

~ Hearts and Flowers Border ~

by [fingersmith](#)

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Disclaimer

This is my first attempt at Uber fiction - so please be gentle with me. 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.

Language: English! In the broadest sense! Be prepared for some good old-fashioned 'effing' and 'jeffing'. Put this down to me being a potty mouth, and, as I tell my students 'Not being bothered to think of something else'.

Violence: Some scenes are a little intense, but nothing bloody or gruesome - I'm too much of a pussy for that.

Sex: Yes please! 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.

This story is set in the North of England ... that little island off the coast of France. 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.

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.

Acknowledgements: I have quoted from various texts, especially poetry, throughout this piece. All music quoted has been used without the permission of the artist. 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. And also my little boys of the furry variety - The Border Terriers from Hell.

Part One

Present Day - 2004

Chapter One

Life, my life, had been turned upside down, inside out.

For a second time.

Yesterday, I was just me: marking, planning, teaching, and bawling at kids who jacked around in class. It was all I had. All I needed. But today ...

It had been an ordinary day, nothing special. I had even forgotten about my visitor until just before the tap on the door. But it was as if I knew, in that split second, deep down, that this was going to be different ... that this unexpected, forgotten visitor would hold something for me. You could say that I was apprehensive, prophetic and even a little bit manic ... but I knew ... about what God only knows.

I think the trigger was the way that time slowed down as the door opened. The groaning of the hinges announced the arrival of a hand ... a firm, grasping hand that choked the life out of the poor defenceless handle. The hand was connected to a toned, tanned arm. The arm, as arms tend to do, was attached to a broad shoulder which pinned itself to a body.

My eyes scanned the rest, noting the long legs and the slender hips. I snapped myself out of my trance and became captured by ice blue eyes.

Have you ever felt your stomach drop into your shoes only to shoot back up into your mouth? That's what it felt like. It felt like I had been transported back thirteen years to a time when those blue eyes began to be the centre of my world. Fear gripped me ... honestly. It gripped me right around the heart and squeezed the life out of it.

The room seemed to shrink - I seemed to expand. Not good.

That's all I remember.

In the blackness filling my head I could hear a concerned voice whispering my name, but it seemed too far away to be talking to me. The voice was familiar - too familiar. I wanted to shut it out, as I remembered what destruction it had caused. Slender, strong fingers gently patted the side of my face. I knew I had to open my eyes to see if it was all a dream.

Weakly, I forced my eyes to open, blinking away the startling light. Blurry images danced in front of me, as anxious blue eyes became my centre of attention - the centre of my world once again.

After thirteen long years ...

Out cold. Again. What a wuss.

Chapter Two

Thirteen years previously.

'Fuck off dyke!' I'd always had a way with words - hence becoming an English teacher. 'Clam smacking arse licker!'

I should warn you now. I tend to swear when I'm distressed, nervous, happy, sad, melancholic, watching telly - drunk, sober ... I could go on but I guess you get the picture.

I was sixteen years old and already had the voice of a sailor. My vitriolic display was aimed at Justine Russell - she got on my tits. She always sucked up to teachers, but was a complete bitch to everyone else. Finding out she had been caught with her pants down, literally, in the changing rooms with Ms 'Bulldyke' Wilkins had been a blessing. I vowed to put a 'SPECIAL' in the school magazine (Post It to self -don't forget the hearts and flowers border).

I hated school. School was filled with two classes of people: popular and unpopular. Guess which class I fitted into? I had the dress sense of a kebab, the social skills of an amoeba, and the patience of a dog busting for a piss. I was definitely not in the prominent social circles - the popular group. But then again, I felt I didn't deserve to be, and, more importantly, I didn't want to be.

My mouth had got me into too many scrapes and scraps. You see, I don't think things through before I speak my mind. Consequently, I had more black eyes and fat lips than Mike Tyson. This is the way of the Mancunian. Honestly. If I had been any other way my family would have disowned me. It's a pity they didn't.

I think I was repressed. Oppressed? Suppressed? Depressed? One of them - delete as applicable. You see, I wanted to be the one in the changing rooms with my ... (ad lib to fade).

Well. Not with Bulldyke. She was ... fuck ... a bloke! With tits and a mullet. No. I went more for the dark haired beauties - classic features: straight nose, long black hair, tanned skin, lithe body, tall ... In two words - Emma Jenkins. Now, she was a hottie ... and she didn't even know I existed.

It seemed as if she'd appeared at the end of Year 10. Where she had been until then God knows. Probably avoiding me.

You know when time slows down and everything moves in slow motion, like in the films? That's how it was when I first spotted her.

I was rushing to Maths - does that makes sense - does anyone really rush to Maths? I digress. Anyway, I was walking to Maths rather quickly (that sounds better) and she was coming toward me with the Bitches of Eastwick - laughing - head back laughing. Cue director. Begin to slow things down from here.

My legs seemed to belong to a puppet master. They lifted up slowly and then placed themselves on the ground, noiselessly. I took in the whole scene. Her head was back and she was laughing, but I couldn't hear anything. Her mouth was open, displaying beautiful straight teeth encased by lips that had been formed from red velvet. Perfect. Her head came slowly forward, her closed eyes began to bud open, leisurely. Fluttering black eyelashes blinked open, like she was taking in the world at that moment, to reveal blue eyes ... blue, blue eyes ...

I was transfixed. Rooted to the spot. My breathing was erratic ... my heart was pumping so hard it bruised the inside of my chest. Numbness engulfed me. My mouth was dry ... like cardboard, and I thought I was going to keel over.

Long, dark hair fanned behind her as she flicked her raven locks over her shoulder. It appeared to stop ... mid air (like in cheesy movies) and then fall behind her. A long sleek arm raised itself to finger stray locks into place. She had the poise and grace of a ballerina - strong, sure of herself. The complete opposite of me.

My eyes drifted down her frame, etching to memory every minute detail. Her skirt stopped a few inches from her knees. Tanned legs went on for miles and my eyes thoroughly enjoyed the ride, although my stomach decided it didn't like long journeys. Wuss.

Doc Martens! I shook my head to clear it. But ... Doc Martens! A complete revelation ... a complete contrast to what I was expecting. Did ballerinas wear Doc Martens? Well they do now. I looked back to her face and was captured by blue eyes. Her expression was hard to read, but she looked kind of startled.

Then they were gone. And summer arrived.

Six weeks of slob time. Perfect. And if hadn't been for spotting the 'Girl in the Docs' I would have loved every minute of it. The image of her in the corridor replayed in my mind like a BBC rerun. I guiltily embraced every shot of her, hands stroking her hair, the crooked smile, the parted, glistening lips ... Every time I thought of the 'incident' it got a little more interesting ...

The Bitches weren't there, obviously. Just her and me. The school was empty ...

No. I'm not going there. Not now. Not ever. I found that out the hard way.

Chapter Three

Summer had wheezed its way through July and August, plunging me back into school before I was ready for it. I'd finished all my coursework in the first week, leaving time to watch total khak on the telly for the remainder of the holidays.

I did enjoy outdoor activities like hanging around the park drinking cider and smoking rollups. The occasional drunken fumble with some unidentified person near the golf course (usually

female - but I didn't leave out the lads - hey ... I was a teenager ... what do you expect?).
Everyday activities for the slovenly girl. No. I had no morals.

Classes were the same. Teachers droned on about exams and expectations. All of them wanting you to do well so it would look good in the league tables. I spent most of my time staring blankly out of the window. And that's when I saw her again.

She was on the all weather pitch with a bunch of other girls. Short gym skirt reaching up to her panty line. Long legs, sleek, tanned and muscular. Yum. Her breasts were bobbing as she was explaining, and demonstrating, to some dip-shit how to throw a shot put. She looked so serious, so sexy, so ... hot.

'Miss Stewart!' My green eyes blinked, dismissing the image that had conjured up and turned to face the History teacher who had called my name.

'Yes Miss?' Be coy ...

'Is there something more interesting out there than learning about the Second World War?'

'God, no Miss. I thought I saw a prowler watching the girls on the pitch. I was concerned for their safety, Miss.' Good save. Miss came over and assessed the scene.

'I can't see anyone. Whereabouts?'

'Near the tall girl with black hair, Miss, just behind the bushes ...' I drifted off for effect.

'What? Near Emma Jenkins?'

That was her name. I held it in my arms, hugging it to my chest with the primness of a Jane Austen character. *'Oh Mr Darcy ... I shouldn't ... really ...'*

I later found out she was the captain of the athletics team, and really popular. Shit.

Every time I saw her my stomach would put in a performance, dancing and spinning - how novel. She was perfect. Her eyes were the colour of summer. Her voice ... her voice was like angel's wings brushing tenderly against a harp. Mushy enough? Thought so.

I was truly a goner. She probably thought I had a stutter and a skin complaint as I used to putter 'Excuse mes' whilst imitating a bolisha beacon every time I saw her. And that was as often as I could muster. I was what you could call a semi-stalker. Where she was I seemed to be just casually walking past at the right time. I don't know why I did that - I didn't have the guts to talk to her, so why bother stalking her? And me, gob shite extraordinaire was lost for words for a change.

I became her shadow for the most part. Always hanging back, a face in the crowd, a nobody. She, on the other hand, was like a social butterfly. She flitted her wings, and landed, effortlessly,

into any given situation. She was loved by all - especially by me. Wherever she went people smiled, joked, came to life. Emma had that effect on people; made them forget their troubles; made them feel special. The words to the old Police song came into mind, especially the line *'I'll be watching you ...'*

The first time she spoke to me I was totally unprepared for it.

Lining up in the dinner queue, waiting to get Listeria, or something just as appetising, I felt something, someone, behind me. I was just in mid rant at the dinner lady, the thin one with the moustache and an uncanny resemblance to Fred Astaire. There were always two kinds of dinner ladies: a fat short one who everyone loved and thought was a surrogate mum, and the thin evil one - the spawn of Satan - who you would avoid like school gravy.

'Call that a portion? You couldn't feed a gnat on that!' I was flowing. 'Don't be so tight ... put another scoop on!'

'Sorry luv ...' She didn't look sorry. Smug was the word. I was getting fired up now, skinny little ...

'Are you okay?' Cue angels' wings. 'Is there a problem?'

I turned around to greet blue eyes looking at me with concern. 'Yeah ... Sorry ...' I mumbled, embarrassed. *'Did my heart love till now? Foreswear it sight for I never saw true beauty till this night ...'*

God. I was standing next to Emma Jenkins. She was talking to me. I was inches away from her and she had noticed me ... noticed me! I could smell her scent. Spicy, exotic, yet so familiar ...

'Hurry up Stewart.' Piss off! One of the Bitches had decided to speed us along. 'We only get fifty minutes for lunch.'

'Hey ... isn't that the stalker?' Chief Bitch chimed in. 'I thought you'd be following someone.'

'Why don't you just go fuck yourself? 'Cos with a face like yours ...' I didn't get to finish.

'Stewart! My office. One o'clock!' Shit. The Head.

I looked at Emma, humiliated, again. She looked at me with embarrassment, about what I don't know.

Grabbing my tray, I skulked off down the line, only to leave it at the end of the counter. How could I sit in the canteen knowing that she was in there after witnessing me make a total dick out of myself? I did the only thing possible - I left.

Nearly a month had gone by and I had avoided her like the plague. Yes, the plague. She was the plague. She plagued every thought I had awake or asleep; she plagued my conscience and my

heart. Yes. She was a disease ... a disease I wouldn't mind dying from. What an agonisingly beautiful way to die.

How could I stalk her now? I felt like a fool, saying stuff like that in front of her. Everyone knew I had been internally excluded for 'using profanity' on school premises. I didn't care about that though ... she knew I had been stalking her ... I was well and truly mortified.

Trying to get in the Head's good books again, I signed up for mentoring duties. I was an excellent student (although I doubt you'll believe me), and was predicted to get all As or A*s. These duties were to help other students who were struggling with certain subjects 'attain a better understanding, thus a better grade' to quote the Head himself.

I was in charge of English Language and Literature. God, how I loved those subjects. I loved the creativity, the logic, the rationality, the uncertainty, the certainty, the ability to take an idea and go with it ... everything. I love the written word, you see. Grammar too - believe it or not - verbs, adverbs, abstract nouns, etc. Everything that made up language. I loved the way we begin to understand how we are influenced every second of every day: how writers affect us, sculpt us into what they want us to be. Yes, I know, I'm rambling... trying to put off the inevitable I suppose.

Mock exams were winging their merry way towards us, preventing us from having a life apart from studying. I was lucky. I didn't need to study as hard as the other kids. It came kind of natural to me. I'm not being arrogant ... I'm just fortunate I guess.

Anyway. School was in panic mode and everyone thought the end of the world was upon us. It was only the mocks but everyone thought this was the be all and end all, that our whole futures were linked to this set of tests. Mocks are there to show us how little we have actually learned in our time at school. That's the easy explanation for them.

Well. I had been assigned four students who needed extra coaching. One lad, Peter Levens, and three girls, Phoebe Dixon, Justine Russell (yes - Justine) and ... you guessed it ... Emma Jenkins. Obviously, I went straight to the Head of Year 11 and told him I couldn't take four students, as it was too much. Thankfully he agreed, and took Phoebe Dixon off the list. What could I do?

Grin and bare it.

I arranged for us all to meet in the library at lunch time the following Monday. Messages in the registers and all that. Then spent the weekend trying to catch a life threatening illness, get hit by a car, alcoholic poisoning. Anything. All I ended up doing was copping off with a girl up the golf course with a bad case of acne, the tongue of a serpent, and the sucking capabilities of a Dyson cleaner. My neck looked like it had had a close encounter with the Boston Strangler.

Monday arrived in all her glory and I felt sick to the pit of my stomach. Lessons dragged along, all the teachers sounding as tired as the students. Double Science kicked off my week with the most evil teacher in the school. Mr Mackenzie. Twat. He was rake thin and look like he lived in

the prep room at the back of the Science Labs. You know - plugged himself in at night. To this day I can't stand science teachers: they make my skin crawl. Yes ... I know its unreasonable, and I also know they are not all like Mackenzie, but ... I'm rambling again.

He was malevolence personified and Monday was not his day ... nor mine for that matter.

It started wrong. I'd got up late and spent ages trying to cover the bite marks, opting for a polo neck jumper underneath my regulation school shirt. That was my downfall. Mackenzie liked uniform. He liked the fact that we lost our individuality everyday and became the automaton that he was.

Obviously I didn't agree.

'Is that school uniform, Stewart?'

I feigned innocence. 'What Sir? My tie?'

'No girl. That rolled up bandage around your neck. You know the policy on uniform. Nothing underneath your shirt.'

'Not even a bra, Sir?'

'Don't get smart with me girl. Go and remove the offending item, now.'

'But Sir ... my Nan said I must keep it on. It's on account of my condition.'

'Which is?'

'I'd rather not say in front of everyone else Sir.' Smart move. He'll think its women's troubles and leave it be.

'Well let's talk about it in the back then.' Maybe not.

After a lot of pleading and lying I ended up in the girl's toilets removing the 'offending' item of clothing even though I'd told him about my consumptive tendencies. I do have rather an overactive imagination. You should have seen his face when I got back to class.

'What is that around your neck Stewart?'

'What? My tie, Sir?' I knew I was pissing him off, but what the heck...

'No, stupid girl, the bruising.'

'Got my head stuck in a door, Sir.' The class erupted into cheers and wolf whistles. Me, being me, decided that a curtsy was in order - well I was the star of the show. That did it. Two detentions - after school - and a letter home. Fuck.

Geography was just as bad. You would think that they had never seen a love bite before. I was going to kill that bint who did this to me. She won't even be able to suck the froth off her coffee when I'm done with her.

One o'clock saw me sitting in the library with a stack of books, and the distinct smell of foundation in the air. Every time the door opened, my heart shot into my mouth (probably to have a look). Peter Levens was the first to turn up. Sweaty, and smelling of stagnant water. He had tried to cover this up with a liberal spraying of Lynx (or the some other prepubescent deodoriser that promised gorgeous women falling at your feet). Not a good combination. He had an aura faintly resembling stale cat's piss.

Then came the clam-smacking-arse-licker - Justine Russell - in all her glory. She wasn't bad looking. Granted. It was ... oh, I don't know, her fake-ness I think. 'Hi,' she purred.

Purred? What was all that about?

'You're soooooo sweet doing this.' She placed her hand on my shoulder and rubbed in a slow circular motion. She mustn't have know it was me who put the article in the school magazine. Lovely border.

I looked over her shoulder, expectantly, at the door of the library. No one else was behind her. My stomach was in knots, deciding it wanted to be a contortionist when it grew up.

'There should be someone else ... shall we wait?' Was that panic in my voice? No. Concern I think. Liar.

'We haven't got much time. Lunch is over soon and mocks are just around the corner.' Justine said in a little girl kind of way. Not innocently, but like you would expect prostitutes to talk to kinky clients. I shuddered involuntarily and agreed.

She didn't show up. Our first date ... I mean meeting ... and she didn't show up. Shit. Wasn't I even good enough to help her with her work? Was it the fact that I used to stalk her that had put her off? No ... don't think about it now.

Surprisingly, we all worked hard and achieved quite a lot in thirty minutes. At the end of the session, Peter just grabbed his stuff, shoved it in his bag and left with a 'Thanks' tossed over his shoulder.

Justine, however, was another matter.

'Are you free later?' Her hand was on my forearm stopping me packing my things away. 'It would be nice if we could, you know, get together apart from studying.' She gave me a half smile (more like a leer) and winked saucily. She reminded me of Moll Flanders, you know, Defoe's slutty heroine.

'No can do Justine. I'm so busy at the moment. I ...' I was beginning to get flustered, and she went for the jugular.

'But I thought you were like me, into girls, you know.' Fuck. I nearly choked. Yes I had the odd fumble but nothing ... nothing ... (audible gulp) ... nothing like that.

My green eyes looked into her brown ones - squarely. 'Well you thought wrong didn't you.' My expression was cold, steely. I saw her shrink back. She probably thought I was going to smack her. 'And even if I was into sex with girls, do you honestly believe I'd screw one of Bulldyke's conquests?'

Fuck. Talk about a change in a person. One minute she was on the verge of licking me out, the next, knocking me out. Her hand came out so fast I didn't have time to block it. Smack. Right in the eye. She about turned and stomped out of the library looking like she was the victim. Jesus. I'll never understand women.

Later that evening saw me sprawled on my back in my bedroom, gazing at the ceiling, which was covered in little lights making up the constellations. I was in pain ... spiritual ... emotional ... and physical pain thanks to fucking Justine Russell. Emma had rejected me. Before even knowing me ... she had rejected me.

A sob worked its way up from my gut to cling unceremoniously in my throat. I covered my eyes with the backs of my forearms trying to stave off the world and how I had been thrown aside ... unwanted yet again.

The sob broke free, leaving my mouth in a rush, forcing it to break apart in a staccato rhythm reserved for grief. I was grieving. Grieving for the chance to be someone else, to show someone else who I could be - someone different ... who wanted to be different.

The backs of my arms were beginning to get wet. Salty tears smeared themselves along the flesh like acid, burning, intensifying the anguish and despair that was running full pelt through every pore. Every inch of me felt it. Every hair, fibre and molecule that made up this degenerate ... this waste of space that was me.

Turning awkwardly onto my side I let the tears flow, accompanying them with a low key keening ... a breaking deep within.

Eventually, I fell into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Four

Tuesday greeted me in her pleasant way: sunshine bursting through the window in a radiant

shower. I felt like shit. Eyes ached, as did my chest, from the previous night's exertions, and I wanted to curl up and die.

Eventually, I got my sorry carcass out of bed, got dressed, and headed downstairs.

'Morning,' Mum's voice greeted me from the front room where she was attempting the Cindy Crawford workout. Doesn't really have the same effect seeing a woman in her late forties, a beer belly and a half smoked fag hanging out of her mouth. Was she trying to kill herself? Not quickly enough, by all accounts, as she was still here.

Standing straight, wheezing (followed by hacking cough), she turned to face me. 'What's the matter with your face? You been gobbing off again?' Loads of sympathy there - thanks Mum. 'You'd better put a spark to it ... you'll be late for school.' A cough gripped her and she doubled over hacking up her lungs.

In between bursts of smoke induced coughing, she spluttered, 'Don't ... think ... you're staying off ... nursing a hangover ... 'cos you're not.' I could hear the phlegm rattling around her chest. She staggered forward to put out her cigarette, only to reach for her packet and light a fresh one. One more cough and a swallow and she was a good as new. She turned to face me, wrinkles standing out around her mouth, the telltale sign of an experienced smoker. 'Did you hear me lady? You're not staying off nursing a hangover.'

'No. Only Dad does that.' I shot back, totally pissed off now.

'We're not going into that again are we? He's having a few problems ... you know that.'

'So are we all but I don't take it out on the rest of you. One of these days I'll hit the fucker back.' I turned my back on her, snatched my school bag and did a prima donna out of the front door. Let her take Harry, my little brother, to school. It was about time she started acting like his mother. And I wasn't going to hang about waiting for her to make any more excuses for her husband, my father.

I nearly escaped too. If it hadn't been for that perverted postman trying to cop a feel, I'd have been clear away.

'You'd better watch that attitude lady!' came her gravelly voice bawling behind me. 'You should show us some respect.'

'Kiss my arse!' I shouted back. Turning to the postman I gave him one of my best smiles. I had him. 'And you can go and fuck yourself you paedophile. Touch me again and your tonsils will have the company of your nuts. Capiche?' Too many Robert De Nero films I think.

Then I was gone, like a bat out of hell, scurrying up the road. Sniggering. I felt better, believe it or not.

Chapter Five

The week flew by with no sight of Emma Jenkins. I met the other two in the library the following Monday. Peter was, well, Peter (cat pee Pete). He got on with things then went on his merry little way. Justine was another matter.

At first she was ... um ... a twat. She constantly questioned what I was doing, knocking my confidence in the only thing that I loved (you know what I mean). Then ... a complete turn around.

Peter had gone, and she was slowly packing her things away.

'Sorry about last week,' she mumbled. She did look sorry too, which was a surprise. 'I didn't mean to ... you know, and ... to hit you.' Yeah, hit - hit on - subtle difference there. 'I'd like to make it up to you. How about a coffee after school?'

I was on the verge of letting her down ... gently this time for obvious reasons. Then ... fuck it ... what could go wrong? It was only a coffee, right?

Wrong.

We met outside Café Rouge at six thirty. Yes, I know we said after school, but Justine said it would be better if we met later for some reason or another. I didn't care either way. I just wanted to get away from the arguments at home. Things were starting to get pretty ugly.

So. There we were, having a half decent conversation, drinking lattes escorted by little caramel biscuits, and putting the world to rights. I eventually let down my defences enough to agree to go for a stroll up by the canal. Big ... did I say big? ... yes - big mistake (I think you get the message).

It was secluded up near the canal. A number of reasons brought that to pass. Firstly, the canal path is where the winos, druggies and homeless people go to escape the coppers. Secondly, it was a little off the beaten path and you feared for your safety. Finally, and this is the biggy, the thing I forgot when I agreed to go there with her, this is where people went to get it on (or off). Swingers and doggers were regulars up here, but it really appealed to gays - especially those who were that far in the closet they couldn't see past last year's clothes.

We were still chatting amiably about school, Justine leading me into a false sense of security by asking about Ted Hughes, and I didn't see it coming. I swear.

Half way under the bridge she stopped, turned and looked me squarely in the eyes.

'Do you know how much I like you?' Her hand came out as she spoke. I didn't move away thus giving her a little more courage. She stepped closer and her fingers touched my cheek. The touch changed into a gentle caress. I swallowed. Hard. 'I've liked you for such a long time ...' Her face

was coming closer to mine. She was taller than me. But then again, most people were taller than me ... and I'm going off the point.

'You don't have to do anything ... I'll just please you ... I've wanted you for so, so long ...' Her voice was gentle, massaging my broken ego, embracing my longing for connection with someone. She leaned closer. Her breath was uneven, ragged. I could hear it catching at the back of her throat as her fingers trailed down my face, across my jaw and then slowly down my neck.

My stomach decided to join in the fun and began to perform a little jig. A tiny flame lit in my pants, a tiny flame of expectation.

'Justine I ...'

'Shush, baby.' She was smooth - I'll give her that.

Her hand went lower until it was cupping my breast. A sigh escaped me from deep within and she took this as a green light and leaned in for the kill.

The kiss was soft against my mouth. Gently she circled my lips with the tip of her tongue, an unspoken question hanging between us. The opening of my mouth gave her the answer she wanted, and it slipped inside like a traveller looking for a place to rest. I sucked at it, delicately, enjoying the texture.

She increased the pressure of her tongue, long languid strokes that stoked the fire building in my gut. Her hand was rubbing my breast, tenderly at first, but with a building pressure that incensed my nipple making it spring to life under her touch. Wetness was building between my legs, my hips undulating against her thigh trying, to ease the ache.

Her mouth moved to my ear, and she flicked her tongue over the edge, a soft breath seeping in to torture my already burning need. My eyes fluttered closed. I inhaled deeply and absorbed the moment.

She moved down to my throat, licking, sucking, claiming me as hers, her body pressing into mine pushing me gently against the wall. Her body weight pinned me there, not that I was complaining, I had too many things going on to think about anything but her tongue, her mouth, her exploring hands that were playing with the hem of my top.

Pushing the material back, her cool hand ventured towards its goal, teasing the nipples back to life. My hips were grinding themselves into her; I was beginning to pant.

A soft moan escaped her lips and I captured its escape with my mouth, moaning in response as she pinched and rolled each nipple in turn. Fuck ... I was going to come at this rate. I wanted her inside me, pumping her fingers deep, deep inside ... oh god, I needed release, I needed to taste her, to take her, to fuck her so bad.

I released my hold of her soft brown hair and grasped her breast. Playtime was over: the big girls

are out. I ground the palm of my hand against her, sucking the place where her neck met her jaw. She was humping me, grunting and murmuring sweet nothings in my over-sensitive ears. 'Ohh baby ... fuck me ... make ... me ... come ... please ... oh god ... angel ... fuck me, fuck me.'

What was a girl supposed to do? She offered it to me on a plate.

I roughly turned her round, never losing connection with her throat, and slammed her against the wall. My hands were manic, everywhere at once. I hoisted her skirt up to her waist and shoved my hand between her parted thighs. God. She was dripping. Her panties were soaked through: I had done that. I smiled smugly to myself. She leaned heavily against the wall, her legs becoming weaker by the second. I began my exploration.

My hand slid around the edges of her panties eliciting a guttural moan from her. 'What do you want me to do, eh? Fingers or tongue?' I licked her ear for effect, pretending to know what I was supposed to do.

'Fingers ... god yes ... fingers.'

I slithered my fingers into her pants, past soft pubic hair, and delved into a scorching pot of want. So wet. My fingers pushed past the lips and hovered near her opening, teasing. I pulled back to concentrate on her clit, the small hard nub was screaming for attention. She went rigid, then began to crush herself onto my upturned hand, groaning, moaning, whimpering, climbing up to the place where the world disappears into flashing, blinking lights. A world where nothing else matters. A world where you love and are loved in return. A world where it didn't matter if you were different.

I opened my eyes at this point and stared at her pleasure filled face. She was on the verge of coming hard. Her moans were disjointed, breaking apart, waiting for the big one. I stared; my hips had stopped, shortly followed by my hand. She cleaved to me, trying to get the rhythm flowing again. No. Not this time.

'Don't stop baby, I'm nearly there ...' Nothing. I had to see her eyes. Had to know.

As expected her eyelids pulled back slowly to reveal uncertain brown ones. Not blue ... brown.

'I'm sorry ... I can't ...' She looked confused.

'Come on ... don't worry,' she cooed, and grabbed my arse, pulled it towards her and began to pound herself into me. 'I don't have to ... let me taste you ... just one taste...' she murmured.

She began to lower herself, grabbing for my zip at the same time. I stepped back.

'Sorry ... Justine ... look, you're really nice and all but I can't. I just can't, okay?'

Confused eyes changed to slits of anger. 'What the fuck! What's your game? You were well into this too, and you know it. What's the problem? Is it me?' She trailed off. Hurt.

'No ... no it's me ... I ...' I didn't get the chance to finish. Wham. Smack straight in the eye. Again.

Then she was gone.

The next morning saw me toying with the idea of skiving off school. The last thing I needed was a confrontation with Justine Russell; I couldn't deal with her anger at the moment. I felt too fragile, and my face hurt like crazy.

I could hear them downstairs, a growing rumble highlighting that the storm was on its way. That decided it - school it was.

I stumbled out of my bedroom; half dressed. I saw my little brother, Harry, cowering in the corner of the landing.

'What's up squirt?' I knelt next to him and tried to smooth his ruffled hair, to no avail. 'What are you doing there?'

'Hiding.' An almost whisper. He began to shake, holding back the sobs that were rattling around his chest aching to break free to ease the pain. Like me, he had learned the hard way - that's not how you got them to notice you. Only the social services did that, and that didn't last either. The only notice they took of you was at the end of their fists.

'Come on pipsqueak. Let's get you ready for school.'

I don't know what little boys do in the bathroom, but I do know what they don't do. Wash. He was my brother and I loved him dearly, but the distinct smell of wee that followed him around like a puppy was sometimes overbearing. 'Back in. And this time WASH - *with soap*,' I chided.

Five minutes passed and out he trotted with an almost angelic glow about him, the smell of soap and toothpaste guarding him with its shield of cleanliness ... well ... as much cleanliness as Harry could cope with.

He finished getting dressed, while I rummaged through Mum's purse for dinner money for the both of us.

As we were leaving the house I heard the smack. He was hitting her again, and although I didn't see eye to eye with her on just about anything, that's one thing I didn't agree with.

A short stop at the phone box, an impression of a concerned neighbour and we were on our way again. That should sort him out for a while. They'll hold him until he sobers up enough to be let out. Bastard.

I left Harry at the school gates with a hug and a quick ruffle of his hair, and he was gone. He bounded up to his mates, the morning events almost erased from his mind. Almost.

I arrived at school twenty minutes late. Shit. I'd missed the beginning of Geography. No, I'm not a Geography lover, but we were sorting out places for the field trip the following Monday. It was a two-day sleepover at Whitby. Classy. ... not. But at least I could get away for a while. We had to be in class because we were being assigned our sleeping quarters and if we had any 'issues' with whom we were bunking with we had to sort it out now rather than later.

Oh well. As long as I don't bunk with Justine I'd be okay.

'Nice of you to show up Stewart.' Some teachers really had a chip on their shoulder. They should get laid more often. It might dislodge the stick that was rammed firmly up their ...

'Are you with us? Hello?' I'd blanked out a little at this point. Probably because I could see Justine Russell glaring at me from the back of the room. Cue scene, again:

I slithered my fingers into her pants, past soft pubic hair, and delved into a scorching pot of want. So wet. My fingers pushed past the lips and hovered near her opening, teasing. I pulled back to concentrate on her clit, the small hard nub that was screaming for attention.

I swallowed audibly, feeling a tingle in my pants. Don't go there, I chided myself. You couldn't even pull it off the first time.

'Are you going to stand there all day Stewart? Or are you going to sit down so we can carry on with the lesson?'

I stumbled to my seat, blushing furiously. The teacher seemed smug thinking she had embarrassed me. If she only knew ...

'As I was saying ...' a glare in my direction. Fuck off. 'If you want to find out more about the accommodation come and see me at break time. And for the people who couldn't be bothered to turn up on time...' Another glare. I looked out of the window. 'Check the notice boards at lunch. And please, please don't come to me with stupid reasons why you can't bunk with someone, or else you'll find yourself bunking with me and Ms Wilkins.' Fuck that.

I turned, and shot Justine a knowing look, then winked. She stuck two fingers up at me whilst mouthing 'Fuck you.' Charming words from such a delicate flower. I giggled to myself. I felt a little better now.

Lunchtime had me feeling completely different. I'd had my lunch (the Kamikaze Special), then went behind the gym for a quick fag with the rest of the miscreants, only to have my day shoved down the toilet again. Yes, you guessed it - the Geography field trip.

I stood in front of the notice board to check out the names and even laughed when I saw Justine's name next to Debbie Mitchell's. Even I knew they absolutely hated each other. Thank you God.

Still chuckling I hunted out my name. I blinked. Blinked again. Rubbed my eyes ... shook my head to clear it ... but it stayed the same. I was bunking with Emma Jenkins. No ... it must be a mistake ... she's not in my class, she can't be ... I can't share with her ... she thinks I'm a stalker ... she hates me (thoughts of laughing at Justine's and Debbie's situation flashed through my mind at this point. That's different. But why?) ... I can't sleep in the same room ... get undressed ... her get undressed. That stopped me. Emma Jenkins, naked, in a room with me. But she hates me. She didn't show up for mentoring, so I doubt she'll strip off and flash those fabulous ... assets.

'What's the matter Stewart? Deciding who else to fuck about?' Justine. Obviously.

'Just leave it out, Justine.' I began to turn, dismissing her with my back. She grabbed my arm pulling me round to face her. 'Get your hands off me,' I hissed.

'You didn't say that last night, did you? I thought you were quite partial to me grabbing your tits... you were moaning enough then. What changed?'

'I didn't like the view,' I spat.

'Really?' Her tone became almost playful, in a spiteful kind of way. A crowd was gathering by this point, but I didn't give a shit. 'Was that before or after you shoved your hand between my legs?' She smiled. She knew I was dying here. 'Didn't you like finger fucking me, eh?'

My face was burning. The anger I held inside was bursting. So ... I let it go.

'Actually, no. It was like shagging a dead pig.' I lied, I know. 'You should practice kissing the back of your hand more, Russell; you might pick up a few tips. And for fuck sake ... trim your quim.' A chuckle went around the crowd. Her face paled at this point only to flood again with blood as the anger returned with a vengeance.

I turned to go before she kicked off again and slammed straight into Emma Jenkins, who staggered backwards, taking me with her. We fell into a heap on the floor, me on top, my hands on her tits, my face inches away from hers. Blue eyes looked into mine ... click ... a connection ... a connection that felt so real, so familiar, like we had looked into each other's eyes thousands of times before.

It seemed like an age before I realised where my hands were. I tore my eyes from hers, swallowed and began to struggle to my feet. I felt exposed, cornered in some strange way, and didn't know how to react.

She held her hand out to me to help her up. Cool, elegant fingers wrapped themselves around my clammy hand, and I eased her to her feet. I must have brought her up a little more forcefully than I realised, as she tipped forward and landed in my arms. Bliss. It felt like I moulded into her, her scent inducing my senses to wake up and smell paradise.

'Are you alright?' A soft gentle voice caressed my ear and laid itself to rest in my soul.

I looked up, quite a way up for that matter. Six foot of pure sex appeal encased me in strong arms, staving off the world, and Justine Russell. Nothing existed around me apart from her body and those eyes. I had come home.

'Yes ... I ...'

'Stewart ... Russell. My office, now!' Shit.

A faltering smile graced my lips, and I became rapidly aware that I was still in her arms.

'Sorry.' She let me go, a shy crooked smile hovering over her perfect face.

'Don't touch her Jenkins. She's a clit tease.' Fucking Russell. So, I did the only thing I could do in that situation. I smacked Justine right between the eyes.

It felt great.

Chapter Six

Three days suspension with immediate effect. I'd expected worse, but after I'd explained, in detail, to the very homophobic 'but trying to understand' Head, about how we had nearly had unprotected sex the previous night, but I'd stopped because I'd realised it was wrong. I'd even put in the details about how wet she was, that she wanted me to 'fuck her' and then lick me out. He softened a little, then became flustered and was easy on both of us.

I was even allowed to go on the Geography field trip ... and so was Justine (unfortunately - but hey - you can't have everything), but we had to stay away from each other. As if I'd be going anywhere near that psycho.

It wasn't too bad being home for three days. The police had carted Dad off to the police station, kept him in overnight, and then released him. God knows when he'll be back. Usually at least a week. Mum, on the other hand, had liberally applied a ton of makeup and swanned off to bingo. We didn't expect her back anytime soon.

Three days filled with fun and games - just me and Harry. I kept him off school for company. Not good I know, but it was an opportunity to lavish him with as much love and attention he could handle.

His eyes began to sparkle once again. Fear was replaced by peace. It was the happiest I think either of us had been for such a long time. That is until the 'bastard' came home.

We'd been asleep for a couple of hours, curled up on the settee, hugging each other, totally

content and relaxed. The telly was on low and the gas fire lit the room - really homely.

The front door opened with such a force it cracked the plaster behind it. 'What the fuck!' I shot up, pulling Harry protectively behind me.

'Where's that bitch?' Pissed. How unusual.

'We don't know.' I was scared. He didn't look with it. His eyes were vacant ... cold.

Slap. My face stung. He grabbed for the front of my pyjamas and I heard the rip and felt his nails dig into my flesh. 'Run Harry!' I shoved him away and aimed a kick at the bastard's crotch.

He caught it swiftly and shoved me back onto the couch. 'Fiery little fucker aren't you? I like that in a woman.' He leered at my exposed breasts and licked his lips. 'It's about time I showed you what your old man can do ... I think you'll like it.'

His drunken breath was turning my stomach, but not as much as the impotent thrusting of his flaccid dick. 'You need to be taught a lesson, bitch, and I can make it last all night.' He began to push my pyjama bottoms down, scratching the inside of my thighs in the process. A long thick tongue slapped itself on the side of my face and trailed down towards my mouth. I couldn't move. Fear gripped me and pinned me down as surely as he had.

He leaned back, one hand around my throat, the other clumsily undoing his pants. His eyes were on me, his tongue, full of spit, licked his chapped lips. 'You're gonna love this.' A short laugh shot out of his mouth, and he smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Thud. I saw the glint of the ashtray as the light from the gas fire caught it. He fell, unmoving, on top of me, a slow trickle of blood coming down his temple. Harry stood behind him holding the large glass ashtray high in the air, waiting to strike again.

'It's all right sweetheart ... it's okay ... he can't hurt us now,' I soothed. Harry stood like a statue, frozen in time, posing in an almost comical way.

I gripped the bastard's shoulders and shoved him off me. He was a dead weight, granted, but I had the momentum now. No way was either of us going to be here when he came round.

'Come on squirt, let's get out of here.' We hastily went upstairs. 'Get ready, love.'

'Do I have to wash again?' I choked out a laugh that was shortly accompanied by slow torturous tears crawling down my face.

'Don't worry about that babe. Just get some warm clothes on, okay?'

In less than five minutes we were free, winging our way to Sarah's, Mum's sister, who lived a good walk away.

Mum and Sarah did not see eye to eye and we didn't see her much. It was probably because she lived with her partner Elaine and had a much better life than she did. Therefore, we were banned from ever going there. Especially since the show down in the high street two years before, where Mum had called Sarah a 'Fucking dyke' (now you know where I get my manners from).

Sarah hadn't flinched. She stared Mum squarely in the eyes, hatred oozing out, and spat 'Well at least I didn't plump for second best.' With that she turned, and blended in the gathering crowd, never to be seen again. Until tonight that is.

Now, we had nowhere else to go. And I quite liked Aunty Sarah - she was very much on my wavelength, and knew what a pair of bastards my parents were.

Shocked green eyes greeted us as Sarah opened the door. I think seeing two visibly upset relatives, with a mish-mash of clothing on nearly gave her a turn. She called the police as soon as we told her of the night's events, and we waited for them to visit us.

Two hours, three hot chocolates and a plate of biscuits later, the police had been given all the information they needed. They picked him up half way down the road bawling at the top of his voice for me to go back and 'get some'. Someone who specialised in rape cases counselled me. I stressed that I hadn't been raped, just assaulted ... but that was bad enough.

They left with the reassurances that we wouldn't be seeing that 'bastard' (their words) again for a long time.

Hopefully.

Mum had been found with the help of Aunty Sarah. She knew that Mum would be at 'her fancy man's' in Stalybridge. She was shagging him when the police turned up, trussed up like a schoolgirl too. Fucking slut. Not surprisingly, she didn't seem to give a fuck about Harry, or me and said we should be safe at Sarah's. She'd changed her bloody tune - she hated Sarah - but when it was convenient ...

The police told Sarah (with Harry and me ear wiggling), that reports had been filed on both our parents with the courts and the social services. About bloody time. Only time would tell ... it being the great healer and all (I thought I'd go for more than one cliché).

Watching Sarah and Elaine with Harry made my heart ache. He sat, curled on Elaine's knee with his thumb pressed into his mouth. The fear had eased a little on his features, but it was still there behind his eyes. Elaine stroked his hair, painting him with soothing words, gently rocking him in a maternal rhythm. His eyes were drooping and sleep came for him like a welcome friend.

She still held him, stroking him, keeping him safe in her arms. Something his mother should have done.

'You both can stay here as long as you want you know. There's plenty of room ... it would be a chance for us to ... you know ... get to know each other.' Elaine spoke softly, her eyes

alternating from me to Sarah, who nodded approvingly.

I feebly nodded, suddenly tired from all the exploits of the evening. I felt secure here: home at last.

After a hot shower and attending to my cuts and bruises, I snuggled underneath a thick duvet that smelled of springtime. I was exhausted: physically, spiritually and emotionally spent.

The constellations were gone. Funny, but I missed them twinkling and comforting me from afar. I missed the great bear and the plough that I used to trace with my finger with half closed eyes. Well. I could always get another one to lie underneath.

With that, I closed my swollen eyes and drifted into sleep.

Sarah and Elaine were perfect. Their constant attention over me and Harry made us feel like I had died and gone to heaven. We had gone back home on the Saturday to collect all our things, and I mean all. They decided that living with them could be a permanent thing if we wanted. All it needed was a court order and the permission of one of our parents.

I froze when I heard that. No way would either of them give up their meal tickets. Elaine didn't see a problem. She was a solicitor, a partner to be exact. Both her and Sarah were financially secure and more than prepared to take on a ready made family.

Harry was slowly coming out of his shell like a hermit crab facing the sunlight of their love and attention. It was a joy to watch. His little arms held aloft every time one of them passed, hoping for a hug, which was never denied. The ugly duckling turning into a swan. He no longer smelled of wee. He took special care of his hair, which he combed lovingly with only the tiniest amount of spit, and smiled easily, displaying a gap where his front tooth should be.

I still heard him crying out for his mum in the night, the nightmares were still coming thick and fast. But when I saw Sarah and Elaine in his room holding him and calming him down, I knew he - we - could get through this.

Fingers crossed.

Chapter Seven

Monday came quickly. I had forgotten about the trip, even forgotten about Emma Jenkins for a few minutes. I lugged my over-full holdall, through the school gates and skulked about the coach park waiting for the arrival of the others.

I could see Justine in the corner talking to a bunch of girls, whilst shooting sly glances in my direction. Like the drama queen I am, I kissed the back of my hand, and mouthed 'kiss my arse'.

Such a lady.

Ms Davies strolled up, chatting intensely with Ms Wilkins. It became quite heated at one point, with Ms Davies grabbing the gym teacher's arm and stopping her in her tracks. More heated words, sly glances, a cupped cheek ... what the ...? A cupped cheek? It was so quick I think only Justine and me spotted it. We looked at each other in amazement, shrugging our shoulders, then shaking our heads. What business was it of ours ... maybe the teachers were taking my advice at last ... get laid and get rid of that stick up their ...

'Help me with this, Stewart.' I turned to greet the frosty expression of the Geography teacher humping ... no not the PE teacher ... her holdall and two rucksacks that looked to be full of worksheets.

'Can I help?' Cue angel's wings.

I turned. Slowly. My senses were in overdrive. My heart was thudding in my chest and my clothes seemed restrictive to the point of unbearable.

'Hi,' I squeaked out, alarming myself at the pitch.

'Do you need a hand?' Her eyes met mine. Click. There it was again.

'No ... yes ... whatever ...' God, I felt like a jerk. She smiled sympathetically at me and grabbed for the holdall at the same time that I did. Our hands grabbed each other's, and electricity sparked all the way up my arm, down my chest, to settle somewhere in my lower region. Jesus. I could get electrocuted - you should never mix electricity with water.

She seemed stunned. I hadn't electrocuted her, had I? Our hands flew apart and the holdall fell to the ground with a thump.

'Watch what you're doing girls!' Ms Davies shouted. I laughed - you know, the nervous ones that always get you into trouble, and that broke the tension. Although Ms Davies didn't see the funny side to it.

Coach loaded, names taken, and everyone on the bus - and we were off. It was going to take at least four hours to get there, so I opted for a double seat of my own and a good book. I put my headphones on and listened to the radio. Sinéad o' Connor. What a load of sh... I stopped:

*It's been so lonely without u here
Like a bird without a song
Nothing can stop these lonely tears from falling
Tell me baby where did I go wrong
I could put my arms around every boy I see
But they'd only remind me of you*

Why did that affect me? I turned in my seat to look at Emma Jenkins who was sat two rows behind chatting with a group of girls. Why do you affect me so much? I don't even know you. But you make me feel lonely ... it seems like ... years have gone by and I have eventually found you again. How stupid. I shook my head and began to turn back to the front, not noticing very interested brown eyes watching my every move.

The guesthouse we were staying in was quite nice. Not brilliant, or lush ... but nice ... homely in a seventies kind of way.

'Get into your pairs!' shouted Bulldyke Wilkins. I felt a hand on my arm.

'I think I'm with you.' Such blue eyes. I wish you were with me.

I swallowed, trying to get some moisture into my mouth. 'Are you Emma Jenkins?' Smooth operator.

She nodded and stuck out her hand. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Laura.' She gripped my hand and pumped it up and down in a comical way. We both laughed, a genuine laugh this time. Almost relaxed.

'Oi! You two!' Bulldyke again. 'You've got the attic room next to Ms Davies and me. Serves you right for not paying attention.'

I found out what she meant by that soon enough.

The attic was eight flights of stairs away. The last two sets were designed for hump backed dwarfs with extremely small feet - did I mention nerves of steel too? By the time we had got to our room we were knackered and collapsed on candlewick-covered beds.

'I feel like I've stepped back in time,' Emma panted. So did I, but for completely different reasons. This was becoming creepy, but in a good way.

'Yeah... very quaint,' I answered.

'Beds are comfy though. How's yours?' Blue eyes caught mine, and I smiled at her. I couldn't help it. I was in a room with Emma Jenkins and as well as being really hot, and drop dead gorgeous, she had a great personality too,. And she hadn't mentioned the 'stalking incident'.

'I've been meaning to grab you for ages now ...' That had my full attention. 'You've been running the mentoring club right? For English?'

Here it comes. This is when she goes off at me.

'I'm so sorry I didn't turn up ...' Wait a minute. Sorry? 'I didn't get your message until I got back to school. I was on holiday with my parents. They're separated but were trying again for my

benefit. Waste of time that was.'

'God. Don't worry about that ... I didn't notice you weren't there.' Liar. She, on the other hand looked a little upset. 'Well ... I did notice ...' Did she brighten up then? 'But ... well ... it doesn't matter ... if you're free ...'

'I'd love to,' she interrupted me, leaning over and patting my arm. 'Come on. We have to meet the others.'

This was becoming a good day.

The first two days were hectic. Death by worksheet, believe me. I'd only spoken to Justine once, and that was under duress. She had collared me as I was making my way to bed on the first night.

'If you want a little company later ...' Did that girl have no self-respect? 'You are more than welcome to come to my room. Debbie is shacking up with Jason after lights out, and ...' she trailed her finger down my arm. I shuddered and glared at her, trying to ignore the interested looks we were getting from Emma. 'For any reason ... you're more than welcome.'

I brushed her off. Obviously. That girl was a psycho - after all that had happened ...she still wanted to shag me.

The last night was a real laugh. We were leaving after lunch the next day and the teachers allowed us to have wine with our meals. A little too much for some. We ended up singing and prating about until Ms Davies decided that we needed our sleep, all the while looking at Ms Wilkins.

Both Emma and I went to bed at the same time. Reaching our door I was surprised to see it open. I pushed tentatively and peeked inside. No one. Must have left it unlocked - or the chambermaid could have done it.

Emma used the bathroom first whilst I was sorting out my bag for the next day. My hand felt wet. 'What the ...' I pulled the covers back to reveal a big wet patch on the mattress.

'You could have gone first if you wanted,' chuckled Emma. Where did she come from?

'I don't understand ...' Oh yes I did. Fucking Russell had done this - payback, or she wanted me in her room. I told Emma this.

'Tell the teachers.'

'That's what she wants me to do. She knows I know it's her, but if I blame her ... shit ... the Head'll have my balls.' Emma looked surprised at this. 'Don't worry, I'll kip on the floor.'

yesssssssss ...baby ... YES! There you go. One, maybe two, satisfied women. I was clasping and unclasping the muscles to my anguish by this point. What I wouldn't do for a little pressure.

I spoke too soon. Emma's leg came up between my thighs and pushed itself into my need, sighing in her sleep. I gasped out loud, the pleasure from that movement nearly my undoing.

'Sssshhh honey,' she murmured, pulling me to her until my head was underneath her chin and her face was buried in my hair. 'Sleep now. It will be easier in the morning.' What did she mean by that? I didn't care, couldn't think, and didn't care that I couldn't think. I was in heaven.

After about thirty minutes and loads of mental cold showers, I drifted off, totally content to be in her arms again. Again? Oh, it doesn't matter.

Sunlight trickled through the window, and illuminated the bed where we were wrapped around each other. I had spent a while guiltily watching her sleep, smelling her scent, feeling her soft breasts nestling into my shoulder.

Slam. The door burst open to reveal Justine Russell and her cronies. 'No wonder you didn't take me up on the offer Stewart - new conquest is it?'

I was like a rabbit caught in the headlights. I couldn't move. I looked guilty: I knew that. So when my gaze met Emma's confused expression, I nearly died of embarrassment. I did the only thing I could think of doing; I shot up; pushed past the sniggering bunch of twats in the doorway; ran down the corridor and locked myself in the bathroom.

Chapter Eight

The journey back seemed to take an age. I sat on my own, headphones on, and blocked everything out. My mind kept on sneaking back to images of Emma nestled next to me; the softness of her hair; the rhythm of her breathing; her scent. Then the image of Justine standing in the doorway would break through and I was filled with abhorrence for myself, and that bitch, Russell.

Jumping down off the coach I stalked off. I could hear Emma shouting me from behind but I kept on going.

As I turned the corner I could see her towering over Justine Russell, shouting something in her face, but I was too far away to hear it.

Home at last. I threw my bag in the hallway and stomped in to the lounge. I was greeted by a picturesque scene: Harry on Sarah's knee, reading a book aloud to her. My heart filled with love: past events forgotten.

'Laurie!' Harry bounded up to me, arms outstretched, a glow about him - just the thing to lift my spirits.

'Hey squirt.' I scooped him up into a giant hug. 'How's the main man?'

'Mum came today. She's not happy Laurie.' I looked at Sarah who shrugged her shoulders and sighed.

'She's pissed because they have stopped her income support and the family allowance. She should have thought of that when she let that monster keep coming back.' She stood and walked over to me, holding out her arms for a hug. I fell into her embrace and the dam broke. A sob that I had been keeping buried for God knows how long broke free. Tears worked their way from painfully closed eyes and thickly tracked down my cheeks.

'Hey ... don't worry. You won't be going back there again.' Her soothing voice made things worse. I started shaking, coughing out cries and gripping onto her all the more. She stroked my back, shushing me, caressing me with words. 'Come on ... there now ... get it all out.'

'You ... you ... ddon't un ..der ..stand. It's not that ... I'm ... crying ... a ... bout.' I panted out between sobs.

Sarah led me to the sofa, sat me down, and then went to the drinks cabinet. 'Not that I agree with drinking ... but I'll make an exception.' She gave me a brandy and ordered me to sip it and calm myself down so we could talk.

Forty minutes later I had told Sarah about Justine Russell (she agreed ... Justine was a psycho), and about Emma Jenkins. All of it. Even the nitty gritty. Even the 'wanting to do unspeakable things' with her.

Guess what she did? Go on, have a guess. She bloody laughed.

Not impressed. How could she laugh when my heart was breaking? I think my expression said it all, because she stopped.

'Oh Laura ... don't worry about things like that. You're only sixteen. You will fall in and out of love many times before you meet the one.' I hadn't said that I loved her ... don't know what's she's talking about.

She didn't seem surprised about me having a crush on, or having relations with, another girl. But why would she?

She's with a woman herself.

She patted my arm and gave me a reassuring smile. 'Whatever's meant to be will be.'

The next week went by without much happening. I saw Emma in the canteen again on the first day back and she waved from her table. I turned and left.

Monday came around again. I had already tried to get out of mentoring duties but I was still on probation for smacking the Psycho Bitch from Hell. Therefore, one o'clock saw me in the library, books out, hands twitching, and too many butterflies in my stomach to count. Yes ... I was shitting myself.

When you want everyone to turn up - nada - when you don't - they all turn up at the same time.

Peter was completely oblivious to everything. He just got out his books and pencil and waited to be spoon-fed. Justine was a total, and I mean total, bitch, to me, and to Emma too. I deserved it, I know, but Emma ... what had she ever done to her? It was the longest half hour of my little life. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

As usual, Justine lingered whilst we were packing away. But so did Emma.

'Could I speak with you a minute?' She dismissed Justine with a look. The look.

'Sure.'

Justine snatched up her stuff, turned abruptly and left. Thank God.

'It's the English mocks next Thursday and I really need some help, especially with the poetry.' She looked almost bashful as she said this. 'Could you ... would you consider some one on one tutoring?' Some one on one - I liked the idea. Tutoring her didn't seem too bad either .

'Yeah sure. Whenever.' Thank you God.

'How does Friday night round my house grab you?' Right in the crotch. Sometimes I surprise myself with my crudeness. 'We could study for a bit then maybe watch a video ...'

I was ecstatic. Alone with Emma, round her house, invited by her. She wanted to be with me ... alone. Ditto. And no mention of Whitby - added bonus. Yes, I know it was to study, and yes I know there was nothing more to it, but I was euphoric anyway.

'Great. Give me the details, you know, address, phone number, etc, just in case something comes up.'

I quickly scribbled my details on a scrap of paper and she did the same.

'It's a date then.' She smiled at me. If only ...

The rest of the week dragged along at a snail's pace. Nothing of note happened. I didn't get into any scrapes, kept my mouth shut, even though Geography had taken on a new aspect. Thinking about Ms Davies and Bulldyke performing the beast with two backs made me smirk inwardly. Then I remembered what I was doing at the time - *ooohhh be still my beating heart*.

Having an overactive imagination took its toll on me, and by Thursday I was a simmering pot of carnal desire. I couldn't go round to Emma's like this. As soon as she answers the door I'd be on her like a sex starved dog. Now there's an image ... oh shut up!

Lying in bed, listening to the sound of the rain and thinking about the following evening, I began to twist reality into my own imaginings. Emma was the star of the show, of course, and I was her leading lady. I could feel the arousal seeping into my body. First in my stomach where it whirled around before venturing lower. My heart rate was beginning to pick up: my breathing becoming more laboured. God. What was I to do? The only thing possible.

Relieve the tension.

I slipped my left hand underneath my t-shirt and gently grazed the underside of my breast. The nipple, who was at this stage sleeping, bolted awake and stood to attention. Leisurely, I circled the outside. No, I didn't want to hurry this - my hand was now Emma's. I trickled my fingers over the pert stump, teasing, pulling, pinching lightly.

My right hand, hating to be left out, sneaked past the elastic of my pyjama bottoms to fondle soft downy hair that covered my most intimate place. Left hand circling: right hand travelling - a perfect combination. Emma's face hovered in front of me, her eyes full of desire, her lips slightly parted and glistening.

My right hand ventured lower, eager to fulfil its quest. Easily it slipped between my wet lips. A soft groan escaped my mouth as I unhurriedly pushed downwards, coating my fingers from the source of my wetness. I curled my finger slightly as I brought it back to the bundle of nerves at my core, and then back down again. Hips that lay dormant awoke, to steadily begin a rhythm of their own making, trying to accommodate the fire that was pulsating through my body. Both hands were on the go, one pushing, and the other circling. Hips rocking, quicker now, attempting to keep pace with the building climax and the overzealous hands.

The pressure wasn't enough, so I abandoned my breast and allowed the left hand to join its twin. I separated my lips and rubbed, softly at first, the slick folds that protected my innocence. I increased the pressure, using the flat of my hand. I needed release, and I needed it now.

I became more frantic. My eyes were beginning to glaze over. It was on its way. It started at my toes, the tingle that travelled up my legs to settle, raging, between my thighs. I could feel the walls deep inside me contracting, retracting, then contracting again. My hand was rubbing uninhibitedly. I didn't give a fuck about anyone catching me. Shit. This was good. The heat coming from me could toast bread.

More frantic now. I was on the verge. Up down up down up down - stroke stroke stroke - up

down up down up down. I nipped my clit between my fingers and gently tugged. Every muscle in my body tensed. And over I went ... crashing, thrashing, not a sound coming out of my mouth. My face was contorting into frenzied poses, my teeth biting down on my lower lip to keep it all in. And it made it better. Much better.

I fell asleep, the smell of my orgasm clinging to my fingers. Thank you Emma.

Chapter Nine

Friday night arrived and I was beside myself with nerves. I stood outside her house in Heaton Moor - yes the posh end of town, and summoned the courage to knock on the stained glass door that separated me from her.

Tap tap tap.

So gentle. Unlike me. The images of last night were racing around in my brain and I was feeling a little guilty about what I had done ... who I had invoked to get me there.

'Hi Laura.' She was there, resplendent, looking like a goddess brought to earth for my pleasure. Her hair was freshly washed, a little damp at the ends. She wore faded blue jeans that hugged her hips and exposed part of her tanned midriff. Her t-shirt was trying furiously to connect with the waistband, but to no avail.

My eyes devoured the image. 'Are you okay?' Fuck.

'Yeah ... sorry about that ... hi ... I was just mentally (undressing her?) checking (her out?) that I had brought everything.'

'Well come in. You must be freezing standing out here.' She began to rub her arms and I noticed that her nipples were embracing the cold evening. Little devils .

'My mum is out for the night, some work social or something, so I'll be your hostess tonight.' Her smile was wide and mine joined hers. 'You look so pretty when you smile, Laura. You should do it more often.' My heart stopped in my chest and time stood still. 'Come on ... we'll never get done at this rate.'

With that she turned and walked down the hallway. *Being your slave, what should I do but tend / Upon the hours and times of your desire?'*

I waited a couple of seconds to get the blood flowing back to all limbs and away from that one special part where it seemed to go every time I was near her. Deep breath. Relax. Then, eagerly I followed.

In the kitchen we prepared sandwiches and drinks to take up to her room. It was fun. We chatted

like we had known each other forever - really, it felt like I had always known her.

Two and a half hours later saw us slumped back on her bed, papers everywhere. Ben Jonson was exposing himself like usual. And me for that matter:

*Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine ...*

Just one sip. I promise that would be enough to quench my thirst for you. Parched. I felt like I had been in the desert, and she came along - fresh, clear, refreshing, the only thing that would save me. But like the parched wanderer, too much water could be fatal.

'Ooo - I love that poem,' she gushed. 'Read it to me.' So there I was, reading Jonson's *To Celia* to the one person I wanted to read it to. Under ideal circumstances she would have had her head on my lap, and her hand would be stroking my arm in a slow circular motion. I was getting goose bumps just thinking about it. Then, my overactive libido was joining in and I could feel my senses becoming acute. I flushed furiously and jumped off the bed, nearly knocking her off it.

'Are you okay?' She looked concerned. 'The poem hasn't upset you has it?' If you only knew ...

'No ... cramp.' I rubbed my leg for effect.

'Here ... let me. I'm used to muscles tensing up after training.' Shit. She had both her hands on my calf and was kneading and digging her long fingers into the flesh through my jeans. 'It would be easier if you lifted these up,' she said, tugging at my jeans. I didn't answer, didn't move.

She continued up my leg and began torturing my thigh with her hands. God, it was heaven. I did feel a little guilty considering I didn't have cramp in the first place, and because I was enjoying it a little too much.

She was on her knees in front of me, rubbing, pressing her strong fingers into pliant flesh. I watched the top of her head bobbing with the force she was using. I could smell her freshly washed hair as it wafted up towards my over-sensitised nostrils, and I furtively inhaled her essence. 'How's that?' Heaven. I sighed, knowing I had to let her stop.

'Loads better. Thanks.'

'My pleasure.' No ... definitely mine I think.

We settled in the front room to watch a video. 'Horror or Drama?' she asked. I cocked an eyebrow at her that said more info needed. '*Silence of the Lambs* or *Fried Green Tomatoes*.'

Silence of the Lambs it was. How can a girl resist Jodie Foster?

I was quite brave, honestly. I only jumped a couple of times. I didn't like the bit when they found the victim's nails stuck in the wall ... ugh ... to this day that still makes me shudder. I kept on stealing sly glances at Emma - she was totally absorbed in the film, her eyes wide.

Beautiful.

The climactic ending was very nearly climactic for me. Jodie was in the basement and the killer was watching her through night vision goggles. Emma grabbed my hand at this point. Jodie's breathing became laboured as she swung her gun this way and that trying to aim at something. Emma pulled my hand to her chest (yes - where her very soft breasts were). Bang. Off goes her gun, Emma ends up in my arms, head buried under my chin. God ... she had a good grip, not that I was complaining. I snaked adulterous hands around her back.

'Did she get him?' A muffled voice came out from my jumper, her warm breath seeping through the corded wool to settle on my skin.

'It's okay.' I tentatively stroked her back, to reassure her of course. 'He's dead.'

Blue eyes blinked up at me, a look of embarrassment on her face, a sly crooked grin taking over her features.

'It's your film. Haven't you seen it before?' Her delightful head shook from side to side, an adorable expression on her face.

'Too scared. Mum bought it last week and I've been wanting to see it ... but not on my own.' A small smile graced her lips. I looked down at her arms about me, mine about her, then looked at her face again.

'Sorry ...' she scrambled back as if burned. 'Bet you think I'm a right baby.' Babe yes, but definitely no baby.

I shook my head. 'I would have hid too if I could have moved.' I gave her a cheeky grin, and raised one eyebrow. She laughed and relaxed.

'That's okay then.'

We said our goodnights shortly before midnight. Elaine was outside in the car waiting for me.

I shut the car door and waved vigorously at Emma as we pulled away.

'So. That is the mighty Miss Emma Jenkins?' I nodded, content. 'You've got great taste ... just like your Aunt.' We both laughed out loud.

'I think Sarah will agree with you there.'

I settled in for the short ride home, looking out the window, but my mind was solely fixed on a pair of twinkling blue eyes.

Chapter Ten

'Laura! Phone!' What a way to wake up.

I put my head underneath the duvet and ignored Sarah's voice. 'Phone!'

Leave me alone. It's Saturday for Christ's sake.

The duvet was yanked back, to reveal Harry grinning at me, his gap looking strangely bigger this morning. 'Aunty Sarah said you gotta get up. Someone's ringing you.'

'Tell them to ring back,' I grumbled, patting around, searching out the duvet. I pulled it swiftly over my head and shut the world out again.

'Up lady. Someone's on the phone for you, and you'd better take it,' Sarah's voice brooked no argument.

I threw the covers back, feigning irritation, and plodded down to the lounge. 'Hello.' I sounded pissed off.

'Laura?' My heart picked up the pace. 'It's me ... Emma. Look, if this is a bad time ...'

'No, no ... you're fine, it's fine ... go on ...' Was I rambling?

Elaine, Sarah and Harry were making faces at me, putting their fingers in their mouths to imitate gagging actions. Harry decided to play an imaginary violin. I glared at them and turned away.

'Do you fancy meeting up this afternoon? Grab a coffee - a little shopping?' She sounded nervous.

'Sure ... I'd love to.' I could hear air kisses behind me. They were so immature - honestly.

We made the arrangements and I hung up. The three of them sat on the sofa looking like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. 'Very funny.' I about turned and went to get ready - I only had three and a half hours! It would be a rush - but I'd manage .

Manchester Piccadilly was heaving. People were rushing from place to place. Mothers were dragging screaming kids behind them, threatening them with 'Father Christmas won't come to you at this rate'. Cars pumped out fumes making the air thick, and noises greeted us from every angle, penetrating deep within and vibrating through our bones.

But I didn't care. I was with Emma again - bliss.

The Arndale Centre was alive. Shops displayed promotions, luring the unsuspecting shopper in with ease, with promises of a new look, how to keep your man happy in bed, tips on feeding your kids (because - obviously - you hadn't fed them before) and how to change your mundane world into something straight from the pages of *Hello* magazine. I didn't buy it. No - not *Hello* magazine - I mean the whole shebang.

We wandered through shops, fingering the merchandise, and commenting on how pricey things were. Miss Selfridges had on a promotion - what a surprise - 20% off all t-shirts - in winter! Emma picked up a short crop top and held it against her. It was black, silky black. Nice.

'What do you think?' I nodded - completely speechless. 'I'd better try it on to make sure. Come in with me.' I nodded again. Shit. I was like one of those cheesy toy dogs in the back of a Ford Escort.

The changing rooms were nearly empty, just a couple of other girls in the corner, giggling. It was a communal one - everybody had to strip in front of everybody else. I swallowed the gathering spit from my mouth. I was going to see her in a state of undress and I, in turn, was in a panic mode.

'Maybe I should wait for you outside ...' I drifted off, embarrassed at my own inadequacy to think pure thoughts.

Emma was tugging at her top, arms over her head, completely oblivious to my condition, and to what I had said. I looked at the floor, unexpectedly nervous.

I looked around, taking in the carpet's entire pattern, and then slowly raised my eyes to sweep around the walls, making note of the posters of young buff men wearing jeans and a smile. My eyes landed on Emma's exposed back. Firm, rippling, tanned. It looked smooth and strong. I could see the line where she had worn a bikini top, because (deep breath), she wasn't wearing a bra now. Her left breast was showing a little. I could see the curve of it, a hint at the roundness that lay hidden. I was spellbound. My tongue poked out a little to moisten my sudden dry lips.

'What do you think?'

'Laura ... earth to Laura.' I shook my head to clear it and looked into her concerned blue eyes.

'What?'

'I said what do you think? I quite like it. Do you think it fits okay?' More than okay - she was a vision.

'It's alright I suppose.' Well I couldn't tell her the truth now could I?

She was pulling it over her head by this point and I noticed the mirror in front of her. A full view of her chest greeted me like an offering. Full, round breasts bobbing about as she pulled her arms from the sleeves. Dark pink nipples sat pride of place ... just one taste ... touch. She was absolutely stunning, and my pants were soaked through.

'Ready?' I nodded, becoming a mime artist once again.

We had spent a few hours in the town and I didn't want it to end. I was in paradise and she was my angel. Well, for today anyway.

'It's been great Laura. I really wish I didn't have to go, but I've got a date tonight.' I froze, rooted to the spot. A date? Jealousy surged through me - who the fuck with? 'Rob Evans has been pestering me to go to the pictures with him for ages, and I agreed just to get him off my back.'

That bastard! He was known as Rob 'the octopus' Evans by half of the school. I fucking hated him -especially now. He prowled after girls, charmed them, shagged them and then left. What could I do? She was a free agent.

'That's nice.' Well come on - what did you expect me to do? Fall on my knees and beg her not to go? Or, better still, fall at her feet and tell her how I worshipped her, would die for her again and again, implore her to rethink this terrible mistake - that we were meant to be together ... we were always meant to be together? Didn't think so.

'I wish I could get out of it.' So do I. 'But I promised. I'm having such a good time with you.' I smiled, weakly.

Fifteen minutes later I made my excuses and left.

Totally pissed off - that doesn't begin to describe how I felt. I felt cheated on. By Rob Evans of all fucking people. Bastard. What were they doing? Was he mauling her, priming her to be his next conquest? Were they kissing? Was she offering him her mouth, lips glistening, tongue probing, sucking gently at his lip? Was he touching her perfect breasts, holding them, weighing them, softly squeezing before grazing the nipple with his fat fucking fingers? What if he ventured lower? You know, inside her pants. Fucking bastard. I wanted to tear his head off.

I knew I was being irrational. I knew it was none of my goddamn business who she was with, and I knew deep down she would never be with me. But I was in pain. Hollowness had set itself in my gut and my heart was ripping apart. I wanted to curl up and die before I went out to rip that bastard's dick off.

What if he forces her to do something she wasn't ready for? Fear enveloped me. What if she can't fight him off, and I let her go without saying a word? I sunk my head into my hands, trying to block out the image of a scared Emma fighting off the Devil himself.

Harry kept on coming into my room asking if I was okay. I snapped at him a third time. I felt like such a shit. He had been so pleased that his second front tooth had fallen out, with only a little bit of wobbling and prompting, and was eager to find what the tooth fairy was going to leave him.

His little face crumpled up and he began to shudder with hurt, hurt that I had caused him. 'I'm sorry squirt. Come here.' He raced into my arms flinging his own tiny ones around my neck and hugging me as hard as he could.

'I love you Laurie. Don't worry about Emma.' How did he know? 'She'll soon see how special you are and love you nearly as much as I do.'

What can you do, eh?

I agreed to watch telly with them in the front room. Boring, shitty Saturday night telly, with everybody grinning like idiots. You know the ones ... fake smiles, all teeth ... not like Emma ... Her smile was perfect, although a little crooked at times .

It was nearly nine o'clock and the phone alerted us to its presence. 'Get that will you Laura?' Sarah asked from her place snuggled up to Elaine on the sofa, and Harry nestled between her legs on the floor.

'Hello.' Totally pissed off.

'Laura?'

I swallowed. 'Yes ...' I wanted her to say her name so I could roll it around in my head later.

'It's me ... Emma.' There we go.

'Is everything okay?' Was that panic in my voice? 'That bastard hasn't hurt you, has he?' The anger was up now and raring to kick the shit out of anyone who stood in my way.

'No ... no. Everything's fine. I just wanted to see if you were okay, you seemed a little out of it when you were going today.'

'Just exam pressure catching me off guard.' I lied. 'I bet Rob isn't chuffed that you are ringing me on your big date, is he?'

'He isn't here. I'm at home. God ... he was like a man with eight arms? (I did say octopus, right), 'He was forever trying to get a hold of me, any part - he didn't seem to care where. So, I blew him out and told him I had to get home early. And here I am.' Yes. There you are, my sweet sweet angel. My heart soared like a captive bird, finally given its freedom once again.

We chatted for another half an hour about everything and anything. Why was it so easy to talk to her?

'Are you free tomorrow?' 'Cos we could get together and go to Lyme Park for the day ... if you wanted to of course.'

Of course I wanted to, and we arranged to meet, with our study books, at ten o'clock the next morning. Joy.

I skipped into the front room again to be greeted by three sets of eyes - two knowing and one tired. 'Anyone fancy a cuppa?' I was elated, a new lease of life thrumming through me. I knew this was only the start of Emma's dating escapades, and that this time she wasn't interested. What would I do when she did find someone who took her fancy?

I can't think about that today, I'll think about it tomorrow, in the words of Scarlet O'Hara '*Cos tomorrow is another day.*' Corny, but true.

As I was skipping to the kitchen humming, I heard Elaine say 'Well, she's brightened up.' Yes I had - I bloody well had.

Lyme Park was beautiful. The weather was absolutely glorious, and I was in my element being with Emma for nearly the whole weekend. It was cold, but sunny - good weather for nearly the end of November. Mock exams started tomorrow, but I didn't care - today I was free.

We walked around the woods for a while, watching the deer roam majestically around in their natural habitat. The squirrels were getting prepared for the onslaught of winter, scurrying around in the leaves looking for stray nuts and berries to store away. It was perfect, and seemed like we had walked together this way thousands of times before. Strange.

Lunchtime saw us with sandwiches bought from the local National Trust shop - they must think of a price and double it. We sprawled on the grass, lying on our jackets that we had been carrying around all day. We did a little bit of studying but couldn't really concentrate on anything for very long.

The deer were fascinated with us and watched us from afar. 'So beautiful.' Emma said. I turned and she was looking straight at me, a weird look on her face. She looked away quickly.

'It was a nightmare last night.' Yeah - tell me about it. 'Rob acted like a total prick in the queue to the pictures. He was being rather personal to a couple of guys who were in line just ahead of us, calling them fags and the like.' She shuddered at the memory. 'I can't stand it when people are horrible about other people's life choices, can you?' I shook my head and played with a piece of grass that had suddenly become extremely interesting.

She lay down flat, her hands on her stomach, and gazed at the sky. I could see her eyes following a bird that had taken flight at the sound of a car backfiring in the car park. Such concentration. Her brow furrowed, and she broke her gaze away. A sigh broke free from her. 'Wouldn't you like to be as free as that bird, Laura? You know, do what you wanted, when you wanted and not

worry about the consequences?' She looked at me, her eyes a dark blue.

'Well yeah ... I suppose ...' I chewed my lip. 'But you must remember that even though we think the bird is free it still follows the laws of nature. Everyday it is a fight - only the strongest survive. They can't cuddle up under the duvet and call in sick because they can't be bothered to get their backsides out of bed.' I fingered my hair. 'So, in a way, no, because I was only tempted at first because I imagined myself as that bird and nobody else knew me. So, I was free. Do you understand?' I turned over onto my back and stared into the powder blue sky.

Everything was quiet. Emma didn't answer straight away.

'But at least I could fly away when I wanted to.' Was that a sigh?

We lay like that for a good thirty minutes, completely quiet, but it wasn't uncomfortable, it was ... right.

'What's the story between you and Justine Russell then?' I nearly died. What had brought that on?

'What story?' Yes. Be coy ... don't let anything slip.

'It just seems that you two are always at each other's throats. Every time I've seen you together you have been arguing or throwing punches. Even in the library on Monday you could cut the air with a knife.' She laughed. 'And I don't think she likes me very much for that matter.'

'That's because of me.' Shit - what to say now ... 'Justine and I ... er ... have ... er ...' Emma was listening intently. 'We have ... er ... a history.'

'Obviously.' A crooked smile.

'Yeah ... well ... erm ... it's a little bit more than that.' Emma was more engaged than before, and leaned in closer. 'We ...' I couldn't believe I was going to come out to Emma Jenkins. 'We ... had a bit of a thing one time.' I was blood red by this stage.

'It sounded like a little bit more than a bit of a thing, Laura. If my memory serves me right, she mentioned something about, and I quote, 'finger fucking her'.' I nearly died. Again. How dramatic.

'But I didn't ... we didn't ... I couldn't ...' What? Couldn't what? Finger fuck her because she had brown eyes? Or couldn't give her one because she wasn't you? 'We only kissed a little and had a little fumble. That's it.'

'Hey. I'm not judging you, just asking so I know what I'm dealing with.' She smiled reassuringly. 'So why is she so bitchy?' I wanted to say because she's a fucking psycho, but that did sound rather harsh.

I explained how Justine seemed to think that there was something going on with the two of us.

She had already told me that she had wanted me for a long time. I did feel embarrassed telling Emma this. I played it low key, and tried to brush it off, wanting to change the subject, but scared where it might lead.

'One more thing Laura.' I looked at her with expectation evident on my face. 'Does her quim really need a trim?' A laugh burst forth, and I joined her, seeing the funny side to this conversation at last.

After packing away, we decided to investigate the house and gardens, our conversation staying light and friendly. Thank God.

We said our farewells just before six because our first exam was after registration.

A quick hug (yum) a peck on the cheek (double yum), and she was gone. I was left feeling relaxed, happy and ready for anything.

Chapter Eleven

Monday. Library. Not good. Firstly Peter didn't show up, and I knew it was just going to be the three girls, together, alone. Shit.

The door to the library burst open to reveal a very harried looking Justine. This did not bode well. Emma arrived one minute after, looking decidedly worse for wear. And then there was me ... sat there all prim, my blonde hair tied back away from my face in a loose ponytail, a pencil behind my ear, and an aura of righteousness surrounding me. I had to keep my cool, act natural.

Big beaming smile to the ready. 'Hey girls ... glad you could make it.' This actually worked. They both stopped in their tracks and looked at me gone out for a second. Nice move Stewart.

'So what do you want to look at today?' Was that my voice or Mr Holmes the English teacher's? I sounded really calm, in control. It's a pity that no one mentioned that to my stomach.

They plonked down either side of me, like lambs. Ha!

The atmosphere, although strained, was okay. We all got stuck in discussing the novel we were studying.

'Poor George. He is tied to Lenny for obvious reasons. Can you think of his reasons for killing him at the end?'

'Well. Steinbeck uses the parallel storyline of Candy's dog.'

'Good Justine. Why do you think he does that?'

'I don't know.'

Emma sniggered. Not good.

'What are you laughing at, you slag?'

'Excuse me. You ... calling me ... *a slag*? That's a case of the pot calling the kettle black, don't you think? I'm not the one stalking someone in the hope of a good fuck.' Shit ... Ring any bells? Bloody hell Emma, where did that come from?

Then it kicked off good and proper. I just sat there ... frozen, pretending that I wasn't with them.

'Really? That's not what I saw in Whitby. You were stuck to each other like a couple of dogs in heat.'

'And your problem is ...?'

'Everyone knew that Laura and me had a thing going, and YOU stole her away from me. How could you?' Her voice broke at this point and I did feel sorry for her, but only a little bit.

Emma's eyes were cold, like slits on her face, and her lips formed into a thin line. Uh oh ... here it comes.

Emma leaned over Justine, her face mere inches away. 'Stole her away?' she hissed. 'Stole her away from you? I didn't think you owned her in the first place, you fucking psycho.' Shit. 'If she did come to me, she would do so willingly. I don't have to steal anything. You got that?'

'So you're not denying that you two are fucking each other's brains out then?' Was that a sob in her voice? I'm getting soft. Although you wouldn't even think I was with them, never mind the centre of their conversation - if you can call bad mouthing, bad language and gross indecency a conversation - I didn't raise my head. Ooooh, look what Steinbeck has done here?

'What if we are?' That got my attention. 'What if we are fucking each other's brains out, and loving every goddamn minute? What the hell has it got to do with you?'

Justine was gob smacked. So was I for that matter, and slightly aroused at Emma saying the word 'fucking' in conjunction with my name. Yes - I am a pervert - and proud of it!

'Come on sweetheart.' Emma grabbed my hand, pulled me up and into her. She possessively wrapped her arm around me and led me out of the library. I didn't say a word. I was too stunned. So was Justine. And so was half of Year 11 who were studying in the library at the time.

Outside, Emma started laughing, hugged me close and then let me go. 'Sorry about that. But I think that might have done the trick - she'll leave you alone for a while at least. Got to go, see you later.' I could still hear her laughing to herself as she was hurrying down the corridor, taking my heart with her.

Wow.

Chapter Twelve

Exams took over our lives for the next two weeks. English was pretty easy, but Maths was a bugger, let me tell you, but hey ... you can't have everything.

Emma and I had lunch together every day. I even stopped going for a quick smoke behind the gym so I could spend more time with her. Justine would glare at us whenever we would bump into each other in the corridors, the dinner hall, even in the exam room. If I didn't know any better I would have sworn that Emma was gloating.

Rob 'Octopus' Evans would hover near Emma all the time, trying to get her attention in some fuck-witted kind of way. I wanted to knee him in the under-crackers and be done with it, but that would mean explaining my actions to Emma. I couldn't reveal myself like that ... I couldn't bear to see the look of disgust on her face.

'I could fix him up with Justine,' my evil mind pondered - kill two birds with one stone (hopefully). But I doubted she would go for all the extra tackle. Pity. They would have made a perfect couple, and got them off both our backs.

I didn't know if Emma enjoyed the attention, or was just pampering his need. She was such a sweet person (except to Justine - snigger) that I didn't know what to think.

With all the pressure of doing well we didn't get the opportunity to see each other in the evenings or at the weekend. She had to see her father in Chester from Friday night to Sunday night. I was gutted, but understood why she had to go.

I still hadn't met either of her parents. She seemed to shy off when I asked about them, not wanting to go into too much detail for some reason or another. Answers like 'Oh, he lives quite far away now' and 'She works late most nights' were the norm. I didn't press the point.

Christmas was on its way in all its gaudy glory. Every shop I went into had crappy songs playing from an album older than the Queen mum. Bloody Band Aid. Yes! I know its Christmas and do they bloody care? I think they have more important issues going on than who is going to get the newest fad. Like famine, disease, AIDS, drought, etc.

No I wasn't a 'Christmas Hater' as such. But we have to prioritise. And my priorities came in a six-foot, dark haired, blue-eyed package labelled 'Emma Jenkins'. And I wanted to peel the wrapping off really slowly ... Where did that come from?

The results from the mocks were quite pleasing. I got an A* for English: Emma got a B. Not bad. She was over the moon with it though saying she had only been targeted a C. She wiped the floor with me in Maths - grade A to my C. I was quite pleased with it. Maths and me had a history - we did not get along, and we both knew it.

All in all life was good. Home was brilliant, with only the occasional drunken visit from the tart with no heart - our mother. Daddy dearest was serving three years in Strangeways for attempted rape and being a twat. The last one was my idea.

Emma and I were inseparable. We spent all our time with each other, and when we were apart we talked for ages on the phone, about what, I couldn't tell you.

Lads were sniffing around her all of the time at school and outside. Well, she was one hot looking woman. She seemed kind of embarrassed when she told me who had asked her out, and at times seemed expectant of a response. I had resolved myself to live in her shadow, my unrequited love sitting on my lap like an offering. I had no chance with her, but you have a reason to keep going if you have hope. That's all I had, and I had that in abundance.

Chapter Thirteen

Christmas Eve arrived, resplendent in icy rain and sleet. No snow. For God's sake - this is Manchester.

Emma and I were going to a youth disco at the Young People's Centre. Quite a few people from school were going, and it looked like it could be fun.

Seven thirty saw us trudging in, soaked to the skin, makeup deciding to turn into abstract art for the duration. We looked gorgeous to say the least. Ten minutes in the girl's loos and we were raring to go.

It was heaving. I think every teenager over the age of sixteen had turned up, and the place was packed out.

As the evening wore on, the temperature began to rise considerably. Music blared out from speakers all around the room. It was deafening. Soft drinks were on sale at the bar, but alcohol was in the building gratis the older kids. Therefore, the innocent coke held aloft could have any amount of concoction floating beneath its surface. Emma and I had mingled in the crowds, never at a loss for people to chat to, even though I had only one person on my mind.

'Hiya stranger.' Cassie Phillips. God. Cassie and me went way back. Actually she was one of my first inexperienced fumbings. She had skin of ebony and black shimmering coloured eyes. Long, thick black hair completed the ensemble. She was nineteen. Yes I know. Three years older than me, but at the tender age of fifteen, I pretended to be seventeen just to hang around with her gang.

'Long time no see. What have you been up to?' she asked, stroking my arm suggestively.

'Oh. This and that.' I was watching Emma on the other side of the dance floor chatting to the

Bitches of Eastwick. 'Just had my mocks ... working hard ... you know how it is.'

God she looked good - Emma, obviously. She was wearing black loose fitting trousers and *the* black top. Her midriff was on show to all, a sheen of sweat gracing it. It was flat and well defined. I could just imagine my fin...

'Who are you looking at? Nice abs I must say.' Go away Cassie. Let me have my pervy little thoughts.

She was drinking a bottle of water, holding it aloft, pouring the translucent liquid into her parted lips. It was all in slow motion, like snap shots in my mind.

Action: sweat shimmering on her stomach; hand raised above her head, her head tilted back; raven locks cascaded down her strong back; eyes closed; the lustre of perspiration coated her top lip; the excess water sparkled on her sensuous mouth. I wanted to lick it off, taking with it the dusky lipstick, devouring the lips underneath.

She stopped drinking and turned to face me. Hooded eyes caught my gaze ... and I held it there ... willingly. She hypnotized me. Her eyes held a depth that I had not seen before, looking almost violet in the dim light. Her tongue poked out to capture stray droplets of moisture that had mingled with sweat, sweeping it deliberately around her mouth. Making me stare. Making me want her. Making my heart hammer in my chest for just one kiss ...

She began to walk towards me, a definite swagger to her gait. Her eyes didn't leave mine: mine didn't leave hers. Could this be it? Was this really happening? My legs were weakening; my mouth was dry. I could hear Cassie trying to get my attention but I disregarded her. Emma was my focus.

Damn. Fucking Rob Evans. Fucking octopus boy - bastard. I was seething. Rob Evans stepped right in her path as she was walking over to me ... for a chat. A fucking chat! Emma, being Emma, chatted back, her eyes coming back to rest on mine. But less ... and less. She was laughing now. He had his hand on her arm rubbing up and down like he was wanking it off. She looked comfortable with him, at home, relaxed, while I stood there getting angrier.

Jealousy, our green-eyed foe, reared up from deep within me. How dare he ... she ... he ... I couldn't even think straight. Who exactly was I angry at?

'Trouble in paradise, Laura? Your girlfriend sure looks happy chatting to Rob.' Justine. I should have known she'd turn up, Miss Fucking Bad Penny, 1991.

Cassie made her excuses and left. No surprise really. There was me, for the most part, ignoring her, and then looking like thunder. To top it all, up strolls psycho-stalker to piss me off even more. I would have left too.

'What do you want, Justine?' My voice sounded bored: my insides were on red alert. Evans was all over Emma like second skin. 'Why don't you just fuck off?' I turned and stalked to the Ladies

room.

Inside the loos it was quiet, just me, alone with my thoughts. I was shaking, especially my hands. I just wanted to go outside and throttle the life out of Evans. How dare he! How ... dare ... he ... come and take what ... Take what, Laura?

Take what was mine, that's what.

My throat had a lump in it the size of an orange. Inside this orange nestled a sob. Inside this sob nestled a broken heart. How could I liberate this ache, this orange, this broken dream? I didn't dare. If the dam burst it could never be repaired. Unfortunately, I thought wryly, there wasn't anyone to stick her finger in the dyke until help arrived.

I gripped the edge of the sink, my hair tumbling over my shoulders and in front of my face. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts I didn't hear the door open and close behind me. Didn't hear the footsteps approaching. Only knew someone was there when I felt the hand on my shoulder. 'Are you okay?' Softly spoken, so soft, but not her.

'Yeah ... never been better, Cassie.' I sniffed.

She tilted my head back to look into my eyes. Her eyes shone with feeling. She touched the side of my cheek so tenderly it was nearly my undoing. Both hands cupped my face now. 'It will happen if it's meant to happen.' Yeah. Heard that before. Cassie was using her left hand to stroke the hair away from my face. 'Come on, precious. Don't upset yourself. Hey ... you've still got me.'

I looked her squarely in the eyes. She was serious. Who was I kidding? Emma Jenkins would never go for someone like me - not in a million years. Get over yourself Stewart. Get it into your thick skull - she doesn't want you that way.

Cassie leaned closer, expectant. I looked into her big black depths and began to get sucked in. My breathing hitched, a solitary hiccup and I was ready. My right hand reached up and snaked around her neck, only to grip on her hair at the nape, fixing her in place. I leaned towards her, closing the distance between us. A gentle brush of the lips, the meeting of tongues ...

'What the ...? Excuse me.' Emma. Shit.

'Emma ... wait! It's not what you think ... Sorry Cassie, I can't ... I have to ...'

'Just go.' She smiled, a truly genuine smile.

I ran out of the loos and back into the club. Frantic eyes sliced through the crowds searching for her, praying that she hadn't just left.

I wish she had.

She was in the corner all over Rob Evans. She actually had him pinned against the wall and he looked kind of startled. If I hadn't been so revolted, so despairing, I would have laughed. Her hands were all over him. She was grinding herself into him like two pieces of wood trying to light a fire. I felt sick to the pit of my stomach. I had to leave now or else I was going to make a bigger fool of myself than I already had.

Merry Christmas everyone. I hope you all get what you deserve - just like I did.

Chapter Fourteen

Three weeks went by. Christmas and New Year had been a mixture of pleasure and pain. The pleasure came from watching Harry, Christmas morning, surrounded by a mountain of presents, eyes aglow, and a smile slicing his face in two.

He spent the whole day singing, 'All I want for Christmas is me two front teeth' and flashing his comical grin. I had tried, really, I had. I had tried to join in the fun, but my swollen eyes were a dead giveaway. I explained that I was coming down with a cold, but I doubt Sarah and Elaine believed me. Harry gave me loads of unexpected cuddles, throwing his arms around my waist whenever I was near. This only led to me going into my room for another session of sobbing, thumping the bed with my fist, anger and pain washing through me like a violent cleansing. I was wretched. I was in so much agony deep inside that I felt I wouldn't survive ... couldn't survive ... didn't want to ... survive.

Why had she kissed him? Why? She said she didn't like him in that way. The image of her grinding herself into him made my stomach churn, tie itself in knots and left me aching, yearning, craving that it was me underneath her and not him. Her mouth had claimed his. Her tongue had been thrusting into his mouth, possessing him. Her hands were pulling his hips into hers. You couldn't get a hair between them. Why did you do that Emma? If you wanted a quick fix I could have been there for you ... no strings, honestly. I would have done, been, anything that you wanted me to be. But no. You weren't like that were you? You weren't a pervert like me.

We had been back at school for almost two weeks, and I had only glimpsed Emma occasionally, mainly in assembly. She looked ashen, withdrawn. Blue eyes looked dead, her face was gaunt. She looked how I felt - lost.

It was mid January when the snow came. Fluffy whiteness coated the ground and hid the dangers beneath. But being Manchester it only lasted in its purity overnight, changing from an insulating bedspread of white to a sloppy mess of brown slush. Cars whizzed by coating unsuspecting people in the fragments of a city winter.

The air was icy. Hot breath mingling sent messages to the heavens in secret code. Layer upon layer of clothing were stacked on bodies to fight off the chill of the day, creating staggered

movement with people becoming obese in their clothing. Heads were covered; eyes used peepholes to grope through the day, whilst avoiding the dangers that surround blindness.

I was blind. I didn't see it coming did I? I must have worn my blinkers so close to my face I didn't see it. Emma and Rob. Rob and Emma. If you say it fast enough, without feeling, it sounds right, don't you think? Emma and Laura. Say that fast ... no ... it still doesn't make sense ... nothing does anymore.

Chapter Fifteen

It was Saturday night and I was in my room, alone, again. Sarah and Elaine had taken Harry to Pizza Hut as a treat. I had opted, as usual, to stay at home. There was no reason to go out anymore. What was the point?

The shrill insistent ringing of the phone broke my reverie, and stopped my drawing of Rob Evans with eight arms, a small wrinkled dick, and a noose around his neck. Blackened teeth were also a nice touch.

'Hello.' No emotion.

'Laura.' My heart skipped. 'Laura ... it's me. Look, I'm sorry to interrupt you ...'

'No ... no ... you're okay. I was just sketching.'

Her sobs reverberated around my head. 'What's up? Emma ... love ... what's the matter?' Panic invaded my voice, and it wavered. 'Where are you?' I needed to get to her, be with her ... always.

'At home. Oh Laura, I need to see you. Something's happened, and I don't know who to tell.' I bet it was something to do with that bastard. I'd fucking kill him if he hurt her in any way. And I mean *any way*.

Twenty minutes later saw me outside her house, dressed in a combination of my bedroom floor.

When she answered the door I drew in my breath. She looked a mess. Dishevelled clothes and hair, red rimmed eyes and shaking like a leaf. I took her in my arms like it was the most natural thing in the world. 'Shhh baby. I've got you. Nothing can hurt you now.' She pressed herself into me, holding me so, so close, her body quivering. I stroked her back, her hair. I placed delicate kisses on her cheeks, her ears, whilst tenderly crooning words of love and shelter.

Eventually we got inside and I led her to the front room, sat her down on the sofa, and sat next to her. I held her hand and fixed my eyes on her angst-ridden face. I waited for her to speak. I didn't know what had happened but she looked as if her whole world had crashed about her, smashing her life into smithereens in the process.

'It's Dad,' she eventually said, eyes closed, squeezing back the tears. I waited. 'He's divorcing Mum.' Short and sweet but it was a start. 'I honestly thought they'd get back together. How stupid. He's been shagging his secretary for years, and I've just found out they have a child together.' She started crying again, her free hand angrily wiping away her tears. 'I thought it was Mum who messed around. Did you know I actually saw her fucking someone in her car? She saw me too, but just kept on going.' Her voice trailed off at this stage. 'She had the audacity to deny it. Said I must have imagined the whole thing. But how can you imagine that? It's not something a child would make up is it?' She squeezed my hand more tightly stopping the circulation to my fingers, but I didn't care. I just looked at her with all the love I had displayed right there on my face for the entire world to see.

'Funny. You always hurt the ones you love.' She looked deeply into my eyes. 'Usually without knowing it.' She looked away, looked down at our hands that were enjoying an illicit tryst.

My mind wandered. Where's Evans? Shouldn't he be here comforting his girlfriend? Bastard.

'Where's Rob?' It was out before I could stop it.

'Why? What's he go to do with anything?' She looked puzzled.

'But ... he's your boyfriend,' I said, surprised that I had to remind her.

A sharp laugh. 'Are you joking?'

I sat back and released her hand. 'Well, if my memory serves me right you were quite fond of him on Christmas Eve.' My voice was cold, distant.

Was that embarrassment, confusion, or disgust on her face? 'Well ...,' a dry humourless laugh, 'that was then ... in the past. Just put it down to spur of the moment. Better still, it was more like a reaction.' She glanced at me.

'To what?'

'Life.'

She turned away and I couldn't see her eyes. God, how I ached to see her eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

We were back on track. She didn't love Rob Evans - she thought he was a twat - like I did. I was floating.

Belated Christmas gifts were given. I had given her Sinéad O'Connor's album highlighting Nothing Compares 2U - that just made me think of her, about the Geography Field trip, the

snuggling. But since our break-up (platonic, obviously, but not for the want of trying) the beginning seemed more apt - 'It's been seven hours and fifteen days / since you took our love away'. That's how it had felt. That it had been taken away.

But now it was back!

Emma bought me a pen set with an engraving 'To My Teacher and best friend. Love as always Emma Jenkins'. I had asked her why she had put her full name on there, and she said 'In case you meet any other Emmas, then you won't mix us up.' How could I ever do that? They'll only ever be one Emma: one person who my heart cleaves to.

Anyway. It was on a Thursday, the second Thursday in February to be exact, and the reason I knew that was because that was the day the school magazine came out. Also, I knew because it was the Valentine's edition. It was so much fun reading through the messages the rest of the lovesick school had put in there.

Well, it was funny until I saw the massive announcement. Hearts and flowers border - the works:

*Laura Stewart
Loves
Emma Jenkins*

I nearly fucking died. I hadn't done this, had I? I couldn't remember posting it. Shit. What if Emma saw it? I'd be toast.

'Hey... what are you looking at?' Fuck! Emma.

'Nothing. There's nothing to see.' I sounded like the teachers when they were breaking up a scrap 'Move along now. There's nothing to see. Come on, move along' whilst the two protagonists were deftly kicking the shit out of each other - blood everywhere, teeth flying, fists coming from all sides. Yes. And that was going to happen here if Emma spotted this.

'Let's have a look then.' She leaned over and grabbed the edge of the magazine.

'No ... it's really boring ... honestly.'

'Let me be the judge of that.' A soft smile. She nearly had me, and the magazine. But, I pulled it away just in time. She lunged and seized it. We tussled around, me squirming underneath her, both panting out phrases like 'let go' or 'it's nothing', 'drop it', 'it's boring'. Then with a triumphant pull she had it in her grasp.

'Then why hang on to it like it's a life line then.' Crooked cocky grin, her eyebrow raised into her hairline. She smoothed the crumpled papers and got into role as a newsreader. Her eyes skimmed over the pages, until they stopped. Widened. And then squinted. Then widened again.

'What is it?' I timidly asked, pleading innocence.

Little by little, a smile formed on her face, her eyebrows raised, and then she laughed. Deep, guttural, sexy ... fuck was she sexy.

'Don't tell me you were worried about me seeing this?' I nodded. 'It's Russell. She's getting her own back.' Well that explains the heart and flowers border. She laughed again. 'Come on you. Lunch.' She got up and walked ahead, the magazine firmly in her grip. I would have to get a copy for my treasure box.

I sat staring after her, a sigh escaping me. I wish I had put the declaration in there ... just to let her know ... I did love her ... and I always would.

Chapter Seventeen

The real exams were done and dusted, and the school year had finished in a blaze of glory. All that was left was the school prom.

Emma was going with Richard Morris - Dick the Shit. He was a lad from her athletics club: tall, beefy, brains of a rabbit. I was going with - myself. I couldn't hoist up the enthusiasm to go with anyone else but Emma, so I thought I would have the pleasure of my own company.

We arranged to meet there. Everyone had scrubbed up nice for the occasion; even the school Pigpen, Tony Andrews, had sluiced himself. A blessing, believe me.

The hall was unrecognisable. Banners hung from the wall announcing 'Good Luck Class of 1992', and tables were set out filled with nibbles. The DJ was playing Lenny Kravitz's It Ain't Over Till It's Over, and the lighting was dim, with only a few laser lights dispersing the blackness at intervals.

I looked around and spotted Emma chatting to a group of teenagers, Richard hanging on to every word that she said. Twat. She looked absolutely stunning. I noted every nuance, every curve and swell. Her lithe body was coated by a luscious black dress that hugged her figure before touching the floor. I spotted a split from her ankle to nearly the top of her thigh, displaying delicate slip on shoes with a two-inch heel. The muscles on her calf and thigh stood out at the pressure, and my eyes trickled slowly up her bare leg, lightly licking my lips in the process. Spaghetti straps finished the top of the dress, but the front plunged just enough to see the swell of her breasts. The back was cut away revealing toned shoulders and back. Her hair was away from her face, clipped back with stray locks dangling down to caress her cheek. She was a vision. And I fell in love with her all over again.

I had made an effort - it was the prom after all. Sarah had helped me choose a full-length red dress - scarlet to be precise (yes - the scarlet woman - I know). She said that it would bring out the green of my eyes and reveal the strawberry essence of my hair. I just agreed - I just wanted to look special for one special person. I did look good, even though I say so myself. And the fact

that the dress exposed quite a bit of my cleavage, and my breasts are my best feature, was an added bonus.

The DJ was now playing I'm Too Sexy by Right Said Fred. Emma turned and looked directly at me. She smiled as if smiling at a stranger and turned away. The smile fell from her lips, she scrunched up her face, thought about something and then turned back. Her eyes bugged out and she mouthed 'Wow', and came over.

'You look fantastic Laura. Wow! You scrub up good.' She hugged me hard and I could smell her perfume, musky and sensuous with a hint of spice.

'What about you?' I held her at arms' length and looked her up and down shaking my head from side to side. I pursed my lips and gave a low whistle. 'You are one hot woman Emma Jenkins, do you know that?'

She laughed at this and grabbed my hand. 'Come and dance with me?' Madonna's Like a Prayer was now blaring out around us and I allowed myself to get carried away with the mood. God ... she was a good dancer ... especially being so tall. She swayed her hips and clapped her hands just like Madonna in the video ... I was mesmerized, and a little turned on.

We danced for a few songs and finished on the Stone Roses Fool's Gold. She led me over to where Dick the Shit and the others were standing. He was not impressed at all. Livid is more the word. 'Emma, sweetheart.' He tried to put his arm around her and she shrugged it off. Nice move Jenkins. I smiled smugly at him ... he glared ... I smiled all the more, then put my arm around Emma's waist.

'How about a drink, honey?' Emma beamed at me and threw her arm about my neck. I led her away with Dick's eyes boring through my back. I smirked to myself. I knew it was Emma's way, and that it meant nothing to her, but it meant the world to me, that for five minutes it seemed like she was mine.

The night wore on. Emma and I got separated and spent the evening mixing with people we would probably never see again for the rest of our lives. It was happy and depressing at the same time. School is the biggest thing in our lives for so long and then it's over ... gone ... finished, and we are thrown out in to the real world to survive on our own. The rules of the game change and we haven't been told.

Eventually, the evening was drawing to a close. Emma was dancing with Dick (head?) to Jimmy Somerville's To Love Somebody and I was waiting in the wings, watching her every move. Jimmy was squealing 'You don't know what it's like, ooh baby you don't know what it's like, to love somebody, to love somebody, the way I love you'. No. She didn't. But I sure as hell did. It hurt like crazy. Dick was trying to feel her up and she was like a goalie deflecting every move. I had to smile at that.

I sat down at a deserted table and fiddled with a flower from the table ornament, stealing sly peeks at the woman who held my heart so firmly in her hand and didn't even know it.

'Fancy a dance Laura?'

'Fuck off Justine.'

'Suit yourself.'

The song was beginning to end and I could vaguely hear the DJ announcing the last dance of the evening. I felt someone next to me, waiting, and I was on the verge of telling Justine to fuck off again when my eyes were caught in a blue gaze.

'Dance with me.' Not a question, or suggestion, but a promise.

I held my hand up to hers and she took it gently, lifting me to my feet swiftly. She led the way. My heart was hammering in my chest, the rest of the room had faded away. I was going to dance the last dance with Emma. She had asked me.

Arriving at the centre of the floor she turned to me, her eyes dark, hooded, her lips moist and ripe. I licked my own in reflection. She pulled me to her, so close, I nestled the side of my face against her bare skin and breathed in deeply. My senses were overcome; I couldn't think straight; my legs were beginning to weaken.

Her arms were around me, holding me so tight. My own snaked up her arms and draped around her neck like we had done this a million times before. The music started, the first part drowned out by the dedication announced. 'And this one's for Laura. Thanks for being there, from Emma.'

Sinead O'Connor's voice echoed out of the speakers 'It's been seven hours and fifteen days since you took your love away.' I nearly passed out there and then. It was heaven. Emma snuggled closer. Did she just kiss my hair? No. Just wishful thinking. My heart was beating hard in my chest ... my mouth was dry. She pulled away, looking deeply into my eyes, her own looking violet, smoky with ... with what? I don't know, I can only hope - it was probably my overactive imagination again.

She began to sing to me, a soft voice, beautiful, melodic: I didn't even know she could sing.

*Nothing can stop these lonely tears from falling
Tell me baby where did I go wrong
I could put my arms around every boy I see
But they only remind me of you*

The same words that I had heard all that time ago coming from her beautiful mouth. She clasped me to her once again, like I was going to save her somehow. Her hot breath fluttered against my ear as she sang the refrain '*Nothing compares 2 U*' over and over again.

You know, the funny thing was, I did not get aroused. No. It was something far deeper than that. It was like a bonding, a connection of sorts, like I had found my path in life.

The song was ending; I didn't want it to end. Then I felt it. A soft kiss on my ear, so soft you could mistake it for a loose piece of hair brushing past, but it was definitely a kiss.

'Thank you, Laura,' her husky voice breathed in my ear. Then she was gone: and I was left standing there, tingling in all the places that her body had come into contact with mine. I shivered.

Justine Russell was glaring at me from the sidelines. So, I did the only thing I could think of: I blew her a kiss, winked and skipped off the dance floor.

What a perfect end to a perfect night. Sigh.

That night was never mentioned between Emma and me. Not that we really had the opportunity to see each other as she was spending the summer with her father, his partner, and her little half brother. We were going to start at the same college in the autumn to do our A levels. Emma and Laura - Laura and Emma. Doesn't sound so far fetched now.

I couldn't wait to see her again, and wished away my holiday until I could drown in the blue ness of her eyes once again.

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~ Hearts and Flowers Border ~

by [fingersmith](#)

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Chapter Eighteen

Two Years Later

College had been a blast from start to finish. The work was pretty standard and we got through it with no real problem. Exams were taken and all we had to do was wait for the results. I was eighteen, nineteen in just over a month's time. Emma was nineteen in two weeks, and I had

something special planned.

Emma had dated on and off throughout the two years, leaving me in a state of purgatory. I wanted her so badly. She was my entire world and she didn't know it. How could I tell her that when she went out with those boys my heart was breaking? How could I tell her that I wanted her so badly I would cry myself to sleep at night? How could I tell her that I loved her more and more each day?

I couldn't.

I was frustrated beyond reason, and therefore had liaisons with many willing, nameless people over the two years, but nothing remotely serious. I only did it out of desperation, the feeling of connection with another human being. Every time I imagined them to be Emma, even though their scent was enough to alert me it wasn't her. I still hadn't given my virginity up to anyone ... I was saving that for the right person. And we all know who I thought that was, right? Hope was still there in abundance.

We applied for the same universities and both got accepted at Manchester Uni with conditional offers. It was perfect. Both of us together for at least another three years - what more can a girl wish for? Now that is an open question.

Deciding it would be better, Emma and I rented a place a while before classes commenced. It would be easier than commuting, and I had the added advantage of seeing Emma all of the time. Heaven. We both had to get a job to pay for it. I started shelf stacking at Waterstone's bookshop, whilst Emma got a job at HMV.

Sarah and Elaine were supportive of my decision. Harry, on the other hand was another matter.

'Why do you have to go and live somewhere else, Laurie?' His green eyes filled with tears. 'I need you here with me. I'm starting at big school soon ... what am I going to do without you here?'

'Come on squirt, I said tousling his hair. 'You've got to be the man of the house and take care of Aunty Sarah and Aunty Elaine. They need you to be strong. Do you understand?' He nodded, but I could tell he wasn't convinced. 'I have to move out. It'll be easier to go to the library and get to class if I'm closer. I'll only be twenty minutes away and you can visit me anytime you like, okay?' He hugged me hard, burying his face in my shirt.

'Will Emma be there?' A sly grin grew on his face. He had a crush on Emma - big time. Like his sister, eh?

'Yes. She'll be there. And yes ... she won't mind you coming to visit, and even staying over, okay?'

'Okay.' Big smile (with teeth now).

Chapter Nineteen

We moved into our studio flat together, Sarah and Elaine helping me, and Emma's mother helping her. It was the first time I had actually seen the woman in the flesh - honestly. I had spoken to her on the phone on many occasions, but every time I went to Emma's her mum was either working or out. She was not what I expected to say the least.

She was stunning to look at, granted, but there was something missing ... something I couldn't put my finger on at the time; and it was only years later that I realised it was a conscience. She had black hair, like Emma's, and her eyes were a darker blue - but cold. Her voice was refined to the point of annoying, and she ordered Emma around like she was a servant. Evidently, she did not like the fact that her daughter was working in a music store when she could more than afford to pay for anything she could ever possibly want. Emma looked embarrassed by this. As you can see, I didn't really like her much.

It was heaven in our new 'pad'. Every thing was ours - crappy furniture, crappy dinner service, crappy everything - but ours - Emma's and mine. Life was sweet.

Results were in, and we did better than we expected. I got three As and a B (bloody History), but Emma got straight As - that's my girl!

Clearly, we were overjoyed with our results. Our University place was in the bag, so we decided to celebrate big style and group together with all our friends, go into Manchester's Gay Village, then back to ours for a shindig.

Canal Street was packed; chairs and tables spilling out onto the pavement; music pumping through the windows; and the hot sweet smell of summer in the air.

Perfect.

Each club boasted the best beers, the best atmosphere, the best everything. One place even had 'Shag tags' where you were given a numbered badge and people could leave messages for you on a big notice board with their number. You would read the message and then hunt their number out. If you didn't like them, you didn't have to do anything else. It was fun.

We ended up in Via Fossa, a trendy pub where all the action took place downstairs. It was dark, and small, especially for our rowdy crowd. But we were drinking bottled beers by the caseload and nothing was going to dampen our mood.

Did I say nothing was going to dampen our mood? Well, I forgot to mention that we bumped into Justine Russell and her girlfriend. I think her partner was either drunk or stoned - no, not because she was with Justine. Her eyes were glazed and her pupils took over all of the colour. Actually, Justine had changed quite a lot from school. She had lost that psycho edge that had been so endearing. I chatted with her for quite a while when Emma was having a heated discussion with her latest conquest, Mike Collins. I even invited her (and her dopey girlfriend) to

the party after the pubs chucked out. Emma wouldn't mind.

I was totally engaged in conversation with a group of girls at the bar (probably hoping for a quickie in the loos knowing me). Yes, I know it sounds vulgar, but what would you do? Sit at home waiting for the person you love to notice that you are alive? Didn't think so.

'Dance with me,' a husky voice breathed in my ear.

Emma.

She looked deeply into my eyes. 'Come on ... dance with me.' Thoughts of prom night filled my head. Could I go through that again? Yes ... without a doubt.

She led me on to the dance floor, turning as she neared the centre. Grabbing both of my hands, she pulled me towards her, her eyes not breaking contact with mine. The dance floor was packed and we were snug in the core, away from prying eyes. 'Come closer ... closer,' she murmured, as she slipped her arms around my waist and pulled me tightly against her. 'Oh Laura ... hold me.'

My arms circled her neck and I looked into her face, which was leaning down towards me, her lips impossibly close. I could feel her breath on my cheek. Tina Turner was singing in the background and Emma was grinding her hips into mine, so fucking slowly, so sexy. She was still staring at me, a question in her eyes.

She began to sing again in that low velvety voice that made my stomach lurch forward just to listen:

*I'm so confused I don't know what to do
but don't give up
don't give up
it just may take a little time.
Be tender with me baby
I'm so afraid you'll go away
be tender with me baby
Always*

She stroked the side of my face, fingers caressing my cheek, tracing the contours of my lips. I placed a kiss on the tips and she smiled, and drew my head to her breast.

*Why does my heart keep on longing
Why do I feel like I do
I hope you see this is not really me
this is just a phase that I'm going through
Be tender with me baby
Be tender with me baby
I'm so afraid you'll go away*

She lifted my face up to hers. 'Laura ... please forgive me.'

And then she kissed me. So gently, her lips brushing over the surface. My hand pushed her head down so her face moved closer into mine to deepen the contact. The gentleness was replaced by something more carnal, more needy. My lips had picked up the tempo and I was holding my breath. Lips like velvet. They tasted like ambrosia, soft, wet, inviting. A tongue came out and licked my mouth begging entrance. I let it in readily, sucking it in, willing it to memory. Her hands began to move, sliding fully down my back. One grabbed my butt and pushed it into her groin. She moaned. I moaned. My own fingers trailed along her collarbone, daring each other to move lower.

Emma took the lead. Her left hand slipped in between us and cupped my breast tenderly, like it was breakable. 'Oh God, Laura!' she panted, coming up for air, but her hand was firmly on my butt whilst the other one was teasing my nipple through my top. I lunged in again for her lips, consuming her like a starving man would a dish he has coveted for years. My hand was wrapped in her hair; the other ... the other was on its way to her breast.

Heaven. I'm in heaven. Her breast was firm yet soft at the same time. She gasped on contact and broke off the kiss, only to devour my throat in needy kisses, sucks and licks. I was feeling light-headed. After all this time of wanting her and believing she didn't feel that way, here I was, in her arms being finally awakened to love and desire.

She pulled back from my neck and gazed into my eyes. 'Your eyes are so green, Laura. Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?' I shook my head. 'Then I've been a fool.' She kissed me again, squeezing my breast so tightly like she was claiming it as hers. My hand tugged at her hair, sinking my fingers deeply into her raven locks. I was nearly frantic with longing.

She pulled away and looked at me. Her crooked smile played on her lips: her eyebrow raised in question. I nuzzled my face into her neck savouring the scent. Long slender fingers raised my head to align with hers. Another kiss; gentle this time. 'Until later.'

Later it is.

Two o'clock saw us all at our place. The music was pumping though our tinny speakers and the place was smoky and hot. People were draped over every piece of furniture, lounging on the floor, and propping up the walls. Corners of every room saw couples getting intimate, oblivious to where they were.

I was in the kitchen getting ice out of the freezer when I felt smooth slender hands encircle my waist and firm thighs push into me. I stopped and enjoyed the sensation.

'Come here you.'

I turned around to be caught in her arms. She nestled into my hair drawing a deep breath like she was capturing it to memory.

Lips met mine, not softly this time, but determined and experienced. I gladly followed her lead, crushing myself to her; heart banging in my chest; arousal claiming any rational thought.

She lifted me onto the cabinet and pushed my legs apart, not breaking the kiss for a moment. Her hips came between my legs and thrust themselves into me. I groaned - this was ecstasy. She started thrusting more intently now, her hands roaming my face, hair, breasts and my thighs, like she was feeling her way over new territory. One hand gripped my butt again and forced it into her. The rhythm was becoming intense, my need chafing the bump in my jeans. I could feel the orgasm building from within.

Her hand slipped inside my shirt, resolute in its quest, pushing past the barrier of my bra to cup an exposed breast. 'Oh God ... Emma,' I breathed. I had died and gone to heaven.

This only spurred her on. Hips becoming frantic now, gasping breaths entered my mouth mingling with my own. 'I want you, Laura ...so ...so ... much.' It was like a cry, a confession. My heart reeled; my stomach was too stunned to react. 'God ... yes.' Her lips broke the contact and devoured my neck, biting the tender flesh, claiming my skin not knowing that she had claimed it eons ago. My nails were digging into her back spurring her on.

'Sorry to interrupt.' A cold voice announced from the door. Mike was standing there with an empty glass in his hand looking at us both with a mixture of hurt and hatred.

We sprung apart. Cold air separated us. 'Mike ... I ...'

'Forget it, Emma. I should have known.' With that he turned and stalked out of the room.

Emma turned to me. 'Laura... I just need ...' She stopped, chewing her lip, the lip that had been trailing down my collarbone one minute before.

'Go and see him. Go on ...' I gently pushed her away and smiled reassuringly. She went after him calling his name above the noise of the music.

I leaned back on the counter, the throbbing between my legs beginning to subside slightly. My mind was re enacting our last kiss. God. I honestly didn't think I could want her anymore than I did ... but now? Sweet Jesus. She was everything I'd ever hoped for and more.

'Hi Laura.' Justine was in the doorway, looking almost sheepish.

'Hey.' I was in the mood to be pleasant. 'Enjoying yourself?'

'Well I am now. I sent Trish home. She was well out of order. I don't think I'll be calling her in the near future.' She laughed. 'So ... how are you keeping? Still studying hard?'

We began to chat about school days, and she looked embarrassed about how she was with me then. 'Oh, I was truly fucked up. Especially all that with Bulldyke and the school magazine and all ...' She smiled at the memory. 'She didn't even get a slap on the wrist for that you know. I got

her out of it. Said it was just someone stirring up trouble.' I had always wondered why Bulldyke hadn't got the sack. 'Then she went off with the Geography teacher ...' Didn't I know it, 'Mariel!' I thought and laughed to myself.

'So ... you're living here with Emma now?' I smiled. 'Her bloke seems nice enough. I was chatting to him earlier and he said that he thinks she might be the one. Sweet, eh?' I didn't answer. I knew better. 'Yeah, he said that they were getting on really well if you know what I mean?' A flea of doubt jumped about in my head. But ... nah ... she wouldn't - would she?

'Excuse me Justine. I've just remembered something. Help yourself to a drink.' With that I left.

I looked all over for Emma. I eventually asked a couple leaning outside the bathroom if they'd seen her. 'Yeah. She went in there with a blonde haired bloke.' They pointed to her bedroom. I moved in slow motion, the door appearing gigantic in front of me. My hand reached out for the knob. Quite steady - good. I turned it and pushed the door. Locked. I didn't understand ... why would her door be locked? Fear began creeping up my spine.

I knocked. 'Go away! We're busy!' Mike's voice. Mike and Emma in her room ... locked room ... busy. I leaned my head and listened against the wood.

I could hear Emma's voice, almost pleading. 'Come on Mike ... we're both at college. These things happen.' His muffled response. 'I've wanted this for so long ... I need this ... please ...' It went quiet. I could hear the squeak of bedsprings as someone got on the bed. I couldn't stand it anymore.

The pain in my chest was exploding. She had led me on: I was a fucking experiment. The words to Tina Turner's song came back to haunt me *'I hope you see this is not really me / this is just a phase that I'm going through'*. She was trying to warn me, that's why she asked me to forgive her. I had been such a fool. I was a phase, a charity case that she had to help out before she moved on with that cunt in the bedroom.

Anger blinded me and I stumbled, grabbing my chest with one hand whilst the other clawed its way down the wall. I felt sick, my stomach deciding to revolt. I just made it into the bathroom in time before I lost everything I had consumed that day. Then I dry heaved, retching up the bile that I felt for Emma Jenkins ... felt for myself.

Gentle fingers combed their way through my hair, calming me, leaving me numb to everything around me except her touch. 'Hey baby. Ssshhh ... Don't worry, I've got you. I'm here. No one can hurt you now.' I turned to look into the compassionate eyes of Justine. True love was spilling over her lids and trickling down her face. She cupped my cheek and curled her fingers from her other hand around my own anaesthetized one, bringing them to her mouth to lay gentle kisses on the tips. I watched, transfixed, unfeeling, an emptiness coating me from the inside out.

I don't know how we got there but we ended up in my room. I don't know how I became naked but I was. Justine was above me, hands everywhere. I was flat on my back, my legs wrapped around her while she ground herself into me. I had my arm over my eyes trying to stop the tears

her features. She still had one hand on the door handle, too shocked to move.

'How could you do this Laura? To me ... to us ... and with her of all people?' Her voice was breaking, her face crumpling, folding into a visage of misery. 'WHY?' She screamed at me. 'Why did you lead me on?'

'Lead you on ... lead you on... I'm not the one in there screwing Mike, am I?' The anger spilled out, vitriolic in its despair, taking no prisoners - kill on sight.

'But I ...' I didn't let her finish.

'Enough! Get out! And take that fucking cunt with you!' I pulled Justine roughly up by the hair, both hands clamping the sides of her head, and kissed her hard, my tongue thrusting in her mouth so deep I strained the underside.

I heard the door slam, and I broke off the kiss. 'No more Justine. I think you'd better leave.' She looked hurt. She knew I had used her. But hadn't she taken advantage of me? Yes - I know - excuses, excuses, excuses - 'There's no blame here' should be tattooed on my forehead.

I was disgusted with her: I was disgusted with myself. The night had started out so wonderfully, and now I was left with a broken heart, a broken dream and a broken future.

The next morning Emma was gone. I don't know where - just gone. And I haven't seen her for the last ten years.

Not until yesterday that is.

Part 2

Chapter Twenty

2004

So now you know the events leading up to this moment. In retrospect it seems very naïve, very girlish, but at that age everything is a drama. No, I didn't see Emma again from the moment she slammed my bedroom door closed. She seemed to disappear off the face of the earth. I called her mother's just before the start of Uni to ask if she was still attending. I can't repeat everything she said, but the facts were she had moved in with her father. And no, she wouldn't give me his address. All I wanted to do was to look into her blue eyes again, throw myself at her feet and beg her forgiveness ... and forgive her ... for anything. I didn't care if she screwed half of the football team as long as she came home to me at night. '*So true a fool is love, that in your will / Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.*'

That wasn't to be. She was gone.

Obviously I was a total mess. Everything I had ever known, or cared about, was ... gone. I was left with a weeping wound where my heart used to be - a void, an abyss, call it what you want - it is still there.

Sarah and Elaine supported me through it all, as I had to move back with them for a while. I couldn't take care of myself - didn't want to. Thoughts of ending it all were constantly racing through my head. I think the only person who stopped me doing something foolish was Harry.

A whispered, 'I need you Laurie,' as he snuggled against me trying to stop me from crying. That seemed to break through the walls I had erected. An eleven-year-old boy had saved my life. I'll always be thankful to him.

But, he's no longer a boy. Twenty-one and making all the girls heads spin. He is grown up now, quite the looker, brains too. He is in his final year at Uni, training to be a journalist. English was his forte - wonder whom he got that from? To him, Sarah and Elaine were his parents. They had raised him for thirteen years, shielding him from the drunken visits of his mother, and fighting for custody when he was ten. They couldn't love him anymore if he was their own.

Anyway, after attaining a 2.1 with honours I did my teacher training. I loved it. Still do. What else did I have, except a string of one-night stands? Yes, teaching was the only thing that could absorb me enough to not feel the emptiness rebounding inside me.

I started at this school six years ago and have steadily made my way up to second in the English department, mainly because I threw myself into my work. I was 'out' at school - it wasn't a problem with the other members of staff, fortunately.

I think I'm going off the point. Or am I clarifying it?

There I go again.

As I said before, teaching was all I had and my students came first. I would stay late, get in early, organise study sessions for the Year 11 students who were coming up to their GSCEs. Nothing was too much trouble for good old Ms Stewart.

We always have a Parents' Evening for Year 11 about three months before they take their exams. Reason being, we can give the kids a good old fashioned bollocking in front of their mums and dads and frighten them into doing better. And it helps focus the kids on the importance of getting a good grade too.

There was one student, Jack, a really good lad, tall, dark hair, blue eyes ... He was one of my favourite pupils. He had an eager mind and nothing was too much trouble for him. I think he had a little bit of a crush on me too, probably because I was the only female teacher the right side of thirty. I would do anything (within reason) for him.

Well, as I said, the Parents' Evening was a big deal.

'Miss?' Why do students always say Miss as a question?

'Yes Jack.' Why do teachers always answer as if they are bored shitless?

'My parents can't make it on Wednesday. They're away on a business trip.'

'Really.' Why do we always say it like we think they are lying? Probably because they usually are.

A crooked grin sported his face. 'Yes, really Miss.' I laughed and put down my pen.

'And?'

'Can my sister come and see you instead?'

I looked at him, puzzled. 'And why would she want to do that?' Images of a twelve year old with bunches entered my mind.

'Well, she's looking after me while they're away. I'm staying with her for a while.'

'Okay, then. Don't forget to fill in the slip.'

'She can't make it on the night, but she said she could squeeze you in on Wednesday morning.'
Cheeky cow - squeeze me in! I'll squeeze her ...

'Is that okay then, Miss?' He looked at me with those big blue eyes and I was lost.

'Go on then Jack. I'm free period four. Tell her to sign in at reception and they'll send her to my room.' He flashed me a big smile and raced off to his next lesson.

How did I know that was going to change my life as I knew it? As I said - it's all retrospective. We live and learn.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was Wednesday morning and I had forgotten about the visit from the cheeky cow of a sister. It was one of those mornings - you know, the ones where you get up late, get stuck in traffic, have a blazing row with some dickhead who cuts you up, get caught in staff briefing applying lipstick at the back of the room - those mornings.

The first two lessons went okay. Kids were nuts on account of there being a drop, and I mean drop, of rain splattering helplessly on the window. They were fascinated with it. I was just glad it

wasn't windy - they were worse then.

Period three saw me teaching Year 11 *Of Mice and Men*. God, that brought back memories. A heated discussion of the importance of Curley's wife and why did all the characters, apart from George and Lennie, use fake names, took up half the lesson. Stevie Daniels put her hand up.

'Miss?' The question in the voice again. 'Why does Steinbeck have George kill Lennie at the end?' A flashback of nearly thirteen years - the snigger - the argument. A small smile graced my lips.

'Good question Stevie. Anyone?' That kicked them off good and proper. I had to call it a day when two of the students bordered on a fistfight. God, I love my job. Never a dull moment.

'Right everyone. Don't forget your anthologies tomorrow. We are studying Pre 1914 poetry.' Groans all around. 'Get over yourselves. You should be privileged to read such works of wonder.' They all started to pack away, mumbling about me being a slave driver and other things that I can't mention. I started to quote Wordsworth at them - just to piss them off further:

*But to go to school in a summer morn,
Oh it drives all joy away;
Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day
In sighing and dismay*

I walked around the classroom quoting directly to individual students and checking the floor for the unlimited amount of crap they could leave behind.

I reached the front and ended with:

*How can a bird that is born for joy
Sit in cage and sing?*

'Dead right,' someone muttered.

'Well done, Anthony.' He looked at me gone out. 'At least you understood it.' The bell went ending the lesson and they all rushed out - must be me.

'You haven't forgotten have you Miss, about my sister coming?' Jack was behind me; I didn't even know he was there.

'Of course not,' I lied. And out he went, whistling.

I sat down at my desk. That was all I needed. Some stuck up piece of ass coming in here thinking she knows everything. Squeeze me in ... the cheek of it.

Tap tap tap.

'Come in.' Here comes bossy boots now. That was the last lucid thought I had for a while.

Chapter Twenty-Two

She looked good; I'll give her that. Dressed in a classic black suit, the jacket slung over one shoulder; an open collared short-sleeved white shirt finished the look. Her raven locks were shorter and danced just below her shoulders. The blue eyes were the same. Older, wiser, but the same.

After I had come around from my dead faint, (I pleaded lack of breakfast and too much caffeine for my behaviour) I made my excuses, and scampered off to the staff room.

Inside the room I let out the breath I had been holding. Ten years. It had been ten years since I had looked into those eyes. Those blue, blue eyes. Feelings washed over me, feelings I thought were dead and buried a long time ago. I lifted my hand to push strands of my hair behind my ears. It was shaking. I was shaking. 'Pull your socks up Stewart. You can get through this.' Why hadn't I made the connection, Jack Jenkins - Emma Jenkins? Probably because I knew she didn't have a brother. But she did have a half brother ...

I took a deep breath and went back to my room.

'Sorry about that, Ms Jenkins.'

'Sanders, Mrs Sanders actually, Ms Stewart.' She was married. My heart sank all over again. Wait a minute ... why? Probably that Hope coming back to bite me in the ass again.

'Sorry about that, *Mrs Sanders*.' Lovely fake smile just about ... *there*. 'So, you have concerns about Jack's exams then?' And off I went into teacher mode, totally professional, showing target grades and past marks. I passed the mark sheet over to her and she studied it intently. I took this opportunity to swallow everything about her. Her concentrated gaze, her pursed lips, lips that I had kissed, that had kissed me, the stray lock of hair that was hanging across her chiselled features. She was stunning. Her husband was a lucky man. I tore my eyes away.

'Looks good, Ms Stewart.' She met my gaze, and then sat back on her chair to look me over. 'The years have served you well if you don't mind me saying.' I shook my head and flashed her a smile. She looked down at her lap then back at me. 'I wondered if Jack's Ms Stewart was my Ms Stewart, my Laura. I just had to come in and have a look.' Steady gaze. I swallowed the lump in my throat. My Laura - my heart began to beat again.

'Yes it's me - in the flesh.' Was that a blush? Nah ... must be hot in here.

'So, how have you been? It's been a long time.' Too long. 'Jack raves on about you all the time. Says how you inspire the kids, and you seem to be the only one that doesn't have a stick up their arse.' I laughed out loud. That was the Emma I knew, and loved.

'I'm okay. Busy most of the time with school, but okay. How are you? What are you up to now?'

She began to tell me about her job as a systems analyst - I didn't have a clue what she was talking about but I enjoyed listening to her voice again. 'And that's where I met David, my other half.' I understood that all right. I was beginning to forget that she was married. 'Well, I say other half, we're not together anymore.' *Sweet love renew thy force*. A sad smile traced around her mouth. 'We were only married for just over a year before I told him it wasn't working.'

'I'm sorry.' What else to say? Yippee would be a start. She looked at me, confused.

'But why should you be sorry? I was the one who made the mistake of marrying a man I didn't love.' This was getting better and better. 'Anyway, Laura, do you mind me calling you Laura?' My expression said it all. 'Thanks for your time, I know how busy being a teacher can be.' She stood up and extended her hand. 'Lovely to see you again. We should meet for a drink one night.'

'That'd be great.' Did I gush?

Probably.

I took the offered hand for an innocent handshake. And there it was ... the connection on contact. She must have felt it too because she looked startled and pulled her hand away like she been burned.

Then she was gone, and I was left wondering if I had dreamt it all.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Two weeks passed and I was working harder than ever. I got into work early and left as late as possible. I had rewritten three schemes of work in my spare time. It seemed as if I was running away from something, but what, I don't know.

Entering the staff room at lunch I was accosted, yes accosted, by the school secretary. God that woman was like an octopus. She was forever stroking my arm, patting my hip, or just generally getting on my tits.

'I've a message for you, Laura.' How can anyone say a name and make it sound so vulgar - beats me. 'A Mrs Sanders has called in. Something about Jack Jenkins.' Had the staff room always been this small? God, my hands looked huge holding the pink slip between my fingers. My eyes scanned down to the boxes at the bottom, and I held my breath to see which one had been ticked - *Please call* - and a mobile number.

I can't count how many times I picked up the phone to call, then put it down. I can't count the amount of times I began to dial the number. I was such a coward.

'Hello ... Mrs Sanders? This is Laura Stewart calling on behalf of Jack.'

'Hi Laura. I was hoping you'd get back. Sorry to deceive you ... I didn't want to talk about Jack.'
Silence. 'What are you doing on Friday night? Do you fancy coming out for a drink, or maybe catch dinner ...?' Did I want to go there again?

'Love to.' Hey! Wait a minute. I hadn't gone through the whole patter yet - Crabbe springs to mind - *No more debating take the ready hand*. God. More quotes - get a life Stewart.

'Great. I'll pick you up about seven thirty?' I agreed and gave her my address.

My hand was shaking as I lowered the receiver. I was meeting Emma Jenkins - oops - Sanders (*a rose by any other name ...*) - in two days. Shit - two days! It would be a rush - but I'd manage.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Friday night saw me in a state of panic. I didn't know what to wear ... no ... that wasn't the problem. I didn't know what I was doing, you know, setting myself up to get hurt all over again. I think I may be putting the cart before the horse again.

My stomach was dancing around, performing cartwheels and back flips, and I was definitely nauseous. Every time I thought of Emma, her eyes, her smile, the butterflies would climb up my throat nearly choking me. I couldn't spend five minutes in her company never mind a whole evening. But I wanted to ... so much. I could feel it inside me, behind my breast in the place where my heart used to be.

I went for the casual look: jeans, white shirt left open with a skimpy top underneath, a little mascara and lipstick. I didn't want to go all out, you know, evening dress and tiara.

The shrill ringing of the doorbell broke through my thoughts. She was here, and on time.

I stood behind the door trying to calm my breathing. I couldn't answer it panting like a knackered dog. She would make her excuses and leave. That was an idea ...

'Hi Emma.' My voice sounded steady. Tick. My hands didn't shake. Another tick. I digested her outfit, her body, her smile, those eyes ... all in one quick glance. Big cross.

She looked radiant. I could smell her scent, mmm *Cool Waters*, sexy ... I subconsciously licked my lips. I wondered what it tasted like. Another big cross.

'Come in,' I gushed. 'I won't be a minute. Take a seat.'

In she strolled, confident, the sexy swagger still there and even more appetising. I pointed her

into the lounge and then bolted to the bathroom.

'I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.' I stared at my reflection in the silvered glass. Not bad ... quite sexy. I pouted my lips and tilted my head back. I looked like I had special needs. A laugh broke out relieving the tension. 'Come on Stewart. It's only one night.'

'But I want more,' a small voice said inside my head. I think it came from my heart, but I couldn't be too sure. It had been quiet for so long I didn't recognise its voice, didn't really know if I wanted to listen ...

She was reclining on the sofa when I arrived back in the lounge, totally at peace with the situation. I took her in at that moment. Ten years had only made her more beautiful. She wasn't the girl I knew then ... but she was too, do you understand that? Emma Jenkins in my home, sitting on my sofa, waiting for me to get my act together so we could go and eat. Shit - I'd better put a spark to it.

'Nice place,' she said nodding her head in recognition of her surroundings. 'Do you live alone?'

'Yeah. I bought this place three years ago when I was financially stable. I always wanted a dog to greet me at night, but being a teacher ... well, it would be cruel to leave it all day. Maybe one day, eh?' She smiled and looked wistful for some reason or another.

'Ready?' As I'll ever be - *Lead on McDuff*.

Italian. Mmmmm. Have I ever told you how much I love Italian food? Well, I do. It's more filling for a start, and the deserts ... oh god; I could get aroused just thinking about it. I was surprised that Emma had remembered this little detail, happy, but surprised all the same.

The restaurant was sultry: dimly lit tables that hosted solitary candles for the more intimate liaisons. Single roses posing in crystal vases, soft music filtered through hidden speakers promising undying love - totally couple orientated. I captured it all; filed it to memory. I looked at Emma who smiled at me and winked.

'You like?' I nodded like a prepubescent teenager. 'Good. I know you like Italian - bigger portions.' A soft laugh escaped that wonderful mouth. I wanted to capture it in my own ... get a grip.

The meal was wonderful (yes ... big portions) and the company was better. We chatted about our lives, our jobs, everything. I couldn't believe how quickly we seemed to get back into our roles again.

'So, I attended Cambridge University, Queens College, and got a first class with honours. That set me up really. I now work mainly from home, which is good because I can look after Jack when his parents are away.' She sipped at her water. I was the only one drinking, a lovely Shiraz,

mmm. 'But I do have to go on business trips occasionally. Actually, I'm off to Rome on Monday for four days.' Another sip. She looked for the waiter.

I looked at her.

The candlelight was doing something to her face. She seemed vulnerable, beautiful, distant. I wanted to put my arms around her and tell her she was safe, I would take care of her. I could feel a surge of emotion clambering up my throat. I wanted to cry and I didn't know why.

'Excuse me,' I stumbled up from the table and headed to the rest room. I could feel her eyes on me but I couldn't turn around.

After splashing copious amounts of cold water on my cheeks and neck I felt a little calmer. 'What are you doing Stewart? She doesn't feel that way about you, or have you forgotten?' A sneer crossed my face. No. I could never forget that.

Before we knew it the night was drawing to a close and she offered me a lift home. Sitting in her car watching the streets of Manchester rush by I had a feeling of true contentment.

'Put some music on if you want - there's case of CDs in the glove box.' I sorted through them and picked one that said '*Faves*'. I felt like my life had been transported back in time as the first track began to play '*It's been seven hours and fifteen days, since you took our love away.*' A strong, slender hand shot out to the player and ejected the disc. 'Not that one. It jumps like crazy.' She gushed.

Was that a blush? Did the song or the situation embarrass her? I leaned back in my seat and looked out of the window too scared that I would expose my feelings if I looked at her right now. The car was silent: she was silent. I was kicking myself - I should say something, something to break the tension.

'Lovely meal. Thanks.' What a golden-tongued charmer I was. No wonder I was on my own. 'The lasagne was lovely, just lovely.' Think of another word apart from lovely you moron. 'The wine was nice too.' Nice? Nice? Could you not think of a weaker word? What about okay? The desert was okay - my inner voice was getting on my tits.

We pulled up outside my house. 'Fancy a nightcap? Coffee?' for a moment I thought she was going to refuse.

'Sure, that'd be great.' My heart began thumping again, and I hadn't realised I had been holding my breath.

We sat either end of my sofa, shoes off, coffee in hand. Perfect. I had put *Dido* on the CD player just to fill the air.

'I can't believe you're still single. I thought they'd be queuing up outside your door.' I blushed at

her words.

'Well ... I have just come out of a relationship.' Her blue eyes held my gaze for a while and then dropped.

'Oh really?' Did her voice seem strained. 'What happened?' You. You walked back in my life and I was lost.

'It wasn't working. Jenny was nice enough, but not for me.' I tried to sound wistful but it came out as lame instead.

'Were you together long?' Her voice sounded faint, controlled. She looked up at me again. 'You don't have to answer if it still hurts.' A smile, soft, gentle, reassuring.

'Nearly a whole week.' She laughed out loud at this confession.

'A week! God, she did well.'

'Yes. She's been the longest so far.' I grinned a full out grin. Her face became reflective, pondering what I had said for a minute. She tapped my leg and giggled almost girlishly. God. I love you Emma Jenkins ...

I felt a pain in my chest; I knew I was leading myself down a very dangerous path by allowing this woman back into my life. I shook my head trying to dispel the images dancing there, taunting me, reminding me of the heartbreak I nearly died from ten years ago.

But that was the past. We've both grown up since then. We're both different people ... different women, with different lives ... different goals. I took a sip of my coffee, hiding my emotions in the dark, hot liquid swirling around in the mug.

Live for the moment, girl.

Our conversation led to her asking about Sarah and Elaine, not forgetting Harry. I became animated when I spoke about them. Understandable really, as they were the closest people in my life.

'How are your parents?' Loaded question. Her voice became bitter when she spoke about her mother. I hadn't known how much she hated her, couldn't believe that I had missed the revulsion she felt for her.

'So, you haven't seen her in three years? Long time Emma.' I sipped my coffee. 'I haven't spoken to her since ...' I stopped, realising where this was going.

'Since when?' Another loaded question.

'Since just before I started Uni.' I had to go on. 'I called to see if you were ... um ... coming back

and ... erm... where I could reach you...'

She sat forward at this bit and stared right in my eyes, almost as if she was willing me to say something. 'What did she say?' Blue eyes looked dark, almost a little crazy.

'Said you had gone to your father's and wouldn't give me your address.'

'Fucking bitch!' I jumped. 'The lying fucking bitch!' She slammed her fist on the arm of the chair. 'I fucking well told her ... of all the ... fuck!' She leapt out of her seat and began to pace. 'I can't believe she'd do this. What a ...' I just stared, dumbfounded.

'What do you mean, Emma?' I almost didn't want to hear the answer.

'I told her ... fucking told her ... if you called she must, and I repeat must, give you my number. No wonder you never contacted me.' She flopped down next to me and buried her head in her hands. 'No wonder I never heard from you again.' This last bit was more of a whisper.

I stared at the wall wishing for my insides to stop boiling. I told you it wasn't until years later that I realised what was missing from her mother - a conscience. I would now like to add - she was missing a heart too.

Emma left shortly after that. She snatched up her car keys and said she had to pay someone a visit. I knew who she meant, but didn't say anything to her. What could I say?

She hugged me at the front door and I inhaled her scent. Not just her perfume ... her ... all of her.

Two weeks flew by in the scurry of work. The end of school production was underway. It was called *A Wilde Evening* and had a mixture of Oscar Wilde's plays and poems. Jack was in the lead role as the great man himself. He was perfect for it too.

I heard from Emma a couple of times when she called to chat, and even grabbed a coffee with her the previous Saturday. But it seemed there was still a distance between us.

I asked Jack how she was on occasion and he said that she was really good, and seemed happy. He put this down to her having 'found someone' and thought it may be '*someone special*'. Obviously I didn't ask him again. I knew it had been a mistake to let myself get involved again. I should have remembered that life with Emma Jenkins could only mean one thing - heartbreak.

I ignored her calls. Yes, I know, the coward's way out. I couldn't go through that again. I don't even think I have got over the last time yet.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I had to collaborate with the Art department for the backdrops for the play. It was usually the Head of Drama's job but he said Claire Hepworth had specifically asked for me. In other words - he couldn't be arsed.

Claire was nice enough. Quite attractive really. She was a little taller than me, brown shoulder length hair and fiery brown eyes. Nice tits too. And she was straight. School was ultra demanding - more so than usual, so we arranged to meet at the Elizabethan pub on Friday night to iron out the details.

We met there, both of us weighted down with notebooks and sketches - hers better than mine - obviously! It was nice, in a boring kind of way. Usually when I'm with a woman I've only got one thing on my mind - how quickly I can get her into bed and how long do I have to wait before I make my excuses and leave. Don't get me wrong, they always know it is a casual thing, I would never lead someone on. I know from past experiences how much that can hurt.

Half an hour went by and we were totally immersed in our work and conversation. Then I felt it. It seemed as if all the hairs on the back of my neck were standing to attention, like a charge of electricity had raced through them scaring them into action.

I turned. Emma was just coming through the entrance with a tall, distinguished looking man. Give her credit, he was handsome in a hetero kind of way. My heart sank. It felt like I had been punched, and punched and punched.

'Are you okay, Laura?' I nodded at Claire and desperately began to sort through the sketches again pretending that I gave a fuck.

My eyes were drawn to Emma. She was laughing and slapping him on the arm. I would have liked to slap him too. He was loving it. Kept on looking around to see who was watching him with the hot date. Bastard.

She was beautiful. She was sexy. She was ... with him. I looked away, looked down, then looked up again to be caught in blue eyes. The room blacked out and only Emma was there. A soft smile graced her lips that steadily grew into a wide crooked grin. She waved. Then she shifted her gaze on to Claire and her facial expression seemed to cut off, close up. She looked back at me and gave me a sad smile and turned back to her date.

Ten minutes later saw me in the toilets banging my head against the wall. Why was I such a coward?

'New treatment for an annoying headache? I'll have to try it on David out there.' I stopped thumping my head, frozen by her voice. That man was her husband - 'Ex -husband' a little voice inside whispered.

I laughed, a truly fake laugh. 'No. Just having one of those days again.'

'Tell me about it.' She sighed and entered a cubicle.

I was just about to leave when she started to speak. 'So, a new conquest, eh Laura?' I could tell she was trying to make it seem light-hearted but there was something underlying it that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

'Just a work thing, actually. Thought we might as well take it to the pub instead of sitting in my classroom.' The toilet flushed and she came out, grinning.

'Speaking of love lives - how's yours?' My head nodded towards the door. 'Jack said he thought there was someone special in your life.' I was embarrassed that I had pumped information from a sixteen-year-old boy.

That laugh again. 'No. No one special.' She began to wash her hands, her back to me. 'And as for David ... he's in town for a couple of days - probably thought he could get a quickie in while he is here.'

'And?' It was out before I could stop it. I held my breath waiting for the answer. Emma studied me through the reflection in the mirror.

'Been there. Done that. Anyway... ' I released the breath that I had been holding. 'What are you doing tomorrow? Fancy going to the flicks?' A teasing smile.

How could I resist?

Saturday morning saw me at Sarah and Elaine's - early. After the usual jokes of 'Have you wet the bed?' they calmed down enough to let me unburden my thoughts.

I told them about Emma re-entering my life. They looked at each other with raised eyebrows and passed on knowing smiles. I ignored their childish behaviour and decided to wallow in my own misery. I contemplated sucking my thumb at one stage but thought better of it - not good for the reputation.

'You don't understand ... she broke my heart. I can't go through it again,' I wailed as I stamped my foot.

'Has she led you to believe that there is a chance of taking up where you left off?' Trust Elaine to be analytical. Why couldn't she just agree to everything that I said and be done with it. 'Or are you jumping the gun here?'

I hadn't thought about that. All I had thought about was how I was feeling in reaction to seeing her again, not even thinking about what was being offered. 'Bloody women...' I sighed. 'I don't know. What do you expect me to do? Ask her?' They both nodded. 'Have you completely lost

your marbles?' More nodding. 'Are you pulling my leg?' Vigorous nodding accompanied by huge grins.

'Look Laura. We both know that your relationship ten years ago with Emma nearly destroyed you. We also know that being without her nearly destroyed you too. You have to grab what you want in this life - nobody will give it to you on a silver platter. Tell her how you feel. Tell her how you felt. Be honest with yourself ... and to her for that matter.'

I digested Sarah's words. How on earth could I tell her how I felt? She'd run a mile. But then she'd know. But she'd still run a mile.

I sighed.

'Laura. Always remember - whatever will be will be.' Sarah's wise words. I remember them from the first time around and look what good that did me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Standing outside the pictures on a Saturday night in Manchester Piccadilly was no picnic. I had been propositioned twice and accosted by an old lady who swore I was her twin sister.

I was just in the middle of directing some pervert to 'Turn left at the end of my finger and continue going until he fucked off out of my sight' when I heard Emma's dulcet tones behind me.

'Well that's a sight for sore eyes.' I was leaning over, shoving my middle finger repeatedly in the air at the unfortunate bloke who had asked 'How much?' in a gravelly Secret Squirrel kind of way.

The pervert was forgotten. I'm sure I teach his son. Never mind.

Emma grabbed hold of me in a bear like hug. 'Come here you.' Flashback? Most definitely. 'Are you ready to have the be Jesus scared out of you?' I feigned fright in an overly dramatic kind of way, you know like in the 1920s silent movies. This made her laugh. 'Okay then big guy. You can buy me the biggest popcorn in the house.' She grabbed my hand and led me to the entrance. 'And if you're a good girl, I'll let you hang onto me at the scary bits.'

'In your dreams, Jenkins.' No reaction to me using her maiden name. 'If I remember rightly, you're the one who nearly wet themselves watching *Silence of the Lambs*.'

'With laughing - yes - I remember it well.' She play shoved me and ran inside. I was left mesmerised. You blow me away girl. Do you know that?

Gothika was okay I suppose. I was expecting something a little more frightening, but seeing

Halle Berry certainly made up for it. I didn't say I didn't jump three feet in the air on numerous occasions though, did I? Especially when she was in that bloody cell, on her own, then she wasn't. Christ. That was one fucked up vision. Me being me leapt in the air at this point and grabbed hold of Emma's arm. She wasn't expecting it and screamed at the top of her lungs. I thought she had seen something I hadn't and I joined her. It was funny, believe me, you had to be there. Actually, the people who were there didn't find it very funny though. Whatever.

As the film was reaching its climax, Emma began to get closer and closer to me. 'This brings back memories,' I thought. Another jump and she was gripping my arm. Another - my hand. Please let there be one more. By the end of the film she was nearly on my lap - I was in heaven but I just looked smug. I couldn't resist. 'Nice to see you've toughened up, Jenkins.'

'I thought I did great,' she sighed as we left the cosy interior of the movie theatre and made our way outside. 'I usually get scared at things like that, but I had 'Stewart the Saviour' to protect me,' she crooned. I mock hit her and laughed.

The fresh air outside was like ... um ... a breath of fresh air? It was too early to go home yet and we decided to go for a stroll, see if I could tout for some business. The streets were packed with clubbers, mostly teenagers, students and twenty somethings. Manchester was alive with activity. Cars lined the streets pumping out music that could make your ears bleed. The night smelled of smoke, car fumes and beer - lovely to a true city girl.

We strolled along, side by side chatting inanely about what was on display in the shop windows. Before we knew it we were on Canal Street standing outside Via Fossa. I walked on ahead and waited for Emma to catch up with me. She had stopped and was staring at the outside of the club. A burly bouncer asked if she was 'Coming in or not?' in his charmless way. She looked startled, like she had just been awakened, and then searched out my own concerned gaze.

We continued to walk.

'Do you still see Justine?' Her voice was cold.

'No - well yes - but only at a distance.'

'So not up close and personal then?' A bitterness crept into her voice.

'Been there. Done that - never to be repeated.'

She was silent, lost in thought. 'We'd better get going; it's getting late.'

The drive home was uncomfortable. The silence was screaming around us making my ears hurt. 'Fancy a coffee?' No response. 'Okay. Thanks for a lovely night.' I attempted to get out of the car. A hand gripped my arm holding me fast.

'Are you free tomorrow?' I nodded. 'How do you fancy - me - you - a picnic, provided by me of course - a book of poetry, provided by you - and a day at Lyme Park?' A gentle smile graced her

features, making the last twenty minutes fade away. 'Maybe that'll bring back happy memories, eh?'

'Love to.'

'It's a date then.' Huge grin.

If only ...

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was beautiful. I hadn't visited Lyme Park again since ... well since ... you know.

Trees surrounded us in all their late spring glory, budding leaves waved in the light breeze and the woods were becoming shaded once again. The deer were there with their young trailing after them. It was like watching a nature channel with the volume turned on low. So peaceful.

We walked through the woods to the far side of the park and set up our picnic, throwing a chequered blanket down on the grass. Boxes of goodies were brought out by my Emma's beautiful hands and I 'ooohed' and 'ahhhed' in all the right places. This made her laugh. 'You're always thinking of your stomach, Stewart.' Not always. I gave her a saucy smile. 'Well ... your appetites then.' A crooked grin just for me.

Perfection. That's what it was. A beautiful day, with a beautiful woman, what more can a girl ask for? We were secluded in our patch, the only company being the flora and fauna, and we made the most of our time together.

I read some poetry, some funny, some sad, some crude - just to keep the balance. She listened intently, her eyes devouring every word, especially the ones about love and loss. Gently she took the book from my hands and scanned the index. Frantic fingers sifted through the book.

'This one.'

I looked down to the open page. *To Celia*. I stared at it, trying to calm my breathing. 'Sure.' Was that my voice? It sounded like a teenager - a teenager sat in Emma Jenkins's bedroom thirteen years ago.

I began to read, stumbling over the first few words, apologising, and starting again. My eyes flicked intermittently to Emma. She was sprawled out on the grass; her eyes fixed straight ahead, her face blank.

'You read aloud so well Laura.'

'It's my job.' I smiled at her as her eyes met mine. A sad smile came back to me. Why did she

look so sad? I couldn't go into that now, she must have her reasons.

I lay back onto the blanket and absorbed the springtime sun, listening to the scamper and rustle of leaves around me. I could hear Emma's laboured breathing.

'About that night ...' I heard her sit up so I cracked open an eye to look at her. 'With Justine ...' My voice trailed off. I sat up and looked squarely at her.

'I don't want to know. It's in the past.' A cold, hard voice, so unlike her. I tried again to explain, but she cut me off. 'I said I don't want to know. Leave it.'

'But I need to explain ...'

'What?' Her voice was forceful 'That you fucked that slag in our flat! While I was in the other room breaking up with Mike. You fucked her right in front of me, Laura! For Christ sakes - you even kissed her when you knew I was watching.' Her voice was venomous now, raising in volume, scaring the birds from their perches.

'Breaking up with Mike! Right. Didn't sound that way to me. Funny how loud bedsprings can sound through a locked fucking door!' I shot to my feet. 'I heard you, Emma, pleading with him to forgive you, to screw you, and I quote "*Ooooh Mike ...I've wanted this for so long ... I need this ... please ...*" The last bit was spoken in a childish and ugly voice. She looked shocked - yeah, caught you out good and proper, Jenkins. 'I know you played me for a fool. And like a fucking fool I fell for it again.'

'But I didn't ... I wasn't...'

'Fuck you, Emma Jenkins,' I grabbed my jacket, 'I'm going. See you around.' With that I stormed off, my little legs moving so quickly I thought I would topple over. 'Play me for a fool. Not again,' I muttered under my breath. Shakespeare's sonnet sprang to mind '*Being your slave ...*'

'Fuck you too, Shakey.' I wasn't in the mood. I was livid. How dare she? How dare she tell me she hadn't slept with Mike Collins? Did she think I was that fucking naive? Well, she can kiss my arse.

I could hear her behind me calling my name. I ploughed on. People were beginning to stare.

'What the fuck are you looking at, twat?' Some poor unsuspecting bloke happened to be the victim of my line of vision. He shook his head, bewildered, not wanting to get on the wrong side of a five foot four bundle of anger.

'Laura ... wait!' I did wait, Emma. For three years I sat on the sidelines and watched you with all your boyfriends, patiently waiting for my turn. Yeah, and look where it got me.

Strong fingers grabbed my arm and forced me to stop, spin round and face her. 'Don't leave me, Laura. Not again!'

I stared at her hand. 'I didn't leave you in the first place - you left me, remember?' The words were almost spat from my mouth. I tried to move.

'Please?' Almost whispered. She pulled me into a hug, crushing the breath out of my body. 'Don't leave me, please?' The pleading note in her voice halted me. 'Do you know how many times I wanted to come back ... speak with you ... hold you. Do you know how hard it was not to get down on my knees and beg your forgiveness? I've watched you for the last ten years Laura.' I grunted. 'Yes. I have. I used to drive past your house, sometimes park up, and watch you. You seemed so happy - how could I ...' She drifted off. 'We were both so young, Laura ... wanted different things.'

I broke away and fixed a stony gaze into her tear-filled blue eyes. 'Still do.' I said, turned and left her there, holding my still beating heart.

'But I didn't sleep with him.' I heard I say. But I kept on walking.

Liar. Fucking liar!

She didn't follow me this time.

As I sat on the bus I could still see her standing there, looking lost, rejected. I pulled my jacket around my shoulders to ward off the chill the gaping hole in my chest was causing.

It was for the best.

Wasn't it?

I was fuming. Sat on the bus, on my own, fuming. I was mumbling to myself, arguing on my own, and people were beginning to move away from me. I didn't care.

How dare she? How dare she try and get out of sleeping with Mike Collins. I knew what I had heard that night. If she was so adamant that she hadn't slept with him, why did she say she wanted to beg my forgiveness? What was there to forgive? Yes. What was there to forgive? She lied to me! She led me on! She made me believe that I had a chance - a chance with her.

'Fuck her!' It shot out of my mouth before I had time to stop it, and I could hear people muttering behind me about the youth of today. 'And fuck you too!' Two old blokes were sat there, probably stating how they had fought in two world wars for the likes of me, expressions grim.

'There's no need for that young girl. Think about the children.' I looked about me. Not one child in sight.

I was just about to go off on one again, but felt all my energy seep out of me. I could still see the rejection on her face, hear the whispered 'But I didn't sleep with him.'

I rubbed my eyes to try and stem the flow of tears threatening to expose my pain. I had lost everything.

Again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I didn't hear from her for nearly a week. Saturday morning had arrived after a rather strained week at work. I had chewed the heads off students and colleagues alike for no reason. Someone had to suffer apart from me.

I was lying in bed staring at the ceiling at the pale constellations I had put there as soon as I moved in., tracing the star patterns with my finger. The whispered 'But I didn't sleep with him' danced about my head like a macabre dream. I didn't feel the all-consuming anger now ... only grief.

An insistent knocking at the front door broke my reverie. 'Flowers for Stewart.' The deliveryman smiled at me, taking in my rumpled hair, puffy eyes and skimpy pyjamas. 'Someone loves you.' I smiled at him, but I really wanted to tell him to shove his comments up his ... 'Have a good day.' And he was gone.

The bouquet was huge. A myriad of smells poured forth jousting for position with the vibrant colours of the arrangement. I shut the door, still a little shocked to think straight. It wasn't my birthday. Who on earth ...?

A small card stuck out from the foliage and I took it out cautiously, like it was going to explode in my hand.

Sorry about Sunday - Please forgive me.

Can I see you again? Maybe tonight?

We need to talk.

Love, as always, Em xxx

I reread the words 'We need to talk.' About what? I didn't think I could stand another confrontation. An image of Emma's face floated in front of me. Blue eyes were filled with pain ... pain I had put there with my cruel words. Whatever had happened in the past, happened in the past. I sighed.

We needed to talk - get this out in the open, resolve the events that have haunted my dreams for the last ten years.

I took in the card again and a smile crept onto my lips - Em eh? Then I noticed the hearts and

flowers border. A laugh broke free from deep within me. That felt good - life's too short to be so damn angsty.

Obviously, being a woman, I let her stew for an hour before I called her. The phone rang and rang - maybe I had left it too late? Maybe she dec...

'Hello?' She was panting, like she had been running.

'Hello there, Em.'

'So you got them then? Well?'

'They're beautiful.'

'Not the flowers ... tonight?' She sounded urgent, like her whole life depended on my answer.

'I don't fancy going out with you tonight,' I said.

'Okay.' I could hear the hurt in her voice.

'But I'd love to cook for you. Here? ... Seven thirty?' A smile broke my lips as I heard her muffled 'Yes' on the other end of the line. I could picture her pumping her fist in the air.

'That'd be lovely, Laura. Do you want me to bring anything with me?' My heart please.

I reassured her that I was more than capable of going shopping for food and purchasing a bottle of wine on my own. I was a big girl after all. 'Don't I know it?' She purred. Did I just come in my pants? Oh Stewart, get your mind out of the gutter and get down to business.

'So. You think we need to talk?' Silence on the other end. 'So do I.' Still quiet. 'We need to get this out in the open so we can move on with our lives.'

'Okay.' It sounded almost distant, like she was going back into her shell once again.

'Seven thirty.'

'Okay.' A little stronger now, I could hear the resolution kicking in.

We said our goodbyes, and I started to plan. I had only eight hours to prepare. It would be a rush ... and you know the rest.

Dinner was a success. Chicken breasts cooked with leeks and mushrooms, followed by warm chocolate fudge cake and cream. Emma made orgasmic noises throughout, tantalisingly licking her spoon with the flat of her tongue only to alternate with just the tip. My desert was cold by the

time she had finished. I think I had my own little mini orgasms watching her eat. My god! If she could eat a cake like that what would she be like ...? I said leave it Stewart.

We took our coffees into the lounge and sprawled onto the sofa.

'Do you mind if I unbutton my jeans - I'm stuffed.' Weakly, I nodded my head. You can take them off if you want, I wouldn't mind - no sirree - not at all.

The conversation was light, at first, neither of us wanting to spoil the evening. But we both knew it was coming.

I took a deep breath. 'So, you said we needed to talk?' She sat a little straighter in the chair. 'I'll start shall I?'

Her face was a mask. She looked down at her hands that were fidgeting with her pinkie ring like she had no control of her actions.

'I slept with Justine Russell.' Her head shot up, her body stiffened. 'Yes. I can't deny it. You saw me ... us ... not that I would deny it anyway.' I took a deep breath. 'That night ... I came looking for you, and ...' She tried to interrupt. 'No ... Emma ... please. Let me finish.' I took a deep breath. 'I got to your bedroom door and it was locked.' Her mouth opened to say something. I just looked at her, pleading with my eyes for her to keep quiet.'

'As I said ... the door was locked, so I knocked.'

'That was you?' She seemed incredulous.

'Emma ... please?' I nervously sifted my hands through my hair. God. This wasn't easy. 'Yes it was me. Mike told me to go away - said you were busy. I couldn't believe it - one minute with me, next with him. I could hear your voice in the room saying that you were both at college, these things happen, and about how much you needed this.' I stopped and picked up my wine to guzzle a large mouthful.

'Laura ... it wasn't like that. It was you I was talking about, not Mike.' Her voice was no more than a whisper.

My eyes widened at the revelation, only to go back into slits again. 'I need to tell you the rest, Emma. I need you to know.' She nodded, her eyes full of ... something I couldn't quite place.

'You may say that you didn't sleep with him ... let me finish! But I went on the evidence. I left your door and headed for the bathroom, losing what little I had eaten that day. Justine found me there, comforted me. You must understand - I was devastated, Emma. Justine offered me a release from something. She said all the right things, told me that she loved me, pressed all the right buttons. Next thing I knew I was in bed with her. I can't even remember getting there, couldn't think straight.' I couldn't look at Emma. I knew she would look at me with the same disgust I felt for myself. What if she had slept with Mike, at least she had done so for the right

reasons ... broke my heart in the process, but for the right reasons nevertheless.

'It was the first time I had ever slept with anyone. I even lost that too.' I didn't say what else I lost, even though it seemed quite obvious. 'The next thing I know you were standing there. I felt so ashamed, Emma, so dirty. I wanted to hurt you as much as you had hurt me, as much as I'd hurt myself. When you left I told Justine to go. I used her to get back at you. I can't help but feel sorry for her. I was to her what you were to me - a pipedream. Both of us didn't seem worthy.'

I stopped. Picked up my drink and leaned back into the sofa, eyes staring straight ahead.

'It was never a pipedream, Laura. I wanted it then as much as you did.' Then ... she said then. 'I just ... well I couldn't just cheat on Mike. I had to sort things out first. I didn't know he had locked the door until I was leaving. He tried to make me stay, said all I needed was 'a good seeing to'. He got quite aggressive at one stage and I had to force him ... force him away. I was still a virgin, Laura. I didn't lose my virginity until I got married to David.'

My eyes shot round and stared at her. A virgin! Emma ... but she ... I couldn't finish that sentence. Her eyes began to tear again. 'Straight away I came looking for you to tell you what had happened. I couldn't believe it when I saw ... when you and ... why can't I even say her name?' She wailed. 'Why has she still got a hold on our lives?' I moved over to her end of the settee and put my hand on her leg, rubbing up and down reassuringly. I could feel her trembling underneath my fingertips. A deep breath.

'I hate her so much, Laura. It had to be her didn't it? All the way through school she used to taunt me about you and her. How you two had a past ... and I was no part of it and never would be.' Tears silently slipped down her cheeks. I wanted to catch them, brush them away. But I still had a niggling doubt.

'Sunday. At Lyme Park you said you wanted to beg for my forgiveness. Why?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Yes it does, Emma. We need to get this all cleared up. We've lived with this hanging over our heads for too long.'

The air seemed thick with silence. It seemed to drag around, suffocating everything under a thick cloud of deceit, shame and misunderstanding. It wasn't until her voice splintered through, breaking the tense molecules into smithereens, that the cloud of the past was burst.

'Okay.' She cleared her throat, trying to eradicate the emotion building from within. 'Cards on the table.' She leaned forward and filled her glass with wine, delaying the moment, biding her time. She gulped half of the contents and wiped the excess on her lips away with her thumb. 'You really want to know why I asked for your forgiveness?' I nodded, transfixed. 'I wanted you to forgive me for not fighting for what I wanted. For running away and not dragging that bitch off you. I wanted you to forgive me for being a coward, taking the easy way out. I wanted you to forgive me for leaving you. I knew that you would regret it and hurt really badly. But I just

couldn't stay.' I dipped my head in understanding, tears trailing down my cheeks too.

'It didn't stop me though.' I looked at her questioningly. 'Two days later, I waited for Justine Russell to come back from the pub and I confronted her.' A blonde eyebrow shot into the air. 'I threatened her - told her to stay away from you or she'd be sorry.' Both my eyebrows were hiding in my hairline now. A sardonic grin crept on her face. 'You know what she did?' I shook my head. 'Laughed. Said that you'd been the best fuck of her life and you loved it. I don't know what got into me, Laura. But I pasted the shit out of her. I couldn't stop hitting her and screaming at her to stay the fuck away from you.' My face must have said it all.

'That's not the best of it.' She swallowed nervously, her eyes misting over. 'She pressed charges. That's why I had to move away to my father's - I was bound over to keep the peace.' Her hands were agitatedly plucking at an unseen thread on her top. Blue eyes hesitantly glanced up into my own expecting some form of rebuke. I sat silent, waiting for her to continue.

Another swallow. 'If I was seen anywhere near her I would have been up in court. That would have been the end of my career.' She looked down, back to her lap again. 'That's why I didn't come back. I couldn't.

'So - you didn't sleep with Mike, and you beat the shit out of Justine Russell?' She nodded.

I felt like such a shit. I hadn't trusted her enough then to not let me down. I hadn't trusted myself enough to think I deserved her.

What more could be said? She looked so miserable sat there. She had exposed her inner most thoughts, relived memories that should have stayed buried. And for what? For someone who wasn't fit enough to clean her shoes.

She looked directly in my eyes, eyes so blue, so vulnerable.

Then a whispered 'Can I have a hug?' So childlike, so innocent. Who was I to resist?

We had drunk wine with our meal, and quite a few glasses whilst we had been talking, so I coaxed her into having a Scotch to round off the night.

'I've got plenty of room. Stay over. You can stay in the guestroom, or the sofa, wherever.'

My bed. Please choose my bed. I won't hurt you. I just need to feel you next to me again. Smell you. Watch you when you sleep. Push stray locks away from your face. Know you are there ...with me. No strings.

'Thanks. That'd be great.' She took the offered glass, raised it in the air. 'To friendship - and all who sail in her.' We both laughed, totally at peace on the outside, but my insides were in turmoil.

It was past midnight when we decided to call it a night. I offered her some large sweats and a t-shirt to sleep in. 'I usually sleep in the buff, but I'd better make an exception. Don't want to frighten you in the middle of the night when I nip to the loo now do I?' Please. But I think I'd frighten you with my reaction.

A big hug, I breathed her in. 'Night, Laura. See you in the morning.' I left her outside the guest room and went to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Shit. I hadn't told her about the spare toothbrush.

I made my way down the hall, feet not making a sound. Her door was ajar and I could see her stripping off. I felt like a voyeur, but I couldn't take my eyes away. Her skin was smooth; legs strong and firm; thighs toned. She bent over to put her folded clothes on the chair and I saw her butt. Two rounded spheres of muscle, how I wanted to trail my fingers over them.

She turned to face the door and I was captivated by her breasts. Full, curved into a swell revealing dark nipples that were half erect. I held my breath as my eyes went lower. Dark, coarse hairs guarded her beauty, neatly trimmed, begging to be ruffled. I was riveted. My heart was drumming inside my chest entreating me to release it. I licked my lips in invitation.

'Laura?' A question softly spoken. I looked up into dark blue eyes that were fixed on my face, the expression unreadable. 'Are you okay?' Why did she just stand there naked? Why didn't she cover herself up, put on the t-shirt, cover the object of my desire? Why did she have to be so beautiful? So unobtainable?

'Toothbrush,' I squeaked out. I cleared my throat and tore my eyes away. 'Toothbrush. For you. To use. Night.' And off I went at the speed of light, embarrassed at my near Tarzan impression and my inability to stop staring. I thought I heard a giggle as I shut my bedroom door. Shit - I wanted to kick myself - especially up the backside.

But that was impossible, see. My legs are too short.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of the radio floating up the stairs accompanied by the delicious scent of bacon. My stomach ordered me to get out of bed and investigate.

I stumbled downstairs rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I hadn't slept much the night before. There were too many emotions running around in my head, and my body for that matter.

I had lain awake for hours thinking of everything that had been said, of everything that had been admitted.

Guilt kept me awake.

Guilt at the thought of Emma beating the shit out of Justine Russell, being charged with GBH.

Guilt at Emma having to move away from all her friends because of my weakness - it made my heart ache.

Guilt, because of the knowledge that Emma hadn't slept with Mike ... had still been a virgin, and I slept with Justine.

If I hadn't been so quick to think the worst our first time could have been together.

In a way that hurt more.

Emma was in the kitchen still dressed in the sweats, cooking breakfast and singing along with the radio. It was like a living memory - ten years hidden. Emma, in our flat, cooking breakfast.

I stood in the doorway and watched her, the wiggle of her hips, the nodding of her head as she stirred scrambled eggs around the pan. She held the spoon up to her mouth and belted out:

*yeh you're all I need
yeh you are all that I need
I'm so in love with you
I'm so in love with you
I'm so in love now yeh
I'm so in love with you again
I'm so in love
with you
oh yeh
you gotta tell me
you know you gotta tell me
whether it is right or it's wrong
I gotta know
I gotta know
you gotta tell me*

Yes. I'm so in love with you too, Emma Jenkins. And no, I can't tell you.

'Really? Nice eggs,' I nodded at the pan and flashed her a big smile.

'Oh, you're finally out of the pit then lazy bones. I've never known anyone who could sleep like you.' Was that an embarrassed smile? Hope so. 'Nice hair.' I tried to flatten it but it wasn't haven't any of it - I think it was aroused.

Breakfast was relaxed. It seemed as if last night had been a cleansing of souls, something we had needed to do for so long, but were too scared of the outcome.

We shared the *Observer*: her having all the boring financial bits while I looked at the newly released books and the comic strips. Good combination. It was, in a word ... bliss. I had never felt such contentment. Well I had, but not for ten years.

'So what are your plans for today? I'm away again tomorrow and thought you might want to do something before I go?' Did I say bliss? Should I change that to euphoria? Nah - bliss would do. I nodded, a piece of toast seeming awfully dry in my mouth at that moment. 'I'll have to go and get changed - we could go on the way if you wouldn't mind stopping at mine?' I shook my head. I'd follow you anywhere, anytime.

I was in big trouble. I was captured by her once again. This couldn't be good but I couldn't help myself. I was caught, hook, line and sinker.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Her house was classic modern and it summed her up perfectly. Although it had the ambience of the present, it exuded a feeling of timelessness, something familiar in the air.

She hastily went upstairs to shower and change and told me to have a poke about. So I did.

Books lined the shelves from modern mathematics (yawn) to computer manuals. I wasn't even tempted enough to take one down and have a peek. Then I saw it. Tattered, dirty and stuffed in the top corner of the bookcase. It was her poetry anthology from school. I slipped it from its haven and looked it over. Youthful handwriting adorned the cover in both Emma's hand and mine. Things like 'Justine Russell is a twat' (my handwriting) - 'A big twat at that' (Emma's). Pop groups' names were scrawled on there exposing our bad tastes. I laughed and began flicking through it.

It fell open on its own to reveal a crumpled piece of paper. The hearts and flowers caught my eye:

*Laura Stewart
Loves
Emma Jenkins*

With a shaking hand I moved it aside to reveal Jonson's *To Celia*. I almost expected it. The annotations were smudged, the writing nearly invisible, and there seemed to be something spilled in here - drops of something.

She had underlined:

*I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honoring thee
As giving it a hope that there
It could not wither'd be;
But thou thereon didst only*

breathe
And sent'st it back to me

Why had she underlined that part? I shook my head and carefully put it back. I'll think about it later. I couldn't deal with the memories ... too painful.

I entered the front room. It was bright, decorated in cream walls with two large brown leather sofas in the centre. The floors were stripped pine and varnished. A large white rug sat pride of place in front of the open fire. It was exquisite. Very tasteful - like her.

My eyes drifted to the mantelpiece at a framed photograph. No. It couldn't ... I stepped close. It was. A framed photograph of Emma and I at college, arms wrapped around each other and laughing at the camera. My hand was shaking as I picked it up. We looked so happy, so contented. It seemed as if the world had stopped spinning at that moment. I remembered it well. It was taken after we had received our A levels results. But that means ... that means she would have developed this after the Justine Russell incident. I didn't understand. Why would she want to be reminded of that?

'Those were the days, eh?' Her voice startled me and I thrust the photograph back onto the shelf, mumbling an apology. She came and stood next to me, I could smell her freshly washed body but I could still smell her. Her hair was towel dried and strands of it still clung to her face. She gently lifted the photograph, her eyes sparkling. 'Who would have thought that in the matter of hours everything we knew would be turned upside down. Life eh?'

What could I say? There was nothing that could excuse what had happened, especially now that I knew she was an innocent in the events. I had followed my own vulnerability, believing that no one could possibly love me, especially Emma. She was too good for me. Still was.

'Has Jack seen this?' A small smile began to creep on her face. A slight nod. 'So he knew who I was?' Another nod. 'So you knew it was me before you came to school?' Bigger smile - looking almost sheepish. 'You little bugger.' An all out laugh. 'You two set me up!' I feigned shock. 'Why you ...' and I tickled her - right in the ribs, the place where I knew I could get her. She wriggled like crazy, spluttering, laughing, and trying to catch my hands. We staggered backwards until I felt her legs meet the sofa. Shove. Down she went, me on top of her.

'Give up!' I tickled more frantically. She was laughing unreservedly now. 'Come on say it! Say "Laura Stewart is the Champ". Go on say it!' Demon fingers dug into her.

'Okay! Okay! Laura Stewart is the Chump!'

'Why you little ...' My fingers dug in again.

'Okay! I give in - Laura Stewart is the Champ!' My hands stilled but stayed on her sides. We were both panting hard. Blue eyes met green and locked. The air was thick with expectation. Our breathing was beginning to calm from the exertions, but still had a hitch. Her face took on an unreadable expression. She was so beautiful, and it felt so natural to have her underneath me.

'Bout time. And don't forget it.' I grinned, and she returned it with one of her own crooked ones.

'Are you going to let me get up, or are we staying like this for the rest of the day?'

Now there's a thought.

Style Woods was any naturist's dream . No naturist - not naturalist - perv. We stopped at the Ship Inn for Sunday lunch and a shandy before we headed into the woods. God, the food was good. Yorkshire puddings the size of tennis balls, and so light and fluffy ... there I go again - thinking about food. At least it gave me a respite from thinking about her, the announcement tucked away; the underlined passage.

The woods themselves were coming to life, just like I was. Musty smells seeped up from the undergrowth after the initial rain of spring, and birds warbled their songs from up above us. The river was calm, almost reaching the stillness of a lake in its own tranquillity. Ducks charged over in the hope we had some offering to them, like they were pagan gods.

We stood, silent, the need for words redundant. How can anything top this perfection?

Easy.

Emma took my hand into hers. Honestly, I wasn't expecting it. Her fingers curled around mine in possession, holding me fast. I swallowed my heart back down.

'Come on. Let's go.'

With that she led me back along the path back to the car, still holding my hand ... my heart.

She dropped me off and escorted me to my door.

'So ... I'll see you soon okay?' Her face was so beautiful, the dying sun casting shadows over her features.

'When?'

'Not sure. I'll try and make it back for the production, okay?'

With that, she put her arms about me, slowly, and drew me to her. I melted at the contact. 'You take care okay?' Please take care, for me.

I could smell her spicy scent ... no, not perfume ... her scent, her smell. Her hand came up to my hair and stroked back the stray locks. I looked up into her eyes and drowned. She looked so

serious, like this was the most important minute of her life. A kiss, soft and gentle on my forehead, featherlike. A sigh escaped me. Another one on my cheek. I gripped her waist in possession. On the lips. So light, so tender, a gentle brushing of lips, but with that kiss I was truly lost.

A connection in my breast so strong it took my breath away. It felt like my soul had reached out of my body and pulled hers in. I felt whole again.

Then she was gone and I was left wondering, again, if I had dreamt it all.

Chapter Thirty

I felt empty without her. I couldn't concentrate, couldn't sleep, even my appetite had died off. Honestly.

I hadn't heard from her for two weeks. Not a postcard, phone call, text message - nothing.

It was the production's opening night and everyone was in a state of panic. Rehearsals had been a nightmare. The kids had buggared up nearly every line in the whole thing. Oscar Wilde would be spinning in his grave at this rate.

I was the only one who seemed unruffled. Probably because I had other things on my mind - more important things.

I sorted out make-up, lights, props, you name it I was there. What else did I have? I had to keep busy some way or another. Jack looked fantastic in his costume: smoking jacket and cravat, just a touch of makeup for the people at the back. I never asked him about Emma, it wasn't fair to put him in the middle, and I didn't want to know if she was with someone else.

She didn't turn up. Nor the next night. Jack didn't seem bothered about her absence.

It was on the final night that I saw her again.

I was bollocking some Year 9s who had been pissing about with the props the night before. I was in mid rant - real teacher angry - you know - give the impression that you are boiling mad, but in reality it is all an act. It was also a good way of relieving the tension that was building up inside me.

'It's not you that I'm disappointed with, just your behaviour.' Yeah right. 'Now go away and think about what I have said.' Off they scampered, probably going for a ciggie before the play started, the wise words I had bestowed on them completely forgotten - or probably not even heard in the first place.

'Hello stranger.' That voice. My heart cheered.

'Oh hi.' I tried to sound aloof. Remember - not a word - for two weeks!

'Come here you.' She grabbed me and encased me in a full body hug. I began to melt then thought better of it and drew back. She smiled at me, a full crooked one - the ones I love best, and grabbed me again, crushing me to her breast. That did it. The feel of those weapons bobbing underneath her shirt was my downfall.

A gentle kiss on my hair. 'I really missed you.' A soft kiss on my ear. 'Sorry I couldn't get in contact, you know how things can get.' No. Actually, no, I don't.

'Hi Emma.' Jack. 'Glad you could make it tonight. Just got in?'

'Yeah about thirty minutes ago. I haven't even been home yet - had to get here and see my best people.' She turned and smiled at me. I blushed. 'Is Dad here?' Jack nodded and pointed into the audience to a handsome man in the third row, sitting with a pretty blonde woman. 'Better get this over with. Are you free later Laura?'

'Well, I have to clear up a bit ... keep the caretakers happy ... and then I'm all yours.' Her face lit up.

'Until later.'

'Later it is.'

After we had cleared up (Emma getting stuck in, making the kids laugh with her antics), we went to a local wine bar not far from school. I had been there before, as it was gay friendly, and the atmosphere was light yet sultry.

A piano took centre stage, and a middle aged crooner was singing songs from all times, taking requests for a nice tip.

It was soothing.

Emma ordered a bottle of wine and settled in her chair. Blue eyes flicked over the candle that was stuck right in my line of vision. I didn't want anything to spoil my view of her, so I shoved it, unceremoniously, to the side. She laughed.

'I'm sorry I didn't get in contact with you, Laura, I ... I had a few things I had to sort out in my head, you know ... I ... well. I'm sorry anyway.'

'Did you practice that? Cos you should have.' I grinned. I didn't care that she hadn't called, etc. She was here now and that's what mattered. That smile again - wow.

We chatted for about half an hour until she excused herself, begging needing the bathroom. I sat there twiddling the drinks mat, then reading the bottle of wine. Mmm ... good year... as if I had a clue.

'Excuse me, madam.' I looked up, startled from my wandering thoughts, and met brown eyes. 'This is for you.' The waiter stood next to me holding out a single red rose. I looked at him dumbfounded. 'And there is a message I have to tell you.' He cleared his throat '*I sent thee late a rosy wreath, / Not so much honoring thee /As giving it a hope that there / It could not wither'd be.*'

My eyes filled with tears. 'And this one's for Laura.' I looked up and saw Emma on the stage, microphone in hand. The music began, the pianist was accompanied by a faceless man with a guitar, and I was once again transfixed. Her voice was deep, soulful, full of emotion:

*When you find the one
There's no questioning the silence
All is said and done
When you find the one
And when you make the choice
To believe in your existence
With hello you will know
When you find the one*

A sob tore from my throat. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Emma, on a stage, in front of a room full of people, singing to me ... to *me*.

She stepped off the stage, her eyes fixed on mine, repeating the last stanza, but walking towards me, her hand outstretched, inviting me to join her. And I did. I don't remember consciously getting up and walking towards her, but I was suddenly in front of her and she was singing.

*I believed it could be true
I believe I always knew*

She stopped singing and lowered the microphone. Her eyes looked deeply into mine, aflame with emotion. She whispered, 'And I knew it was always you.'

And then I kissed her, fully on the mouth; my lips open, inviting her tongue inside to connect with its soul mate. She didn't hesitate and devoured all that I offered, all that I promised. She dropped the microphone on the floor and crushed me to her, our kiss becoming frantic, my hands roaming all over her back, up and down her arms, wanting to possess her, wanting her to possess me.

A loud cheer erupted in the room, and applause. We reluctantly drew apart and gazed into each other's eyes. How could I have missed the love that I saw there? A slow, sexy smile graced her lips. 'I love you, Laura Stewart, always have, always will.'

I kissed her again, hard, and then pulled away. 'Laura Stewart loves Emma Jenkins. I have done since the first moment I saw her thirteen years ago.' She kissed me so softly I thought my heart was going to combust.

'Let's blow this joint.' She grabbed my hand and led me to the table to get our things. The whole bar cheered as we made our way to the door. But not as loudly as my soul did. Emma Jenkins loved me ... loved me ... do you understand that ... Emma Jenkins loved me.

And God, did I love her.

We were back at my place before we knew it. Inside the door, coats thrown on the floor, arms and legs wrapping around each other, tongues dancing in each other's mouths. Next thing we're on the sofa, her hands inside my top grasping at my breast, muttering words of love and longing. She was grinding herself into me and I was pushing back with the same enthusiasm, panting out staccato phrases that rang with my need. 'God Emma... oh God ... Emma ... yes ... that's it ... just there.' This spurred her on. She shoved my top up and plunged her head between my breasts. 'Fuck yes!' Her hot mouth closed over my nipple whilst her hand began to clutch at the other one like it was a life raft.

One of my hands slipped down the back of her jeans, pushing her into me. The other one around the front trying to get her buttons open. 'Laura ... god Laura ... I want you so badly ... so much ... god I love you ... love you.' She was thrusting harder into me. I nipped and sucked her neck. 'Fuck me ... yeeesssss,' she hissed.

My hand reached inside her jeans and slipped effortlessly into her pants, the downy hairs tickling my hand. She gasped and thrust herself forward trying to capture my fingers. I could feel the heat coming from her arousal. I held my breath waiting for the ultimate contact, waiting to touch the slick folds.

She sprang off me like she had been burned. 'We can't do this. Not now!' What the fuck? 'No. It has to be right - has to be special. Not some quickie on the sofa. You mean more to me than that, Laura.' She sat back on her haunches, balancing precariously on her heels. Her face was twisted in a mixture of desire and dismay. I stroked her face trying to ease her dilemma. I could tell that she was worried about my reaction. A small laugh escaped my lips to be greeted by a startled look.

'Sshhh honey,' I soothed, as I brushed my fingers through her hair. 'I wouldn't have it any other way.' I gently stroked the side of her face. 'I've waited too long for you to mess this up now.' My fingers settled underneath her chin and I gently eased her face to mine to place a tender kiss on those swollen lips. 'When we are ready, when the time is right, and only then.'

She leaned forward to fall into my arms. I wrapped myself around her, protecting her from the world like a warm piece of bubble wrap. Her head nestled underneath my chin and I stroked circular patterns on her back and listened to her heart beat get back to normal.

When I told her I would wait, I meant it. I know you think all I want is sex, but I didn't want sex with Emma. Oh no. I wanted to make love with her - and that's a big difference.

Chapter Thirty-One

We didn't go any further that night. We sat on the sofa, arms around each other and talked for hours. Obviously there was more kissing. Long, sensual kisses that blew me away and made me both happy and sad at the same time. Happy because we had finally overcome our fear of each other: sad because we had wasted thirteen years.

'I know what you are thinking, Laura.' I turned to look into her eyes, a smile creeping onto my lips. 'You're thinking that we have wasted thirteen years, aren't you?' I must have looked startled because she laughed. 'I know what you mean. But we have to live for the now. I doubt that we would have survived if we had got together at eighteen.' Weakly, I nodded. Deep down I knew she was right.

'When Jack first spotted the picture of you and told me you were his Ms Stewart, I was nearly beside myself. I wanted to rush to the school, sweep you up like in that movie, and carry you away. I couldn't think straight: work was a nightmare. All I wanted to do was see you again and tell you how I felt.'

'But I thought you said you had watched me over the years?'

'I did, when you lived at Sarah's, but when you moved out it was like you dropped off the face of the earth.'

'Well. In a way I did. I moved into Uni lodgings for my last two years. And you know that is unlike anything the normal world has ever see.' We laughed and snuggled up to each other again. I could hear her heart beating strongly inside her chest. I could smell her essence. My fingers traced the contours of her collarbone etching to memory every nuance.

'So why didn't you come and sweep me off my feet? Make an honest woman out of me?' I kissed her collarbone, the temptation too much.

A soft sigh. 'Because I didn't know if it would be the same. It had been ten years since I had spoken to you let alone anything else. What if we were completely different people? I had this image of you in my head. What if you had changed? Or told me to sling my hook? At least at this rate I still had the dream of you. For all I knew you may be straight.' I glared up at her. 'You never know.'

'How long did you wait before making the appointment?'

'Five months.'

'Five months? Five friggin months?' I couldn't believe it, as you can tell by my reaction. Emma had known where I was for five months and didn't come to see me. I sat up brusquely, wrenching my self out of her arms. 'Why on earth did you wait so long? Why didn't you come and speak to me?'

'I couldn't. I didn't know what to say. Poor Jack ... I pumped him for information about you, you know, what you liked, where you lived, were you seeing anyone?' She slipped her hand up my back rubbing up and down in soothing strokes. A stray hand made its way to my hair. 'Look honey, I was scared ... I didn't know what you would say. The last time we had spoken ... well ... just say it was a little tense.' I exhaled the breath I had been holding. 'I wanted to speak to you so badly. You looked the same and ...'

'Wait a minute.' I turned to face her. Her face was crimson. 'I looked the same ... but ... that means ...' I noticed her face becoming more incandescent and could feel the heat simmering off her. 'You watched me.' I said a matter-of-factly.

Her eyes looked everywhere but into mine. 'Emma ... Look at me. Emma ...' a shy smile played at the corners of her mouth.

'I'm so sorry. I just ... I just ... well you were there and ... well ... it didn't hurt just to look ...' her voice drifted off.

'How many times?' No answer, just a lot of wriggling. 'Emma ... how ... many ... times?' I enunciated each word.

'Can't remember.' Almost childlike. I glared at her. 'Okay, okay.' She held her hands up in supplication. 'I don't know how many exactly. A couple of times a week - maybe more.' I sat open mouthed. 'Sometimes every day ...'

She had watched me everyday for five months and I didn't even know. How could I walk around oblivious to everything about me? It's a wonder I didn't get run over.

'Why did you decide to come and see me - what changed your mind?'

'I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to speak with you. God ... I was so nervous. And then when you passed out - twice...!' My turn to look embarrassed. 'I thought I'd done the wrong thing and should have kept away.'

'But look at us now.' We were back in position; me sprawled all over her, my arms around her waist, my head on her breast. 'You would have missed this.'

'Oh, but I have missed this.' She leaned down and kissed me on the mouth. 'So much.'

Ditto.

The guestroom stood empty that night, although Emma said it would be wiser to sleep separately for the moment, as she didn't know if she could keep her hands off me. I wouldn't hear of it and told her, in no uncertain terms, that didn't she think I had waited long enough for her to be next to me - snuggling.

I slept like a log. I don't think I even had a dream. Not surprising really as I had all I had ever dreamed of snuggled up next to me. I was in heaven. I was in bed burrowed into Emma Jenkins and she loved me. Loved me! I wanted to shout it out to the world but thought I'd better not as it would scare the shit out of her. My life was taking on a whole new meaning. It seemed like I had been given back everything that I had lost and then given a little bit more for good measure. Fuck. I felt good. She felt good. I even thought my dickhead Year 10s were perfection personified. Nothing could dampen my mood.

I promised myself that I would be a better person from now on. No more swearing, no more getting pissed senseless, no more ripping heads of kids who had not done their homework. I was going to be a role model for all future generations. People would think of me and nod their heads approvingly and say 'Laura Stewart was all that was good and perfect.' God, I felt smug ... I felt supreme. So this is what it's like to be totally and utterly in love.

Thinking back to how I felt when I was a teenager I now realise that my feelings for Emma were not a patch on what I was feeling now. I thought back to what she had said earlier. Would we have made it? That's a question that could never be answered.

The biggie was 'Can we?'

Morning crept her way into my bedroom throwing herself over the bed like an old friend. She trailed her fingers down Emma's face, caressing every gradation of her chiselled features. For a moment I felt jealous, wanting to be the only one to touch her.

Lost in my musings, I was unaware that blue eyes were taking me in, waiting for my eyes to reach hers.

'Morning.' You've got to love her voice. It rippled in places that I didn't know existed and acted like a match to my dormant libido.

'Hiya sexy.' I leaned in for a gentle kiss that all too soon became hot and demanding. I didn't care that I had kitten breath. I just wanted to suck her right inside me. Eager hands began to trace hems of tops; knees began to part luscious thighs; a rhythm began in hips that had been waiting all their life to be in this situation.

I could feel the dampness seeping through my pyjama bottoms as I increased the tempo, my breathing becoming ragged, expectant. Her hands drifted to my hair, gripping and tugging, pushing and pulling.

Then she began to slow it down, lazily stroking down my spine, her hips receding, her kisses becoming more chaste. I needed more but I knew that we needed time to rediscover each other. I didn't want to just jump into bed with her and have wild, unadulterated, fantastic, ravenous ... god ... shit ... calm down ... Let's start that sentence again. I didn't want things to get out of hand before we had time to adjust to our relationship.

Our relationship ... oh how I've wanted to use those two words about me and Emma for so long ... too long. I wasn't going to let my overzealous libido ruin this. We had to do it right.

She was looking at me again with the same apprehension I'd seen there the night before. I had to make her know that I was okay about it.

'Hey.' Kiss. 'We've got all the time in the world for that, Emma. It has to be right ...' Another kiss. 'I want it to be as special as you do.' Her face relaxed and she pulled me to her engulfing me in her strong arms so I was nestled into her breast.

I was in heaven.

Two hours later saw us showered, dressed and eating breakfast. We hadn't showered together, although that would have been a good idea - save water and all that.

We had a fantastic weekend. Lazy, in a loved up kind of way. I felt euphoric and I think she was pretty chuffed too. It was funny to watch her expression change from stoic to puppy dog as quick as a flash. All it would take was a touch on the hand, a kiss on the cheek, a soft word murmured into her ear and she was a ball of mush. And I loved it.

Monday saw me skipping down the corridors at work, students staring at me wondering if I had finally lost my marbles. I had lost something ... but definitely not my marbles. I was the picture of restraint and grace. Excuses about missing homework was responded with 'Ah well ... life's too short to worry about that. Soon as you can ... ok?' I think this unnerved them more than if I had ripped off their heads and spat down their necks like I would usually have done.

Jack watched me intently all through his lesson period five. I could tell that he wanted to ask me something but didn't know how to broach it.

After the lesson was over, and the kids had all piled out muttering about 'bloody love poems' I could sense that Jack was behind me.

'Miss?' That question in the voice again.

'Yes?' Bored shitless response.

'Can I ask you a question?'

'You just have.' I stared at him. He didn't know what to do. I let a smile slide onto my face. I got an all out grin in response. God. How did I not see it? He was the absolute spitting image of his sister - especially when he smiled.

Although I had tried to break the ice I could tell that he was nervous. 'I ... just ... er ... *wonderedhowyouwere*,' the last bit coming out a rush. He looked everywhere but at me. I waited patiently. Let him finish.

'I ... er ... just wanted to say ...' another pause 'that I am really glad that you and Emma are friends again.' Did he know? 'It's been the happiest I think I've ever seen her. I know that something happened between you years ago ... but ... erm ... I'm pleased that you have sorted it out.' I smiled at him.

'Sorry that I didn't tell you ... that I deceived you for so long ... but she asked and ... well you know ...' He was shuffling his feet by this stage and gripping and ungripping the handle to his bag. 'I was so worried about her Miss.' I looked at him intently, green eyes begging him to continue. 'She was wasting her life. First she married that dickhead - excuse me. Then she would just sleep with women left, right and centre.'

'Excuse me? What was that?' My voice sounded a little shrill. Jack looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him up. 'She slept with whom?'

'But I thought ...'

'She slept with women?' Poor lad. His face was the colour of plaster cast and I could see a line of sweat forming on his top lip.

'Well ... yeah.' Deep gulp. I stared at him intently. 'Emma's ... you know ... well...she's ...' he drifted off.

'Gay?' I said it for him - as I think it would have choked him to say that in front of me. He nodded, eyes fixed on mine waiting for a reaction. I laughed. He stared harder. I laughed again.

'Miss?'

'Yes ... yes ... course she is. Don't worry about it Jack. It just came as a surprise that's all.' Bloody hell. Even though I had kissed, slept in the same bed as, kissed again, fumbled and nearly had sizzling sex with Emma I hadn't even considered the fact that she might be gay. Stupid, I know, but I had arrogantly assumed I was her first. 'You were saying?'

He studied me, almost expecting me to laugh again. Shaking his head to clear it, he continued. 'Well, as I said, I was worried about her, she seemed so unhappy like she couldn't be bothered with anything. And then I spotted that picture of you and her on the mantelpiece. When I said you were my teacher I couldn't believe her response. She seemed almost possessed, grabbed my shoulders and said was I sure, not just the once, but three times. Then she wanted to meet you,

and then she didn't. She kept on saying she was going to see you and then she chickened out at the last minute.'

Reminds me of someone else I know.

'Then when I made the appointment, she was so happy. Then she kept on changing her mind every time I spoke to her - one minute she was coming - the next - she couldn't face it. But I'm glad that she did. She's a different person, Miss. I just wanted to tell you that and thank you.'

I know I shouldn't have done it, rules and all that, but I grabbed that wonderful young man and nearly squeezed the life out of him.

'No Jack. Thank you.' And thanks to your wonderful sister too.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Tuesday and Wednesday swept past in a wonderful haze. I was so at peace. I had seen Emma both evenings and we were getting closer and closer - I didn't think it was possible, but we were.

I asked Emma about her past relationships - yes I know - leave it where it belongs - in the past. But ... what can I say? I'm a woman. And being a woman meant I had to know the details.

She didn't bat an eyelid when I told her what Jack had said. Actually, she chuckled rather endearingly, and told me that she had always had her suspicions about her sexuality - especially when she got to know me at school. The only reason she had married David in the first place was a stab at what society deemed to be standard, wanting to fit into the tight mould of what qualified as normalcy.

Obviously, it was a big mistake.

I was intrigued about the school bit but she was having none of it and decided to play 'Tug Wrestle', a game that she thought she'd invented that included a lot of wrestling, especially on the sofa and the floor, and tugging at clothes. Every time I broached the subject she would avoid it. I'll get you in the end Emma Jenkins.

When Emma turned up on Thursday evening she seemed almost shy as I opened the door. She looked beautiful. Her hair was still slightly damp and I could smell *Cool Waters* drifting off her in sensual waves. I waited for her to come in but she kept hovering on the doorstep.

'What's the matter with you? Are you coming in or what?' She kept standing there looking bashful (and beautiful), one hand hidden behind her back. 'Come on. Dinner is almost ready.' Still standing there. 'What've you got behind your back?'

'It's about time,' she pouted. 'I thought you teachers didn't miss a trick.' From behind her back came a dozen vibrant red roses on long stalks and a mass of greenery. 'A rose for my rose.' That smile, crooked, enticing. I pushed the offering aside while I pulled her in for a deep kiss. I felt the connection of two souls click ... and then I pulled away to examine my gift.

'They're beautiful ... just like you.' I kissed her again, then plucked a vivid bloom from the centre. I caught her gaze and riveted her to the spot. I held out the bloom to her and softly quoted *'My lurve is like a red red rose that sweetly sprung in June. My lurve is like a melody ...'* I didn't get to finish. She scooped me into her arms and laid one on me. I didn't care about the neighbours ... let them get their own warrior woman.

Warrior woman? Where did that come from?

Well. She was like a knight in shining armour, so chivalrous and strong and good and sexy and hot and ... and I better stop that train of thought.

Dinner was perfect. She was perfect. The evening was perfect. All in all everything was ... yes you guessed it ...flawless.

'How would you like to go somewhere special for the weekend? My treat?' Blue eyes waited patiently for me to answer. I was still deliberating over the word special ... did she mean special as in go somewhere and do different things for a treat or special as in 'It has to be right - has to be special' special. My heart begged for the latter but I was content for the first option.

'T'd love to.' Her face lit up.

'Leave the arrangements to me. I'll pick you up at six thirty tomorrow. Can you stay until Monday? I know it's a Bank holiday, but you might have made arrangements.' Eager eyes pleaded with mine.

'I'm all yours.' And I was too.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Funny how time drags when you are waiting for something. If I was going into one of those situations where I was bricking myself - like the dentists or waiting for my phone bill to arrive, then time would race ahead sticking two fingers up shouting 'Kiss my arse' and then stop as I was just entering the testing time. Stop, and then ... hold ... leaving me dangling there until the will to live had been sapped out of me.

But if you were looking forward to something time became Super Bitch and changed all of the rules. Each second seemed like someone scraping their nails down a blackboard, each minute was a bloke fart in a lift stuck between floors. And every hour ... god ... every hour was like

listening to Michael Jackson singing. Do you get the drift?

The students were a bloody nightmare. Kids have a knack of recognising a weakness and pressing against it with all their might. Do you remember when I said that future generations would think of me and think I epitomised 'all that was good and perfect'? Well, it didn't last. I would now be remembered as the Evil One. The kids didn't stand a chance. I had more experience being a pain in the arse than they had. Believe me ... I was a nightmare.

Their graceful and peaceful Ms Stewart became Ms Obstinate, Ms Angry, and Ms If You Piss Me Off Again You're Going to Regret it. The day was filled with the childish muttering of how unfair it was ... should just grow up ... what's the point ... and that was just me. The kids weren't as forgiving, and I'm certain I heard the words 'tight', 'arsed' and 'cow' floating my way. Bless. You've got to love them.

I was showered, packed and pacing from five fifteen, and eventually six thirty crawled around to stop languidly at my door. I was jittery, expectant and sweating profusely - why, I don't know. I had been for a wee four times in fifteen minutes - that's how wired I was.

When she rang the bell my heart stopped... listened ... took note ... and then ... started again. I was like a bloody teenager.

'Hi Emma.' Completely in control, the smile as cool as a cucumber being written in reference to me. 'Don't tell me it's six thirty already?' I tried to sound incredulous but it came out as simpleton. She didn't notice, and the reason she didn't notice is because she was as nervous as I was.

I could see her swallowing rapidly, like her throat was attached to her eyes, which were blinking rapidly. 'You set.' Woman of few words, that's my girl. By her body language, her actions and the lack of dialogue I was beginning to believe that maybe it was 'the special' that I wanted. But I wasn't going to set my heart on it.

I had done that before and I wasn't ready to feel that way again. As long as we were together - that suited me down to the ground. We had all the time in the world and I wasn't going to risk that for anything.

After we packed the car, and we had both visited the toilet again, it was nearly seven before we set off. Emma put some classical music on the CD player and turned to look into my eyes. 'If I was you I'd get some sleep. We should be on the road for about three and a half hours.'

'Are you going to tell me where?' I wasn't too concerned of the location; my brain was still trying to digest why she wanted me to get some rest.

'It's a surprise.' She turned away - discussion over.

I pushed my seat back and lowered it. Well, I should do what the lady wants - don't want to be tired.

We stopped after a couple of hours to grab something to eat. It was a lovely little pub in the middle of nowhere. A roaring fire greeted us, and though it was May it was still nippy in the evenings. Flames from the blaze lured us to set up home - so we did while we ate homemade country vegetable soup and fresh, warm rolls. Emma sat with her back against the wall facing the door. I sat directly opposite her engraving to memory every detail of her and our surroundings. I was totally at peace.

The bitter was refreshing and easily slipped down our throats. 'Another?' I asked her hoping that she said no. She did.

'We'd better make tracks. I'd like to get there as soon as possible.' That crooked smile again. 'We don't want to be sleeping under the stars now do we?'

I wouldn't mind as long, as I'm with you.

The rest of the journey was uneventful. I tried to guess where we were going but by the time the lights of the car lit up the signs they were gone.

Our destination arrived just after eleven and I woke up to the low tones of Emma's voice blending perfectly with Gabriel Faure's *Requiem: In Paradisum*. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. It was the closest to heaven that I think I had ever been. Her eyes glowed in the darkness of the car like chips of sapphires.

'Laura ... Laura ... Are you okay? Honey?' A concerned voice.

'Never been better.' I leaned forward and captured those lips, savouring this moment, deliciously feeding from her. I pulled back and looked her in the eyes. 'I love you ... so ... so much.' An all out grin burst onto her face.

'Good job too, or else I would have to punish you severely.' She mock growled and lunged at my ribs to tickle me mercilessly.

After a spontaneous tickle come snogging session, we exited the car, which was parked in a near black car park. Emma grabbed both of our bags and led the way around to the front of the hotel.

I froze when I saw the sign outside. The Whitby Lodge. We were in Whitby ... but I didn't understand.

'Tada!' She looked pensive like she was waiting for a response, any response other than an

impression of a statue. I just stared at the guesthouse. It was the same one from thirteen years ago, the outside sported a different colour, but all in all the same place.

'But ...' I stopped, tried to scramble inside my head for something to say.

'We don't have to Laura. We can stay somewhere else. I just thought ...' Her face was falling; she looked crushed.

'No ... no ... it's perfect. Just a shock. I didn't think you would remember that's all.'

'How could I forget.' Not a question - a statement. She stared into my eyes, her own becoming misty with the memory. 'This has been engraved into my mind for thirteen years. I just wanted us to see it again.' A long arm stretched out to me with a slender hand open in invitation. 'Come on baby. Let's check out those memories and see if we can add a few.' Her fingers curled around my own and she pulled me towards her, placing the softest of kisses on my forehead.

After checking in, climbing eight flights of stairs - yes, the ones designed for hump-backed dwarfs with extremely small feet - and nerves of steel, we arrived outside our old room.

My heart fell into my shoes when she opened the door to reveal two single beds. She didn't seem phased by this at all. Actually she seemed pretty happy. I felt like a twat - for want of a better word. I know I said whatever will be will be but I was hoping that this would be that special time. Oh well.

She closed the door behind us and then turned on the lamp beside her old bed. Her attention came back to me. I just stood there, rooted, trying to look nonchalant. Emma watched me, her face intent, trying to understand what I was thinking ... and something else ... I don't know ... just something.

'Well ... this is a surprise. Those stairs nearly killed me when I was sixteen - I think you'll have to get the Fire Service out to get me downstairs again.' An attempt a humour but the tightening of my throat gave me away.

Emma turned from me and went to the sink to get herself a glass of water. I stood there. Just stood there.

What was the matter with me? Snap out of it girl. You're here, with Emma Jenkins, and she loves you. Loves you! In my mental meanderings I had failed to see her standing directly in front of me, her leg touching the bed that had been mine. She was waiting for me to focus, water in hand.

'Laura.' So quiet. 'Laura ... I ... I need to tell you something.' I snapped out of my thoughts and noted how close she was to me. 'Do you remember the last time we were here?' Her face was earnest. How could I forget? - The pleasure and pain theory - having the woman of my dreams here with me, but knowing that she would never be mine? I nodded, still unable to speak.

'Well ... I have a confession to make.' Nervous fingers played with her hair. 'Remember how we blamed Justine Russell for absolutely everything?' I nodded not wanting to hear Justine's name at this moment. 'Well ...'

'Well what?' My interest was piqued now.

She lifted the glass of water, and with a quick movement, poured the contents all over what used to be my bed.

'I don't understand.' And I didn't.

'It was me.' I looked at her. 'I poured water over your bed that night, not Justine.' My mouth fell open - I was speechless - a very unusual condition for me, believe me.

'You! You poured the water ...' I trailed off and gawked at her. She nodded. 'But why on earth ...?'

'I wanted you to share my bed. I wanted to see what it would be like to share my bed with someone that I ... loved.'

'Loved?' I was astonished. 'But you didn't even know me.'

'You're wrong there. I first noticed you at the end of Year ten. The image of you is still so strong in my mind. You stopped my heart that day.'

'What happened?' I swallowed nervously.

'Well ...' A gulp. 'I was walking down the corridor on my way to Maths, completely oblivious to school and listening to the near conquests of Maria and her cronies ...' She swallowed hard. Maria was one of the Bitches. 'Then suddenly, like a gift from the Gods, you were there, standing to the side with an ethereal look on your face. I thought you were a vision, something out of my imagination.'

My eyes were filling with tears. She was describing the exact same moment that I had seen her.

'When I saw you I felt something click, like I had known you all my life and longer. I didn't know what to do; I had never felt this way about anyone, never mind another girl. I felt scared and elated all at the same time.'

My heart soared and I rushed into her arms knocking the glass from her hand. We held each other so tight almost like we were balancing on a precipice, each other our salvation. I tilted my head back and looked deeply into her eyes. The room seemed to shrink away leaving only us. I could feel her heartbeat next to my chest beating out an incessant thumping, which matched my own. 'Do you know how long I have waited for you? Do you know how much I want you ... need you ... love you?' I angled my face so it was aligning with her down turned one, watching

her graze her tongue over her lips in invite, begging to be tasted.

Slowly, I raised towards them, the distance between us an agony. Soft lips caressed mine, gentle circles so light it seemed as if it was a dream. More insistent, the surge of latent emotions rising to the surface like from slumber - becoming alive, refreshed and hungry. Lips parted to allow tongues to enter and leisurely stroke the insides of each other's mouths, the sensation becoming delectably unbearable. Hands began to roam of their own volition, needing no guide to help them on their way, the journey etched to memory from eons of travels.

My fingers were unfastening the buttons to her shirt, and I was trying to control the uncontrollable feeling of desire, wanting to tear it from her torso like a mad woman, exposing her body to the night and my starving eyes. She stroked my back in supplication, palms begging entry to hidden secrets lay dormant for her, and her only.

Slipping her shirt from her I bared toned shoulders. Her bra was delicate, barely covering her breasts, and my mouth was watering just for a taste of her. I slipped the straps down one by one; enjoying the unwrapping of this precious gift ... she nuzzled my hair. I could hear and feel her breathing me in, and I relished the moment.

Her hands had worked their way to the front of my blouse and were ardently loosening the garment's hold over my body. She was dextrous and gentle, my own hands redundant in my disrobing. The cool air caressed my exposed skin, shortly followed by her lips. A sigh fought its way loose from my mouth only to be captured by luscious lips and an unforgiving tongue, her kisses becoming urgent, begging for more admission.

My fingers crept around her waist to draw her pelvis to mine, pulling hard, imprisoning her against my body. Searching lips sought out the pulse point on my neck to gently suck and lick until my heart was literally in her mouth. The rhythm of our hips began its ancient dance, swaying seductively against each other begging for the ultimate contact of our bodies, hearts and souls.

The button of my jeans was prised open, releasing the near torture of the suffocation that clothes had placed on me. Hungry hands dipped inside slowly pushing the cloth downwards. I toyed with her button, flicking and stroking the cool metal tormenting my fingers until the temptation of her flesh cried out to me, imploring me to release it to my caress. I relented, knowing that I was lost to her whim, her love, her desire ... my own desire.

We stood in front of each other, naked for the first time. My breath caught in my throat almost choking me with my need for her. Fascinated eyes roamed over her curves and swells that emphasized her beauty, her femininity, her raw carnal appeal. Random thoughts skipped and cavorted around my vacuous mind landing on the phrase that epitomised her, a phrase that I was sure I had used like a canto 'By the Gods you are beautiful'. It sang to me, it promised me life; it swore undying love and devotion, the ultimate salvation for a sinner like me.

The embrace of the naked. Perfection. The reuniting of souls. A blessing granted to me from a life of praying for this moment. We merged together, the softness greeting me like a memory,

like a jigsaw puzzle of two pieces. I moved downwards, tracing my tongue and lips over taut flesh. Her breathing was erratic, soft moans eliciting from her throat in a timeless murmur. My hands caressed her skin, skin like silk yet with the firmness of muscle dancing underneath. I wanted to ravish her, throw her down and show her how much I desired her, needed her, yearned for her touch. I wanted to love her, make love to her, show her how much I loved ...

But I couldn't do that even though my need was all consuming, eating me little by little from the inside out. I craved to hear her voice crying my name in the throes of her ecstasy; hungered for her hands in my hair, pulling me away only to push me back. My left hand reached up to gently cup her breast whilst my mouth made a friend out of her left one, my tongue teasing, rippling itself over the pebbled flesh that guarded her nipple. Tender touches in my hair, fingers pursuing their path around my jaw to sit contentedly on my cheek.

I guided her backwards until I could feel the resistance of the bed against her legs. Then I lowered her down, so carefully, like she could break and melt away taking my soul with her. All I could hear was our breathing; all I could smell was our scent. The touch of her was like an addiction, the craving taking over all rational thought.

She was on her back and I slipped above her appearing like a shadow. I kissed her mouth once again wanting to crawl inside her, become part of her. It seemed like I couldn't get close enough, I couldn't satisfy this longing that was beating from my chest ... my gut.

Full body contact. The sensation like a balm to me, coating me with her love, my love, our love. Her hands trickled down my spine taunting the hairs on my body to stand up and acknowledge this wonder. Strong fingers dug into my behind pushing my need into hers. This felt so right ... so true. How can anyone say that love can be wrong - whomever it is with?

The rhythm began again. Hips beginning to rotate, pressure pads of desire activated and on red alert. There was no going back from this; we were too far-gone for retribution. Too needy.

Arousal oozed from every pore. Longing seeped from every touch. Love soaked our bodies far more than our sweat. Need percolated inside me, bringing to the boil all the years of want. My hands went lower, my lips on their trail. I could feel her fingers tightening in my hair, harder, more insistent. I was impelled to sink lower, licking and stroking her abdomen, the taste of her unbearable in its small portions. My tongue delved into her naval, lapping at the dip only to plunge inside once again. It felt like a connection. Digits hungrily grasped and caressed her skin - gasoline on my already out of control flame.

I loved her so much. I have loved her so much for thirteen years. I am in love with her.

I reached the apex of her core wanting to sample the fruits that would sweeten my tongue and ruin me for anybody else. I could smell her and it was a like a drug begging me to have one more fix. Who was I to refuse - I am but here to serve.

Soft hairs tickled my chin as I ventured between her legs, allowing me entry to her secret place. A gentle breath escaped my lips to flit and dance through her hair. A moan. I moved lower to

kiss her parted thighs, thighs that housed her wonder. She was insistent on her needs, thrusting herself into me, wanting more, trying to rush me. No. I had waited too long for this. I needed take my time with her, taste every part of her, touch every hiding place. Palms stroked her thighs and her calves, noting the contours of the living flesh beneath my hands.

I could feel my own excitement growing, entreating me to quench its thirst. But no. I can wait - wait forever for her if needs be.

My tongue became a traitor. It slipped from my mouth to stroke the outside of her core, asking permission to enter. Granted. It eased along the slick folds, lightly, like it didn't want to be a burden. My hand came up and separated the flesh that covered her innocence, making me privy to her femininity, her essence.

Tongue in action again. Slight licks to taste. It was like dipping into a honey pot made just for me. I nearly came then; she tasted like how I imagine heaven to taste, but sweeter. Her hips were becoming more forceful, more frantic. Her hands were like automaton, liberally roaming where the need was greatest.

Strong, sure flicks and licks and strokes. Her body was throbbing: so was my need. I increased the speed wanting her to feel the sensation, but not reach that height yet. I didn't know how long I could keep her waiting but I was enjoying myself too much, the maelstrom of emotions pulsating through me like a rush of adrenaline. She was gripping the back of my head now, grinding her centre into my face. I was loving it, loving her.

I could feel my own orgasm forming in my gut and somewhere decidedly lower. I needed to purchase my need on her thigh, her hip, her hand, anywhere ... I didn't care. As long as she was there with me when I came I didn't care how.

My index finger found its way to her opening, toying with the idea of entering her. I stopped my ministrations and looked into her hooded violet eyes, eyes that were pleading for me to fill her. Slowly, and gently, I entered her, my tongue still working on her nub. I pulled it out and filled her again with two fingers, gently pumping my arm in the same rhythm of her hips. I reached deep inside her, curling my fingers against the spot and stroked in and out. She was beside herself, I was beside myself - we both needed release.

I pulled my fingers from her to hear her gasp at the lack of contact. My mouth became the soul provider to her needs as it sucked in each lip in turn, twirling and nipping, my mouth brushing against her clit. I went lower and eased my tongue deep inside her, my head picking up the rhythm. She was grinding at an almost frantic pace now. I could feel her insides tensing around my tongue, the need in me rising tenfold. It was exquisite torture.

I wrapped my arm around her hip to rest on her stomach to hold her in place for her climax, never missing a stroke. The beat pulsing from our bodies a metronome of want.

Tighter. Tighter. Her walls were imprisoning my tongue in their depths, sucking me in, making me want to crawl up inside her and stay there.

The vibrations rattling around her incensed me, my passion almost tipping over. My hips were crushing themselves into the sheet struggling for release. And then ... like a fantasy ... over she went, pushing herself into me, pushing herself into my face, crying out my name over and over again, which, in its turn, sent me crashing with her.

Searing white light blinded me yet made me see clearer than I had for years. Our hips were bouncing, my arm trying to control her lack of control whilst releasing me from my prison.

Hips began to slow down, grinding into gradual cessation. Little jolts of pleasure still stayed around for the duration, pockets of pleasure for Emma and me alone.

I still hadn't had my fill of her. She dragged me up her body and pounded her hips into mine, beginning the sensation all over again, like we hadn't just made love.

Effortlessly, she flipped me onto my back and straddled me, her lips possessing mine, a frenzied look taking over her features. She looked as if she was in a trance, but my name spilling from her lips told me she knew whom she was with.

She pushed herself between my legs and began thrusting hard. I could feel and hear the slap of her stomach hitting mine. She was wild and passionate. Her teeth grazed each nipple in turn, undecided about which she should have sole possession of. My longing for her was back with a vengeance, ignoring the exquisite orgasm of minutes before, wanting a second, a third ... wanting it all.

'FFFFFFuuuccccccckkkkkkkkk ... EEmmmaaaaa!' I crashed over the edge, Emma there to save me as I fell. She held me, comforted me, and owned me from this moment on. Tears raced down my face, blinding me. A solitary sob broke free, eventually escaping from the cage inside me. Gentle fingers brushed them away, capturing some of their essence to taste. Comforting words spewed forth, concerned eyes took in my state. I stroked her cheek. 'I just love you so much.'

She pulled me up into a sitting position, kissing me wetly, tongues sliding over swollen lips, hands frantic, trying to claw their way through flesh to reach the soul beneath. We both adjusted our positions and wrapped a leg around the other's waist. The rocking became automatic, the pace set by a higher being, we were too lost in each other. Our tender centres rubbed against a thigh, easing the ache that was unbelievably still there.

Almost at the same time, we slipped a hand between clutched thighs and began our ministrations, nurturing the bud to flower and reach out for the satisfaction that we both craved. Rhythm became erratic, breathing laboured, arms aching, thighs crushing. 'Lllllaaauuraaaa ... Lllllaaaurra ... God ... God ... I love ... you ... love you.' We came together, slowing down with gentle caresses and kisses, whispering words of love and devotion with swollen tongues into tired ears.

We lay down, exhausted, satiated - for now. I couldn't get enough of her. It seemed as if the dam

had burst and I was forever lost.

Although exhausted, we woke up throughout the night to begin our lovemaking all over again, each time seeming like the first. One time Emma woke me when she was between my legs, lapping at the juices that had overflowed. The sight of her raven locks buried there nearly tossed me over the edge. Blue eyes glanced up from their task to capture my gaze. The swirling of her tongue incessant, fine hair tickling my thighs and stomach, her eyes never once leaving mine.

I could feel the orgasm building and my eyes began to close. 'I want to see you. I want to watch your eyes as you come.' She stared intently at me and I nodded.

It was building, building so high and so fast. My hips were crushing themselves against her face, she was moaning and whimpering, lapping and sucking. Sweat trickled down from my breasts and she rubbed it into my flesh with her free hand in steady circles. Her head was frenzied, her tongue demented as it thrust into me and then pulled out to circle and suck my open wounds. Teeth clipped my clit in agonising precision, gently yet torturously definite. My eyes were fluttering, begging to close but needing to witness this miracle, wanting to appease the demon that was welling up inside.

Intense feelings flooded to my core throwing open the gates to free the emotions from within. A scream left my lungs - I couldn't stop it, nor could I stop the pulsating vibrations that travelled the whole length of me and then back. Uncontrollable tremors that shrieked of release wracked my body. Her hands were steadying my hips, holding me down, keeping me safe. My chest was heaving, every breath calming me, the emotion within me playing with my sanity.

Gentle fingers stroked my stomach. A conductor for the sensations, the only way my body could ease.

I leaned forward and cupped her face, my lips bestowing a kiss on each eyelid, each cheek, her nose, and eventually, her lips. 'I love you, Emma Jenkins.'

That crooked smile again. 'I love you, too.' She climbed up my body and slipped beside me. I nestled in the crook of her arm, my head on her breast, my arm around her waist. 'Sleep now. We have all the time in the world.'

I don't think I have ever felt that contented, that relaxed, so loved. She made my life complete and I was deliriously happy.

[Continued in Chapter 34](#)

~ Hearts and Flowers Border ~

by [fingersmith](#)

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Sunlight danced through the crack in the floral curtains to land, gracefully, on the bed. I could feel the heat from it on my fingers and it felt wonderful. My right side was firmly against Emma, heat from her naked body insulating me. My left leg was between her thighs, and I moved it surreptitiously.

'Good to see you're awake.' My green eyes shot to twinkling blue eyes that were studying me intently.

'How long have you been up?' I leaned in for a kiss.

'Oohh ... about ... let me think ... about an hour.' She flashed me a smile. 'But you were wrapped so tightly around me I couldn't move.'

'You should have shoved me out of the way,' I pouted.

'I'll rephrase that. I didn't want to move.' I snuggled closer, embracing her, smelling the scent of our mingled bodies that coated her flesh.

After we both visited the bathroom, we climbed back into bed reasserting our positions. Laying in each other's arms and we relished the contact, chatting about anything and everything. The subject of our last visit cropped up again.

'God. It was a nightmare being in bed with you, feeling as I did, especially when Ms Davies and Ms Wilkins started to have sex.'

She laughed. 'Oh God yeah - that was a nightmare.' I stared at her.

'You heard them?' My voice reflected the shock that I felt.

'Who didn't? Now, they were loud.' A smile crept on her face. 'But not as loud as you.' A gentle kiss. 'I thought I would ravish you then and there. I was so turned on, especially having you so close to me, being able to smell you ...' She smelled my hair. '...touch you ...' She trailed her fingers down my arm. '... and have my leg between your thighs.' She looked down at my thigh that was firmly planted between her own. 'I honestly don't know how I managed, especially when

I heard you moan.'

My face blushed beetroot. 'But you were flat out ... dead to the world!' I was incredulous.

'I don't think I slept for more than twenty minutes that night. I kept watching you, not believing that I was in bed with Laura Stewart. When they started, *really* started, my body began to betray me. I had to get as close to you as I could, as I dared to. It was only the horror at being caught that stopped me.'

'But you knew I was gay, right?' She nodded. 'Then why didn't you do something? You knew I was turned on.'

'Yes, I knew you were turned on. Those little mewling noises you made, made sure of that. What I didn't want to happen was for us to... you know ... do it,' an adorable little blush, 'because they were doing it. I wanted you to be with me for the right reasons. I couldn't have survived if the next day you said that it was a spur of the moment thing.'

I hugged her to me. I understood what she meant, and it made sense. I would have felt exactly the same way. 'Okay. If you fancied me so much why didn't you pin a move on me?'

'Many reasons. I tried to get you to go for me. Remember *Silence of the Lambs*?' I nodded. 'Do you really think I was that scared?' I nodded again. 'Cheeky bugger.' I grinned. 'No, I had seen it before and thought it would make a great reason to grip hold of you.'

'What would you have done if I'd picked *Fried Green Tomatoes*?' I stroked her arm.

'Easy. I would have been inconsolable and fell into your arms to weep out my grief.'

'Why you sly ...' She kissed me and I felt the yearning deep inside me rise to the surface once again. Neither of us had the strength to take it to its conclusion so we ended it slowly.

'What else?' I needed to know.

'Let me see.' Blue eyes looked back in time, appearing to glaze over in thought. Suddenly they were back and filled with light once again. 'I know. Remember that first Christmas?' Nod. 'Remember the disco At the Youth Centre?' Another nod. 'Well, that night I was going to kiss you ...' I tried to interrupt but she put her hand over my mouth. I could smell myself on her fingers. 'Yes ... I was going to kiss you and tell you how I felt. I'd spent so long plucking up the courage, and when I caught that same look in your eyes as I spotted you across the dance floor I made my move.'

'Yeah. And that bastard Rob Evans stopped you!'

'Laura?'

'What?'

'Let me finish.' I nodded my head again, looking almost sheepish. 'As I was saying ... I walked across the dance floor, and yes, Rob interrupted me. I laughed at everything he said, and agreed with all his ideas about how stuffy it was in there, and then escaped. You were gone. I looked for you everywhere and eventually asked Justine, of all people, if she had seen you. She told me you had gone to the ladies, and she also told me, and I quote "to keep your fucking hands off Laura - she's mine". I couldn't believe the sight that greeted me.'

'I'm so sorry,' I wailed. 'I thought I didn't have a chance - I was so upset. Cassie was trying to calm me down.'

'Well ... that's not what it looked like to me.' I tried to protest but she hushed my lips. 'It's in the past - forget it.'

'Why did you get off with Evans?'

She looked pained at this. 'I was so angry and hurt ... I ... I overreacted. I saw you leave and wanted to chase after you, beg you to forgive me and ... and ... tell you how sorry I was that I had read you wrong.'

'Read me wrong? Why?'

'It was obvious that you weren't interested in me that way. I didn't want to jeopardise our friendship ... you meant so much to me. Still do.'

'Why on earth did you think I wasn't interested in you? I was like your shadow. If you said jump I'd ask "How high?".'

'Lots of reasons. The number one being how you would avoid touching me.' I sat up, startled by her words. 'You wouldn't let me hug you. You always seemed embarrassed by it.' Sadness seeped from pale blue eyes.

'It's only because I couldn't trust myself not to molest you on the spot. My hormones were on overdrive every time you were near. I thought you would be disgusted and tell me to fuck off.'

Strong arms pulled me back into her embrace and loving kisses scattered themselves all over, ending on waiting lips. Her eyes pinned me to the spot. She looked so serious. 'Another reason was Justine Russell.' She stopped, her eyes clouding over in memory. I was sure I saw hate flicker there, fleetingly, but still there. 'She was forever having digs at me, saying that you and her were ... you know. That made me feel sick thinking of her touching you. You deserved so much more than that bitch.' The last word spat from her mouth like a curse.

'But we didn't ... I never . well not until ...' I trailed off.

'As I said, that's all in the past. We have our future to consider. And if you're a good girl, I'll tell you what gave me the courage to try again.' Her face lit up. She looked liberated, finally free of

the memories that haunted her.

I was intrigued about that night. But mainly I was elated at the prospect that Emma Jenkins had spoken of our future. Not *the* future - but ours.

Life was good.

Twelve o'clock saw us showered, dressed and fed. We decided to take in the sights of Whitby as it had become quite a cultural place to visit over the years. Cafes lined the streets, and books lined the cafes. It was relaxing, and the place was esoteric in its own charming way.

We visited Whitby Literary & Philosophical Society, a charming Edwardian museum, where I was the boring one and bought a teacher's pack. How anyone can visit Whitby and not be fascinated about Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is beyond me. The atmosphere of the place screamed gothic, and the vision of a man in a black cape played with my imagination.

As well as the educational side to the museum I found the toilets to be perfectly glorious. Funny expression for a public convenience, but it wasn't any run of the mill visit. Emma and I had gone in there to freshen up and ended up in the end cubicle, clothes barely covering our bodies and deeply engrossed in a passionate tryst. God ... was she hot ... was I horny? I thought I was going to eat her at one point.

The outer door creaked open as I had my hand inside her, pushing myself into her with a ferocious need that bordered on frightening. She was grunting and pushing back, her juices slicking my fingers and wrist. At the sound of voices I stilled my hand and waited. Emma kept up a slow rhythm, hooded eyes boring into my own. 'Don't stop,' spoken so softly I had to keen my ears to catch it. She continued to grind herself into me, the tip of her tongue sweeping along her bottom lip, her perfect white teeth biting into red lips. Another moan.

'Are you alright, luv?' A concerned elderly voice outside.

'Never better.' My eyes never leaving Emma's. I leaned in for a kiss and I felt her melt under my touch. I kept up my thrusting, impaling her on four fingers. Her hands tightened into my hair and she leaned down to bite my neck.

'Oh yeah!'

'Are you sure you're alright?' Closer to the door this time.

'Oh God ... *yeah* ... *oh yeah*.' Perfectly quiet from the other side. The toilet flushed, then the hand dryer burred, and eventually the outer door opened and closed.

Alone ... thank the Lord.

I nestled my face between her breasts and inhaled the smell of her. My tongue browsed the cleft of her chest only to roam around puckering nipples, the skin taut and ready to be suckled.

Further down I went, the smell of her arousal like a beacon to my hunger. My tongue danced at the line of her downy hair, toying with her, toying with myself, fingers still buried deep, stroking the spot locked away from anyone but me. Forceful, hard strokes against her walls making her squirm and plead for more.

An inquisitive tongue burrowed through the soft hair that protected her from me, to forage for the elixir that could quench the thirst that ravaged my gut, begging me to take my fill. Thick, long strokes coated her lips, parting them to allow access to a perfect bud that trembled at my touch eliciting a whimper from deep within her chest.

I pulled my fingers free, sucked off the coating and murmured sounds of fulfilment, the taste of her burning into my taste buds, making them scream for more of her.

'Please don't stop ... *please* ...'

My tongue found its way to her opening, perching outside, tip at the ready. Slowly, I eased myself inside her feeling her sucking me in, a moan escaping her mouth, a moan escaping mine. I pulled out gently. She sucked me back in. In. Out. In. Out. The rhythm was getting faster - inoutinoutinoutinout ... her hands were behind my head and she was crushing herself into my face. I could hardly breathe - didn't care. Continuous noises escaped her mouth; her backside was slapping against the cold tile of the cubicle, and I could feel her tensing, her walls clasp.

Her body convulsed, rising off the wall until she was arched away, my head pushed fully into her. I carried on thrusting, my hands gripping her arse, kneading and pushing.

I pulled my tongue out and took her outer lips fully into my mouth in a wet and slippery kiss. I could feel her nub pulsating, so I flicked my tongue over and over fervently. Another orgasm ripped through her and the roar of her voice ricocheted around the empty room. Her legs gave way almost immediately and she slipped down the wall taking me with her.

She was slumped against the wall, eyes closed, breathing erratic, and her chest heaving, with me half sprawled on her body. We were tangled in a cocoon of limbs, my head nestled on her quivering stomach, my hands were still underneath her clinging onto warm sticky flesh. A torturously slow kiss ensued, our breathing mingling and rough.

Not the most romantic of places, I know. But it didn't matter where we were as long as I could be with her ... in any way. My own gratification was achieved through her - I was content to give.

After tidying ourselves up and leaving the museum (to very amused and not so amused stares) we visited the Abbey.

The Abbey was an old ruin that displayed the ruthlessness of mankind, with its sombre walls masking the destruction imposed upon it. Actually, it felt pretty creepy, especially with all the

Goths roaming the place. This was an opportunity to grip on Emma, as if she would make it okay.

Lastly, we visited a museum that decorated the great Captain Cook, who sailed all the way to New Zealand on his ship the Endeavour. We were lucky to see the replica of the ship, the Bark Endeavour, which was new this year.

All in all, it was an exhausting day. The evening saw us eating fish and chips out of the paper watching the ships enter the harbour. So peaceful. We seemed like an old married couple and I was so content. I was here again, with the one person I loved above all others and she loved me in return.

What else could a girl want?

The weekend flew by in a blur of activity and sensuous lovemaking. The landlady of the guesthouse gave us curious looks whenever we returned or collected our key. She would study us intently hoping for whatever she was searching for to spring out and bite her on the ass.

It wasn't until we were going that Emma whispered in my ear, 'I wonder if she has had complaints about the noise?'

'What noise? Shit ... no!' My face turned crimson, then paled significantly. 'You don't really think she ... oh no ... I'm so embarrassed.' I hid my head in her jacket and I could feel her giggling through the rippling movements of her chest.'

I didn't want to face her, but Emma persuaded me to go with her. I think she felt a little unnerved too, but was trying to pretend that she didn't care.

The landlady stood behind her desk, fag hanging from her lips reading the local newspaper. A cat that had seen better days was trying to get her attention, as cats tend to do, and pawed at the open page. 'Pack that in Smoggy. Go and kill a mouse or summat.'

Emma cleared her throat. 'Erm ... excuse me.' Aging grey eyes looked up to be transfixed by us again. 'We'd like to pay the bill please.' No response, just a shuffling of paper and a grim look. She passed the bill over to Emma, who swiftly brought out her Visa card. I chucked the cat under the chin then sniffed my fingers. Fuck, that cat stunk to high heaven. I furtively wiped my hand down the side of my jeans.

Emma signed, refusing my offer of payment, stating that it was her treat. The woman glared at us once again. 'Is there a problem?' I'd had enough.

'Sorry to stare luv, but you two look like them birds of the telly.' Our faces were blank. 'You know, that tall one with dark hair ... a bit butch looking, and the little blonde one.' More blank expressions. 'What was it called ... bloody hell ... it's on the tip of my tongue.' Something was

on the tip of mine too, but I'm too much of a lady. 'Warrior something or other. Not on now, but used to be. Sometimes catch it on the reruns.' We didn't have a clue, but we both smiled anyway.

What is it about the British? Why didn't we just say 'We don't know what you are talking about. And by the way stop fucking staring, you're giving me the willies.' No. We say 'Really. Oh that sounds fantastic.' Sad - but true.

Neither of us wanted to go back to our dreary little lives, but I had promised Sarah, Elaine and Harry that I would see them as soon as I got back. Harry wanted to introduce me to his new girlfriend, and how could I disappoint him? I think he was after my blessing in some weird way.

The journey in the car was quiet yet relaxed. We didn't need conversation to hide lack of connection. Our lives were forged by another link in our chain of destiny. The only downside was that I didn't know when we would see each other again. And I so wanted to see her soon, see her constantly.

The car pulled up outside my house at nearly eight o'clock Monday evening. 'Sorry I can't stay. I've got to go into the office tomorrow and pick up the information about the new clients. I still haven't done the groundwork for the account yet.'

'Don't worry, sweetheart. I know you're busy. Look, don't stress about me, I'm free this week, when you can make it will be great.' I tried to hide the disappointment in my voice.

'Tomorrow night. You, me, a nice bottle of wine ... I'll even throw in some nibbles too.' Saucily, her eyebrow rose and hid underneath her hair.

'I wish I could but I've got dinner arrangements.'

'Really?' I could hear the hurt in her voice.

'Why don't you come?' She looked pensive. 'It's with my family - you know, Sarah, Elaine and Harry.' Her smile beamed, lighting the whole street. 'They would love to see you again. You'll be surprised at how much Harry has grown.'

'I'd be more surprised if he hadn't. I'd love to.' Then she leaned forward to plant an agonising kiss on my lips. I wanted to drag her inside and ravish her until she begged for mercy. Unfortunately I knew that she had to be somewhere else, so I dragged my unforgiving lips away.

She helped me to my door declaring that I needed help with my one bag on account I was vertically challenged - a dig that earned her a dig in the ribs. Soft, deliberate kisses were shared at the door, and then she was gone.

Well, Harry wasn't the only one to bring home a girlfriend tomorrow night. I sniggered to myself. All of the people I love most under the same roof.

Could life get any better?

Chapter Thirty- Five

Sarah had been intrigued when I said that I wanted to bring someone over for dinner, especially when I wouldn't tell her who. She tried to pump me for information - I couldn't believe it that she didn't guess who it was straight away.

I was a bit nervous about how the evening would pan out. Elaine had a habit of interrogating anyone who I took round, almost like a father looking out for his baby's interests. I rarely took anyone there, not because of the Spanish Inquisition, but because I had not really thought that much of anyone to allow them into my fold, not really stayed that long in a relationship to even consider taking them to meet 'the family'.

Emma was different.

I picked her up at her place just after seven and she looked stunning, per usual. I wanted to skip dinner and go straight for dessert, but she eventually prised me off her and gave me that look.

'Come on Laura. We don't want to be late.' A loving kiss. My mind thought that we were thirteen years late as it was what would another hour do. But she was right. I didn't want to turn up bedraggled and smelling of sex - not the first time that they get properly introduced to her. And I didn't want to take the limelight from Harry's new relationship either.

We were both greeted by an extremely happy Harry. His girlfriend was all that he promised, blonde, brown eyed and hopelessly smitten with my kid brother. Funny thing was - I used to teach her - small world eh?

Dinner flew by with constant rib tickling and general taking the piss. Nobody seemed surprised that Emma was my 'date', and they treated her to the same piss taking as I was getting - always a good sign.

The evening was nearly over when Harry took me to one side. 'Guess who I saw yesterday staggering out of the pub?'

'Father Christmas?' Sarcasm was always my forte.

'Well ... he was there. But guess who else?' Obviously Harry had been around me long enough to not get phased by my fantastic wit. But I could tell that he felt uncomfortable broaching the subject, so, like a true Northerner I looked at him with 'I don't give a shit' expression. That was the usual way that I dealt with problems I didn't, or couldn't, handle.

'No other that Daddy dearest.' His eyes never left mine.

'And?' I turned to go, in my book the conversation was over. Harry grabbed my arm.

'Look Laurie ... I know you don't give a rat's ass about him, but I thought I'd warn you.' I glared at him. 'He seems intent on looking you up ... said something about apologising ...'

'He can go fuck himself!' A little too loudly. I could feel, rather than see, Emma making her way over from chatting with Elaine.

'Laurie ...'

'No Harry. End of discussion. I have avoided that bastard for thirteen years, and I'll be buggered if I am going to talk about him now.'

'What's the matter? Laura ... are you okay?' And I'll be buggered if I was going to discuss him, and what he had done ... tried to do, in front of Emma - she didn't need to know. 'What bastard?' I turned to look into concerned eyes.

'Nothing honey, no one.'

Emma knew that I was lying but knew that I didn't want to talk about whoever it was Harry and I had been discussing. It wasn't long after that I feigned a headache and left. I felt totally deflated. The evening had started out wonderfully and with just the mention of that twat's name everything had seemed to fold in. I couldn't understand why that would happen - it's not as if I thought about him at all, or that night, it's just ... it's just ... oh I don't know ... just something.

The car was silent. Emma had tried to start a conversation, and I had tried to pick it up, but I couldn't concentrate, my mind decidedly elsewhere. So she gave up and stared out of the window.

I pulled up outside her place and turned the engine off.

'Are you up for a nightcap?' Blue eyes looked at me hopefully.

'Not really.' I just stared ahead again. 'Maybe tomorrow? Sorry ... I'm quite tired.' The last part came out as an obvious lie, and my chest hurt with the telling of it. But what could I say? Sorry ... just thinking about the time my father tried to fuck me. Didn't think so.

'Okay.' Such a quiet voice. Was that a hint of hurt there too? 'See you tomorrow. You know where I am ...' She drifted off leaving the unspoken message hanging in the air. 'Whatever it is ... I'm here ... and I love you. Goodnight.' I heard her open the door to leave. I reached out and grabbed her arm making her slip back into the seat, closing the door behind her. She kept her back to me and I tried to turn her around.

'I just ... I ... I need to sort through some things ... please understand ... I love you, Emma - nothing can change that.' She turned to face me and I could see the tears threatening to spill onto her beautiful face. 'Hey ... baby, come here.' She fell into my arms and started to sob, her body wracking with the force. 'Ssshhhh ... hey ... I'm sorry ... it's not you ... god no.' Glistening eyes shot up to peer into my own: she was trying to control her breathing. I thought my heart was going to break.

'I thought I had done something - said something to hurt you.' She began to cry again. 'I don't know what I'd do without you, Laura - I love you, so much.' I held her, clutched her, it felt almost like a nurturing - I felt protective. Funny thing was, what she needed protecting from was me.

Hungry lips searched out my own to devour my mouth. Hands gripped themselves into my hair whilst she fell forward into me. I returned her passionate embrace, relishing the contact, knowing that this is what mattered - the here and now. A hot tongue trailed itself from inside my mouth, over my jaw to descend to my throat. She sucked wildly, her hands slipping down to grab my breasts. I arched into her touch, needing to feel those hands on my skin.

Wish granted. Fingers slipped inside my top to push past the barrier of my bra and grasp my ready breast, pushing her hand into the pliant flesh, kneading it like dough. My breathing was laboured, I was moaning - she was grunting as she pulled the nipple to full attention and pinched the sensitive nub. Another moan. I could feel my body pushing her back against the door and began to scramble over the seat paying no heed to the steering wheel.

Pinning her against the door, I became frenzied in my attentions. I pulled her t-shirt up and lunged at her breasts, forcing as much of the scented flesh into my watering mouth as possible. I could feel my jeans being pulled over my hips and down, the cool evening's air breathing onto my overheated flesh. I started to grind my mound on her hip, needing the contact, feeling the blood race to the spot. My hands were tugging to relieve her of her top, my fingers desperate for uninhibited contact. Arms raised themselves to release the imprisonment of cloth that was acting like a bastion of virtue.

I pulled her to rest on the seat and leaned down to the lever to lower the back of the seat and she slipped backwards taking me with her. Another twist and the seat flew back to leave her flat. I straddled her, stripping my top from my body to expose bare skin.

My hands tugged at her jeans, liberating the buttons. I gripped the waistband and pulled them, tugged them, ripped them down her thighs. I pushed the restricting cloth down, using my knee to push them to her ankles. She kicked them free. Underwear tore underneath my hands; nothing would stop me from touching her, possessing her, loving her.

Hot mouths captured flaming flesh; lips, teeth, throat, ears - all under attack. Her skin tasted of redemption, of a promise I needed to hear. Carnal sounds broke free from deep within: guttural, animal, primitive. Fingernails scraped down innocent flesh, tattooing ownership, inciting the addiction. Sweat coated our bodies; our need coated our thighs, thighs that were pumping into each other, clasping, smearing slick juices onto each other like a fiery balm.

Sensations were pulsating through me, every nerve ending on alert, every noise, every movement adding to the rising fire that was waiting to lose control and break free to consume us both. Her deft fingers chafed my bud, promising freedom. I positioned myself over her hand, and, almost in chorus, speared myself onto her fingers, pushing them deep inside me, my own three digits buried deep within her. She filled me. I filled her. For an agonising moment we both froze - enjoying the tortuous sensation of penetration.

The rhythm of our hips began, not slowly as before, but with a necessity born of desire, primal and demanding. Grunts broke free, followed by moans of expectation. Her name fell from my lips like a mantra promising her salvation and enduring love. I wanted to impress onto her my worship; I wanted to burn my soul within her, I wanted to push myself deep inside to never return.

Savage rhythms, unabashed by place or time, usurped reason to dominate and control. Rational thought was left behind: only hunger remained.

I could feel her juices running down my arm, my own following in quick succession. Her walls were tightening, her hips frenetic with her need, choking sounds coming from somewhere below me and I searched it out to quell it with my mouth. Teeth nipped hard into swollen flesh eliciting a hint of blood followed by soothing licks.

The sensation welling from every pore was tantamount to hers, the ecstasy was blinding, the knowledge enlightening. I posed my thumb over her engorged clit, hovering over the spot like a prize to be claimed. And claim it I did. Her cry broke around the car, reverberating off the walls to become captured deep within me.

A scream left my lungs without warning, as the orgasm ripped all the way through me - we were almost in unison. We continued to thrash against each other unrelenting in our fever of coupling. Tears flowed freely down our cheeks as we murmured against each other's necks and faces, kissing and calming each other, our bodies a citadel to the other's vulnerability. Shuddering, convulsing jolts traced themselves through outlets throughout our bodies.

Our hands were still insistent, fingers still buried, thumbs still rubbing. Throbbing sensations built up again only to tumble over into another climax. Lips caught lips. Slow and sensuous dancing of hips and mouths, salty tears mingling to refresh parched tongues.

Hips began to slow. Urges began to ebb. Desire satiated ... for now.

Violet eyes met mine. Swollen eyes, swollen lips and a tear stained face. 'I love you, Emma,' whispered and punctuated by a gentle kiss.

'I love you so much,' snivelled out.

We lay there. I was sprawled half on, half off her.

'I hope your neighbours are understanding,' I said, looking down at our nearly exposed bodies lying flat in the front seat of my car - a car, might I add, that was parked on the road outside her house. Her eyes followed mine and then rose again to meet my gaze.

'Gives them something to moan about.' Embarrassed chuckles broke free relieving the tension. I lay beside her snuggling close and inhaling the scent that was purely her.

'Emma.'

'Mmhm?'

'I'll have that nightcap now.'

She scooped me into her arms and gripped me so close to her I couldn't breathe. But - who needs to breathe when you could die right there and then and die a happy woman?

This is a rhetorical question in case you were wondering.

Inside her house we continued our lovemaking. Not the hurried carnal coupling we had experienced outside in my car. No. It was gentle, tender, beautiful. Hands that had seemed almost violent with possession now seemed reverent, worshipping each other, stroking every curve and swell, every dip and line. Hips that had been frantic in their greed for satisfaction, now became temperate, the rhythm slow and sensuous, only to increase speed as the crescendo approached.

Hours passed. Words of eternal love whispered into fevered ears. Promises of forever etched into skin. Eyes pleaded guiltily, awash with devotion.

We lay in each other's arms, me half across her breast, her arm secured around me, and let the feeling of contentment wash over us. Hands still caressed damp skin, knowing that it was more for the contact than for gratification.

I felt at peace. The first time in my life I felt truly protected and content. Happiness seeped through my pores like it had finally been released from its self-imposed prison. There was only one more thing for me to do.

I had to tell her about my past. It was the only demon that I could still feel within me.

'Emma?' My throat was parched, so I cleared it and spoke again. 'Emma?'

'Mmm hmm.' She sounded like a cat, purring in pleasure.

'We need to talk.' I felt her body stiffen. I couldn't believe that after what we had just experienced she would still be anxious about how I felt about her.

'I need to get a drink - want one?' And she was gone, not even waiting for my answer.

It seemed like an age before she came back carrying two glasses of juice. She handed me one and climbed carefully back on the bed, propping herself up on her pillows. I watched her sip her drink, trying to appear distant but I could see every emotion, every uncertainty on her face. I gulped my own drink and then gently eased her glass from her grip.

After placing the glasses on the side, I snaked my arm around her waist and pulled her down. She seemed tense, but soon relaxed into my arms. I nuzzled her neck, placing gentle kisses on her collarbone. I heard a whimper.

'I need to tell you something ... something about my past. Don't worry, it doesn't affect us.' A little kiss for reaffirmation. I lifted myself up onto my hand and looked into her eyes. 'I happened years ago ... something about my parents ...' I could see the concern in her eyes but I also saw relief; relief that she tried to cover.

I lay in her arms and told her the story of my miserable childhood. I told of the beatings, the arguments, the inability to feel safe. Memories washed over me and out of my mouth. I couldn't stop it. Memories of Harry losing his front tooth to a drunken father with ready fists. Memories of lecherous stares and gropings that no child should have to endure. Black eyes, fractured arms and swollen lips - all became revealed.

I couldn't look at Emma. Periodically, I had to stop to get my bearings and try to control the emotions that were fighting to get out.

I told her of how my mother used to turn a blind eye to everything: how I hated her even more than him for her lack of support. 'She was just glad he left her alone - didn't give a shit about what we were going through.'

Emma pulled me to her, embracing soundlessly, coating me with love, understanding and a promise of protection. She held me in her arms until I got my emotions under control: her soft, caring strokes calming my soul and easing the ache deep within. 'I need to finish.'

'It can wait, Laura. You need to shut off for a while.'

'No. I have to tell you all of it before I chicken out.' I took a deep breath and began again, wrapped up in Emma's arms, the only thing giving me the courage to go on.

'He was always a dirty fucker.' I felt Emma's body stiffen. I couldn't even look at her. 'He had been banged up for beating the crap out of mum too many times. All he got was three lousy days ... Then he came back.' The memory was so strong; it wrapped itself around me and began to choke ... Emma made soothing noises, cradling me in her arms.

I hastily wiped away the thick tears, smearing my face with the salty wetness. 'I told Harry to get out of there, I knew it was going to me this time. And I knew it wouldn't just be a slap.' The room seemed so big, so quiet, that I had to turn and look to see if she was still there. 'I was so scared

... I'd never ... you know ... still haven't.' I swallowed nervously and snuggled even deeper into her. 'He slapped me so hard I felt my teeth rattle around inside my head. The next thing I knew I was flat on my back with him on top of me. All I could smell was beer and sweat - I can still smell it.' My stomach clenched at the memory; the memory of his words; the wild look in his eyes; the feel of his fat fingers clawing themselves down my legs; the feeling of helplessness.

'It was Harry who saved me. Whacked him over the head with a glass ashtray and knocked the fucker out. He saved me from him - saved me ... when for years I had stood to the side powerless to help.'

The tears escaped me then. The pain in my chest tore me open, exposing my vulnerability to both Emma and myself. She folded me inside her, taking great care not to cramp me, holding me against her with one hand whilst the other ran soothing strokes down my back and through my hair. Tears flowed with abandon, escaping after thirteen years of being held inside to face the fear and the shame of my life, and my lack of courage to look after my little brother.

We lay like that for an age: her soothing, me crying.

Finally, I plucked up the courage to look into her eyes, dreading what I might see. Only anger rested there. Anger that initially I thought was aimed at me. 'That fucking bastard ... I'll ... I'll ... fucking kill him ... *fucking ... kill him!*' Teeth clenched around every word, making her face take on the features of a macabre mask. She looked primal, savage and just a little insane.

Our positions changed as I began to soothe her, trickling words of comfort and calming to oversensitive ears. Eventually she began to cool off, and her pale eyes caught mine, concern and love taking over. 'You will never have to worry about him again. Got that? As long as I live he will never hurt you again.' She pulled me into her arms to nuzzle my hair and whisper words of love and security into my ears. 'It's not yours or Harry's fault that those bastards couldn't see what perfection they had.'

I felt relieved. I thought I was abnormal in some way because all parents love their kids, right?

I didn't tell her about what Harry had told me earlier.

What was the point?

Chapter Thirty-Six

The weeks flew by in a mindless blur. I was so happy, especially now that I had got that burden off my chest and Emma hadn't been disgusted and left. She was the most important person in my life and we spent every available minute in each other's company. We had begun to know the woman in each of us instead of the youth from all those years ago. It was strange, but I loved her more than I ever thought was possible. Although we had always had that connection, it seemed as if the boundary between what physically separated us had joined leaving no mark. We were

totally as one.

When Emma had to go away on her trips I could feel the pain in my side like I had an open wound. The ache I felt was incessant and nothing could numb it. On the evenings before her trip the atmosphere would appear strained - mainly because we loathed to part but didn't want to admit it.

Her trips were getting less regular, and shorter too. But it still didn't stop me aching for her when she was gone. When she returned we were nearly frantic with need for each other - nothing seemed to satiate our lust and desire for each other.

On her return from her last trip she barely made it through my front door before I was on her, tearing at her clothes. I heard the pop of her buttons and the plink plink plink as they scuttled down the wooden hallway. Her skirt was next. It pooled around her ankles only to be kicked away by a trim black court shoe. My hands delved inside her underwear like they were searching for hope ... for salvation ... the hot wet juices greeted me like an old friend.

She was just as desperate. I didn't feel my top being torn from me; didn't feel my slacks leaving their nest; didn't feel the disposing of my underwear. No. All I could feel was her. She was hot. Smooth. Hard. Wet. Mine. Insistent hands roamed her, claimed her again. Teeth met skin in ownership, biting and scraping along needy flesh, wanting to tear out chunks and swallow it whole.

The coupling was frenzied. The slapping of skin and the pounding of flesh were joined by laboured breathing, gasps and moans. Epithets were muttered, forceful declarations of want and longing spewed forth like a tirade, a tidal wave of sheer hunger spilled over to drown and quench the raging fire that boiled below like the fires of hell itself.

Control was lost. Screams broke away from deep within to reverberate off dulled walls and be recaptured inside trembling bodies. Breathing erratic. We found ourselves slumped on the floor, half undressed, and clutching at each other.

I looked deeply into her glistening eyes that radiated love. A soft kiss on her cheek. 'Welcome home darling,' and I raised my hand to insert my drenched fingers into my mouth, sucking off the juices, taking extra care to nuzzle the webbing between each digit, savouring the taste of her. My tongue trailed over every inch, whilst her mesmerised eyes digested every movement.

'I think we should make our way to the bedroom.' Her voice was thick with need once again, and I felt my arousal surge once more.

She stood over me. Then like I was made of air, she scooped me into her arms and carried me into the bedroom.

Who am I to refuse?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The school year was drawing to a close. Year 11 had left the previous month and only come in for exams. The relief surged throughout the school and allowed the teachers a little down time. This was the perfect opportunity to get lessons planned for the following year so that the summer could be free to do whatever we wanted.

Jack had been one of the leavers and I was sorry to see him go, although I did get to see him occasionally when he visited his sister. He was preparing himself for the advent of college in the autumn and still wanted my advice on courses and the like. I didn't mind, and not because I was desperately in love with his sister either.

Emma had arranged a holiday cottage for us in the Lake District, a little place near Eskdale, really out of it. I couldn't wait. Two weeks in the middle of nowhere with Emma Jenkins - just what the doctor ordered.

I loved the lakes. The beauty and tranquillity found there bordered on the sublime. I found that it allowed me to take stock of my life on the previous visits I had undertaken, though none of them would be as perfect as this.

The journey only took two hours on the motorway. It's amazing - you can go from the heart of the city to the core of the Lakes in such a short period of time.

The cottage was incredible. A huge open fireplace dominated the room, although we doubted we would light it considering it was the beginning of summer - but the good old British weather made you very aware of the capriciousness of nature.

The master bedroom was breathtaking. A four-poster bed stood magnificently in the centre of a rustic room that poured oak beams down the walls and across the ceiling. Rugs were scattered across the floor appearing almost random, and most of the furniture was stripped wood. I wouldn't have cared if I was stuck in a tent with her - just being with her made me whole.

The first few days were spent languishing in heated lovemaking, eating unhealthily and getting a feel for the place. On the fourth day we actually ventured outside to take in the lay of the land.

Our first port of call was Wastwater. The atmosphere at this lake was one that couldn't be replicated anywhere else in the world. Its ethereal beauty captivated the soul as the lake lay alongside Scafell Pike, the largest mountain that England had to offer. However many people came to Wastwater it never lost the feeling of solitude. It was like you were completely on your own, only nature to accompany you.

We had taken a packed lunch and our bathing gear as the day promised sunshine. Laying flat on our backs against the shoreline we immersed ourselves in our company once again.

I don't know how long we had been napping but the sound of frantic shouting pulled me out of

Morpheus' realm.

'Ernie! Ernie! Come on fella! Come on!' I shot to my feet, Emma close behind me. The shouting was getting closer, and the voice was becoming more desperate.

A tall dark haired woman came over the edge of the bank holding what looked to be a ball of black hair - a wriggling ball of black hair at that. She looked frantic, her face a dark shade of crimson and her long hair stuck to her face with sweat. She caught my eye. 'You wouldn't happen to have seen a dog running this way would you?' The hope in her voice was apparent. The bundle of hair in her arms began to whine and wiggle more, exposing the most adorable dark brown eyes and shaggy head. 'Now, Bert, stay still.' The dog wriggled more.

'Sorry, I ...' I looked at Emma who shook her head, 'we haven't seen anything.' Her eyes were wild. 'Do you need any help?'

'Thank you so much,' she gushed, the relief evident. A smile broke through for a moment until 'Bert' started to squirm in her arms. 'I haven't got his lead with me ... Ernie, his brother, has run off after some bloody sheep, and I just left everything where it was and chased him. My partner is well up the road trying to hunt him down.'

'Do you want me to look after the little man while you go and find the other one?' Another relieved smile and I was handed the package of living, breathing, licking flesh. Interested eyes appeared in front of my own and I was hooked. The dog was the picture of lovability. Shaggy hair bunched itself over sparkling eyes, a shiny nose that was pressing itself to the exposed flesh of my arms, a tickly tongue that wanted to wash my face clean. I was so mesmerised that I failed to see the young woman and Emma leave to look for Ernie.

I nestled my face into his fur and breathed deeply. He smelled of open air, the lake and fun. I tickled his belly and he made a contented whimper and stretched himself back fully into my arms to expose the underside of his belly. 'Ah ... you want to be tickled do you?'

Twenty minutes passed and I was having the time of my life. Bert was so much fun. I had found a stick for him to play fetch with and he obediently brought it back every time, sitting in front of me waiting for me to pitch it again. I didn't notice the return of Emma and the young woman, who by this time was joined by another woman with blonde hair and a stubby dog on a lead.

'Ah ... this must be the infamous Ernie.' Big brown eyes landed on me, eyes full of expression and ... guilt, I think.

'Yes ... the fastest Border Terrier in the Lakes,' the blonde woman laughed.

We had a conversation about the dogs and Ernie's impression as a silver bullet, all the while stroking them behind the ears. Ernie had fallen asleep by this stage, the events of the chase having tuckered him out. The women explained that they had never chased sheep before, but then again they had never been so close to sheep before. It looked like the boys' holiday was going to be spent on the end of the double lead they shared. Bless them.

After much thanks and the promise of a drink one night they were gone. I missed the dogs immediately, and a sigh broke free from within me.

'What a lovely pair of dogs - the owners were nice too.' It didn't escape Emma.

'Funny how you commented on the dogs first,' she laughed. 'They said they were an eighth long haired Jack Russell crossed with a Border Terrier.'

I nodded still looking at the stick that Bert had brought back to me a few minutes before. Another sigh. I had always loved dogs, but as I've said before - it is too cruel to leave them cooped up all day on their own. Ah well - when I retire eh?

We packed away our picnic and headed off to Ennerdale for another bout of sunbathing and relaxation. Emma seemed lost in thought ... so I let my mind drift to my four legged friends once again.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Lakes were all that it promised and more. The sheer beauty of place left me breathless and feeling insignificant. The only thing that surpassed that beauty was Emma.

Buttermere was commercial and hosted a myriad of different nationalities that all converged there to feast on the serenity that it offered. Obviously, because so many people visited, it lost some of its mystery. All the same, a good, long walk around the lake was still a lovely way to spend a few hours and enjoy a picnic.

We had been sitting on the shoreline just about to start our lunch when the familiar sounds of shouting reached us. Not frantic this time; just alerting the pair of where their owners were.

Pounding feet could be heard racing towards us. We couldn't see anything. Then they were there - Bert offering a red rubber ball to me covered in spit, his eyes sparkling begging for a game of fetch. Ernie had Emma pinned on her back and was giving her face a thorough washing.

'There you two are ... oh ... sorry.' The dark haired woman looked embarrassed and tried to pull Ernie off Emma. He wasn't having any of it and pounced back, more determined. Bert was whimpering at my feet, a look of desperation flitting over his shaggy face, the ball resting against my foot. I tickled his head, loving the feel of his fur under my fingers.

The blonde woman appeared carrying a rucksack and joined the meeting.

'So ... here we are again ...' Emma laughed. 'Fancy stopping by for a while. We were just about to have some lunch. You are welcome to join us.'

'Great. We were just about to do the same. I'm Annie by the way, and this is my partner Helen,'

the dark haired woman said. They unloaded their rucksack that contained the boys' packed lunch and water as well as their own lunch.

It was fun. We chatted about the Lakes, our lives, and the boys. Bert and Ernie played in and out of the water, fetching sticks and the red ball until they slumped down, exhausted from their play.

I chatted to Helen finding her easy to talk to. She told me that they had both come up from Norfolk for a holiday, but she had originally come from Manchester before moving down south with her parents when she was seventeen. I kept looking at Emma who was engrossed in conversation with Annie. They both looked animated in their discussion; a discussion about what I don't know.

'How long have you two been together?' I think the question was spurred by a fleeting grain of jealousy as I watched my lover chat easily with someone else.

'Eleven years.' A soft smile graced her face. She was totally in love with Annie that much was obvious. 'What about you and Emma?'

'Two and a half months.' A contented sigh escaped. Two and a half months of being alive.

'Is that all! You two seem like you been together for ever.'

'It's a long story,' she smiled in encouragement. 'Well ... it all started thirteen years ago ...' and I told her the events leading up to this moment. Not all the events, especially the Justine Russell fiasco, but the bare bones of it.

After a couple of hours, lots of play fights with the 'terrible twosome' as they were dubbed, we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways. It had been a lovely afternoon and made me feel contented in some strange way.

'Good to see relationships getting stronger over the years instead of breaking apart,' Emma's rich timbre trickled over my ears. That was it. Seeing and chatting to two people who were so obviously in love gave me hope for the future.

My hope was that in eleven years our relationship was still as strong as Annie and Helen's. God. I hope so. I really do.

The rest of the holiday sped by leaving us breathless and totally at peace with the world and each other. It was like a dream come true spending all day and every night with Emma and I didn't want it to end.

The last evening was spent on the patio area sharing a cold bottle of wine, watching the sun dip down below the hills and witnessing the appearance of the bashful stars. Emma's face was obscured by shadows that danced and played with her features leaving my eyes straining to

capture those fascinating blue orbs again.

'Why did you make a move on me? You haven't told me yet.' I had to know. What had been the difference between then and now.

She smiled that crooked smile of hers and my heart began to gallop.

'Can't we just say that I couldn't resist you anymore?'

'We could ... but I need to know. What made you make a pass at me after college, and then again years later after all that had happened? You said that you *knew* that I wasn't interested. What changed your mind?'

It was so quiet. I could hear her breathing.

'Well ...' she looked sheepish, 'at college I had all these feelings racing around inside me that I couldn't deal with. You were a constant thing in my life ... someone who I had come to love so much ...' her voice faded into the night.

'And?' I prompted.

'You always seemed so content with your lot. You dated on and off ... and then there was Justine Russell who was always ready for some sarcastic comment about how you wouldn't give me a second look.'

'But we didn't see Justine all the way through college.'

'I know ... but it used to play on my mind, especially after the Youth Centre fiasco.' She looked wistful, staring out at the darkened horizon. I fiddled with my wine glass and waited.

'I dated a great deal throughout college ...'

'I know,' I interrupted, and she laughed at the comical hurt expression on my face.

'It was my way of dealing with things. I tried to block out my feelings for you, thinking they were a crush, a phase, a *something* that I shouldn't be feeling for my best friend.' I entwined my fingers into hers and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

'Then ... when we went to the Gay Village and I saw everyone else making out ... my sense of reasoning kind of took a holiday. You looked so beautiful ... I thought my heart would burst out of my chest and scream out its secret to you.' She took a sip from her glass and licked the excess from the rim. I felt a flame kick start in my gut.

'I was arguing with myself ... should I ... shouldn't I? You were oblivious. I watched you laughing and chatting to everyone. I noticed that women were flocking around you wanting your attention ... wanting to claim you ... and I felt jealous.'

'You? Jealous?' I was incredulous.

'Yes me. Jealous.' She leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss upon my lips. The flame in my gut began to heat up and venture south.

'Then you looked at me.' A sigh escaped her lips, and she turned and caught my gaze. 'I could see myself reflected in your eyes ... just a glimpse. I had to see if what I had witnessed was true ... that you wanted me too.'

'Oh God, yes.'

'That's when I asked you to dance. Holding you in my arms was like coming home. I couldn't think straight ... the scent of you ... the feel of you ... it smothered my senses ... I couldn't stop myself. When you responded to my kiss ... god ...' her eyes were glassy from the memory. I lifted her hand and kissed along her knuckles.

'Why did you ask me to forgive you?' She looked at me, confusion masking her face. 'Just before you kissed me you asked me to forgive you. Why?'

A slow smile appeared as the memory came back stronger. 'Well ... it was in case you didn't feel the same way ... I was covering all bases.'

'But I did.'

'Yes you did.' Another kiss - a little longer this time. 'The rest is, as they say, history.'

We were quiet again. I knew she was lost in thought about how that evening panned out: how it broke our lives apart. I didn't like to ask about why she decided I was worth the effort again. So we just sat there, lost in the memory of days gone by, revelling in the closeness of each other now. Fate was a fickle player, I knew that, and I didn't want anything to get in the way of my feelings for the dark haired woman seated next to me. I couldn't survive losing her again.

'I am so happy.' An almost reverent whisper that broke through my reverie. I thought it had seeped from my head until I was ensnared into pale grey eyes that bore into my own. A ghost of a smile tortured her perfect lips as she looked at me for a response. I smiled. Her hand came out and grasped my own, the thumb rubbing soft small circles on the back.

'It's hard to believe that we will be back in the city this time tomorrow,' I sighed, deliberately missing out the fact that I was more concerned about having to sleep in my over large bed ... alone.

She stood up, and although we hadn't been snuggling I missed the warmth of her skin. Stretching a long toned arm towards me, she smiled once again, a hint of sadness playing along her mouth. I felt a spark of nervousness, not knowing why she would look sad. I didn't want to know. 'Well ... let's make the most of our time here then.'

I allowed her to lead me to the bedroom, anticipation fluttering around my stomach like a captured butterfly. Slowly, she drew me towards her and inhaled my hair, then my neck. 'You smell wonderful,' she breathed, her breath caressing my skin leaving it tingling. Sure hands trailed down the front of my shirt, fingering the buttons until I could feel inaudible pops as they were released from their prison.

The cool evening breeze embraced my newly exposed skin and I closed my eyes in expectation. Soft delicate kisses flickered on my chest, moving steadily downwards to waiting breasts. Her hands were not idle as they gently pushed my cargo shorts away from my hips to gather in a cotton pool around my feet. All I had between me and my modesty was a thin piece of material that mimicked underwear.

My hands began their quest. Firstly, they stroked her hair, trailing through long dark strands that felt like new spun silk under my touch. They rested for a moment on her cheeks, cupping the supple flesh and allowed my fingers to hint at a caress. Then they ventured to her collarbone to finger the protruding bump with light strokes. All the while she was circling my breasts, tantalising them with the promise of attention only to pull away at point of contact. Frustration was rearing his ugly head once again.

Her head lowered, and moist lips opened and closed around an awaiting nipple that was rigid with longing, the puckering flesh around it taunting, demanding attention. They hurt with the need for her touch, and I as felt the wetness envelope me I released a moan. I felt those lips smile into my skin and her hand came into play, flicking the other nipple and rolling it gently between her finger and thumb. I felt her palm come into the action, rubbing directly over the stub ... another moan, deeper, more guttural. Her fingers parted and the nipple was captured between her index finger and forefinger where she set up a coaxing rhythm. The shocks from this action, and the gentle, yet possessive suckling, fled to my core and I wanted to throw her on the floor and take her hard.

But not this time.

This time was meant to be slow. It was meant to be a joining; a gentle coupling; a reaffirmation of our love.

I nuzzled her hair, desperately wanting to kiss her. Her mouth snaked its way back up to my waiting lips and took them firmly. I returned the gesture, moaning deeply within her mouth, feeling her moans enter me, making the wetness between my legs pour from the source.

I don't know how we got to the bed. I can't even remember undressing her. But the feel of her skin on mine made me want her over and over again. It felt like the first time ... again. Every time felt like the first time with her. So special.

She came hard the first time, quivering underneath me, breathing out my name in throaty moans, her nails deep in my back. I nearly tipped over the edge at just the sight of her. She was absolutely beautiful, her face flushed, her eyes hooded, a fleshy tongue sweeping over plump

lips. I licked her neck tasting her in my mouth - the taste that was purely Emma.

She flipped us over ... my beautiful girl straddling me, eyes the epitome of desire. 'What do you want?' sultry and breathless. 'Tell me ... what would you like me to do?' Hungry kisses barked at my throat, her tongue swiping and licking. 'Tell me ...' her voice trailed off as she captured my breast in her mouth and she feasted.

'Touch me ... I need ... god ... I need to you to touch me ...'

'How?' A mumbled response, my breast hindering her speech. Her hips were rocking against me and I could feel my desire coating my thigh, slicking its way to her skin.

'Fingers ... tongue ... whatever ... just touch me.' I was becoming desperate. I needed to feel her in me, against me ... anywhere.

She pulled away breaking the contact of skin and tongue and lips. 'Tell me ... what do you want me to do?' Her expression had an air of surety about it. She seemed primal.

Her thigh came between my legs and began to push against me. I wrapped my thighs around her legs and pulled myself into her, bearing my want into firm muscles, my hands gripped her hips steadying me as I ground myself into her.

She pulled away leaving me gasping for more. 'Please Emma ...' my voice held a note of entreaty, my eyes implored, my fingers clutched at her hips trying to pull her to me.

'Please what?' A playful smile, and her hand reached between my legs to allow fingers to slip along swollen lips coating themselves in my juices, sending shuddering jolts through my body. My eyes fluttered closed and then opened to concentrate on her face again. She was staring at me, the curve of her lips obvious.

I felt probing fingers rest outside of my opening, just a gentle pressure to announce their arrival. 'What do you want Laura?'

'To feel you inside me,' I panted.

'And? What do you want me to do then?' Her thumb grazed my clit making my body shoot off the bed.

'Fuck me - just fuck me!' Strong fingers entered me, pushing inside until I was filled. I nearly came then. She started thrusting in and out, the rhythm frantic, I plunged myself onto her, needing to feel her inside. Her tempo began to increase, the strokes deeper, the pace quicker, her thumb more insistent. I could feel the orgasm building as she fucked me, her free hand pinning me in place by my hip, her legs straddling my thigh. I could feel her grinding herself onto my knee, short grunts emanating from deep within her, her passion slicking my thigh, her fingers still deep.

I could feel her tensing and I knew we were both close. 'Harder Em ... *Harder!*'

And she did.

We broke through into our climax together, hollow roaring sounds escaping from deep within as we both rode our passion, drawing out every shudder, quiver and tremor, little jolts flying through our bodies. Hot wet lips found each other, and I was surprised to find tears on her face. I was even more surprised to find them on my own.

Frenetic 'I love yous' tumbled from our lips like a catechism, committing this time to memory never to be forgotten.

Sated for now, we folded into each other and drifted into a contented slumber.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

It happened not long after we got back. I should have expected it ... should have been prepared. But hindsight only happens after doesn't it?

It had been nearly a week since our return. Emma had been busy catching up with work and we hadn't seen each very often. I spent my time preparing for the return to school in a few weeks, wanting to be ready well beforehand as this would leave me time to spend with my girl.

Friday night saw me leaving Sarah and Elaine's and on my way to meet Emma at the Red Lion where we were supposed to catch up. I was so engrossed with seeing her again I didn't pay any attention to my surroundings.

Big mistake.

Darkness was sneaking up on me and I looked at my watch, audibly sighing when I realised I was running late. It was my fault. If I hadn't been waxing lyrical about the love of my life I would have seen it coming.

The pub loomed ahead in the distance and I fumbled around in my handbag for my mobile to alert Emma of my impending presence.

'Hello luv.'

I would recognise that voice anywhere.

'What the fuck do you want?' I spun around to see my father, older, dirtier, but him all the same.

'That's no way to talk to your old man is it?' I turned to go. A grimy hand landed on my upper arm. I tried to shake it off, but his grip became tighter, more insistent.

'I've nothing to say to you.'

'Look luv ...' his strong hand pulled me around to face him, 'I just wanted to chat ... catch up. Your old man's missed you.' A leer appeared on his face and I was thrown back to a time when that leer was poised above me, fat hands between my legs.

Fear seeped into my stomach and a cool sheen of sweat covered my body. I visibly drained of colour. 'I've ... I've ... got nothing to say to you.'

'Pity,' hungry eyes trailed up and down my torso, he unconsciously licked his lips, his focus resting on my heaving chest.

'Look ... I'm meeting someone and ... and I'm already late. They'll come looking for me soon.' I had consciously avoided the gender of the personal pronoun hoping that he would think it was male or even a group of people.

'Yeah ... I know. That big leggy dyke you're hooked up with.' The surprise on my face was evident. 'Your old man doesn't miss much ... bet she's a goer.'

'*Fucking leave her out of this!*' I spat out, anger getting the better of me. I couldn't stand the thought of him thinking about Emma never mind anything else.

'A little touchy aren't we,' he sneered. 'Maybe I'll pay her a visit next.' He licked his lips leaving them wet and sticky.

'If you go near her I'll ...'

'What?' He cut me off. 'You'll do what? Get someone to hit me over the head again?'

'Just fuck off and leave me alone.' I turned again, trying to free my arm from his grip. I felt the pressure behind his hand increase and abruptly found myself slammed against the wall, his forearm across my throat.

'Play nice,' he growled.

I was finding it increasingly difficult to breath, as his arm was steadily adding more pressure. His body was crushing itself into me. I tried to shout out but he applied more force making it impossible.

'I'd like to carry on where we left off,' he growled as he nuzzled my hair. The bile was rising in my throat. I knew this time I didn't have Harry to save me - there was no one.

A jean clad leg pushed between my thighs, parting them wide. I closed my eyes, the arm across my throat making me feel faint.

He was mumbling about me needing to feel what a man could do, then I would realise what I had been missing - what I couldn't get fucking a woman. 'Although I'd like to watch,' he snarled into my ear.

One hand began its journey underneath my top. Why didn't anyone stop him? There was no one about. It was nearly nine o'clock on a Friday night and everyone would be in the pub or at home.

I felt his hand grab my tit, rough and calloused. He kneaded it painfully whilst still holding me secure by my throat, his hips were striking up a rhythm and I could feel his erection begin against my crotch. God no! I couldn't bear the thought of him taking me. Why hadn't I come in the car? Why did I think I would be okay walking to the pub? Emma had offered to pick me up - but no - I had to be Miss Independent didn't I.

His hand left my tit and fumbled its way down to my zipper, the weight of him heavy against my small frame. I could feel him tugging but was helpless to stop him. I resigned myself to my fate.

'Come on sweetheart ... show your daddy how much you love ...' he let out a whimper as his body was physically lifted away from my own. My hands went instinctively to my neck to soothe the burning sensation. He was slumped against the wall, fear in his eyes.

Six foot of anger towered above him, her hair flying out, her blue eyes mere slits in a stoic face. Lips parted in a grimace that oozed destruction. Hands balled into fists as she tried valiantly to control the anger radiating from her. She looked like a warrior ... an avenging angel sent to earth to save me.

'What the fuck is your game?' Her voice was ice. She didn't blink as she faced him down.

Although she exuded power, he believed that she was still only a woman.

Big mistake.

'So ... the dyke returns,' he spat. 'What you gonna do? Stop me?' He struggled to his feet, trying to assert a sense of authority, a sense of power. Now, he was a big man, but Emma made him seem tiny. She stepped closer to him, I could only watch from the sidelines as I still felt faint. I slumped down the wall, my legs giving way and fumbled in my bag next to me to retrieve my mobile and ring the police.

He adopted an air of confidence. I could tell that he didn't want to appear weak in front of a woman, a dyke at that.

'You fuckers are all the same. Just 'cos you fuck like a man you think you are one.' He laughed, albeit shakily.

'And you're a man? Attacking a woman ... your own daughter I might add ...'

'She's no daughter of mine. She's nothing but a bastard. I took on that whore of a mother of hers

when her real father didn't want anything to do with them.' That laugh again.

I sat there. Stunned. He wasn't my father? I didn't understand. His name was on my birth certificate. I felt a jolt of relief that was mixed with anger. Why hadn't anyone told me? Sarah must have known ... wait ... she said something about my mother settling for second best ...

'Hello ... Madam ... could you please state your location ... hello ...are you ...'

'Yes ... sorry.' I passed on the details never taking my eyes off the scene in front of me.

'Feels good doesn't she ... firm tits,' he was taunting her now, 'but I liked 'em better when she was younger.' He licked his lips, smacking them together like he had just enjoyed a tasty treat. 'Her pussy was all wet for ...' Smack. Emma's fist came out so fast we were all surprised. He nursed the side of his face.

'Not bad,' a trickle of blood left his mouth and he swiped at it with the back of his hand inspecting the red stripe that appeared. 'I knew she wanted it ... she was gagging ...' Smack, harder this time. He reeled back slightly dazed.

I could see that Emma was having difficulty controlling her fury. Her chest was heaving frantically, her posture rigid.

'Tell me. Is she still limp in the sack?' Her hands were on his shirt in an instant, and she slammed him against the wall repeatedly. 'You dirty fucker ... dirty ... *dirty little fucker!*' She screamed into his face as she kept slamming him harder and harder into the wall. His feet were not touching the floor: his teeth were clacking together.

Her left hand left his shirt and began backhanding him across the face making his eyes bug out. 'How do you like to be on the receiving end, huh? *Huh?*'

I stood up and approached the scene, a scene that seemed surreal yet actually playing out in front of me. I laid a hand gently on her shoulder and could feel the tension emanating from deep within. 'Em. Come on love. Leave it. The police are on their way.' I felt her relax under my touch and she let him go. He slumped to the ground, keeling forward so his face was nearly touching the floor. I thought he had passed out.

I turned her around by her shoulders and her face instantly lost the darkness that had harboured there. A look of concern gathered around her eyes and her mouth. 'Oh honey ...' She scooped me into her, cloaking me with love, acting like a human shield. 'My poor baby,' the words mumbled into my neck.

'My hero.' She tensed and pushed me away, only to deliver a roundhouse kick into my stepfather's gut. The breath left his body in an agonising gasp and he flew backwards into the wall with a sickening thud. I knew he wouldn't be getting up from that anytime soon.

She turned to me, taking me into her arms again, holding me safe. 'Don't worry. I've got you.'

The police arrived a couple of minutes afterwards to find me completely blanketed in Emma's arms and an unconscious man slumped on the pavement. We both went to the station to give our statements and he went to the local medical centre to get checked over.

Three hours later saw us curled up on my sofa softly stroking each other's back, almost like petting each other.

I felt safe in her arms. Contented.

'You won't have to worry about that jerk anymore. You've got me to protect you now.'

Thank you Emma. You honestly don't know how much I needed to hear that.

But deep down something was niggling me. I couldn't put it into words - just something. A seed had been planted after the attack - and what it was going to grow into was still a mystery.

Emma stayed with me for the weekend and comforted me when the emotion became too much. I had refused counselling from the police feigning tiredness. I promised I would go and see them, or someone, to talk through my ordeal.

Not only had I nearly been raped, again, by that sick pervert, but I had also found out that I had spent the best part of my life living in ignorance. I felt like a fool. I couldn't sit there and tell someone I didn't know how useless I felt. No. I had to get on with my life, push this mess behind me and carry on.

It's funny how things come back to haunt you isn't it?

I had a tearful conversation with Sarah Saturday morning. God ... livid wasn't the word to describe her reaction.

She told me that what he had said was true - he wasn't my father. I became angry at this point, demanding to know why nobody had thought to share this nugget of information with me - especially at the time.

Sarah seemed uncomfortable with the question. 'Well ... see ... Elaine wanted to ...'

'Elaine knows and I didn't?' The words spat out from clenched teeth to sound harsh and accusatory.

'Look ... Laura honey ... we thought you were beating yourself up about no one loving you enough to give a damn. If you were to know the truth about ... you know ... your real father walking out ... well ...'

The fight left me. What could I say? It was true. That was the key thing about my teenage years, all I rattled on about, not being wanted: Mum ... Dad ... Emma. I could understand why they hadn't told me. What good would, or even could, it have done.

The conversation ended on a happy note. The bastard was looking at five to seven years, and it was only later that we found out he was wanted for other things too and would be spending a stretch at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Good riddance.

Chapter Forty

I didn't even know that Emma had taken Martial Arts until the night of the attack. She nonchalantly informed me that she had taken it up in Cambridge as a good way of relieving tension. I could have done with a little stress relief - especially after losing her. She said that she tried to practice when she had a chance but felt like she was going a little rusty.

Good job really. I doubt that bastard would have got up from that one.

Funny thing was he tried to press charges against her. Can you believe the gall of that man? The police laughed at him and put it down to self-defence. Thankfully, they didn't check Emma's record and find out about the attack on Justine all those years ago. I don't think they would have been able to brush it away as easily as they did.

It was also a good job that the bastard - can't call him dad anymore - didn't know, he would have dragged that out to save his own neck.

Don't want to write about him anymore. In my eyes, he is dead to me now.

The summer flew by. I didn't want it to end, although I couldn't see Emma as much as I wanted to - like twenty four seven. She was busy with some large project that she had to get finished before the end of September.

The school year rolled around and delivered another set of rookie high school kids who were visibly shaking on their first day. Wide-eyed and innocent; dressed immaculately in new school uniform. I knew it would be only a matter of weeks before that all went out of the window. They were so impressionable, and the upper school kids had a whale of a time breaking them into routine.

As all teachers, I was really busy for the first couple of weeks. The word 'frantic' sums it up nicely. I had assessments to do, national testing, rearrangement of set lists, GCSE analysis to write, etc.

Yes. As I said ... really busy. I didn't give myself time to think.

So busy that I didn't really notice that Emma wasn't coming around as often as I would have liked. Well, I did notice, and I did feel put out, but ... but I was up to the eyes in paper work, you know how it goes.

After the first couple of weeks, when things had started to settle back down, it hit me. When we spoke on the phone she seemed a little edgy, like she had something else going on and she couldn't concentrate fully.

Don't get me wrong; when we did see each other the bond was still as strong as ever. But something was niggling at the back of my mind; something I didn't really want to think about in case I talked it up.

It was three weeks into term and she turned up late for our date. I hadn't seen her for two days and was feeling vulnerable. I missed sleeping with her every night; holding her close; feeling her next to me as I spooned against her. It wasn't sex - it was so much more than that. I just missed her, you know.

Although she was only fifteen minutes late, we had missed the beginning of the film. I was not best pleased. I didn't give a flying fuck about the film, I just felt that she was slipping away from me and there was nothing I could do about it. I began to think that she was losing interest; that she had come to realise that what we had when we were nineteen was infatuation; and now that she had sated this desire she could move on but didn't know how to tell me.

We ended up going for a coffee at the local book café. She seemed relaxed as she spoke about what she had been up to. I just listened and answered her questions as economically as I could without seeming rude.

The evening went slowly downhill from there. Every time she received another curt response her brow would crinkle just that little bit more.

I wanted to throw myself at her feet and beg for her to love me. Or if she couldn't love me, just to let me be near her, look at her, live in her shadow. The more I thought about it the more depressed I became.

'Laura ... honey ... are you okay?' Concerned blue eyes gazed into my own and she leaned across the table to take my hand in hers. The cool smoothness of her fingers made my heart ache. I would miss those hands, those eyes, that voice ... so, so much.

'Just a headache. I think I need to sleep it off.' My voice was quiet and she looked more

concerned.

'Do you want to go home, get in bed? I'll look after you.' She squeezed my hand.

A tiny crack was heard coming from my chest. I could feel the blood seeping out of my heart and flooding my body making me drown in my anguish.

'I'll be fine. It would be better if I just got into bed and slept. We can do this another time.'

'But I don't mind. I'd like to ...'

I interrupted her. 'I wouldn't hear of it. It's better if I'm on my own.' Never a truer word spoken.

Hurt flashed across her face like she had been symbolically slapped, and then she looked concerned again. Her hand grasped my own, tighter. She looked down at our hands and a small sigh escaped her lips. 'Come on then - let's get you to bed.' Nervous eyes looked into my own.

She dropped me off outside my door, asking again if she could take care of me. Once again I turned her down. She leaned forward for a goodnight kiss and I turned my face away so she only brushed the side of my mouth. I scrambled out of the car.

'Laura?'

I turned and nearly looked into her eyes ... if I had looked into those blue depths my resolve would have turned to water and I would have begged her to come inside so I could commit to memory the feel of her; the scent of her; the sound of her; the taste of her skin; the taste of her love. Commit to memory the way she looked when she was in the throes of passion: the way she looked at me as she made love to me, like she loved me.

But I would have to live my life with the memory of our short time together.

'I love you.' Her voice was gentle, and for a split second I wanted to believe her.

'I love you too, Emma ... so much.'

I leaned back into the car and claimed her lips. They were so soft, so inviting. My tongue poked its way inside her mouth and she sucked it in, a little groan escaping her.

I pulled away leaving her reeling from the lack of contact. 'Goodnight Em.' And I fled inside not turning around to look if she was still there. I felt like Orpheus, wondering if his beloved Eurydice was behind him, but knowing if he turned around he would lose her forever. Unlike Orpheus, I stood my ground.

When I entered my house I went straight to the side window and peeked outside. She sat there in her car, unmoving, staring at my front door, a pained look on her face. The flooding in my chest was heaving its way to my throat making me choke out the tears that had been threatening to

appear all evening.

Fifteen minutes later, she started her car and pulled away.

The dam broke as sobs tore themselves from my chest. I knew I had to let her go. I knew that I didn't deserve her. I knew that I was completely devastated and doubted that I would survive losing her again.

Harry couldn't save me this time.

I fell to my knees, tears cascading down my face unchecked. I was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe. A low-pitched keening was emanating from deep within my soul, gradually escalating into something bordering into a wail. My hands gripped my hair and I began to pull, rocking myself backwards and forwards. I was dying inside.

The next morning I found myself in the same spot in the hallway, bundled up into a ball, clothes crumpled and eyes burning. I dragged myself up and staggered upstairs to hide underneath the duvet until I couldn't feel the pain anymore.

And that would be a long time coming.

I know what you are thinking. You're thinking 'Why don't you just ask her?' I would be doing the same thing if I were in your position. I hate it when I read something that is similar to this and they don't do anything about it. Why didn't I ask her?

Simple.

All my life I have had people rejecting me for some reason or another. I always stuck around and waited for its conclusion. And look where it got me. I couldn't face Emma telling me she didn't feel we were going anywhere and it would be for the best if ... I can't even finish that sentence. I couldn't face looking into her beautiful face and listening to her reasons why she didn't think it was working out.

Yes. I am a coward. But unless you've been through the same thing, you can't possibly know how you will react. And I hope you never do.

Funny thing was ... everything was going great until the night of the attack. She probably got a really good look at what she was getting into and decided that she should get the hell away. Don't blame her really.

I just love her so much.

And it's agony.

The phone was constantly ringing. I knew it was Emma trying to talk to me, but like the coward that I am I let it ring. The doorbell went numerous times. I ignored it and pulled the pillow more firmly over my head trying to block out the sound.

A couple of times I could hear her shouting my name up towards the window, and like the weakling I am I closed my eyes and let the tears trickle down my face.

Two days I spent like that. I didn't have the energy or the motivation to get up, go to work, eat, wash ... anything. The only thing I did was break my heart over and over again - that took up all my time.

On the third day I heard my front door open and close. Then soft footsteps roaming around downstairs. I hoped it was a burglar who would find me and suffocate me with a pillow.

The footsteps made their way upstairs, across the landing, and stopped at my bedroom door.

A gentle tapping followed. I snuggled deeper under the bedclothes that were beginning to smell of stale sweat by this time.

'Laura? Are you in there, love?'

Sarah.

I ignored the question, but my ears picked up the sound of the door opening and a heavy sigh escape the woman who I had come to think of as a sister.

'Oh honey ... what's up?'

The sound of her voice, so full of concern, made my heart break all over again. I was buried beneath the covers and all she could have seen was the shaking movement as the pain pulsed through me. Every part of my body hurt. My eyes were so swollen I could barely see.

Covers were lifted from me allowing the light of the room to filter through the self-imposed darkness. 'What on earth ...?' Sarah's voice held a hint at panic at my appearance. 'Laura honey ... what's happened?' Her arms circled my shoulders lifting me up into an embrace. I was like a rag doll, completely without purpose, just a pile of disused cloths to be thrown out with the rest of the trash.

Sobs were louder now the protection of the duvet was gone. Firm, yet gentle hands stroked down my back and I could feel the sway as she rocked me from side to side making shushing noises into my ear.

'What on God's earth has happened?' I didn't answer ... I couldn't. My throat was thick and blocked; I'd lost the ability of speech. 'Is it about your father?' I shook my head, the tears coming

faster now with the memory of that night mixing with the loss of the light of my life. 'What is it? Come on baby, tell me. We are all so worried about you. Emma came around to ours three times today saying she couldn't get any answer.'

I lifted my head at this point. Why would she care? 'She is so worried about you ... has been since the night of ... you know.' I started to cry all over again.

Sarah held me in her arms for over an hour. Kind words of comfort accompanied by gentle strokes alleviated the crying, until I was just lying in her arms feeling nothing - completely numb.

'She doesn't want me,' my voice barely audible.

Sarah stopped her rocking but the hand still smoothed my back. 'Who doesn't want you, honey?'

'Emma.' Her name was like a coating on my lips. I loved the feel of it as it trailed passed my tongue and ventured out into the world on its own.

'You are joking, right?' Sarah's tone was of disbelief. I shook my head. 'Laura ... look at me.' I shakily met worried green eyes. 'Emma is completely head over heels in love with you ... what on earth gave you that idea?' I shrugged, not wanting to go into detail - it was still too painful.

'She is beside herself with worry. We had to stop her breaking the door down this afternoon.'

'If she's so worried, why isn't she here with you now?' I stared challengingly into Sarah's eyes.

'She wanted to come, but I said that I would feel the way for her first. She kind of has the impression that you want to break it off with her and don't know how to tell her.'

'Me!' I shot up straight, knocking Sarah's hands away. 'Me wanting to break up with her! That's a laugh. More like the other way around!' I was shouting now.

'What on earth gave you that impression?' She looked incredulous at my outburst.

'She's always making excuses why she can't see me. Turning up late ... looking harassed like she's got better things to do with her time.' I shot out. 'Are there enough reasons there?' My tone was cutting. Why I wanted to be spiteful to Sarah God only knows?

'Have you ever asked *her* why?' Such a simple solution. But what was the point, I already knew the answer.

I shook my head and felt the fight leave me. 'I need to sleep ... I'm so tired.' I began to lower myself to the bed again when the tone in Sarah's voice changed dramatically.

'Get your sorry arse out of that bed Stewart. Stop being the martyr and get the fuck up.' My eyes grew huge at this outburst. I had never heard her come out with compromising words ... and now

they were directed at me. 'Don't feel so goddamn sorry for yourself. If she going to leave you - get over it. But don't make decisions for her.'

She grabbed my arm and yanked me off the bed, grabbing my shoulder and beginning to shake me.

'By the God ... don't just curl up and die ... sort this fucking mess out before you fuck it up big time.' I allowed her to shake me, my eyes beseeching her to stop. Her grip loosened and her eyes dropped.

'Come on sweetheart ... she loves you ... I can feel it in my gut. Don't blow what you have together over some silly hunch.' Her voice had returned to soothing, her eyes gentling.

I fell forward into her arms and began to cry again. 'I'm so sorry ... so ... so sorry,' while she shushed me and once again became my saviour.

Chapter Forty-One

After I had a shower and ate the meal Sarah had made before she left, I came to a decision. I was going to call Emma and talk it through. We both deserved to be in the picture, not one outside making all the arrangements whilst the other was standing centre stage waiting to be told where to stand.

I picked up the phone and dialled her mobile number.

'Hello!' Was that panic or relief in her voice? 'Laura ... is that you?'

'Yes, it's me,' softly spoken, my throat was still raw from all of the crying I had put myself through. 'We need to talk.'

'Oh.' I heard a hitch in her voice. 'Yeah sure ... when do you want to see me?'

'Well ... can you come over now?' My chest was heaving and bile was rising up my throat.

'Erm ...'

'Look. Forget it. Some other time.' I was crushed. She couldn't even be bothered to come and tell me straight away.

'Laura ... I ... can I come over later, say about nine?' Her voice held something but I couldn't tell you what.

'Suit yourself,' and I slammed the phone down on her, then picked it up and lay it off the hook.

She had put me off again. I was feeling angry now. How dare she? How fucking *dare* she piss me about? Fuck her ... this was it!

I paced around the house like a caged animal, regularly picking things up and throwing them against the wall. Curses spewed from my mouth like I was possessed by some demon. Adrenaline raced around my body making me buzz, my senses razor sharp.

By the time nine o'clock arrived I was a living pot of anger. I couldn't wait to let fly at Emma - I would make her sorry that she ever walked into my life again.

The chimes of the doorbell alerted me to her arrival and I wasted no time in nearly pulling the door off its hinges to get to my prey.

She stood there, a couple of steps back from the doorway, hands hanging limply at her sides, her head slightly bowed, blue eyes peering into my anger filled green ones. *'How dare you fucking fuck me about!'* I screamed at her. *'How dare you waltz up here like there's nothing wrong!'* I began to close the door in her face when she lurched forward grabbing the side stopping it from closing.

'Laura ... please ... let me explain ...'

'Explain what? That you want out? That you don't give two shits about me? What?' I pulled the door open and stood my ground.

'Can we go inside?' Her voice was calm, but I could hear the note of anxiety ringing out as clear as day.

'Why? Don't you want the neighbours to hear you breaking up with me?'

'Breaking ... what on earth are you talking about?' She pushed her way into the house and went into the front room leaving me standing at the open doorway feeling like a complete dick.

She stood with her back to me; her shoulders slightly slumped. I slammed the door shut with all the strength I could muster, the sound thundering through the house.

'The way you've been acting ... like you don't give a shit.'

She turned to face me, her face crumpling up. I wanted to pull her into my arms and tell her it didn't matter, not to worry. I couldn't bear to see her upset even though she had broken my heart.

'But I love you, Laura,' she croaked out releasing the tears that lay hidden behind those eyes.

'What did I do?'

I felt the anger surge again. It was so unlike me. I usually wasn't an unreasonable person, but my judgement was well off kilter by this point. I had spent three days as a hermit under my duvet, gradually breaking apart, and I needed to know one way or another.

'If you love me so much, why have you been avoiding me?' She tried to answer but I cut her off. 'Why have you been so distant when we have been together, huh? Don't feed me any crap, Emma; I know a knock back when I see one. I've had enough of them in my life.'

She stepped forward, the tears running unmeasured down her cheeks, her hands reaching out to me. I stepped away from her. She stopped and dropped her hands to her sides, only to lift one up to swipe away the moisture on her face. I could hear her snuffling, trying to keep control. Why couldn't she just say it and then go, leave me to my sad little life?

'But ... I love you ... always have ... always will.' Her voice was a whimper, a cry into the night. She was beginning to shake by this point and I could feel my resolve breaking down.

I don't know how I got to her, can't remember moving, but I felt her in my arms, so fragile, so vulnerable. Her body was heaving with the force of her tears and she was gripping onto me like I was her salvation. 'Don't leave me Laura. Don't leave us. I don't think I could survive it a second time.'

I couldn't register what I was hearing. Was she worried that I'd leave her? But ...

My fingers gathered underneath her chin and I tipped her head back. I had to look into her eyes ... she couldn't hide anything behind them. They allowed me to see deep within her.

I felt my stomach clench as I witnessed the heartache there - heartache that I had done. 'Em ... I will never leave you ... God ... I love you so, so much. I just thought ...' Her kiss interrupted me. So passionate and demanding. It felt like she was sucking my soul from deep within. She was claiming me, reaffirming my love for her, her love for me. I felt weightless: I felt elated.

The kiss developed, becoming more frantic in our need for each other. Our hands were everywhere, pulling and tugging at clothes, needing to purchase themselves onto living breathing flesh.

I pulled away and looked at her. 'Em ... do you still want *to be with me*?'

'God yes!' She leaned in for another kiss. I pulled back and looked at her confused face.

'Tell me. Was it my imagination or were you distant with me?' She looked confused again. 'After the attack you seemed to change. You constantly seemed harassed and were forever late. I thought that you wanted to finish it ... you know, not want to be involved with my problems...' I drifted off.

A smile broke open on her face. It was my turn to look confused - why was she smiling?

'Laura. I didn't lose interest,' she laughed aloud - I looked even more bewildered. 'God ... how can you think that? I didn't see you for nearly ten years and I never lost interest then.'

'That was before you really knew me.'

'I know you like I know the back of my hand ... like I know myself - God, even better than I know myself.'

She scooped me into her arms and nuzzled my neck. 'I love every part of you and your life. I love the changing colours of your eyes, the pout of your lip,' she gently kissed them to prove her point. 'The way your nose wrinkles when you smile,' she rubbed my nose with hers for effect. 'The smell of you drives me insane. Your kisses feed the flame inside me. Your hands - God your hands ...'

'Enough already,' I laughed quickly, mainly out of relief. Then my face turned serious again. 'What about my life?'

'What about it? You're an English teacher - I'll get over it.' She smiled a crooked smile.

'What about ... you know ... with the incident and all ...' I couldn't even bear to think about it, never mind vocalise it.

'That was no reflection on you.' She pulled me to her once again. 'You just were in the wrong place with the wrong person. The blame rests solely on his shoulders.' I lay my head on her chest. 'You were the victim, love, but we have to move away from that now and carry on with our lives.' A kiss landed on top of my head.

'But ... why did he try it again?' I could feel the anger well up inside me struggling to come to terms with what had happened.

Emma made shushing noise into my hair as I let the tears flow freely down my face. 'I don't know, honey. But we need to get this sorted. You can't live the rest of your life blaming yourself for somebody else's shortcomings.' I nodded into her chest and she stroked my back in leisurely circles.

We stood there for quite a while, both seeking comfort from the other, soaking it up, relishing in our bond. Eventually, I suggested we should sit down, as my legs felt like they had just completed a mini marathon.

We curled up on the sofa together so closely I doubt a human hair could have passed between us. I felt her breathe deeply and hold it before she released it back into the atmosphere. 'Laura?'

'Mhm?'

'There are a couple of reasons why I have seemed harassed lately.' I looked up to face worried blue eyes.

'What is it - or are they?' My voice wavered right at the end.

'Well ... number one. I was thinking about selling my place and ...' She stopped.

'And?'

'I was worried about asking you ...'

'What?'

'Well ... *wouldyouliketomoveinwithme?*'

'*What?*'

She blew out a breath and sat up straight. Then she plucked my hand away from her shirt and held it between both of her own.

'I said ... would you consider buying a house together; move in together?' Initially I was stunned, but three seconds later my mouth was on hers drinking her in. She eventually escaped and laughed. 'Shall I take that as a yes then?' I kissed her again. Harder this time.

After a couple of minutes she pulled away again. 'The second thing was a little harder to arrange.' I looked at her quizzically. She stood up and offered me her hand, and then she pulled me to my feet unmercifully. 'Follow me.'

She led me outside and towards her car. 'Where are we going?'

'Nowhere.' She fumbled with her car keys and unlocked the door, leaning in to unlock the back. 'Come here,' her voice was low.

I hesitantly walked towards her, my eyes flickering from her face to the opened door. I could hear something coming from within, a scrabbling noise. My interest was definitely piqued.

The inside of the car was nearly black and I could see an orange box resting on the back seat. Inside was an old blanket that was completely messed up. 'What am I looking for?' I was confused.

'Look closer.' So I did.

Twinkling brown eyes peered over the top of the box and captured my stunned expression. A little whine and a pant, followed by a yap. 'A puppy? What's a puppy doing in the back of your car?'

'Probably becoming a little annoyed at having to wait to meet his new mum.' My eyes widened.

'But I can't have a puppy ... it would be cruel to leave him all day.' As I was saying this my hands were searching him out, wanting to feel that chubby ball of roundness and hug it to me.

'But he won't be left all day - I'll be there to keep him company, won't I?' I didn't know what to do. Put the puppy down and hug and kiss her senseless, or hug the puppy tighter - so I did them both. Puppy firmly entrenched in my arm, his head resting across my chest; I gripped Emma and laid a fat juicy one on the lips.

'Careful. You'll do a Lennie on him in a minute.' I laughed out loud kissing her soundly again.

After pulling away from her I lifted the puppy up to look in his eyes, his little body hanging limply below him. A pink tongue lolled out of his mouth and he panted contentedly, a stubby black nose glistening.

'What's his name?' I asked her without breaking eye contact with my newfound friend. 'Ow! He just nipped my nose.'

'I don't know his name - you haven't told me yet.'

'What about Buster? Chester? Shakey? Brian?'

'Brian?' The hoot of laughter left her lungs at an alarming rate.

'Okay ... I get the message. What about Stumpy? Stubby? Bruce?'

'Bruce? What on earth possessed you to call him Bruce?'

'Look at his little overhang and his straight teeth - looks like Springsteen to me.' I nuzzled the dog's nose against my own and he bit it again. 'Ouch!'

'What about Nipper?' I could hear the amusement in her voice.

'Maybe ... oh, he's so cute. Did you see that little yawn he just did? How adorable.'

'I always knew there was a maternal instinct in there somewhere. Come on. Let's get him settled; he's had a long day.'

Emma gathered his belongings from the car and locked up. The puppy lay contentedly in my arms as we walked like a new family back into the house.

It is amazing to think how in one day you can change the course of your life. If it hadn't been for Sarah, maybe the day would have panned out differently. I would have to thank her big time when I saw her next.

We got the puppy settled into his box that I filled with old jumpers and a blanket and put it in my bedroom. He had warm milk and puppy food and was looking contented and sleepy. His brown

eyes began to flutter closed as a tiny yawping yawn escaped his mouth.

I lay on the floor next to him and stroked his head, staring in amazement at this little ball of wonder that had entered my life.

Emma came into the room, fresh from her shower, and settled down on the floor next to me, pulling me into her arms. A sigh escaped me. I felt like a mother watching over her child surrounded by the protection of daddy bear. Sickly sweet - I know, but hey - all through our lives that is the one thing that we search for - the ultimate feeling of belonging.

'Are you coming to bed?' Her voice was husky, and behind the question I could feel a promise lingering there. I doubted sleep was on her mind.

I turned and placed a gentle kiss on her lips, opening my eyes to be captured in her intense gaze. I pulled back and stroked her cheek. 'I love you, Em. I'm sorry ... about ... I don't know what came over me.'

'Shush ... don't worry about it. You've been under a lot of pressure lately, and we need to get that sorted, right?'

I nodded and snuggled closer to her chest.

'Come on baby ... up.' And she lifted me into the air and carried me, giggling, to the bed. Good job I'd changed the sheets.

After laying me down she leaned over me and captured my lips with her own. 'Now. We have some serious making up to do,' she mock growled whilst I squealed with delight. Her fingers trailed themselves down the front of my top and fiddled with the buttons in an agonising manner. I tried to stop her and do it myself, but she slapped my hands away.

'Patience.' Her eyebrow lifted to hide underneath black hair.

I could feel myself getting wetter as I looked at her slowly undressing me. Every movement was punctuated with a kiss, or a lick, or a stroke. My hands reached out and brushed her hair away from her face, loving the contact under my fingers.

It wasn't long before I lay naked underneath her gaze as she straddled me. 'So beautiful,' she murmured as her fingers traced a circle around my breast. My nipples strained into the night eager for attention. They didn't have to wait long as a warm wet mouth captured one and gently sucked, grazing strong teeth up the sides. A moan escaped me and I pushed her face further in needing to feel the pressure of her.

'I want to feel you,' I panted, tugging on her sleep t-shirt. She grabbed the back of the shirt and with one swift movement tugged it over her head, revealing perfect full breasts for my eager eyes. My hand floated towards them like a gravity pull. I was mesmerised by her beauty, her slick form, her silky skin.

Gently, I dragged my finger in lazy circles around each breast in turn watching her tilt her head back and close her eyes. She moaned. I moaned. With the backs of my fingers I rubbed the underside of her breast and leaned forward to capture the waiting bud in my mouth. She gasped on contact stoking the fire that was beginning to rage out of control between my legs.

My other hand stroked her hip and I could feel her rhythm beginning to start and her hips tried to purchase themselves onto my thigh. 'Off!' I tugged at her shorts and she lifted herself up so I could pull them down to her knees, and with a quick movement ... they were gone. There was nothing between us anymore, and I don't just mean clothes. We were fully exposed to each other; our emotions on show unchecked.

I pulled her down towards me and sank my lips into her neck loving the feel of her pulse racing around underneath my touch. I loved the sensation of sucking on the part of her neck where it meets the shoulder, the slight dip; the sensuous taste. Her hands pushed me closer begging for more contact. I could hear her breathing catch as I sucked her neck and stroked her breast.

The pressure from her body was pressing into mine as she lowered me to the bed and covered my body with her own. The furnace boiling within me was an agony and I wanted to desperately to feel her thigh, her fingers, her mouth trying to quench it.

She positioned herself between my thighs, pushing her mound into mine. I could feel the connection and sensation of our wetness mingling together as the rhythm became more intense. I clenched my backside and raised it up to meet her need, making my clit stand out more. Her hands snaked themselves underneath me and gripped onto the waiting flesh, pulling me deeper within her, her breathing becoming erratic. My hands went to her hair and latched onto the nape of her neck, fingering the short hairs there, only to pull her in for a searing kiss.

Faster and faster we ground together, the kisses becoming more intense, almost animal in our need for each other. I wanted to open my mouth and swallow her whole, savour the taste of her for eternity. I could feel my wetness slipping down onto the bed; it was dripping from me.

I could feel her body tensing; I knew she was going to come - so was I. Faster. Skin slapping against each other - slap slap slap - tongues plunging into open mouths, burying themselves deep, not able to get enough. I felt her stiffen, and hold, and the release her climax into the night. White flashes appeared in front of my eyes as I followed her down the path of ecstasy. Strong, deep circles engraved by hungry hips bore into our need. Grunting, trying to drag out the jolts that pulsed through each other, savouring every shudder.

With a last kiss she was going down my body, kissing and licking everywhere, hands acting crazy like they didn't know what to touch first. Desire to taste her raged through my mind as I saw where she was headed. 'I need to taste you, Em.'

Without missing a beat she crawled up my body and turned herself around. As she lowered her mouth to meet my desire I grabbed the tops of her thighs to bury myself into her wetness. The taste was pure nectar, quenching my thirst for her. I could feel her tongue lapping against my

folds and I buried myself deeper into her, my tongue delving into her core. A rumble of carnal desire throbbbed through us both.

Juices dripped onto my chin, as I loved her with my mouth, my tongue delving, my lips kissing and sucking, my teeth nipping. I could feel her nub pulsing against my face as I pushed two fingers inside of her. She gasped into me making the feeling even more intense than it already was.

My arm began to pump as she impaled herself onto my fingers. I added the third digit, shuddering at her moaning and thrusting. I searched out her nub with my tongue and flicked it rapidly across her pulsating centre, my own desire rising in response to her reaction.

I felt her hands join in the fun as she frantically pushed aside the waiting flesh to insert her fingers into my wet warmth. I sighed into her wanting the sensation of her filling me to last forever. God - how I loved this woman.

Her walls were tightening around my fingers, her clit stood out, erect in its need for fulfilment. I knew she was close - I was beginning to feel the familiar jingling racing down my body.

It overwhelmed me. A cry tore itself from deep within to bury itself in her, my fingers pumped although the spasms of my climax made coordination a nightmare. She came then. Screaming my name back into me, spewing forth words of love and need and devotion right into my core. My free hand clasped so tightly to her thigh I could feel my fingers digging into her flesh. I came again and again, each time followed by her, and each time she came so did I.

Exhaustion stopped us; otherwise I would have died loving her. And gladly.

She slipped off me to land heavily on the bed, taking a moment to collect herself before scuttling up beside me to take me into her arms and kiss me deeply, the taste of our love mingling into hot, wet mouths.

We lay like that for an age, soaking up our love, with soft tender kisses and gentle caresses. Time and time again we returned to our lovemaking believing that this time would be enough to quench the thirst, only to start again as soon as we got our breath back.

Morning found us exhausted but contented. We awoke to the feeling of the duvet being tugged helplessly from our lifeless bodies. Small growling sounds were heard emanating from somewhere near the floor and I peeked over the edge to be greeted by sparkling brown eyes and a wagging tail. 'Wap grr wap!' Excited panting accompanied the oral display, his whole body swaying with the force of the tail. 'Wap!'

'Hello there little chap.' Even more excited now. 'Do you want to get up her with me and mummy?'

'Wap wap!'

'I'll take that as a yes then.' I leaned over and scooped the bundle of wriggling flesh into my arms and placed him in the middle of Emma and I.

He was excited to be on the bed and clambered all over the both of us before lying flat on Emma's chest. 'My dog eh? Seems he thinks differently.' I tickled him behind the ears and he let out a contented little whine. Emma laughed.

'What's so funny?' I looked into her mischievous eyes and smiled a full-toothed smile.

'Well ... he may think he's my dog but he takes after you.'

I looked at the comfortable puppy, who was stretched out along Emma whuffling at all the attention being bestowed on him.

'What can I say? My dog's got great taste.' I leaned over and captured her lips in a soft kiss. 'Just like me,' I whispered my eyes not leaving hers. She kissed me again and my eyes fluttered closed.

'Wap grr!'

'Ahh ... he's jealous, bless,' I cooed to the dog. 'It's all right little chap. We have enough to share.'

And we did. More than enough.

Epilogue

That was three years ago. Where has the time gone?

Emma and I moved into a detached house with a huge garden eight months after that episode and I have been living on cloud nine everyday since then. Sometimes, I even pinch myself to see if I am dreaming ... I know ... how stupid can you get?

She started her own business working from home so she didn't need to travel, and that suits me down to the ground. It is still in its baby stages but we are both optimistic. I still teach, although I have drawn a definite line between school time and home time - you have to or else when would you ever get any work done with that tall dark haired beauty in sight .

I talked to a counsellor for quite a few sessions to work through all the anger I held for my parents, and what the man I thought was my father did to me. I have now put that all behind me and concentrate on my own family.

Talking of which, the puppy is not so puppyish anymore. He has grown into a bigger ball of fur, with the classic otter shaped head of the Border terrier. Although we think of him as our baby, he thinks of himself as the pack leader, but let's us get on with all the details of feeding and walking

him.

He's snuggled up to me now as I write this, his head planted on my knee making snoring sounds as if he is asleep. He's waiting for the jingle of his lead to alert him of a day at Lyme Park - lots of leaves to chase and birds to yap at. A very much-loved pooch - and he knows it.

Well, I have come to the end of my tale of love and loss - love and near loss - and love. I hope my messages are clear to you all.

Don't ever take life for granted.

If you want something go for it.

Never be contented with your lot.

Talk about how you are feeling, don't keep it locked away.

But mainly - never let the actions of others make you think less of yourself.

Life is what you make of it, and my life is bordered by hearts and flowers.

And always remember:

Laura Stewart

Loves

Emma Jenkins

Who both love

Lennie

The End (or is it?)

Well ... there we go. I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing. Let me know what you thought.

Email fingersmith - I will try and get back to you. Thank you for reading.
