me to do, Kate?' A whisper, not to drive her even more crazy than I was already, but in reverence of her ... scared if I spoke too loudly, the spell would vanish.

'I ... need ... to ... feel ... you ... inside me, *please* Abbie ... *oh God* ... *please* ... *take me* ... *fill me* ... *fingers* ... *anything* ...'

Now how can a girl refuse that?

I circled her opening with my finger, coating it with her milky wetness, before I claimed her as mine. I gradually pushed my finger inside her, so slowly, before I claimed her as mine. I pulled back out of her and began to circle her core once again, before I claimed her as mine.

Kate's hips were leaping off the bed, hands tried to grip my wrist and force me to enter her. I pushed them away.

'Abbie ... please ... I'm begging you ...please!'

'Please what, Kate?' A smile curled my lips.

'Fuck me ... *fuck me* ... I need you to ... oh God - *yes!*' I entered her with three fingers, no precursor... just straight inside her ... hard. Her hands gripped my arm and pushed my fingers even deeper inside; the groans spilling from her encouraged my own desire to scream between my legs ... and to whisper from my heart.

She writhed on my hand, wanting me to pump in and out of her, but I stayed still, needing to feel her walls pumping and throbbing around three lucky fingers. Curling them slightly, I wriggled them inside her, languishing in the sounds flooding from a mouth open and groaning my name.

Then I stopped again. She pushed down again, willing me on ... begging me to pick up the tempo.

So, I did.

I did what she asked me to do. I fucked her. Fucked her hard. Fucked her until my arm begged me to slow down, take stock, enjoy our last tryst together. Fucked her until my heart was aching for me to stop ... stop and love her ... gently ... tenderly ...

The walls inside her were closing in around my hand ... around my heart. Her breathing was erratic, catching in her throat, the moaning coming from somewhere inside her. I watched her. This is what I would remember ... her ... like this ... me inside her ... watching her.

'Oooooohhhhh ssswwwweeeeeettttt Jjjjeeeeesssuuuussss!' And she came. Juices spattering my wrist, my arm still pumping into her, trying to stave off the shocks I knew would follow. Nails dug into my skin, marking me, a physical reminder of this moment. The moment I made her mine.

The speed of her movements surprised me, as she pulled herself free from my hand and grabbed my arms, pulling me on top of her. Lips fought for dominance, her kisses crazy with want, her tongue unforgiving.

Strong fingers dug into my flesh, one hand on my rear and the other in the small of my back. Her juices were slick, and I could feel the wetness rubbing against me as she ground her hips forcefully into my own.

Effortlessly, she flipped me over and straddled me. Her eyes were crazed ... oblivious to anything else but this carnal need oozing from every pore of her. She was magnificent ... she was savage ... She was ... mine.

Teeth nipped flesh, angry, yet gentle. Hands forced open willing legs; fingers delved and explored; hips rocked ... pumped ... ground into each other with undying abandon. Her fingers parted me, and plunged deep with no warning, sending me over the edge into a crashing, burning

ecstasy.

She continued to push, grind, pump in to me, our ragged breathing accentuating the pleasure, allowing the throbbing, curdling feelings to explode effortlessly into each other.

Clawing feelings were scraping their way deep inside me, her fingers becoming my focus, my target. The need pulsating through me an agony; a superb agony.

Sweat dripped from her onto my overheated skin, mingling with my own. She had parted her thighs and lowered herself on to my leg. Slick, thick wetness painted me, made me want to come so much harder, wanting to join her in oblivion.

It was approaching. My quest. My goal ... was coming. I was coming. Coming ... coming ... coming ...

'Gggggggooooooooodddd ... Kkkkaaaattteeee!' That was all I could manage to utter, the sensations taking precedence over my voice. I wrapped one arm around her, gripping her in a frenzied hold, whilst the other flailed wildly at her side. I could feel her pumping herself against me until she too came crashing into my world of ecstasy, a world that existed for the here and now ... a world that existed only for feeling.

Slowly, our bodies wound down, changing from carnal to gentle, allowing softness to have a voice. Sweet, tender kisses were exchanged, but not one word.

No 'I love yous' this time.

But for once ... I didn't care. Exhaustion had played his part, and I lay underneath her totally at peace with myself for the first time in my life.

And for that I will be forever grateful.

It was less than three hours later I bade her farewell with the promise of calling or writing or catching up soon.

I could feel the emptiness within me returning, but, like the true professional, I smiled for the imaginary cameras.

When I hugged her goodbye, I tried to be brief, tried to show I was okay with her going.

Tried. But I knew I hadn't succeeded.

Reason? I inhaled her. Breathed her in. Captured her in that moment. Her scent forced my arms to hold just that little more tightly, and for a little too long.

I didn't wait to see her drive away. Couldn't bear the thought of 'waving her off', so I left her there, standing at the boot of her car. Alone.

I didn't want her to see the tears streaming down my face; hear the sob in my voice as I shouted 'See ya!'

It must have been fifteen minutes before I heard her car's engine burst into life; another ten before I heard the tell tale sound of the gears engaging, the tyres grating along the gravel.

But I can't tell you how long I sat on the floor, curled in a ball, sobbing out my loss.

Some things we just can't put a time to.

I could tell you exactly how I felt when she left. How a blackness so deep engulfed me; or how the pain inside my chest radiated throughout my body; even how I continued to sob out my grief even when the tears had long since dried up.

I could say how her name continued to pour from my lips like a catechism of longing; or how I rocked myself into an almost catatonic state.

But what good would it do?

It wouldn't bring her back, would it?

Hours passed and I hadn't moved at all from my spot on the floor: what was the point?

I stared blankly ahead of me, face stiff with shed tears, mouth drying, eyes stinging mercilessly. I felt used, abused ... victimised by something deeper than I could comprehend.

'There are no victims here,' I uttered, my voice cracked and dry.

I knew what I had to do.

I had to tell her ... tell her how I felt ... tell her I would rather know than be forever in the dark. I had to know one way or another.

Slowly, I untucked my legs from underneath me and stretched. The muscles screamed, but I carried on, ignoring the pain.

I was going to see her ... tell her ... *get the girl*.

And for the first time that day, I grinned.

'I'm going to get the girl.'

Two hours later saw me back at my parents, wildly packing things into the boot of my car. I had to stop at London first to pick up some stuff from home, but then ... I would be free.

I felt giddy, finally accepting the wonder of the situation. I am gay ... and I didn't give a shit who knew it.

I laughed to myself as I hammered the last of my belongings into the boot.

'You've finally lost it then?' Claire's voice took me by surprise and I laughed again, and proceeded to push the boot down.

'Nope ... I've found it.' Her eyes widened a little. I think I freaked her out a bit, as I wasn't much of a one to laugh to myself (whatever anybody tells you).

'Did your friend find you then?' My face told her I didn't have a bloody clue what she was talking about. 'Last week ... a woman ... tall, dark hair ... came looking for you here.' My face broke out into a grin that spoke volumes. 'I told her you were at the beach house. Nice woman ... attracti...'

I didn't give her chance a to finish. I threw my arms around her and hugged her to me hard. 'Thank you thank you thank you,' then kissed her on the cheek and jumped into my car.

As I was driving away, leaving a very stunned Claire, I shouted through the window 'And you were right ... I am!'

I could see her face in my rear view mirror go from confusion into a smile that split her face in half. I stuck my hand out of the window and waved wildly.

Now to go get that woman of mine.

Part 3

*I want to fall in you Crawl in you Surrender All in you now Could I be sure in you Pure in you
Finding the cure in you Now I plead Have mercy on me*

Mercy - Melissa Etheridge

Chapter Twenty- Three

Janet was surprised to see me back, as I had not given her any indication when we had last spoken just over a week ago. She was even more surprised when I handed her the three quarters

of my first draft.

I was not in the mood for chitchat. All I wanted to do was collect some more stuff and get to Yorkshire - get to Kate.

After fifteen minutes of me edging towards the door, refusing coffee for the fifth time, I eventually escaped her clutches with the promise to complete my story. She seemed chuffed I had decided to work back at the retreat, and didn't even question my change of mind, believing I was going because she wanted me to. Bless.

Outside in the grey light, I decided I would go straight there, back to Forester's Dwell. What was the point of travelling across London just to pick up more clothes? I had what I needed in the back of my car.

Decision made, I climbed into the front seat, turned on the engine, and turned the car around.

I was finally on my way, the smile on my face firmly in place.

The journey was monotonous to say the least. The M1 was packed with commuters and I spent forty-five minutes behind an accident just before my turn off at junction 42.

Patience is a virtue I had never possessed, and within those forty-five minutes I had come out with every expletive in the book ... and added a few of my own into the mix. Eventually, my mind turned to the poor innocents who must have suffered in the crash, and I felt a sense of shame pass over me.

It's amazing how we can turn our emotions around, isn't it? One minute I was gloriously happy to be on my way, then anger reared from within, until, finally, I felt a sense of loss so encompassing, so consuming, I couldn't shake off a feeling of foreboding.

What if something had happened to Kate? What if I got there and ... I couldn't even finish the sentence. I didn't think I'd survive that ... losing her when I had just found her again.

Again? The word 'again' kept skipping around my mind. I had no idea why.

Memories of events at Forester's Dwell popped into my head. The woman I kept seeing who looked like Kate but wasn't. Unexplainable noises in the night ... the words written on both my computer and the mirror (and then later on my bedroom wall).

And poor Enid. The poor woman. I felt an even stronger feeling of despair wash over me. She was dead and I hadn't thought about her in so long. Dead ... gone.

I know I hadn't known her for very long, just an evening in fact ... but that didn't stop her being

my friend. It also made me even more aware of how fickle life was. One minute laughing and joking ... the next ...

Thoughts like this continued to pound through my head, jolting tears just below the surface. I was so absorbed in my mental meanderings I nearly missed the turning for the A6036 to Halifax.

I was twenty miles away from the house but I could *feel* Kate. I had never really lost the sense of her, even after she had left me, but I could *feel* her presence near.

Butterflies skipped inside my stomach, my heart decided it wanted in on the action and began a tempo that made my breathing hitch. Doubt started talking to me, reminding me this was not who I was. A little voice spoke gently, yet firmly into my subconscious 'You are not gay.'

But ... I loved Kate. Didn't I?

No. I didn't. What I felt for Kate surpassed all the boundaries of love ... if love had any boundaries at all. This was obsession ... addiction ... a feeling of incompleteness without her ... her voice, eyes, skin, smell, the taste of her completely captured me ... enraptured me ... made me glad I was alive, glad she was, or had been, a part of my life.

Maybe I was *in* love then.

All depression disappeared; a face splitting grin smacked itself onto my face. Thirty-five minutes later, when I was sitting outside the wrought iron gate, I again asked permission to enter.

Permission to enter more than a set of metal gates ... that's for sure.

Jenny was at the desk, silently tutting at the computer screen. I stood there for a while and just watched her, not wanting to disturb the obvious display of bad humour.

Finally, brown eyes lifted and stared into my own. I saw her blush furiously, either from embarrassment of being caught off guard, or the realisation it was me standing in front of her.

'Abbie!' She leaned over the desk, knocking leaflets and cards from the surface to pull me into a hug. 'Soooooo good to see you again.' And she kept on holding ... and holding.

As diplomatically as I could, I pulled myself away from her, leaving her leaning over the counter in an almost comical way. 'Good to be back, Jenny. Is Kate around?' I tried to sound casual, but the eagerness in my tone belied my indifference.

'She was just here ... let me think ...' I fiddled with my bag, a little uncomfortable with her look. 'I think she's gone to the lake ... she hasn't been feeling too good since she came back.'

'What's the matter with her?' I leaned forward, my face inches away from Jenny's. 'What do you

mean she hasn't been feeling too good?' Panic raced through me. My thoughts on my journey coming back clearly - what if she was taken away from me... now ... now that I had found her?

Jenny's face spoke volumes. Believe me, I was close enough to see every emotion on her face.

'She's not ill as such ... just been even more moody than ever. Bawling at the staff for no apparent reason.' I pulled back, only too aware of Jenny's fixation on my mouth. She blinked repeatedly, coughed, and then looked back into my eyes once again. 'Her exact words were "If Ms Jameson calls, get me - whatever I'm doing - get me."'

Thank you God! If that wasn't a sign she was interested I didn't know what was.

Instead of jumping up and down with joy, I smiled at her. 'Could you get someone to take my bags up?'

'Same room?' I nodded, but secretly wished it wasn't. 'Okay, it's all sorted.'

'I'm just popping out for a walk, but I'll be back for tea, okay?'

I didn't wait for a response, I had to 'get the girl' my heart kept demanding, as it sputtered and jumped within my chest. Poor thing. It didn't know what to expect.

Neither did I ... but it didn't stop me looking for it.

Chapter Twenty- Four

Emotions charged through me as I made my way to the lake. I fought down the urge to run to her ... but also to run away. The feeling of wanting her was so strong, but at the same time I felt out of control. This sensation going through me was like an enchantment, a spell cast to overcome reason and make me something that deep down I knew I wasn't.

I had never felt this way before; no logical reasoning could account for this burning need I had inside ... and that need centred on a tall, raven-haired woman with blue eyes. Her face came into my mind, floating in front of me, urging me forward, pleading with me to save her somehow.

Why would she want me to save her? In what way could I ever do that? She was so strong, so capable, so ... so ... Kate.

I sucked in deeply. The cold, damp air hitting my lungs, causing a shooting ache in my chest. Wisps of cloudy breath escaped back into atmosphere, informing me I was alive ... it was the first time I had consciously thought about being alive ... philosophically I mean. To be alive is not to just exist, plodding around in a mundane world. To be alive meant to live ... really live.

I took stock of my surroundings, the vanishing winter sun dulling in the sky. Trees had lost all

their leaves, and the path was littered with offerings to the winter, sloppy and slippery underneath my booted feet. January was a month filled with nothing but the hope of spring, of rebirth, of the ability to begin again when all around seemed hopeless. That was how I was feeling ... I had lived my life with nothing but now I had hope, and through Kate I had a chance at rebirth.

My step increased. Although my legs are short they worked with all their might to get to my destination.

And then I saw her.

She stood staring out into the lake, like the first time I had seen her here. Stoic. Silent. Distant. The side of her face masked her emotions, her concentration aimed at nothing, yet focused at the centre of the lake. Limp hands dangled at her sides, only to flex and tense sporadically, like she was trying to get a grip on something, trying to restrain herself somehow.

Something alerted her of my presence, because she slowly turned her fixated gaze to meet my own. It took a while for realisation to dawn, her eyes being the first to show recognition, only to be shortly followed by her lips.

I smiled at her, my muscles trying to relax, but knowing this was not over yet.

Her smile disappeared as quickly as it came, and her eyes deadened.

Confusion wrote itself over me, slapping me into some kind of rejoinder, pushing me into saying something ... anything.

'Kate?' I faltered. 'Are you okay?' My voice was a whisper. We were still a few feet apart but she heard it.

She looked me squarely in the face, held her gaze there for an agonising moment. 'Abbie?' The disbelief in her voice was there; waiting to mock her ... waiting to tell her this was a dream.

'Yes?'

A smile so free lit her features, 'You've come back.' The same words she had used all those months ago.

'Of course ... how could I stay away?' She was in front of me before I had finished the sentence, her fingers on my face, cupping my jaw and tilting it upwards. Her breath skipped over my skin, so warm, so reassuring. I licked my lips, ready to say more, but she stopped me with the softest kiss I have ever received. It flitted over my mouth like a memory, until her cheek was against mine, her fingers tenderly holding me in place.

'You've come back to me,' her choking voice and shaking broke my heart, and I knew if I looked at her face I would see tears.

I held her. She held me. The noises around the lake paying homage to our reunion.

Soft sobs echoed in my ears, and I stroked my hand down her back, calming her, soothing her, reassuring her it was me and I was here ... for good.

'What are we going to do now?' Her words tickled my ear, and I pulled away to look at her face, look into her eyes.

'Well ... you could at least take me on a date.'

Her laugh was like music. Rich, powerful music that eased all doubt. 'Or just buy me lunch ... that would be a start.' She threw her head back and laughed long and hard, hugging me even tighter than before. The smile on my face was goofy to say the least, and I snuggled further into her arms.

This was the life. This was what I had waited for ... yearned for my whole life ... and, strangely enough, it wasn't until this moment I knew it.

I felt like the cat who'd got the cream after eating the canary, then been allowed to sleep in the middle of the bed surrounded by pillows whilst being stroked.

Yes. I felt like purring. Wouldn't you?

Hand in hand we strolled back to the house, completely contented without saying a word, knowing the silence we shared, we shared together.

Jenny's face was a picture as we entered, her eyes zooming in on our clasped hands in recognition of what was happening. Shock, quickly followed by a hint of annoyance, then, finally, acceptance. Her shoulders physically slumped as she greeted us both. I felt guilty about having ever doubted her in the past.

We had a quick snack of tea and sandwiches in Kate's room. After hours on the road I was hungry, felt travel weary and dirty. Kate told me to use her bathroom whilst she collected my things from my room, and I felt an urgent need to get out of my clothes, into some hot water and into bed. I was exhausted - both physically and emotionally.

The water was soothing, bouncing off my skin like warm rain, the smell of her shower gel coating me in her essence. Sleep was creeping into me and I had to vigorously towel myself dry to have the energy to get to the bed.

I nodded off, and didn't hear Kate come back in, or hear her in the shower.

But I felt her get in bed next to me. I felt her warm body scoot up behind my naked back, and

enfold her arms about me, wrapping herself into me like we had done this a thousand times before. Soft kisses fluttered on my neck, just below the base of the hairs, her breath pushing stray locks to the side to enable her to use her lips to gently suckle the skin there. Fingers joined in the caress, tenderly stroking my shoulder using just the tips.

Tingles raced around my body, little sparks of want building up from within. I wanted to turn around, turn away, pull her to me and kiss her mouth ... the mouth that was driving me over into something uncontrollable ... something so exquisitely beautiful words could not define it.

Fingers traced themselves down my arms, to stroke along the underside of my forearms, her lips unerring in their task at the nape of my neck. Then they moved. Slowly, oh so slowly, until she was suckling the join at my neck and throat. A groan came from my lips, unbidden, yet unable to contain itself from telling her what I needed.

She had her full hand on my forearm and was massaging the muscles that performed and danced for her alone. My hips began to join in the dance, pushing back into her, feeling her naked body pressing back into mine. Her hand trailed along my stomach, stroking, coaxing, making me ache for her all the more. She pulled me back into her until we were one. Kisses on my shoulder and neck were becoming urgent, and I longed to taste her again.

She pulled her lips away, and I heard a soft moan, our hips still moving against one another. 'I love you, Abbie.' Words so simply said, but my heart pounded with the sound of them.

I turned to face her, our hips slowing down, and looked at her face in the dimming light. 'Don't you know I love you too?' I whispered, before taking her lips with my own, my mouth opening to accept all she had to offer and release all I had to give. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close, her breasts rubbing against my own in supplication to the demands of our necessity ... the demands of our long lost souls that had once again found their other half.

Her body moved over mine, hovered above me for an agonising moment before gently lowering on top of me.

Perfection.

Our bodies moved against each other unhurriedly, knowing this was more than sex, more than gratification. This was the ultimate bonding of heart, mind and soul.

Kate's essence entered me, seeped into each pore, mingled and mixed with my blood, marking me as hers, marking her as mine.

My legs were open, accommodating her slow thrusts into my core. Calves wrapped around hers, holding her to me, my hands pushing her backside into the yearning need pulsating at the apex of my thighs. I couldn't focus on anything but the sensations her body was creating, the building of something primal from within, the building of torturously wonderful pockets of emotion that discharged in electric pockets of pleasure.

I was bordering on the delirious; the goal, not an orgasm this time, but a joining ... a coupling. The sensations made my mouth water for the taste of her. My mouth captured her throat, suckling, turning into small nips and kisses that made her groan and move faster against me. I didn't want to come ... yet - I didn't want this feeling to end. Lips sought out lips, tongues sought out tongues, the feeling of being swallowed whole ... I loved every minute of it. Kate's tongue stroked the inside of my bottom lip causing me to whimper, the sensation overpoweringly beautiful.

Leisurely, her mouth descended my face and throat, fluttered over my collarbone, and landed on the inside of my breasts. It rested there ... listening to the thudding in my chest.

'I love you, Abbie.' Again the words floated upwards to my ears, making my heart soar once more. I couldn't speak: emotion choked me. A wet tongue circled my breast, purposefully missing its target making me crave it all the more. I placed my hand at the back of her neck, guiding her mouth to where I needed it most.

Perfect ...

She suckled me, whilst my hand tangled in her hair, her hand coming up to taunt and tease the other breast into action. Strong fingers rolled the nipple around, pulling and flicking gently but firmly.

Then her face left its haven and descended lower, leaving her hand to continue pleasuring my greedy breasts.

At the apex of my core, she stopped, and looked into my eyes, hers hooded with desire, the blueness almost dark with need. A tender kiss landed on either side of my thighs, her eyes never breaking contact with my own. I was holding my breath ... expectation playing a vital role.

A delicate breath skittered across my pubic hair, igniting my need further. My eyes fluttered closed, and my heart waited.

She parted me with her tongue, so smoothly ... so gently, the sensation almost unbearable. The contact feather like, teasingly distant, yet all consuming.

My hips took up the rhythm initiated by her tongue, grinding slowly around her perfectly sensuous muscle.

Paradise was here.

I felt her tongue rest at my opening before it slipped, effortlessly, inside. Her moan made my juices flood from me ... a tidal wave of desire.

In and out ... so *slowly* ... so *fully* ... the ecstasy of penetration causing flashing lights to appear before my eyes. In and out ... rhythmic ... fervent. In and out ... I pushed down, my wetness covering her mouth and chin. In and out ... in and out ... my insides sucking her back ... holding

her within me ...aching for her to crawl up inside ... crawl up inside and complete me.

Her thumb left its place on my breast and ventured downwards ... downwards ... until it stopped on my clit, hesitated ... waited to find the tempo before joining in the dance of hips, tongue and hands. Her mouth suckled me ... her tongue penetrated ... her thumb caressed ... and I came.

It was not like the previous orgasms I had shared with her. It was deeper ... fuller ... explosions juddering and pulsating ... throbbing its silent cries into the darkness. I felt reborn. I felt fulfilled. I felt loved ... protected ... whole again. This was so much more than sex ... so much more.

She crawled up my body to envelop me, wrap me in her love, hold me whilst I sobbed out my love for her ... told her I would always love her ... *always*.

Time elapsed as I lay in her arms, emotions running rampant, the sobbing easing in my chest.

I smelled her hair, inhaled her scent, breathed her in to capture her in my lungs and hold her there. My mouth was next to her ear, and I gently blew a soft breath onto it. Her body jerked in response. My tongue poked out to trail around the edge, tasting her, hearing her moan into my shoulder.

I rolled her over, my arms never leaving her body, needing the contact of skin on skin. She lay underneath me, vulnerable to my need to touch her, to taste her, to swallow her whole and hold her inside.

Soft kisses landed on her face; nuzzling, lips brushing lips, discovering of skin, hope and desire; want and longing so deep it throbbed.

Lips on her neck, throat, shoulder; a tongue trailing down the curve where her arm met her chest, malleable skin ripe for eating. Teeth came out to nip and graze the flesh into submission; the curve of her breast tantalising me in the half-light.

Who am I to resist?

I tasted her ... loved her with my tongue, my hands, my skin. I massaged her fears, her hopes, my dreams, until I found myself looking at the glistening desire of my lover ... my love. I leisurely snaked my tongue along her folds, from the bottom to the top, from the top to the bottom, savouring the sweetness that was Kate. Tastes of nectar exploded in my mouth, forcing me to take her, to possess this taste ... own it forever.

My hand joined my mouth, more an aid than a spectator. It helped me get to her need: helped me get to what I yearned for, a burning need that was eating away at me, as I was eating away at hers. Juices covered my face and I wanted to drink it in, but couldn't stop licking her, kissing her, just ... *there*. Hips danced to and from my face, her hands wrapped themselves into unruly hair as she ground herself into me. I needed to feel her around my tongue; I needed to push myself into her, lick the insides of her, and taste her from the inside out.

Grasping fingers held onto her hips, as I entered her, my tongue fully extended, sweeping along the walls hidden from the world. But tonight they were mine, and for that I would be forever grateful. A groan met my ears and she pushed herself downwards, her knees raised allowing one hand to slither underneath and rest at the small of her back. I pushed her upwards, allowing my tongue to sink deeper into her, hearing her gasp, hearing my name on her lips.

I pulled back then plunged in again and again and again and again. Incessant rhythm undulating, throbbing out a tempo my tongue joined whilst my fingers tapped out the rest on her erect bud. Again and again ... mouth, fingers and tongue, loving her. Again and again and again I sucked, plunged, and entered her. My breathing erratic, the air thinning, but I didn't care. If I died at this moment I would die knowing I had done what I was sent to earth to do.

Love her.

And love her I did, until I felt the tell tale signs of her release, felt the juices thicken with expectation, tasted the salt of her coming ... and she did, again and again and again.

Like a dying man, I crawled up her body and nestled there until sleep took us both into dreams ... dreams that had come true ... for the first time in our lives.

The rest of the night saw us waking to continue our discovery, each time different to the last, but each time built on trust, our love, our certainty that this time it was forever.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Morning came around too soon, and after toast and tea we decided to go out for the day to Haworth. I teased Kate about her actually taking me on a date, and she adopted a mock pose of hurt before pulling me into a hug.

'I'll take you anywhere,' she breathed into my ear.

'Only the once.'

'Nope ... twice. Second time to apologise.' I play thumped her in the side and she laughed, making me laugh with her.

We were so natural with each other. The solemn woman I had first met had disappeared, leaving a bright, vivacious creature who was totally bewitching.

Two hours later saw us on the road, Kate at the steering wheel, leaving me to wonder at the beautiful scenery. The journey was peaceful. I felt so at peace in her company.

It was lunchtime when we arrived, and our first port of call was the Black Bull public house, to freshen up and get something to eat.

In the toilets Kate sidled up behind me, planting tender kisses on my throat. I didn't care that someone might have walked in, the sensations were too strong to ignore. Her voice pulsed into my neck, 'You're always hungry, woman.'

'You have no idea.' I raised my hand to her cheek, our eyes locked in our reflections in the mirror. God. I wanted to kiss her there and then, take her in the cubicles and part her legs, taste her, slip my hands inside her clothes ... but I doubted how well that would go down in a little country pub.

Over lunch Kate told me about the retreat's history. Her great grandfather, Edward Thomas, took over the house in the thirties when William had died leaving the estate mortgaged up to the hilt. Edward had only lived for three years, and then the running passed onto her grandfather, Henry Thomas. The war had interrupted the running of the place, and had been used as some kind of makeshift convalescence home. After her father married in the late sixties, Henry had passed it on to him, and lived out the remaining years of his life in the Lodge near the entrance to the estate.

I was transfixed with her talking. She had never said as much in one go before. It was perfect ... the conversation ... the company ... the food.

God yes ... the food! Beef and ale pie washed down with glasses of bitter - a true English lunch. I felt full to the brim, but still managed to demolish some home made apple pie, much to Kate's amusement.

'Had enough?' The twinkle in her eye lit up the room, and I knew she wasn't talking about the lunch.

'Behave, Thomas.' The smile lit up her face again and she threw her head back, giving in to a loud guffaw. People began to look and I felt exposed ... kind of 'out', shall we say.

A smile crept on my face unbidden as two words echoed through my head.

'Fuck 'em.'

Haworth church was beautiful. Oak panelled walls led to an ornate pulpit at the front. I looked at the plaque denoting the short lives of the Brontes, and felt a sense of loss. They were so young ... had so much to live for.

The feeling was hard to shake off. We are here for such a short time, and we are so terrified of how other people perceive us ... we miss out on so much. Seems such a waste ... such a terrible

waste.

My eyes met Kate's, and for an indescribable moment I felt a sense loss so profound, I couldn't move. You see, it wasn't my loss exactly, and it wasn't to do with the Brontes, it was ... it was connected to Kate and I, but wasn't. Do you understand? I felt like I had lost her somehow, but not now, not here and now.

'Abbie? Are you okay?' Kate's face hovered in front of me and I pulled her to me, dismissing all the stares I received. Even the closeness we shared couldn't shake this feeling. But, being the professional, I hooked on my fake smile and looked her in the face.

'Never better. Come on. Let's check out the museum.'

With that, I released her, the coolness of the church blending eerily with the coolness in my chest.

The smell of the Parsonage offered memories of three women, holed away in the bleak village of Haworth more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Small dark rooms were filled with remnants of an era long gone; furniture placed expertly to conjure a sense of them having just left the room. The parlour showed pictures from the past, standing resolute over the chaise longue on which Emily had finally taken her dying breath.

Opposite this room was where her father had secreted himself away from his daughters, an office of sorts that bespoke the superiority of men at that time.

At the turn on the stairs, their faces greeted me, almost garishly painted. Pointy features belying their bird like faces. Three women who had challenged the canonised writing of their time; three women who showed they were more than just wallflowers, sitting in corners painting watercolours or embroidering delicate pieces of cloth. I had to smile as I searched out the painted out silhouette of Branwell Bronte, the artist and the brother of the women. At least he had the brains (maybe a gift of prophecy) to realise he wasn't as gifted as his three siblings - women at that. Men, even today, still believe he was the genius of the family. Go figure.

Viewing their belongings, splayed out for the world to see, unnerved me. How we are fascinated with other people's lives when we instead could be looking at our own.

Kate made her own way, reading through bits and pieces and pulling faces at me, mimicking grabbing the breast part of Charlotte's dress.

I mouthed 'Perv,' at her and laughed out loud at her fake sad face as she turned and pretended to slope off. People tutted behind me, probably thinking I was having a moment. Which, of course, I was.

I was staring at Emily's old bedroom when I felt the hairs on my neck announce her presence

behind me, her body leaning close into mine, her soft breath tickling my ear as she whispered, 'Was she a midget then?' I let loose a loud guffaw, which echoed around the house, people giving me daggers as they trundled past, their faces showing their disgust at my obvious lack of respect for an empty house.

'Let's go.' I pulled Kate along by her hand, through Branwell's studio and through into the part which held information about their life and times. Me being *me* read every single word, and all the time I could feel Kate shuffling near me, trying in vain to disguise her boredom. I smiled and continued to read.

Eventually I was ready to hit the bookstore.

'Finally! I thought I'd lost you for a minute there.' Kate's face lit up as she spotted the Exit sign.

'Not quite yet, honey.'

Her face was a picture as I slowly fingered the merchandise, finally selecting a copy of *Wuthering Heights*, two pens, four pencils and a couple of bookmarks. I had always had a soft spot for stationary - a little pervy pleasure I tried to keep a secret ... especially since I knew Kate would take the piss.

Outside the shop, Kate did a dance, before throwing her hands over her head and shouting 'Free at last! Free at last! Praise the Lord ... I'm free at last!'

I stood there, bag dangling from my hand, looking at her with an amused smile. She continued to dance about, getting stares from everyone passing, who in turn looked at me.

'Ignore her ... she's having a turn.' They laughed, and Kate shot me a mock glare and stopped prattling about.

'What?' The voice of the innocent. 'Have you a problem with me being more intelligent than you, Thomas?'

'Why, you cheeky...!' She grabbed my waist, digging her fingers in, making me go weak and nearly pee myself.

I had to slap her on the shoulder to stop, and she pulled me to her, making the electricity jolt through my body again. 'Well ...!' she whispered, 'you have to be intelligent ... you picked me, remember?'

A gentle kiss on the top of my head, and we were apart again like it had never happened.

We decided a cuppa was in order and made our way to the nearest teashop. The narrow, cobbled street forced us to separate to allow others to pass, and I took this opportunity to look at her.

Objectively.

By the Gods, she was beautiful. Her height showed where she was at all times, long raven hair fluttering in the winter's breeze, fanning itself around her perfectly chiselled features. I felt my heart expand, the ache in my chest overbearingly breathtaking - like her.

Blue eyes connected with my own and my breathing hitched at the sheer power this woman held over me, the love I felt for her spilling over into the grey day, making the sun shine so much brighter, making my world spin just that little bit faster.

She stood outside the tearooms and held out her hand, which I took, the connection vibrating through me. I looked at her again and she was staring at our intermingled fingers, and I knew ... knew she had felt the same thing. Her eyes lifted and met mine. Tears sparkled, ready for release from those wonderful blue orbs.

Concern flooded through me. 'What's the matter, honey? What's upset you?'

She sniffed and smiled weakly, her hand leaving my grip to swipe at an errant tear that had escaped down her cheek. 'I'm ... I'm ... you make me so happy.'

I cupped her face and wiped the remaining moisture away with my thumb.

'Ditto, honey. Ditto.'

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Over an extremely large pot of tea, we laughed, joked and bonded even more than I thought possible. Kate was so witty, so full of life ... so different to the woman I had first met all those months ago.

'Whatcha buy?'

'Nothing.' I felt protective over my pencils. Her eyebrow lifted into her hair revealing her scepticism, then her eyes lowered to my carrier bag nestled between our chairs. Blue eyes looked into mine again, daring me to deny it. 'Okay ... okay,' I mock sighed and pulled my bag up, dragging out items for her to see. 'Bookmarks ... pens ... a book ... pencils.' My voice drifted off at the last item.

I lifted my head to see Kate smiling at me in amusement. 'What?'

'Pencils?' Her eyebrow lifted again. 'I thought I saw hundreds of the little fellas in your writing case. Why'd you need more? Fetish, Jameson?' The blush covered my face so bloody quickly, and went even redder as Kate leaned forward, the intent obvious. 'So ... you've got, shall we say ... a penchant for pencils?' A crooked grin ... a raised eyebrow ... a question laced with humour.

Beetroot. I had gone beetroot. The waitress took this opportunity to ask if everything was okay, and I nodded furiously, whilst Kate sat back in her chair looking smug. 'I'll get you for that later,

Thomas.'

'I'm counting on it.' The crooked smile again. Boy, was she gorgeous - I could forgive her anything.

'What's the book?'

I showed her *Wuthering Heights*, but she didn't look too impressed. 'Seen the film ... well, part of it. I'm not one for romance.' I glared at her.

'Film wise that is.' She looked almost angelic.

Then I was off, in obsessive mode, babbling about how it wasn't a love story, it was a tale of revenge, tragedy, regret, jealousy, social taboos and a slight on the farcical laws of the day. *Wuthering Heights* was far from a love story ... it spoke of being denied the choice of who you loved, of conforming, from necessity, to society's rules and expectations.

'Yeah, but what's it about?' She looked a little more intrigued by this point, so I continued. I told her about the outsider, Heathcliff, being brought into the household, how he was badly treated ... beaten and lowered in status by the hateful alcoholic Hindley. It wasn't until I got to the part where Cathy's ghost came back to haunt Heathcliff, from the grave, did I notice her reaction.

Stiff backed in the chair, eyes cold ... uncaring ... although she seemed slightly bewildered. 'Kate ... are you okay?'

'We'd better get back before it gets dark.' A brief wan smile, and she beckoned the waitress for the bill.

What a turn around. One minute she was full of light and laughter, the next ... it made me shudder to see her like that.

Chapter Twenty-Six

We walked to the car in silence, Kate just ahead, arms swinging violently at her sides. I scuttled behind with my carrier bag banging into my legs.

Once on the road, she seemed to ease a little; her hand grabbing the gear stick a little less brutally, and she reduced her speed.

Darkness was creeping across the landscape, blanketing the world, smothering out vestiges of light from the day. I looked out of the window, but saw nothing except her reflection on the glass. I saw her take sly looks at the side of my head, unaware I could see her. The indicator sounded, and I felt the car slow, as she pulled into a lay by that ended on the crest of a hill.

'Need to get some air.' And she was gone, out of the car, striding to the precipice's edge with determination.

I scurried after her, nearly strangling myself with my seatbelt in the process.

Standing behind her reminded me of the Friedrich painting I had seen years ago, the one with the man standing at the edge of a cliff. It had always unnerved me, as the man seemed unaware of what he had, and only focused on something out of his grasp ... something unobtainable.

Well... that was her ... her stance ... the rigidity of her body ... the unwavering focus staring into nothing. Although it wasn't foggy looking over the Worth Valley, the darkness acted like a shroud, her expression showing how she was unclear about what she was seeing. She seemed to be fighting some kind of demon, wrestling with some innate calling that made her stand there on the edge.

I carefully walked up beside her, purposefully avoiding looking at her. I just wanted to make sure she knew I was there for her. The view of the Pennines was breathtaking. Shadows flitting and dancing over the bleak landscape, hiding the ethereal essence of this stepping-stone between earth and heaven.

Cold wind whipped our hair into each other's until it was a tangled mess. I pulled my jacket closer around me, trying to ward off the chill ... the chill not only created by the disappearing sun and the cool wind, but also by Kate's refusal to let me in.

It must have been twenty minutes before she spoke, her voice so low I had to strain my ears to catch her words in the wind.

'You can see them too, can't you?' Emotionless eyes stared straight ahead into the desolate landscape.

'See who?' I moved closer, trying to reach her ... trying to reach into her and ... just ... just ...

Blue eyes turned to face me, despair evident. 'Them.' Her look gripped my heart and froze the blood in my veins. This was surreal. How could she be so full of life ... so carefree one moment, and then the next ...?

I placed my hand on her arm and felt the tension. 'Kate ... please tell me. Who?'

The sob came from nowhere, but I wasn't surprised. I pulled her to me, bringing her head down to rest on my shoulder, whilst my hands rubbed gently across her arms and back.

In between the sobbing I heard her stumbling over words, almost nonsensically, about how they wanted her dead ... wanted to hurt us both. Mothering instincts came over me, and I tried to calm her with soft words, gentle touches ... Vulnerability screamed from her ... this noble, strong woman, who gave the impression of invincibility.

Truth be told, I don't think she was scared ... even now as I held her. What she was displaying now was grief - pure and simple.

The weight of her pulled us down to the ground where I held her shaking body. It would have been a sight to witness: me comforting Kate, shushing her, soothing her fears with gentle strokes and whispered promises. Her head was tucked underneath my chin, and she was cramped up into an almost comical shape, her large frame exceeding the space I had to give her. But we managed.

I slid my fingers through her hair, untangling the knots the wind caused, the silky strands pulling away easily but regrouping into tousled knots again. And then ... I just waited.

And waited.

The shaking stopped, eventually. The pain began to subside, and allowed me to reach her ... allowed me to comfort her.

She tilted her face upwards, capturing my eyes with her own, the sorrow still hidden beneath the surface. My thumb brushed the moisture from her skin. Blue eyes flitted closed and reopened instantly, the sorrow all but gone, but something else taking its place.

'I need to tell you ... need you to know the truth.' A crack in her voice near the end. A slight jerk ... a bump ... a signal to my soul she was going to tell me something I wouldn't like.

I swallowed, nervously. 'What is it, baby?'

Kate sat up, leaving the embrace of my arms so suddenly they had to wait to realise she was gone ... the chill of the early evening causing a shudder to cascade down my spine. But was it the coolness of the day that chilled me? Kate had said something about somebody wanting to hurt us both ... and my heart sped up. I didn't care about myself, but I would kill anybody who touched a hair on this woman's head.

'Tell me, Abbie - you do see them, don't you?'

'Who, sweetheart?'

'The ghosts from the house.'

I stiffened. An obvious yes. Honestly speaking, I hadn't seen the woman or the man since I had come back, but I had seen them. And Kate knew this, didn't she? She had been there when I saw the man lurking near the woods ... she had seen him too ... even told me who he was. She had even told the crowd at the dinner party about the three ghosts. But had I ever told her about her look a like?

'Yes ... I've seen them, but not lately.' I said instead.

'Do you know who they are?'

'You told me the man was an ancestor of yours ... remember? The night of Enid's death?' she nodded her head, her expression pensive.

'And?'

'And ... I saw a woman ...' her face leaned closer to mine, making it near impossible to think straight. 'Who looked a lot like you ...'

'Like me?' She was incredulous. 'Like me? More like you, you mean?'

My turn to look surprised. 'I've never seen any ... *thing* there that looked like me - except me of course. She always looked like you ... but I ... I ... don't really know if I had seen her or dreamt her.' Kate's face told me it was no dream ... I had seen something ... or should I say someone?

We were quiet for a while, trying to digest the information. A sigh burst from her, escaping into the atmosphere in a fine mist.

'My brother used to see them all of the time.' I could hear her swallowing rapidly, trying to control her voice. 'I thought he was imagining things, as you do. He had always suffered with his nerves ... even as a child.' I watched the tear glide effortlessly down her cheek. 'And then when he kept on saying he saw things ... saw people ... who weren't really there ...'

'Go on.'

'Well ... that's why I didn't come back straight away ... I thought he was over reacting ... thought he just needed to get away for a while. He told me he'd seen a man standing at the foot of his bed many times, just staring at him.' She stretched her legs out in front of her groaning at the stiffness there, and giving herself the opportunity to assemble her thoughts. 'He said he looked like us ... you know ... black hair, blue eyes ... but callous and cruel. I don't know why he thought that ... it must have been just a feeling he had.'

'Did he say anything else about him?'

Kate closed her eyes trying to recollect a memory long buried,. Long eyelashes flickered open and she turned to face me, confusion drawn clearly on her chiselled face. 'Well ... actually, yes.' My heart began to thud as I waited for her reply. 'He said it didn't always appear as a man at first ... he would hear something, a scuffling of sorts. Then a bright orb shape would appear to hover ...' she laughed at this point. Dark and cynical laughter. 'Bloody hell ... this sounds like a chapter out of one of those crappy gothic books.' The laugh again. I sat, silent.

A cough sounded from her throat. 'Erm ... where was I? Oh yes ... chapter six ...' A sardonic smile. 'As I was saying, it ... *he* ... appeared as an orb shape sometimes and flitted around the room, taunting him by coming right up to his face. Personally, I don't believe it for a second.'

'But ...' I stammered, 'that happened to me about two weeks after coming to the house.' She

looked me squarely in the face, and I could see her weighing up the options. Either, believe me and her brother and accept that things happen that can't be explained: or disregard everything we had both said and stick with a rational explanation, whatever that could be.

A stream of air trickled through her teeth, an indication she was coming to terms with something, but she didn't say anything more about it.

'Tell me what else, Kate.' I put my arm around her shoulder, needing the contact, and knowing so did she.

A deep breath. A pause. And then she began.

The tale centred on her great great uncle, his wife and his sister, and events leading up to suicide. I was shocked by this admission but stayed quiet throughout.

She told me about William Thomas, an out and out bastard who ruled everyone by fear. Rape, violence and hatred made up his profile. When it came to his sister, Kate's face softened. Katherine Thomas was the complete opposite of him, with a warm, caring way all wrapped up in a beautiful person.

'He took over Forester's Dwell in 1913 ... everyone in the area believed he somehow drove his father into an early grave.' She stopped here, readying herself for the next part of her story. Everything she said after that illustrated a bully, and like all bullies, he was a coward to boot. Tales of how he dodged active duty until it was unavoidable, and how he didn't return straight away after the war.

All the time she was speaking, I couldn't take my eyes from her face. She became enraptured with her tale, adding bits here and there to show how hated the man really was, and how Kate suffered with every action he took. When it came to the part when he returned from war, I was surprised to see her face soften, as I had expected her to become bitter again.

'When he returned, he didn't come alone. He had got married before he went to France.'

'To Vivian.' I stated.

'How ...'

'Just a guess.' I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed her fingers, fingers that were desperately cold. 'Why don't we go and sit in the car? It's bitter out here.' She nodded, and broke away from my arm that was casually draped over her shoulder.

After standing up, unsteadily at first, she offered me her hand to help me up, which I thankfully accepted.

We sat in the car with the heater on full for about ten minutes, trying to warm through our chilled bones. There was no point forcing her to talk until she felt relaxed enough ... so ... I waited for

her to begin again.

'Vivian Wells ... that was her name ... Vivian.' Her face was wistful, like someone talking about someone they had known but lost. 'Poor girl ... she didn't know what hit her when she came up here.' A snort. 'But it wasn't long before the bastard started treating her in the same way as he did everyone else.'

'But why?'

'Why not? Especially after he noticed how well Vivian and Kate were getting on.' Blue eyes met mine in the dim light of the car. 'They were in love ... Vivian and Kate I mean.'

'They were lovers?'

'I don't know if they were lovers, only that they were in love. Kate ... Kate asked Vivian to go away with her ...'

'To the colonies, I know.'

Kate looked at me strangely. I didn't respond, just sat and waited for her to continue. 'Yes ... to the colonies. William found out and forced Vivian to give Kate up.' I looked incredulous at this. 'You must remember, Abbie ... this was 1919. People were not so understanding in those days. Even if it had been with a man ... Jesus ... her family name would have been ruined, let alone running off with another woman.'

I silently nodded, fully understanding how someone could live their life in a sham of a marriage just to save face. At least I had the freedom to eventually get out ... Poor Vivian ... poor Kate for that matter.

'It all happened the night of the Estate ball. Kate had already asked Vivian to leave with her, but she had said no. Kate tried to get her to agree at the party, but William had forced her to publicly deny her. Are you all right, Abbie? Your face ...' I felt the colour drain from me. This was my dream, the one I had had not long after getting to Forester's Dwell.

'She killed herself, didn't she? Kate, I mean?' Kate nodded solemnly. 'Did she throw herself from the Keep?' Another nod. Images flooded through my head of the woman, distraught with rejection, throwing herself from the tower. I could still feel the utter desperation I felt the night I too had wanted to end it all.

The night I had first kissed Kate.

'That wasn't the end of it though. A week later, Vivian drowned herself in the lake.'

My stomach rolled, a flush spread through my body, but a cold sweat clung to me. 'They both ... both ...'

She nodded, her face grim. I started to shake. I don't know why. The lake ... *the lake* I had seen Kate stare into on two occasions, staring like she was in another world.

'Abbie?'

I couldn't answer her. All I could think about was Kate's face staring across the lake, and the words that she had said.

'You've come back to me.'

And her reaction to me being plain old Abbie Jameson - just another guest, even though I hadn't told her my name at the time. She thought I was Vivian for some unknown reason. What she was feeling ... what I thought we were both feeling ... was a remnant of a past love. She was in love with someone who had been dead for nearly ninety years.

The feeling of nausea gave way to anger so quickly I didn't give myself time to think.

I looked at her coldly and the words shot out from between clenched teeth, like my mouth was trying to stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life.

'What the *fuck* is your game?' Kate's eyes widened at my words.

'Can't get the real thing so you thought I'd do ... is that it?' Her mouth was working but the words were stuck somewhere, probably in 1919.

Anger raged. I raged along side it. I was seething with anger, and hurt. I'll admit it now, the thing I did next was totally out of character for me ... honestly.

I slapped her. Hard. So hard my fingers stung like crazy and vibrations shot up my arm. Even in the darkness of the car I could see the mark across her cheek. She hadn't flinched ... not even blinked. Her hand lifted slowly from its resting place on her lap to gently touch the side of her face. Her look was incredulous; eyes that had once been bewitching were now bewildered.

'What have ...'

I didn't give her a chance to finish ... to make up excuses ... to lead me on even further. My hand was on the door handle; not daring to look at her in case I hit her again. I couldn't look at her in case I gave in ... accepted her love for someone else as mine... to love her through me.

The disgust within catapulted my emotions into the dark as the cold air hit my face. Kate clutched wildly at my sleeve, her pleas for me to get back in the car ... her voice thick with panic. I shook myself free dismissing her with my back.

How dare she try to stop me leaving? How dare she lie to me ... lead me on ... pretend I was something more to her than a ... a ... substitute? I was devastated. The anger, I knew, was a mere prelude to a hurt so deep I knew I'd be unable to understand.

I was marching away from the car now, anger making my short legs work that much harder, driving me forward to god knows where. I was in the middle of the Pennines, in January, in the dark. And boy was I pissed.

Garbled mutterings left my lips. Nothing made sense ... and not just the words. This situation ... how could I have let myself get in this deeply? Perhaps my love for her had also been an illusion. Why had I been so stupid? I'd known I wasn't gay. It was that fucking place - Forester's Dwell. I'd even been aware of something 'bewitching' me from the start. It had made me love Kate for its own sick purposes.

I had to break free, but Kate was behind me. I could feel her ... hear her shouting for me to stop ... the panic again ... I could feel the thudding of her boots on the road. I walked on.

A firm grip landed at the top of my left arm and I was spun around to face her, her eyes blazing with utter panic. I struggled in her grip, tried to pull away, but she held me fast.

'Abbie ... Abbie ... for God's sake ... stop!' The tone was desperate. She began to shake me, causing me to struggle more. Then I kicked her ... hard ... right in the shin.

'For fuck's sake!' But she let go ... and I was off at a run.

Grabbing fingers clutched at my jacket and pulled me around. I didn't have time to fight her off as she kissed me, violently, crushing my lips to hers like she was trying to prove something to them ... prove something to me.

Her arms held me fast, pinning my rebellious body into place; suffocating the need within me to fight. The kisses were unforgiving; her mouth ... unrelenting; her tongue demanding entrance, ignoring the tightness of my lips. Lips that were swollen ... bruised ... aching to open and let her in.

And they did.

The kiss held flames of passion, which were unleashed inside my mouth, causing my insides to ignite and forget the reason why I had left her ... the reason I had to leave.

My traitorous hands slipped up her arms and around her neck, only to gather in her hair and to stroke the side of her throat. A moan filled my mouth and I felt a burning need in my core to take this woman here ... to take her ... now. It felt too good, standing on top of a hill, in the dark, in the cold, in the arms of this woman. Too good ... my lips falling headlong into the sensuous disillusionment of the moment.

My body had turned on me ... defected through sheer need of her, conspirators in its desire. My thigh slipped between her legs, needing to hear her moan, groan, whisper *my* name ... let me know she knew it was *me* she was with. Her fingers dug into my flesh, pumping it, kneading it, digging into my backside, forcing me closer into her.

Her lips ripped away from mine, leaving them starving and bare, only to pull me into her, the side of my face crushing against her breasts. Heartbeats hammered against my eardrums, panting breaths landing on my hair, her arms mashing me into her. I gave in willingly.

Words softly spoken landed in my ear. 'I love you, Abbie ... only you ... only ever you ...' Her arms released their hold, symbolically freeing me, allowing me to leave if I wanted.

I didn't.

Ever.

I looked into her blue eyes, and was swallowed inside. They were glistening and so full ... I gasped at the sight of them. There was no denying what I saw reflected there ... it was pure unadulterated love.

Love ... for me.

I pulled her head down until her lips brushed softly against my own. And I loved her. Pure and simple. Maybe the house and its ghosts had played their part, but if this love wasn't real, I doubted if anything was.

'Let's go.' Simple words ... short and to the point.

But behind those simple words, a message ... and so much promise.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The atmosphere within the car was thick with longing, and the journey home seemed to take an age. I caught myself stroking her arm as it held the gear stick: her strong forearm, rippled under my touch. Thoughts of how her arms felt around me increased my yearning for her.

I can't remember how we got back to her room. I can't remember getting out of the car, going past reception and up the stairs. All I can remember is what happened as soon as the door clicked shut behind us. I was intoxicated ... under the influence ... using my homing device of the drunken me ... to stagger home ... with her.

Kate's mouth met mine in a frenzy, swallowing me inside, as she pinned me to the door. I felt my coat fall from me, my shirt ripped from my body, buttons scuttling into hiding, afraid of what was to come.

I was not idle. I pulled her sweater over her head, taking in the dishevelled look. Her hair was tangled and primitive, her eyes focused on my mouth, my lips, my face. The juices wept from

me, amazed at the sheer force one look could do. I was helpless ... captured by her look ... arrested by her will ... spellbound by the moment.

Nipping teeth assaulted my throat. A parody of past kisses. They showed their superiority in an agonisingly visceral way ... but with a gentleness that belied the primal act of dominance. It was primitive perfection ... the basis of hunger ... an act of survival.

Survive I did. She slammed me harder against the door, her hips pumping into me, her hands frantic in their journey to liberate the fire blazing from below ... from above ... from in between. I wanted to feel her skin next to mine, her body rubbing against mine.

I pushed her away. Pulled myself from the cold wood. 'Not here. Bed. Naked.' She looked at me, desire evident, and swiftly started removing her last items of clothing. I did the same and met her on the bed.

She was on top of me as soon as I landed on the mattress; her face buried itself between my breasts, her hands wanton in their journey over supple skin. My legs wrapped themselves around her waist and I lifted my body up to greet her need. I could feel the juices flowing from her, trickling down her thighs in readiness for this moment. She lifted me, her muscular arms easily taking the weight of my body, and pulled me closer into her. I straddled her, comfortably, exquisitely pushing downwards, hunting for purchase on her body.

Her fingers slipped in from behind to tantalise my core from the back. Soft then hard ... soft then hard. I couldn't stop the rhythm ... didn't want to. I just wanted more.

A growl left my lips as I lunged at her throat, wanting to bite my way inside her, eat her whole, swallow her up until she was part of me. Her fingers were tormenting me, the pressure constant but becoming too slow and too soft for the tumultuous emotions churning through me.

'Fuck me, Kate ... Oh God ... *please fuck me.*' I had never asked anyone to do that before, but I needed her to be harder, take control, drive me over the edge. Her kisses became more insistent, and maybe a little crazed.

Then, as if by sheer will alone, she gently lifted me away until I was kneeling a short distance from her, the only physical contact we shared was her hands on my hips. I was panting ... and a little confused. Why had she stopped?

'Turn around, baby.' A voice of velvet, deep, rich ... seductive. Who could refuse? I turned on the spot and felt her come up behind me. Felt her breasts on my back, rubbing into my skin, nipples carving her name deep into my flesh. 'Lean forward, honey.'

And I did, leaving my back cold and exposed, missing the contact of her immediately.

Her fingers danced along my back, tracing the outline of my spine ... up and down ... up and down. Fingers turned into palms, ... up and down ... up and down, each time getting lower and lower, until they cupped my backside, only to escape to the top again, leaving me wanting.

I felt her kneel behind me, her hands continuing their action. But instead of her hands cupping my rear, one ventured along the crevice and downwards, towards the well of fluid that waited for her, the other gripped my hip and pulled me to her.

My body was rocking, scooting back into her, needing her to take me again and again and again.

Two fingers entered me, and I simultaneously pushed onto her and groaned loudly, the exquisite feeling of being filled clouding my senses. I could feel her kneeling behind me, grinding herself into me as she took me from behind. Another finger entered and then another. I couldn't stop the feeling cascading through me, this pleasure ... this fulfilment.

Feverish bodies ... hands ... hips ... pumped and ground and throbbed into each other. The image of her fucking me from behind made me crazy with desire. The need within was escalating at a frightening rate ... and I was powerless to her thrusting, the slapping of skin on skin, the feeling of being filled by her hand.

Faster and faster ... I couldn't hold on much longer. Faster and faster ... I was going to come. Faster and faster ... I could hear Kate's breathing behind me, grunting out each plunge she meted out inside me and behind me, within me and on me.

A low keening noise started within my gut and steadily made its way up through my chest and out through my mouth until it sounded loud even to my ears. I knew I was coming ... the sensations were rampant ... the need was overbearing in its intensity ... the room was fading away and I was slowly getting sucked into sweet oblivion.

'Kkkkkkaaaaatttee ... oohhh ggggooooodddd ooooohhh gggooooodddd!' and I was over into ecstasy, over into the wide blue yonder, over into the place where reality ceases to exist, and I did so, screaming out her name.

She continued to plunge into me, drawing out the sensation of my coming into an agonising pleasure. Her hips were pounding into me and I could hear her grunting faster and faster until ... *'Aaaaaaaaaaabbbbiiiiieeee ... oooohhh gggooodddd ...ssswweeeettt... jjjjeesssuuss!'* Juices splashed onto my skin. I wasn't sure if they were hers, or mine, but they made us slip and slide together, glorifying in the feel of our joined coming.

I fell forward, the pressure of kneeling too much. Kate landed on top of me, sweating and panting into my hair, her body full length over my own. Our breathing was erratic; hearts hammered loudly into each other.

We lay there, struggling to compose ourselves ... struggling to calm our raging blood.

Steadily, our breathing calmed, and hearts began to pump with a sense of normalcy.

It was weird ... but ... our heartbeats ... weird. The rhythms of our heartbeats were the same, like they were synchronised ... like they were one. And then mine skipped ...

Kate began to nibble the back of my neck, soft lips danced over saturated skin ... and I forgot the heartbeats ... forgot everything apart from the feel of those lips, that tongue, gliding down my spine, down down down, until they landed at their target.

And then ... I forgot to breathe.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We lay quietly. Dawn sneaked through the window and cast shadows around the room, fingering everything, touching it with her cool grey fingertips, bringing light back into the world.

We had slept little and exhaustion had taken its toll, but I didn't want to miss this feeling of being held by her, lying in her arms ... being held by *her*.

The previous evening's lovemaking had started fierce, primal, an affirmation of each other, a taking of sorts. But it had ended so beautifully, tenderly, gracefully. Celestial. That's a better word ... celestial. The feelings we shared didn't belong on this earth. They were ... divine.

Eyes closed and we slept on and off until the sun was high in the sky. A loud knocking on the door caused a string of mumbled curses to pour from Kate's mouth as she untangled me from her body.

Minutes later, she returned, with a tray full of delicious smells met my nose and kick started my stomach into consciousness.

'Jenny thought we might be hungry so sent us some brunch.' I felt a stab of guilt about Jenny and her obvious attraction, but the aroma drifting from the tray pushed all guilt out of the picture.

I slid off the bed and slipped on a t-shirt, Kate's scent covered my body in another layer of her instantly. I smiled. She looked at me and she raised an eyebrow. I raised one back. A crooked grin covered her face.

We ate and chatted about sundries, comfortable in the vagueness of conversation.

But ... being a woman - a nosey one at that ... I had to know.

'Tell me about Vivian.' Blue eyes shot up from her task of buttering a piece of toast, held my gaze and then went back to their previous task. Annoyance roared up inside me, and I was just about to go off again when she spoke.

'Vivian ... well ... I've seen her on and off ever since I was a child.' Both my eyebrows rose in surprise at this nugget of information, remembering what she had said about her brother and that she thought he was hallucinating. 'But ... this past year ... God ... it's like she wants to tell me

something ... like there's something I've got to do, but I don't know what. I honestly thought Jim was lying, and I never told a soul about what I had seen.'

It was the same way I had been feeling but I kept quiet and allowed her to continue.

'I keep finding myself in funny places ... doing weird things. I wake up in the night covered in sweat and feel I need to *do* something ... do *anything*, but I don't know what it is.' She dropped the toast back on her plate, her appetite lost. I scooped her hand into my own, trying to show her I understood ... and boy, did I.

The silence between us was waiting to be broken, and break it I did. 'Same here.'

Questioning blue eyes begged me to continue. 'Even before I came here ... I ... well ... I had dreamed of her, of Kate ... no, not you ... Kate, the other Kate.' I leaned over and gently kissed her lips, the contact gone even before it began. 'I kept on dreaming things ... hearing things ... believing I could see things if I just looked hard enough.'

I lay back onto the pillows. She moved the tray from the bed and scooted up to lie beside me. 'My marriage was over, I couldn't take anymore ... something was niggling me to get away ... like ... if I got away, everything would sort itself out.' Her fingers were softly stroking my forearm, and her expression was of concern. 'Then Janet offered to pay ...' Kate mock gasped, and I laughed, breaking the tension, 'Yes *pay* for me to get away, to regroup and get my act together. She said she hadn't even asked for one of your brochures, but it had arrived in the post, the day before I told her my muse had flown ... and I wouldn't be writing anymore.'

'But ... if I remember rightly, your agent's office sent an email asking for a brochure. We don't just send them out to anyone.' A kiss landed on the end of my nose. 'I'll have to check that out.'

She leaned back on the bed, stretched her long legs out and made a contented mewling noise, before she turned her face towards me again. Her expression held expectation.

'What?'

'You haven't finished. What happened when you got here?'

So I told her ... told her everything, the word on the computer screen, the orb, the crying in the hallways, the figure in the bathroom, and the presence in the dining room. I told her how I had seen someone just like her throw herself from the top of the Keep. Her face showed incredulity. Everything was now out in the open.

I even told her about my dream, the vivid one, how I thought she was between my legs, although I was blushing furiously as I spoke.

Her response was not what I expected. 'When was that?'

My turn to look surprised. 'Erm ... I'm not too sure of the date, but it was after Enid's note ... the

night we nearly ... erm, kissed.'

She threw her head back and laughed. I sat there stunned for a minute and then a little annoyed. 'What's so funny, Thomas?'

I had to wait until she composed herself enough to speak, then she starting laughing again. It was only the expression on my face that stopped her, made her swallow a couple of times before she continued. And by this time I was pissed off - big style.

'Sorry about that, honey.' I cocked my head to the side and glared at her through narrowed eyes. 'Honestly ... I wasn't laughing at you ... I ...' I narrowed them even more. 'It's me I'm laughing at! No ... don't get up ... sorry ...' and she started bloody laughing again.

'That's it, Thomas. I'm going for a shower.'

'Wait ... wait! I'm sorry ... please!' She grabbed my arm and pulled me back onto the bed, laying her body across me so I couldn't move. 'Abbie ... listen ... I'm not laughing at you!'

'Bloody looks like it,' was my muffled response.

'No ... on the night you said ... the night that Enid died. Well ... I had a dream too.' I was struggling like crazy to escape from underneath her. Then I stopped.

'What did you say?'

'I said ... I had a dream that night also - quite a vivid one.'

The blush was creeping up her face, making her glow. What an unusual experience seeing Kate blush ... she looked cute in an extremely red kind of way. 'What about?'

'You ... or as I thought at the time.' She cleared her throat. 'Let's just say that what you experienced in your dream ... well ... I did too.'

'You felt someone doing that to you?' The pitch in my voice had risen.

'Not exactly. I was ... erm ... well it ... I was the person doing that to you. You know, what you experienced. I did too.' She looked shy, worried about how I would respond. So I returned the compliment.

I threw my head back and laughed. She looked startled for a moment but then she joined in.

What a sight we must have looked ... both half naked ... her sprawled half across me, pinning me in place, and we were both laughing about the most embarrassing thing we would ever have to admit.

It was wonderful.

Nearly thirty minutes later, we had finished our brunch, emptied the teapot and talked about all that we knew up to now. The facts seemed to be slipping slowly, but surely, into place.

Firstly, we had both seen William and agreed he looked like an evil bastard. Next, Kate had seen Vivian and I had seen Kate ... but we hadn't seen our 'look-a-likes'. After that ... dreams, voices, hallucinations, smells - mine lavender - Kate's Lily of the Valley ... things that went bump in the night ... and on and on.

Kate hadn't seen the journal though, only the page found in Enid's room, and that wasn't fully read until recently. I told her about the writing in the corner of the sheet '*AJ - this is you.*' She looked puzzled, and when I reminded her they were my initials, she looked down right confused.

Eventually, we came up with a conclusion. Not a brilliant one by any stretch of the imagination, but a conclusion of sorts.

It seemed as if we were needed in some way and all we had to do now was to figure out what for.

Easier said than done.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Days came and went with no sign from our look-a-likes and their evil companion. For the last part I was thankful, I didn't relish bumping into him any time soon, especially now I had a fuller understanding of who he was.

Our relationship was getting stronger. Stronger than I ever thought possible. And every minute spent with Kate made me realise what I had been missing all these years. Obviously, that steered my mind to my ex - unfortunately.

My solicitor called and set a court date, although they still hadn't heard anything from Pete. It should still be standard procedure even though he was contesting the pre nuptial on the grounds he was a sponging bastard. The police were still looking out for him for the damage he had caused on both Janet's property, and mine, but I doubted they could actually pin that on him. Even though he was caught on camera entering my house, he still had the alibi of having lived at that address, and no actual evidence of trashing the place. As for Janet's - there was nothing - no fingerprints - nothing.

I had to just wait it out ... see what would happen in London when I went down for the hearing. I wasn't going to spend any more time on him; he had had enough of my life already. The rest belonged with Kate.

As for being a couple of Nancy Drews, we were, in a word, shite. Everything we tried to do came up blank. We searched all through the family records - zilch. The only things we came up

with were the same things we already knew.

We had to think this through ... sit down and think without sitting too near each other, and especially not close enough to touch. That always took us off task. So sue me - I was totally and utterly head over heels in love with her and I liked to show it ... if you know what I mean?

It was nearly the end of the week when she came up with 'The Plan'. It was so simple; I was surprised it had taken us so long to figure it out.

The first step was easy. Find their graves and see if we could deduce anything from that.

Unlike many of the larger houses, Forester's Dwell did not have its own cemetery. Stranger still, only Kate's grave, not Vivian's, was to be found in the family plot at the local church. Very simply it read:

*Katherine Thomas
Aged 24
1896 - 1919
daughter of
James and Elizabeth Thomas
and
sister of William*

It seemed strange to be looking at the grave of the woman I had seen so vividly on many occasions, never mind what else had gone on. Kate stood there, staring at the grey stone slab that commemorated her ancestor's short life.

Next to Kate's grave stood the grave of her mother, father and brother. All in the same grave, but she was not included. Even more odd.

As if reading my thoughts, Kate muttered, 'It's because she committed suicide. She's lucky they allowed her to be buried in the churchyard at all.'

Sadness filled me. That poor woman. Even in death she had been cast out from society, her death mirroring her life ... 'Not acceptable ... not the norm'.

I stood there, staring at the etched words, Kate moved to the other side of the grave, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her stoop down and tug at something. She was pulling weeds from a grave that stood about ten feet away, her face solemn.

Quietly, I walked up behind her and rested my hand on her shoulder, trying to offer some kind of support, for what - I didn't know. Until I saw the gravestone:

*James Thomas 1942 - 2000
Died aged 58 years
Beloved husband of*

Elizabeth Thomas 1948 - 2000
Died aged 52
Both taken tragically from our lives
May they find peace together.

Her parents. My God ... how awful. They had died in the same year, and 'tragically'. No wonder Kate's eyes were sometimes filled with sadness, and loss.

Underneath those names was another, newer, inscription.

James Thomas 1972 - 2002
Beloved son of the above
May he find peace at last.

'James was the lucky one. At least he got to be buried with the people he loved.' Her voice was melancholic, yet tinged with hope for some reason.

I rubbed her shoulders, feeling the muscles dance underneath my fingertips, feeling the tension ebb away. She continued tidying the grave, and I felt a little intrusive, so I left her with her thoughts and her family and walked over to the yew trees that were standing a little way off.

Her lips were moving, like she was having a conversation with someone, and then it dawned on me ... she was talking to them ... telling them about what was happening ... telling them how she was feeling. I could see it written all over her face ... the unburdening.

And then she smiled, such a sweet smile; I thought my heart would melt. She looked so young, so innocent, not at all like the woman everybody knew. She was their daughter, his sister, and a part of a family that was separated by something unavoidable, something so tragic. And my heart wept for her ... wept with her.

After what seemed to be a matter of seconds, she was standing straight, dusting the dampness from the bottom of her jeans. Blue eyes turned to me; sadness flitted away to be replaced by a twinkle ... *just for me*. I smiled back, big and wide, trying to convey all I felt for her in one small action. And with one last look to the stone, she walked towards me, and with every step I saw the confidence flooding back into her.

As she neared, I put my hand out, which she took within her warm one and squeezed gently. No words were spoken ... it was just understood ... we gave each other comfort and protection by just being there.

'Hungry?'

'Aren't I always?'

Her face split open as the laughter came out, shaking her head from side to side. 'Woman ... you crack me up.' And she set off laughing again, with me, joining in, before pulling her in for a hug.

God ... she always felt so good.

Lunch was a simple affair. Chicken salad and orange juice. Very healthy. Until dessert that is ... chocolate brownies covered in extra thick cream.

'Don't you ever throw up?' The amusement on her face whilst watching me eat made me drag it out even longer. I licked the spoon slowly after each spoonful, making mewling noises and fluttering my eyes closed in orgasmic pleasure. I caught her swallowing hard a few times, but her eyes never left my mouth. At one point she even licked her lips. 'Do you want a taste?' I asked her, the double meaning clear as I poked my tongue out and slipped it around my mouth.

Another deep gulp ... and was that a blush? Gotcha. I giggled like a girl and quickly finished my desert. No point dragging it out ... didn't want it losing its appeal now, did I?

We discussed all the information we had to date. Although it seemed quite a lot, it still didn't help us know why we were needed.

'We're missing something ... something really simple. We need to think ... what have we missed?' I nodded at what she said, but my mind was completely blank. Each word bouncing off the vacuous space between my brain and my skull. I think the smile I gave her reflected my state of mind, 'Are you okay, Abbie? You look ... you look ...'

'Simple.'

'Well ... if you put like that ...'

'Very funny, Kate.' I asserted myself and tried to look intelligent. 'Now ... we need to think.'

Quietness enshrouded us, leaving us to contemplate our next move. Ideas soon came freely enough, but they were, basically, crap.

'What we need to do is find out where Vivian is buried, then we can move on from there.'

'How would we find that out? It didn't even mention her in the family history.'

'We need to get a list of all the cemeteries around this area, and systematically go through them one by one.'

A memory shot through my brain so fast it seemed it was connected by Broadband. It was excitably buzzing inside my head, but I knew I had to ask Kate.

'Enid's funeral ...' Blue eyes met mine in puzzlement. 'Did you go to the funeral?'

'No ... I couldn't get away. I was in London sorting through some investments. Why?'

'I saw you ... well ... I thought it was you. In the churchyard when we were all standing around the grave.' She shook her head, telling me there was no way it could have been her. 'It was weird. At first I thought it was you, but then ... I ... you just seemed to vanish, like into thin air.'

'You know what we need to do?' She leaned forward, her face inches from mine. My brain fogging just through the close proximity of her. An eyebrow rose slowly into her hair as she waited for me to get myself in some kind of order. As if trying to discharge the fog in my head, as well as answer her question, I shook my head from side to side. 'Well, Watson ... it is time to go to the cemetery.'

'We've just ...'

'Not that one. Where Enid is buried.'

With that, she grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet and towards the door. I only just had time to grab my jacket from the back of the chair.

She was so full of authority, and gave a brilliant impression of knowing what she was doing.

God ... she made me hot.

It took ages to get information from the people at the cemetery.

Eventually, it was the grounds man who pointed us in the right direction, towards a small grey building tucked away at the side of the entrance. Inside a really dismal smell greeted us. A sickly sweet scent that clung to the back of our throats and made my stomach pitch.

Books were laid out around the room, containing the names of lost lives.

'Well ... at least we know she died in 1919,' Kate's voice cut through the cloggy atmosphere. I just nodded, not trusting the chocolate brownie to play nice.

Even though we knew when she died, it still took us nearly twenty minutes to find the right book, and then the right section. But find it we did. There ... written in a fine script hand 'Vivian Thomas nee Wells'. And although I knew we were going to find it, I still felt sad, not because we had found where she was buried, but because it was confirmation she was really dead.

I know. Weird.

We took down the number she had been assigned 'VT281219'. It's amazing how we all become numbers eventually.

The map on the wall showed us where we should go, and I felt a jolt of surprise as we

approached the yew tree where I had seen 'Kate' the day of Enid's funeral. 'Are you okay, Abbie?' Kate's voice ... so soft ... so full of concern. I didn't care we were outside, amongst the dead. I stood on my tiptoes and lightly brushed my lips over hers. A smile broke out on her face, making my heart skip around my chest, like a puppy chasing its tail.

Just think. I wasn't gay! I laughed aloud and Kate looked at me curiously. 'Don't worry, honey. Just putting some ghosts to rest.' Her face looked even more confused. 'Come on ... let's find Vivian.'

The gravestone was unkempt and uncared for. A forgotten plot of land that held a woman who had died in sin ... died by her own hand ... died of a broken heart.

Vivian Thomas nee Wells
1898 - 1919
Aged 21

Twenty-one! The poor young girl. Twenty-one. I expected her to be as old as me or older for some reason or other. She must have been a mere girl when she met and married that bastard.

Kate's face showed the same shock as mine. That would mean she was only nineteen at the most when she got married. My God. Imagine spending your young life with a man like William Thomas (an easy picture for me to imagine. I know, I had first hand knowledge) but then to die so tragically, so young, and the minute you discovered happiness.

And all because of what society would say.

Anger bubbled within me. I wanted to scream out the unfairness of it all, how no one can choose who to love - love chooses us ... not the other way around. And to think ... even in death they weren't together. No wonder their spirits were so troubled.

Anger ebbed away to be replaced by acidic melancholy, a painful echo that seeped into everything I was or ever hoped to be. Mankind had so much to answer for. How can love be wrong? How can showing someone you care be wrong?

Better still ... how can hatred be the right thing to do? Ostracising two people because they didn't conform to the expected norm - was that right? Driving two innocent souls to their death because they were in love - is this the given? What kind of race are we who can hate more easily than we can love; who will kill so much more quickly than we will agree, or even agree to disagree?

Loving is not a sin.

Though, ignoring love is ...

Exhaustion overtook me. I think it was emotional exhaustion from finding out what bastards we

can all be at times. Even me. I had looked down at the possibility of being gay, just because I couldn't face the thought of not fitting in. How trite is that? How unbelievably coarse and ignorant?

If I'm honest, I think I was more disgusted with myself than the world in general. I had the ability to rise above prejudice, but I chose the easy option. The safe bet. I realised homophobia isn't necessarily from straight people - we are all guilty of this at some time in our life, often directed at ourselves.

In no time at all we were back at Forester's Dwell. We were quiet on the way home, reflecting on those poor women's short lives. In a strange way, it brought things home to me, mainly about my relationship with Kate. Although society still has some ignorant people lurking there, we were a damn sight more fortunate than our predecessors.

We at least had some modicum of freedom, the ability to live and love without the serious threats those women had to deal with. I know ... some people are still in that situation, whether it comes from society or within, but at least we are moving forward to some degree, slowly, but hopefully, surely.

I loved Kate ... loved her. Life without her seemed impossible now. I had come to know the woman behind the mask she used to wear, know her gentleness, her tenderness, her passion, her beliefs and fears. Even the little things like how she liked her coffee, that she couldn't stand Marmite ... not even the smell. I even knew she always checked inside her boots before she put them on in case something had decided to take up residence.

Little things. And it's the little things that build and build and make the big things matter.

We showered and had something to eat, the quietness not affecting us at all ... happy just to be together.

I decided to get some writing done and Kate had to sort out some of the affairs of the hotel but before she left, she pulled me into her arms and gave me gentle kiss. So tender, so featherlike, it could have been a figment of my imagination. Her arms surrounded me and held me in such comfort, the smell of her filling my senses.

And then she was gone, leaving me standing there, filled with her.

Bliss.

I tried to write, but the memories of the day distracted me. So, after about three hours writing nonsense, I decided to call it a night, even though it was only about nine thirty.

Drained. That's the word. Drained. Leaving me an empty shell that contained nothing but air and my thoughts of Kate.

Resigned, I changed into a t-shirt and climbed into bed, sleep already had me in his grasp.

Chapter Thirty

Something woke me up, I'm not sure what, but it made me wake with a start. I knew instantly Kate wasn't next to me. Her side of the bed was empty and cold.

I'm not sure how long I had been asleep, I couldn't see the clock for some strange reason.

Another noise, but further away from me than before.

I sat up, my stomach in knots ... my heart racing.

Someone had been in here with me, and deep down I knew it hadn't been Kate. I also knew they were just on the other side of the door.

Well, if we were going to see this out once and for all, I couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. I decided to investigate.

Yes ... I know ... what is it with people in films when something evil is lurking in a house they have desire to follow it? The big difference was ... the presence didn't *seem* to be evil ... it just *seemed* to want me, for some unexplainable reason.

Decision made, I threw the covers back and slipped out of bed. The room was light enough to see my way to the door, and I quickly pulled on my slippers.

The corridor was empty. Dimly lit and eerily quiet. A cold shiver travelled down from my neck to the base of my spine. I was freaking myself out ... there was nothing *th...*

A shuffling sound startled me, followed by a voice. Soft, warm, inviting. I couldn't catch what was being said, but I knew the words were directed at me. The tone was beguiling ... captivating ... begging me to follow.

Although I felt like I would either pass out with fear, pee myself or shake so much I couldn't move (or all three), I moved forward ... nervous ... shitting my pants ... but I followed.

The hallway's lights, although already dim, seemed to flicker as I made my way towards the voice. Words were becoming clearer now, and I started to catch snippets of what was being asked ... until finally, I could hear the same refrain being whispered down the corridor.

'Come to me. Come to me. Come to me.' Over and over again. 'Come to me.'

I felt hypnotised ... unable to ignore the voice that was so full of loss ... grief ... crying out for me to help it in some way ... crying out for me to go to them.

Who was I to refuse?

I swallowed my fear, sucked in a breath and left the safety of the doorway.

The voice led me further down the labyrinth of hallways, appearing different to how I remembered them in the cold light of day. To say I was unnerved would be an understatement. My mind was babbling ... I always babble when I'm scared ... actually there was one time ... I know ... I know ...

There I was, in the middle of the night, in a t-shirt and slippers (and no bloody underwear), standing at the open doorway leading to the Keep. Standing there ... listening to the moans and pleas from someone I couldn't see ... but could feel. Feel the despair, the ultimate reliance that I, in some fucked up way, could help.

Another deep breath and I climbed the first step: my heart literally in my mouth. I could hear its incessant thumping in my ears. I could have gotten Kate, but I doubted a ghost would wait around. We needed to resolve this once and for all, and unfortunately, it seemed the task had fallen to me.

I can do this. No problem, I told myself.

Big mistake.

My legs knew I shouldn't go. My hands knew I should go back to bed. My stomach was too involved in conversation with my heart to even think about telling me to leave.

The stairs loomed ahead and blurred in and out as panic set in. But that voice? Begging me ... the anguish far outreaching the fear that gripped me.

There it was. The door leading to the keep, slightly open, expectant. Shit shit shit. I held my arm out and timidly pushed it outwards. Cold air rushed to greet me, circling my exposed body, caressing overheated skin. Trying to placate, trying to calm, trying to stop me turning and running for my life.

The moon was trying to hide behind the clouds, poking out briefly to spy on what I was doing, believing it was invisible, believing if I thought I was alone I may turn and leave. But how could I? You understand, don't you? Well ... don't you?

Truthfully speaking, I didn't. Now I was on the rooftop the voice had gone ... disappeared ... vanished into my own imaginings. Once again ... shit.

Then I saw her. Not in her usual spot near the edge, but further back, her face turned away, but I

knew it was her ... I could feel it was her. Her shoulders were heaving up and down in the throes of weeping, but ... muted ... deafeningly silent.

'Kate?' Nothing. No reaction. The figure stoic but broken. And again, 'Kate?' This time I stepped out into the night air, going for broke.

The shoulders froze, in mid motion, but she still had her back to me. 'Kate? Look at me, Kate.' Nothing. 'Look at me.'

She made as if to turn, my heart expectant, the knowledge of the grief I would see there gripped my throat. Then she stopped herself, and with agonising precision walked away ... walked away from me ... me, who was standing there waiting ... waiting to see those blue, blue eyes ... eyes that in this lifetime meant everything to me.

I watched her move effortlessly to the corner of the Keep, and stand there once again. I was transfixed with her ... mesmerised with her grace, her posture, her unwillingness to look at me.

'Come to me.' Spoken from the heart ... fluttered on the air ... to land, effortlessly inside me, only to pull the muscles in my chest into an agony of want ... of a need so strong, I was powerless to step one foot in front of the other.

She still didn't turn around.

And then she was gone, to the left... and I was left there ... alone ... and bewildered ... and maybe just a little angry.

I looked in the direction where she had disappeared and noticed a door ... a great big fucking door ... how on earth had I missed it? I hadn't. I was convinced I would have seen something so obvious.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I reached out to take the rusted handle, pushing down the latch. It was stuck. So I pushed down harder, feeling the metal give just a little before I felt something ... or should I say, *someone*, behind me.

This wasn't like before when I saw Kate ... that feeling of longing and despair that exuded from her spirit. No. This wasn't something I could easily mistake with how I felt when she was near. This was ... how can I say it? This presence that was behind me was nothing short of evil. Plain and simple.

I didn't want to turn around. I didn't want to see what was waiting behind me, and God did I know it was waiting. Apart from the excruciating feeling of being hated, of someone wanting to inflict harm on me, I could now hear short rasping breaths, like the person was so angry they could barely contain themselves.

And I didn't want that aimed at me. I hoped if I just stood there long enough it may go away ... leave ... get fed up with being ignored.

I wasn't that lucky.

I was impelled to turn around. Slowly, I released my gaze from the door to see what was behind me. To see if I had been imagining things again.

Unfortunately, I hadn't.

He was there. I knew it was him although I couldn't see all of his face, just the eyes ... blue ... cold ... filled with something I hoped I would never see directed at me.

Pure hatred.

He stood about ten feet away, but I could feel the anger rolling off him in waves ... all directed at me.

Fuck.

And then, fuck again.

I couldn't go anywhere. I was trapped. He was standing directly in my path of escape, blocking the only exit.

Shit. I was in deep shit.

He started to move closer, each step felt like a slamming thump in my chest. I knew my ticket was up ... knew if he got to me ... well ... it wasn't going to be a happy ever after was it?

I pushed my back against the door, trying to ease myself through the wood, hoping I could morph into nothing ... into thin air. Groaning hinges alerted me that maybe I did have an escape after all, and I turned to frantically shake the lock which was looking rather worse for wear by this point.

I knew he was close. I could feel the hairs standing up at the nape of my neck; my spine was giving way in sheer fright, and for some unexplainable reason I wanted to laugh. Hysterically.

A growl came from behind, inhuman, and I gave the door a swift kick, nearly breaking my toes in the process.

The next thing I knew I was flying through the air, the handle leaving its place in my sweaty hand to swing back with the door. As I stumbled backwards, I could see his silhouette blocking my view outside. Then something seemed to grip my leg and down I went. My last lucid thought was ... plain and simply ...

'Fuck.'

Chapter Thirty-One

I don't know how long I was knocked out for, all I knew was when I opened my eyes I could barely see. The room I was in had a stench that made my insides churn ... musty ... old ... damp, and there was only a small sliver of light coming through the shutters that guarded the window to the outside world.

Pains shot up and down my back as I slowly realised I was slumped on top of something hard and uneven. I shifted one leg from under the other, trying to ease the throbbing cascading down the backs of my legs. An involuntary groan left my lips as I tried to sit up, the surface I was on top of being of no assistance.

My head pulsated, the nerves inside screaming for mercy as I attempted to get up ... but failed ... miserably.

The room was freezing, and I could see my own breath leaving my body in a fine mist. Numbness was starting to creep into my bones, the coldness taking hold. I was only in a t-shirt and slippers for Christ's sake, and it was the middle of winter. The tips of my fingers were beginning to lose all sense of feeling, and I was worried that if I stayed exposed to this temperature I would be in serious trouble.

Eventually, I got to my feet, every joint screaming in protest, and dragged my sorry arse to the door, frantically rubbing the blood back into my arms.

Locked.

I pulled the handle again. It didn't budge. Panic set in now. I was stuck in the room at the top of the house; nobody knew I was here.

Kate's image appeared in my mind. Shit ... she would be worried sick. I pulled at the handle again, really putting some strength behind it now. Nothing. It just rattled and groaned back into place.

Shit shit shit.

Unbelievably, the room was actually getting colder, and the frenzied rubbing up and down my arms did nothing to ward off the chill that had rooted itself deeply inside. I needed to find a way out ... and bloody soon.

My eyes scanned the dark room, resting on the strips of light that had painted themselves kaleidoscopically around the walls. Piles of crap were everywhere. It was like a storeroom of some sort, but it also appeared to have not seen the light of day for years.

The darkness was not helping. If I banged myself once I did it a thousand times. My hands were

my eyes for the most part, fumbling and feeling their way around, searching for something that could help me.

I felt clothing of some description under my hands and lifted it closer to my face, trying to catch the rays of light in the process. A shawl type thing appeared in my hands and I hugged it to me in excitement. Fuck - it stunk to high heaven. Well ... at times like this you can't be choosy.

Slipping the woollen garment over my shoulders did more than gratify the need for warmth; it kind of blanketed me in something else too ... it evoked some kind of memory. I shuddered involuntarily, the images of Kate dancing about in my head ... and images of someone else too ... someone who looked an awful lot like me ...

Another shudder. I pushed the memory, or whatever it was, to the back of my mind. My legs were still cold, and so I hunted about some more to find something that would ward off the chill.

As I was digging through a box of clothes, I felt a familiar presence behind me. I stopped ... dropped the garment back down and gritted my teeth. I honestly didn't know what to expect anymore ... if it was him again, what could I do? It wasn't as if I could rush him, instigate a surprise attack, belt him over the head with one of my frozen limbs or anything. He wasn't real ... he wasn't a physical, palpable human being. How can you fight against that?

I could hear someone at the door, flicking the handle up and down, pushing against the wood, and I froze on the spot - literally this time ... the coldness had taken a back seat to allow true unadulterated fear to take hold.

Someone was trying to get in, and the only person who knew I was there ...

Crunch. The door gave in and allowed a smidgeon more light to enter. The figure stood there silently, adjusting blue eyes to the darkness.

'Abbie?'

I couldn't speak! Can you believe it? Kate was here and I didn't have the ability to answer her question. So, I did the next best thing - the thing that I seemed to be always doing of late.

I fainted.

The next feeling I had was warmth. My body groaned in contentment, and I nestled into something soft and enveloping, the smell so familiar ... so comforting ... so Kate. I was in her arms, my top half covered with the shawl, my legs coated in cloth of some description.

My eyes finally decided to flutter open to be greeted by concerned blue.

'Abbie? Sweetheart ... why were you in here?' I grumbled and nestled into her neck, relishing her body. 'Abbie?'

'It's a long story ... I'll tell you later, okay?' I felt her nod her head and then pull me even closer to her.

Minutes ticked by, both of us contented to stay in each other's arms, but knowing we had to move some time or other. 'Come on. Let's get to bed. And I think I need a drink after this.' A fleeting question entered my head and I was surprised I hadn't thought of it before. 'How did you know where I was?'

'Later ... I'll tell you when we get warm, okay?'

I stood, my legs somewhat shaky after my ordeal.

'What is this place anyway?'

Kate shook her head, 'Haven't a clue ... didn't even know it existed until tonight.' We both looked around and noticed a room full of storage: wooden tea chests, trunks, crates and a mixture of boxes and baskets. 'Looks like this could be interesting ... we'll check it out tomorrow, though. It's too cold and dark to try and sort through all of this now. Come on.'

And we left, the evening's air eerily warmer than the air inside the room.

Back in our room, Kate ordered hot chocolate, and we had a snifter of brandy for the chill in our bones. I had also slipped on some sweat pants, a jumper and some thick socks, but it still wasn't enough.

Over hot chocolate, I told Kate about the events leading to her rescuing me. Her face painted a picture of disbelief, especially when I got to the part about the silhouette of the man on the roof. At this point she put her arms around me, I think more for her benefit than mine. But I enjoyed it anyway.

Slowly, she pulled away and looked into my face, 'My poor baby ... you could have been injured ... or ... worse.'

'But, I wasn't.' A kiss. 'And anyway ... how did you know where to find me?'

Kate's face screwed up in thought. 'I don't really know. One minute I was checking through invoices, the next I was racing to the roof.' My eyebrows shot up into my fringe. 'I know ... it was ... it was just so bloody weird. I felt panicked ... I knew something was wrong ... that you were in some kind of trouble.' She stopped to hug me close to her again, 'And I felt drawn to the Keep for some unexplainable reason. Even funnier ... when I got there I didn't have a bloody clue where you were ... and I ... thought ... You know.'

I did. With all the stories we had told each other, especially with the former Kate throwing

herself off the Keep - well, let's put it this way - anything is possible.

'I looked over the edge just ...' She stopped, her arms crushing the life out of me, but I loved it. 'When I couldn't find you, I thought I heard you calling my name.'

'But ... I didn't ... I didn't even know you were there. It would have been pointless just shouting for no reason, especially up there.'

'I know you didn't, baby. But the voice ... that voice ... it was so much like yours ... but the reason I knew it wasn't you was because of what it said.' I looked at her. 'She said "She's in here." As simply as that. You don't usually address yourself in the third person do you?'

I shook my head. Bloody hell. It was my look-a-like ... on the roof ... right outside the room where I'd been. 'Did you see her?' Kate shook her head, and kissed me on the forehead.

I was tired, we both were. I pulled Kate behind me. Undressing seemed like a burden, so we climbed into bed fully clothed, although I did slip off the stinking shawl.

Just before I closed my eyes, I heard Kate mumble something about investigating the room more thoroughly in the morning. I grunted in response.

She knew what I meant.

Chapter Thirty- Two

Dressed in jeans and old, warm sweatshirts, we ascended the now familiar stairway to the Keep. The door at the far side looked obvious in the daylight. But at night? Who knows ...

We gingerly entered the cold musty room once more. I, for one, feeling a hell of a lot more confident than I had the previous night. We began to rifle through the mess. Boxes and trunks spilled trinkets and clothes from times long gone. Most in nearly perfect condition, thus begging the question 'Why were they stashed up here, forgotten?'

We stopped for lunch and then got back to work again, adding more to the pile we wanted to examine further. It wasn't until the sun was finally giving up for the day that we found it, stashed away in the corner, hidden from everything and anyone who may have stumbled upon this room.

A box. A wooden box. A simple wooden box with a lock on the outside. This box intrigued us, mainly because we couldn't get into it and didn't want to smash it to smithereens - well I didn't, but Kate did attempt to whack it on the floor in the hopes the lock would just 'pop' open. I decided it would be best for all parties if we called it a day and went back to our room, taking the box with us of course.

Forty-five minutes later, we had eventually picked the lock of the box and were sitting staring at

the closed lid.

'Go on then ... open it.' I urged Kate, who had decided to become bashful. 'Open it!' I leaned forward to flip the lid, when her hand stopped me.

'Wait.'

I looked at her, amazed that one moment she was all eager to find out what was inside, and the next cautious. But ... I waited ... and waited ... and waited.

Finally, she looked up from her lap, gave me one of her most dazzling smiles, and threw back the lid.

Inside was a collection of somebody's life. Jewellery, ribbons, small photographs, folded pieces of paper ... journals. Two of them to be exact. One black, the cover wrinkled through usage. The other ... was an old friend ... a one time visitor to my room months before. I couldn't mistake the brown leather, the corners slightly bent out of shape. It was definitely the one. No mistake there. But I couldn't even start to rationalise how it had come to me from this locked box ... how it had managed to unearth itself from underneath all the other treasures that had been hidden away in a room at the top of the house.

It would blow my mind into millions of tiny pieces if I tried to fathom that out. And ... truthfully speaking ... I didn't even want to go there.

Kate lifted them both up and offered them to me. 'You're the writer here ... check these out.'

Gingerly, I took them both in my hand, placed the black one on the arm of the sofa and flicked the cover open on the brown one. The same flowing script - *Katherine Thomas*. The next page greeted me with its familiarity '*May 12th 1917. My brother ...*' I sucked in my breath, holding it there whilst I cherished the feel of being reunited with this woman. It was eerily fulfilling. The last time I had held this journal I barely knew anything about the woman who wrote it, but now ...

I looked at Kate ... she was so beautiful, leaning back on the sofa, her eyes violet in the early evening light. I was totally and utterly in love with this woman ... How times change, eh?

My brain was trying to process everything all at once - the awful circumstances that led to this woman's death, my acceptance of my sexuality, Kate, and how important she had become to me, the separation of the young lovers because of the bigotry of mankind ... I could go on and on but the thoughts and feelings were becoming unbearable. It was too much.

The journal dropped to my knee and I just sat there, trying to control this overwhelming sense of loss combined with my own personal discovery. A complete oxymoron of emotions, but it took both of these emotions to realise what I actually had.

I had the freedom to express my feelings for the person I loved. And even if society still couldn't

deal with who I was and whom I was with ... I didn't care. This was my life ... mine and Kate's. If they are so ignorant they can allow bias overrule love and commitment - then more fool them.

'Honey?' What a beautiful sound ... music landing on my ears like feather-like touches of perfection.

The grin that poured forth from my lips was filled with everything I had to give. And by the look on her face ... she knew it.

'Let's leave these for the morning, okay?' She looked a little surprised, but at the same time pleased.

I know we had been waiting for months to find out what really happened to those women, but ... I needed to be in the here and now, and what better place to start than in the arms of the woman I loved? The journals would be there in the morning ... so what was the rush? Kate and I had the rest of our lives to look through them. So tonight ... she was all mine.

The journals were pushed to the side, memories of love and longing wrapped up in faded yellow pages. I didn't need to look at them to realise what I had found ... I had that sitting right in front of me. The woman that had haunted my dreams - filled my every moment - filled my heart with such light.

This story isn't about Kate and Vivian, or William, or Pete for that matter. This story is about life ... living ... moving on, accepting the unacceptable and moving forward. Memories or 'should have dones' don't count ... prejudiced opinions shouldn't mean anything unless we allow ourselves to listen

.
It was now time to step away from all that ... step away and take that beautiful woman in my arms to whisper '*Forever.*'

And there was no need for me to keep dwelling in the past. It is the future I am looking forward to exploring. And my future is Kate ...

My Kate.

Epilogue

My eyes flew open ... heart racing ... sweat coated my skin.

What the *fuck* was that?

The blackness of the room drowned out my vision - my heart banging in my chest muffled my hearing. Dryness enveloped my mouth whilst goose bumps guarded my skin.

The feelings pulsed through me ... sensations of being drawn in ... being insulated, exposed, devoured.

Hands on my skin ... exploring ... tracing the contours with expert fingers ... digits dancing over my flesh.

A mouth ... hot ... wet. A firm tongue dipping into my core, lapping at the juices spilling abundantly from deep within. A stray hand capturing a breast, pumping the pliant flesh until it ached for more ... ached for her.

My dormant fingers tangled themselves willingly into her hair, my nails digging into her scalp, pushing her deeper into me. Her scent wafted in front of me like a haze ... rich ... exotic ... potent. I loved the smell of her ... it smelled so familiar ... so comforting ... so arousing.

Erratic breaths escaped into the dark, deep gulps of air mixed with the short claspings ones that made this feel so right ... so good.

I could see her through the darkness ... loving me. All of me.

Then I heard it. So close. A voice so tender and soft my soul wept.

'Come for me.'

And I did.

Sometimes ... the unbelievable is possible.

Sometimes ... you have to question your sanity.

Sometimes ... the only explainable reason is that it *happens* ... sometimes.

And my '*sometimes*' was now ... the here and now ... and boy was I going to enjoy it.

The End

Thank you for getting this far, and I hope you enjoyed it half as much as I enjoyed writing it - then we'll both be happy!

Let me know what you think ... but please be gentle: fingersmith@hotmail.co.uk or [Fingersmith](#)
And I will try to get back to you.

Spoilers

Well ... what can I say to make it up to you?

The ending: it was the only way I could end this story. I tried to use a circular structure - both with the narrator and the love interest. I wanted to start it in a negative way in order to show the power of love. I didn't want to dwell in the past - I wanted to show my girls moving on with their life.

The main characters were drawn to each other because of past events, and the love they shared would enable the spirits to rest in peace, happy in the knowledge their love continues. The original lovers - Kate and Vivian - were never seen again. It was as if the joining of our girls finally allowed them to rest in peace. William's duty as a guardian of their belongings ceased to exist. He lost. Hurrah! Mainly because he was a wanker!

William Thomas - out and out bastard (aka wanker) died up to the eyes in debt, and the house passed on to Kate's great grandfather who turned it into a retreat to stop the bailiffs.

Pete was arrested trying to enter Abbie's house again, and had to serve twelve months in prison with some really beefy men who loved his lily-white ass.

Dr Robins did not have anything to do with events at Forester's Dwell. He was just unfortunate enough to fall for the enigmatic Kate Thomas. When he realised it was a 'no hoper' he buggered off.

As for what was written in the diaries ... ah well ... we will never know ... <grin>